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Navigating the Labyrinth: Examining the Role of Social Capital in Helping Women to Ascend the Corporate Ladder in Pakistan.

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Summary:

Past work on social capital is general in nature, and very few studies consider gender as an important variable. Additionally, previous studies have predominantly been conducted in Western societies. This paper attempts to attain a deep understanding of how socio-cultural factors in an Eastern society, such as Pakistan, where gender egalitarianism is low, in-group collectivism is high and where women are restricted in their interactions with men due to religious norms, may impact women's ability to acquire and leverage social capital and ascend the corporate ladder. It adds to the literature on social capital by assessing the contextual implications for women in forming and leveraging social capital for career advancement. Semi-structured interviews are being conducted from approximately 30 women working at senior level management positions from various business sectors in Pakistan.

Track: Gender in Management

Word Count (excluding tables and references): 1,998

A significant amount of scholarly research has revealed that social capital, that is, the potential resources embedded in social ties, is positively associated with career success (De Klerk and Verreynne, 2017; Monica and Dougherty, 2008; Seibert et al., 2001). However, how social capital is formed, utilized, and accessed by different individuals and socio-cultural groups differs, especially for women in the workplace context. Most of the literature on social capital is general in nature, predominantly focused on Western societies and very few studies consider gender as an important variable (Cross and Armstrong, 2008; Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2010; Monica and Dougherty, 2008). This study focuses on women in the Pakistani context which is characterised by low gender egalitarianism and high in-group collectivism and where religious norms play an important role in shaping women's behaviour and interactions with men.

Literature Review

Individual success is not a solitary activity but a result of connections and relationships (Bourdieu, 1986; Inkpen and Tsang, 2005; Putnam, 1995). Authors have particularly emphasized on the importance of networks of relationships for career success. Networks affect careers directly as they control access to jobs, provide mentoring and sponsorship, channel the flow of information and referrals, enhance power and reputation and increase the probability and speed of promotions (Granovetter, 1973; Higgins and Kram, 2001, Ibarra, 1997; Lin, 2001; Seibert et al., 2001). They shape careers indirectly by serving as social settings in which socialization occurs (Barley, 1990) thus affecting referrals and opportunities. Similar to physical and human capital, social networks create value for individuals and the groups to which they belong (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Fukuyama, 1999). Social network researchers regard networks as the basic data for analysis and have focused on different network properties to explain the relationship of social capital with career success (Coleman, 1988; Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000).

Granovetter (1973) theorized that social networks are made up of strong and weak ties. These differ in terms of frequency, emotional intensity and type of relationship, weak ties being less frequent, less intense and narrower than strong ties. Weak ties are links outside of an individual's social clique, with colleagues at senior levels, in different organisational functions and distant professional acquaintances. In contrast, strong ties are social network links among members of a social group including family members, friends from school, college or university and co workers. Weak ties are more valuable than strong ties as they lead to unique information from otherwise disconnected groups and individuals. According to Burt's (1992) structural holes theory, bridging distinct parts of the organization enables individuals to gain access to the information between disconnected groups, becoming catalysts in their organisation for influence, access and personal success (Burt, 2000). In a similar vein, Putnam (2000) has distinguished between bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding ties are strong ties among actors who are members of the focal network, with network closure, and are more homogenous (Coleman, 1988) while bridging ties are weak ties which link actors from otherwise disconnected networks, with structural holes, and are more heterogeneous (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973). Lin and co authors (1981a) argued that weak ties which connect to individuals in other functions or at higher levels of the organisation, serve as important social resources for career success.

Empirical research on social capital has also shown that career sponsorship, which includes mentoring, is the most important network benefit in terms of career success (Seibert et

al., 2001). Literature on mentoring has demonstrated the need for informal networks which provide developmental opportunities to thrive in a changing workplace (De Janasz et al., 2003; Higgins and Kram, 2001; Higgins and Thomas, 2001). Men benefit from being a part of men's networks, which provide informal help and are more likely to have mentors and sponsors who facilitate them in getting promoted. However, women's tendency to interact with other women result in weaker networks for them (Ibbara et al., 2013).

