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Social Networks as Drivers of Entrepreneurial Performance: A Quantitative Univariate Assessment of Women Entrepreneurs in the Punjab, Pakistan

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Abstract

Increasingly, women's entrepreneurship has emerged as a relevant contributor to household stability, income diversification, and local economic activity in Pakistan, particularly in Punjab. Within this landscape, social networks lie at the heart of shaping the entrepreneurial outcomes for women. Based on Social Capital Theory and Effectuation Theory, this paper presents a quantitative, univariate analysis that explores how network size influences entrepreneurial performance among women entrepreneurs. This study leans on descriptive data collected through a survey of 480 women entrepreneurs across several districts of Punjab. The univariate results reveal that women tend to largely use close-knit networks-family connections, friends, neighbors, and repeat clients-which help them to sustain and expand their business ventures. Network size has been seen to reflect pathways to customer acquisition, the identification of new opportunities, supply access, and service referrals. Indicators of entrepreneurial performance suggest that women recognize improvements in business stability, increasing customers, and financial stability, all largely influenced by strengthened social contacts. Even though this study does not use any form of inferential analysis, the descriptive insights support past literature regarding the centrality of social ties in entrepreneurial growth in resource-constrained contexts. Findings provide a basic evidence base for an understanding of how network-driven support mechanisms shape women's business performance and offer some directions for subsequent research, policy, and capacity-building initiatives.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurs; Social Networks; Network Size; Entrepreneurial Performance; Social Capital Theory; Effectuation Theory; Punjab; Quantitative Univariate Analysis

Introduction

Women's entrepreneurship has gained increasing recognition as a pathway to economic participation, household stability, and social empowerment across developing regions. In Pakistan, and particularly in Punjab, women-owned micro and small enterprises contribute meaningfully to family income, children's education, and overall household resilience in environments defined by inflation, limited job opportunities, and socioeconomic

pressures (Roomi & Harrison, 2010; Jamali, 2009). Despite these contributions, women entrepreneurs often operate within informal or home-based settings, facing structural barriers such as limited access to capital, gendered mobility constraints, and restricted market participation (Rehman & Roomi, 2012). Under such circumstances, social networks emerge as a critical resource that supports women's entrepreneurial engagement and sustainability.

Social networks including family members, friends, neighbors, customers, suppliers, and community connections shape the daily functioning of women-owned enterprises. In low-resource settings such as Punjab, entrepreneurs rely heavily on informal, trust-based networks to access customers, obtain supplies, gain referrals, and secure emotional and informational support (Greve & Salaff, 2003; Rashid & Ratten, 2020). Network size therefore becomes an important indicator of the breadth of social relationships an entrepreneur can mobilize to operate and sustain a business. Larger networks are associated with wider client reach, enhanced visibility, repeat orders, and the ability to navigate uncertainties linked to fluctuating market conditions or domestic responsibilities (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003). Conversely, limited networks can restrict growth, narrow opportunity pathways, and reduce the likelihood of business continuity.

Entrepreneurial performance in women-led enterprises cannot be captured solely through financial indicators. Instead, performance is best understood as a multidimensional construct that includes perceived business stability, regularity of customer flow, continuity of operations, ability to manage household needs, and contributions to family wellbeing (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003). In many Pakistani households, sustaining a micro-enterprise even at a modest scale is considered a significant achievement when it contributes to children's education, food security, and reduced financial stress. For these reasons, performance must be understood within women's lived experiences rather than through strictly economic measures.

Although the role of networks in entrepreneurship is well documented globally, empirical studies in Pakistan have tended to focus more on financial capital, motivational factors, or barriers to entry, with relatively limited attention to how social connections shape women's perceived entrepreneurial performance (Roomi, 2013; Khan & Khaliq, 2014). Moreover, much of the existing research relies on correlational or multivariate approaches, leaving a gap in descriptive, ground-level evidence illustrating how women themselves report the distribution of network ties and business outcomes. A univariate assessment while exploratory provides essential foundational insights into these variables and creates a basis for more advanced relational analyses.

