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LOOKING at the hundreds of new products on Instagram, whether it is a cupcake or a candle, it appears that launching a brand is easy. See pictures of a dinner party and it seems like so many of us could be a home chef or arrange flowers or gift-wrap. The reality is that launching a business is hard and for women SMEs who are also wives, mothers, daughters and daughters-in-law, it can look well-nigh impossible to even get the product off the ground. For younger women entrepreneurs, the reality of how much hard work is involved sometimes comes as a shock as Gen Z messaging is about work-life balance, working on tasks that have meaning, etc. Starting a new business can involve all-nighters and running from pillar to post.

In Pakistan, the hurdles can have added layers, including self-esteem issues and possibly having a home environment where women’s working, let alone working long hours, is discouraged.

One make-up artist had come to us for a loan to move into a workspace outside her home. Although her husband was doing well, she wanted to do this independently. As she was a talented professional, she quickly paid back the loan out of the bridal make-ups she did, but her decision took a lot of courage and a private loan, as most banks are sadly still refusing to lend women money despite policies that promise otherwise.

During Covid-19, many women lost or left their jobs and started to become home chefs. The majority had no professional training in cooking and even less in nutrition, food hygiene and packaging. However, they believed in themselves. The cream usually rises to the top and the tastiest brands always get sales, particularly among friends. It was the business-minded women, some with MBAs, who soared, whether or not the taste of their brand was as good. It was interesting to see market dynamics, more than any other factor, influence most of these women SMEs.

Believing in themselves is crucial for woman entrepreneurs.

But whether a business that was soaring or struggling the biggest factor was the hustle — hard work, putting the word out, and hard sales. Facebook ads were a big help. However, the most common hurdle women entrepreneurs faced globally was limited self-belief which was amplified in Pakistan where in addition to personal self-esteem, families — not just in-laws and spouses but parents and siblings too — were often the most likely to say, ‘You’re not going to be able to make this work’.

So if we flip this on its head, the litmus test of whether a woman entrepreneur was going to succeed was belief in herself, regardless of anyone or any situation, regardless of even the competition. Yes, Facebook ads or business strategy and marketing could shorten the path to success, but if a woman truly believed in herself, she would eventually get there, even if it took a decade.

The second biggest asset was building a reliable team. For many Pakistani women SMEs, this was often family and friends. Whether it was mothers or even kids helping to package the goods or a sister doing the logo or graphic design; no one person can do everything, and large families and friend circles in Pakistan can be an asset, once they come to believe in the business.

Prioritising goals is another huge game-changer. Time is money and managing energy is also key in consistent output and results. Networking tremendously helps women entrepreneurs learn about new opportunities and find people who can help them grow their business. It can also be a great way to connect with potential investors, which women looking to scale up their businesses need. The lemonade-stand model will only get them so far. Networking is not about a buddy to gripe with — though that can be a form of bonding — but learning from others’ approaches and successes. That is valuable, time-saving insight.

Since risk-taking is an important part of entrepreneurship, it’s essential for women entrepreneurs to not only feel comfortable taking risks, but to understand that failure is part of the process and know what that means. Failure is not just a word, but a whole experience that one must go through and something entrepreneurs must be prepared for — and realise that it is the next opportunity for success.

So, setting milestones with little rewards, whether they involve buying a cute outfit or even just indulging in a scoop of chocolate gelato, is a must. All work and no rewards can result in not just burnout but grouchiness.

Speaking of temperament, having a thick skin is important for success, in whatever field. In fact, it is often a key factor in happiness in every area of life. So whether you are a woman entrepreneur reading this or a curious onlooker, know that building an empire on cupcakes or candles is not a piece of cake.

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