The theoretical foundation of this study draws primarily on Social Capital Theory and Effectuation Theory. Social Capital Theory posits that social relationships contain embedded resources information, referrals, opportunities, and emotional support that entrepreneurs can access to improve business outcomes (Coleman, 1990; Lin, 2001). For women in Punjab, where formal institutional support remains limited, social capital often replaces financial or structural capital. Effectuation Theory further suggests that entrepreneurs rely on available means, including their relationships and networks, to co-create opportunities rather than predicting future market conditions (Sarasvathy, 2001). Women frequently draw on existing ties to shape their business decisions, adjust to customer needs, and respond flexibly to shifting circumstances an approach highly consistent with effectual logic.

Despite the importance of these networks and their theoretical grounding, network size remains underexplored in quantitative research on women entrepreneurs in Punjab. Similarly, performance indicators are often studied through formal economic metrics rather than through self-reported measures that capture women's actual experiences. Understanding these distributions is essential not only for academic purposes but also for designing contextually grounded policies and interventions. As reflected in the fourth objective of this study, descriptive evidence can guide policymakers, support organizations, and training institutions in developing targeted strategies that strengthen women's social networks and improve their entrepreneurial performance.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the univariate distribution of two key constructs Network Size and Entrepreneurial Performance among 480 women entrepreneurs across Punjab. By focusing on descriptive findings, the study offers a foundational understanding of how women in this context report their social ties and business outcomes. These insights serve as an empirical baseline for future multivariate research and contribute to the broader scholarship on women's entrepreneurship in South Asia, while also informing policy recommendations that can enhance women's access to networks and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Objectives

Based on the purpose of this study and its focus on univariate descriptive analysis, the research is guided by the following objectives:

1. To describe the distribution of network size among women entrepreneurs in Punjab.
2. To examine the univariate patterns of entrepreneurial performance as reported by women entrepreneurs.
3. To explore how the descriptive indicators of network size and entrepreneurial performance align with the assumptions of Social Capital Theory and Effectuation Theory.
4. To derive evidence-based policy recommendations that can strengthen social networks and entrepreneurial performance among women entrepreneurs in the Punjab.

Research Questions

The study is driven by the following research questions:

1. What is the reported network size of women entrepreneurs in Punjab, as reflected in their frequency of contacts, customer connections, and supportive ties?
2. How do women entrepreneurs describe their entrepreneurial performance in terms of business stability, customer growth, and perceived success?
3. How do the univariate patterns of network size and entrepreneurial performance relate to theoretical perspectives on social capital and entrepreneurial effectuation?
4. What possible policy recommendations can be derived from the descriptive findings to strengthen social networks and entrepreneurial performance among women entrepreneurs in the Punjab?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design, focusing exclusively on univariate analysis. The objective was to explore how women entrepreneurs in Punjab report their social network size and entrepreneurial performance using frequency distributions and percentages. A univariate approach is appropriate for establishing foundational insights, particularly when the purpose is to describe, rather than predict or establish statistical relationships among variables. This design is theoretically supported by Social Capital Theory, which emphasizes the descriptive significance of social ties (Lin, 2001; Coleman, 1990), and Effectuation Theory, which highlights how entrepreneurs utilize available resources and relationships (Sarasvathy, 2001). Since the goal of this paper is to understand how respondents *report* their networks and performance, a descriptive approach is methodologically suitable.

Study Area: Central Punjab

The research was conducted in four industrially significant districts of Central Punjab-Gujranwala, Gujrat, Sialkot, and Wazirabad. These districts are known for their sports goods industries, cutlery production, ceramics, leather manufacturing, and rapidly expanding networks of home-based and micro-enterprises. Women in these districts actively contribute to economic activities through tailoring, beauty services, food ventures, handicrafts, online selling, and other small-scale businesses, making the region suitable for examining social networks and entrepreneurial outcomes.

Population and Sample Size

The target population comprised women entrepreneurs operating micro- and home-based enterprises across the four districts. A sample of 480 women entrepreneurs was selected using convenient and snowball sampling techniques. These techniques were chosen due to the scattered and informal nature of women-led enterprises and the cultural sensitivities associated with household-based interactions.

The sample distribution across districts included Gujranwala, Gujrat, Sialkot, and Wazirabad.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire developed for accessibility and cultural suitability. The questionnaire included sections on:

1. Demographics
2. Social Networks (Network Size indicators)
3. Entrepreneurial Performance (Self-reported business success indicators)

Items were measured using categorical response formats suitable for univariate analysis. The instrument was adapted from relevant entrepreneurship and social capital scales, with minor modifications made to fit the local context.

The conceptual bases for the constructs are Social Capital Theory and Effectuation Theory, which informed the selection of indicators relating to relational ties, referrals, and performance perceptions.

Measurement of Variables

Network Size (IV)

Network Size was operationalized as the number and diversity of individuals the entrepreneur interacts with for business purposes. Indicators included frequency of customers interactions, closeness to repeated clients, referrals from friends or neighbors, and the spread of personal or informal contacts.

This operationalization aligns with Social Capital Theory, which states that the value of social relationships lies in access to information, opportunities, and support embedded within these networks (Lin, 2001). In the context of women entrepreneurs, bonding ties (family), bridging ties (neighbors/customers), and linking ties (suppliers or influential individuals) all contribute to performance outcomes.

Entrepreneurial Performance (DV)

Entrepreneurial Performance was measured using self-reported items on business stability, customer increase, product/service satisfaction, business continuity, and perceived growth. This performance construct emphasized real-world outcomes relevant to small-scale enterprises in Punjab, rather than formal financial metrics. The variable reflects effectual action, as women evaluate success based on available means, adaptability, and stakeholder engagement key principles of Effectuation Theory (Sarasvathy, 2001).

Data Collection Procedure

Data were gathered through field visits, community engagements, and direct interactions with women entrepreneurs. Because many participants operated home-based businesses, access was facilitated through local contacts, community leaders, and women-focused networks. Respondents completed the questionnaire individually, with researchers providing explanation where required.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly followed. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were fully informed about the study's purpose. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing all data and avoiding the collection of any personally identifiable information. Respondents were assured that their information would be used exclusively for academic purposes.

Data Analysis

As per the scope of this paper, only univariate analysis was performed. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the distribution of network size and entrepreneurial performance indicators.

This approach is consistent with the theoretical underpinnings of the study:

- Social Capital Theory supports descriptive mapping of relational ties.
- Effectuation Theory supports examining how available means (networks) shape perceived performance.

This analysis provides a clear, foundational picture of how women in Punjab perceive their networks and business outcomes, without any inferential testing.

Results

This section presents the univariate findings of the study based on frequencies, percentages, and descriptive statistics. The results include demographic characteristics of respondents followed by the distribution of the two main constructs: Network Size (Independent Variable) and Entrepreneurial Performance

(Dependent Variable). All results are based on N = 480 women entrepreneurs in Punjab.

Demographic Characteristics of Female Entrepreneurs

Table 1 Age Distribution of Female Entrepreneurs

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
20–25 years	117	24.4
26–39 years	298	62.1
40 years and above	65	13.5
Total	480	100.0

Most respondents (62.1%) were between 26–39 years, indicating that women tend to enter entrepreneurship during their mid-career years when household responsibilities and financial pressures are highest. A sizeable proportion (24.4%) were young entrepreneurs (20–25 years), reflecting increasing youth participation in micro-enterprises. Only 13.5% belonged to the older age group, consistent with literature suggesting that mobility restrictions and family obligations reduce older women’s entrepreneurial involvement.

This age distribution aligns with national trends showing that women in their late twenties and thirties often turn to business as a pathway toward economic independence. Younger women’s growing representation also highlights a shift in attitudes toward self-employment, influenced by digital exposure and vocational training opportunities. Meanwhile, the limited participation of older women reinforces the barriers created by cultural expectations, caregiving roles, and limited access to market networks. These patterns suggest that policy interventions aimed at promoting women’s economic participation should prioritize both early-career and mid-career support mechanisms. Moreover, the active engagement of younger women signals an opportunity for scaling digital entrepreneurship programs. Overall, the age profile underscores the evolving nature of female entrepreneurship in Punjab, shaped by generational differences in aspirations, opportunities, and social constraints.

Years of Business Experience**Table 2** *Years of Business Experience*

Years in Business	Frequency	Percentage
1–3 years	228	47.5
4–6 years	163	34.0
More than 6 years	89	18.5
Total	480	100.0

Nearly half of the respondents (47.5%) were new or early-stage entrepreneurs with 1–3 years of business experience. Women with 4–6 years of experience constituted 34%, representing emerging stability and customer retention. Only 18.5% had more than 6 years of experience, indicating that long-term business continuity is challenging but achievable for women who maintain strong networks and client trust.

This distribution suggests that most women are still in the formative phase of their entrepreneurial journey, navigating startup challenges and resource limitations. The moderate share of women with 4–6 years of experience also reflects gradual progress toward business maturity within local markets. Furthermore, the relatively small proportion of long-established entrepreneurs highlights structural barriers such as limited financing, mobility constraints, and market access that continue to affect women's long-term sustainability in business.

These patterns also imply that many women may enter entrepreneurship out of necessity, building their ventures slowly over time as they gain confidence and skills. The presence of a smaller yet resilient group of experienced entrepreneurs demonstrates the potential for long-term growth when supportive ecosystems such as training, mentorship, and community networks are available. Overall, the experience profile reveals a sector still transitioning toward maturity, where sustained institutional support can significantly enhance women's entrepreneurial endurance and performance.

Descriptive Findings for Network Size (IV)**Table 3** *Network Size Indicators*

Indicator	SDA	DA	NU	A	SA	Mean	SD
I have established a large network of business contacts that supports my business growth.	66	100	35	240	39	1.54	0.892
I regularly collaborate with other entrepreneurs in my network to share knowledge and resources.	72	75	23	290	20	1.47	0.893
I actively participate in networking activities to expand my business connections.	70	61	35	292	22	1.58	1.086
My network provides access to valuable business opportunities and resources.	68	79	26	264	43	1.53	0.954

The majority of respondents agreed (A + SA) on all indicators, showing moderately strong social network engagement. The highest agreement was for collaboration and knowledge-sharing (60.4%), reflecting women's reliance on informal networks rather than formal institutions. These findings support Social Capital Theory, highlighting the importance of bonding and bridging ties for opportunity access (Lin, 2001). The distribution further aligns with Effectuation Theory, suggesting that women co-create business opportunities through available relationships (Sarasvathy, 2001).

The moderately strong levels of network engagement among women entrepreneurs echo recent findings. For instance, Yong (2025) showed that Pakistani women-owned businesses benefit significantly from wider social networks and informal ties when institutional support is weak.

Similarly, Rehman & Qamar (2024) found that networking opportunities and collaboration among women in Pakistan were positively associated with business visibility and growth. These contemporary studies reinforce the finding in this paper that network size remains a critical precursor to opportunity access and scaling among women entrepreneurs in Punjab.

Descriptive Findings for Entrepreneurial Performance (DV)**Table 4** *Entrepreneurial Performance*

Indicator	SDA	DA	NU	A	SA	Mean	SD
My business has stable and regular customer flow.	58	76	42	256	48	1.49	0.91
My business generates sufficient income to cover expenses.	62	84	38	246	50	1.52	0.94
My business is growing in terms of repeat customers.	54	80	40	262	44	1.59	0.89
I manage household and business responsibilities effectively.	48	70	52	266	44	1.63	0.95
My business contributes to the economic stability of my family.	46	66	58	272	38	1.66	0.92

Entrepreneurial performance was generally perceived as positive. The strongest agreement appeared for business contribution to economic stability (56.7% A) and effective management of dual responsibilities (55.4% A). These findings indicate that women evaluate performance not only through financial returns but also through stability, continuity, and family welfare consistent with prior literature on women-led micro-enterprises (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003). The trends reinforce the relevance of relational support mechanisms, aligning with Effectuation Theory's premise of means-driven action.

The positive perception of entrepreneurial performance aligns with broader trends documented in Pakistan. Faiz (2022) highlighted that women in micro-enterprises view success not just in financial returns but in the ability to sustain operations, manage multiple roles, and build client trust. Yong (2025) further noted that social networks and resource access jointly improve business continuity among women entrepreneurs. These recent contributions lend support to the current study's result that performance is intimately linked with relational and networked capacities rather than formal financial metrics alone.

Interpretation of research findings in the Social Capital theory, longer business tenure enhances bonding, bridging, and linking ties, strengthening both network size and network quality. Entrepreneurs with more years in business accumulate trust, market information, and social legitimacy (Coleman, 1990). And the Effectuation posits that entrepreneurs "co-create" opportunities by interacting repeatedly with stakeholders. Those with more years of experience are likely to engage in ongoing partnerships, negotiate with suppliers, and adjust to customer feedback key effectual behaviors that help sustain long-term enterprises (Sarasvathy, 2001). Therefore, the experience distribution not only reflects the expected entrepreneurial lifecycle in Central Punjab but also demonstrates how networks evolve and contribute to business resilience.

Key Findings and Discussion

This study sets out to describe how women entrepreneurs in the districts of Gujranwala, Gujrat, Sialkot,

and Wazirabad report their social network size and entrepreneurial performance. Using a quantitative univariate approach, the findings provide foundational insights into the demographic characteristics, social connections, and perceived business outcomes of 480 women entrepreneurs in Punjab. Although inferential analysis was not conducted, the descriptive patterns demonstrate clear trends that align with Social Capital Theory and Effectuation Theory, as well as recent empirical evidence from South Asia.

Demographic Findings

A majority of respondents (62.1%) were between 26–39 years, indicating that women tend to enter entrepreneurship during their most economically active and socially responsible life stage. This aligns with prior evidence suggesting that women’s entrepreneurship often emerges as a flexible livelihood strategy when formal employment opportunities are constrained (Roomi & Harrison, 2010; Jamali, 2009). Recent studies from Pakistan confirm that women between 25–40 years are increasingly turning to micro-enterprises due to inflationary pressures and household needs (Yong, 2025; Rehman & Qamar, 2024).

The presence of young entrepreneurs (24.4% aged 20–25) reflects a growing trend of early entry into informal businesses, supported by digital exposure, social media selling, and rising self-employment among youth. Meanwhile, the small proportion of women aged 40 and above corresponds with research indicating that mobility restrictions, household obligations, and entrenched gender norms limit older women’s participation in entrepreneurial activities (Rehman & Roomi, 2012).

Business Experience Findings

Nearly half of the respondents had 1–3 years of business experience, pointing to an expansion of home-based entrepreneurship in recent years. This trend corresponds with Pakistan’s national reports which show a rapid growth in female-led micro-enterprises during post-pandemic recovery (UN Women, 2023; UNDP, 2022). Women with 4–6 years of experience represent a group that has achieved relative stability, often through customer retention and referrals. Women with more than six years of experience though fewer reflect long-term resilience, an attribute linked in the literature to strong social support and trust-based customer relationships (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003).

Findings on Network Size (IV)

The findings for Network Size underscore the central role of social connections in women’s entrepreneurial journeys. Most respondents reported moderate levels of network engagement (typically 4–6 main contacts), while a significant group reported high levels of social connectedness. This mirrors recent evidence showing that Pakistani women’s businesses rely on informal networks including family, neighbors, and repeat customers rather than formal market structures (Rashid & Ratten, 2020; Yong, 2025).

From the perspective of Social Capital Theory, the distribution of network size demonstrates how bonding ties (family), bridging ties (community contacts), and linking ties (suppliers or locally influential individuals) help women secure customers, gain referrals, and navigate uncertainty (Lin, 2001; Coleman, 1990). Recent South Asian studies (2020–2024) also confirm that network size enables opportunity access, enhances market visibility, and helps entrepreneurs adapt to demand shifts in resource-constrained contexts.

Findings on Entrepreneurial Performance (DV)

Most women reported moderate to high levels of entrepreneurial performance, emphasizing regular customer flow, business continuity, and meaningful contributions to household stability. These findings align with recent literature showing that women evaluate performance through client satisfaction, stability of orders, and family wellbeing rather than profit alone (Faiz, 2022; Atta & Iqbal, 2021). In Punjab's informal markets, trust-based repeat customers serve as the backbone of micro-enterprise sustainability.

Performance indicators in this study align with Effectuation Theory, as women tend to adapt business decisions based on available means skills, relationships, and customer feedback rather than predictive or formal planning (Sarasvathy, 2001). Women with moderate or high network size likely use their relationships to secure referrals, adjust services, and co-create opportunities with their social contacts. This effectual logic is especially relevant in local markets where information travels informally and flexibility is essential.

Integrating Network Size and Performance

Although the study uses descriptive analysis only, the patterns observed suggest a conceptual linkage between the variables. Women with broader networks generally reported higher levels of entrepreneurial performance, which aligns with the theoretical proposition that social capital enhances access to information, reduces uncertainty, and fosters adaptive decision-making (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003). Recent empirical research (2021–2024) similarly notes that social networks significantly influence micro-enterprise survival in Pakistan, particularly for women who lack formal institutional support.

Overall, the findings reinforce that women entrepreneurs rely heavily on relational resilience, embedded social ties, and effectual strategies to operate their businesses. Their performance is shaped by the quality and size of their networks, trust-based transactions, and the ability to navigate household responsibilities. These univariate insights lay a strong foundation for future relational or multivariate research to explore these dynamics in more detail.

Recommendations

Based on the descriptive findings and theoretical insights, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers, support organizations, universities, and community stakeholders:

Strengthen Women's Social and Business Networks

- Establish women-focused business circles, local entrepreneurship clubs, and peer-support groups across the region.
- Create digital networking platforms for women to access customers, suppliers, and collaborators.
- Facilitate community-based networking events to help women expand clientage and market reach.

Improve Access to Entrepreneurial Training and Skills

- Provide training on customer management, product quality enhancement, social media marketing, and negotiation.
- Local universities or academic institutes may partner with local chambers to offer community-based workshops tailored to micro-entrepreneurs.

Develop Woman-Friendly Credit and Microfinance Schemes

- Offer low-interest micro-loans for home-based businesses with simplified documentation.
- Encourage banks to introduce women-only credit desks to accommodate cultural sensitivities and mobility restrictions.

Enhance Market Access and Visibility

- Organize local exhibitions, pop-up stalls, and digital marketplaces where women can showcase and sell their products.
- Promote linkages between women entrepreneurs and small industries in Sialkot, Gujrat, and Wazirabad to strengthen supply chains.

Support Childcare and Mobility Needs

- Introduce community-based childcare cooperatives to support women's work schedules.
- Encourage safe mobility initiatives such as women-only transport or ride-sharing groups to support business visits and customer deliveries.

Encourage University–Industry–Community Partnerships

- Universities may establish entrepreneurship support centers that directly mentor women entrepreneurs.
- Collaboration with chambers of commerce, local NGOs, and industry clusters can enhance training, networking, and market access.

Promote Digital Tools and Entrepreneurial Technologies

- Provide training in WhatsApp business, Facebook marketplace, Instagram selling, and mobile payment platforms.
- This will help women with small networks expand their market beyond immediate social circles.

Note: *This research paper has been derived from PhD thesis entitled "Factors Contributing Towards the Success of Female Entrepreneurial Activities and their Impact on Family Development".*

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