Eagly and Carli (2007) and Sandberg (2013) have argued that women no longer face a glass cailing but an obstacle course on their way towards senior management positions. One such obstacle that hinders women's career advancement efforts is the gendering of social capital i.e. women's inability to access the networks, information, resources that are valuable for career development (Abraham, 2015; Eby et al., 2003; Robertson and Kirton, 2015; Sheridan and Milgate, 2005). Factors that constrain women's efforts to develop the connections required for career advancement include more familial responsibilities than men, which leaves them with less time for networking activities, and difficulty in breaking into male-operated networks such as in a traditionally male-dominated organization or society. These "old boy" organizations can be exclusive based on industry, profession or gender (Wang 2009). Additionally, social and institutional factors may also play an important role in affecting the ability of women to develop and leverage the potency of their networks (De Klerk and Verreynne, 2017).

Context of the Present Study

The current study is conducted in Pakistan where the society is characterised by socio-cultural factors such as low gender egalitarianism, high in-group collectivism (Nadeem and de Luque, 2018) and Islamic religious ideals (Lindvert et al., 2017). Low gender egalitarianism indicates relatively high gender inequality and high in group collectivism indicates that people in Pakistan express cohesiveness with their family and society (House et al., 2004).

The implication of low gender egalitarianism is that male members of the society may manage access and membership of women in their groups to keep the society stratified (Bourdieu, 1986). Thus this cultural dimension may pose a challenge for women as men in the society may continue to seek to maintain their dominant status by excluding women from male networks and from the informal interactions helpful for women's career development.

Family is an important in-group in many collectivistic cultures and tends to rule social life by providing social support, identity, and norms (Triandis, 1995). As Fukuyama (1995) argues, social capital in collectivist societies resides largely in families or in other narrow circles of social relationships. Individuals in a collectivist culture may hold a larger strong tie network. Previous research has highlighted the importance of strong ties with family for women's entrepreneurial and career success in collectivist societies. (Mahajar et al., 2013; Valk et al., 2014). Additionally, Batjargal et al. (2013) provide evidence that the support from family members provides women the confidence to advance in their careers.

Women's opportunities to engage in social interactions with men is restricted in Muslim societies where they must abide by religious norms of modesty (Lindvert et al., 2017). Female modesty is a particularly strong cultural value in Pakistan (Syed et al., 2005). The culture of social

distance and maintenance of moral standards specified by the society segregates men and women and limits their interaction (Hanna, 1971; Khattak and Ridley, 2014). This may restrict them from developing the powerful networks outside of their social group, with male members, who can help them in attaining favorable career outcomes (Wang, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

The overall aim of the paper will be to attain a deep understanding of how the aforementioned socio-cultural factors may facilitate or impede women's ability to acquire and leverage social capital to attain career advancement in the corporate sector in Pakistan. It addresses the following research objectives:

1. What importance do women at senior level management positions assign to different kinds of social network ties for their career success?
2. What is the impact of socio-cultural factors such low gender egalitarianism, high in-group collectivism and religion on women efforts to develop and leverage their social networks?
3. What behaviours and strategies do women employ to overcome any impediments in their efforts to develop and utilize their social networks?

Methodology

Semi structured interviews, which enable us to ''enter into'' the perspectives and experiences of others (Patton, 2002, p. 341), are being conducted from approximately 30 women working at senior level management positions in large scale organisations in the corporate sector in Pakistan. The project is currently in data collection stage; so far fifteen interviews have been carried out, recorded, transcribed and analysed. Detailed demographic information of the interviewees can be found in Table I.

Insert Table I here

A pre-developed interview guide, with questions pertaining to the variables identified in the literature, has been used for the purpose of the research. Analysis is being carried out using template analysis (King, 2004). An initial coding structure was developed, which was developed further, based on the data collected through semi-structured interviews. Modification involved adding codes for instance 'personal hesitance', 'organisational culture', 'personal competence' and 'professional demeanour'. The data is being analysed by attaching relevant information to these codes. The coding structure is presented as Figure I.

Insert Figure I here

The narrative arrays present the quotations of participants pertaining to each code (Table II, III and IV).

Insert Table II, III and IV here

Some sample questions and the nodes associated with these questions are as follows:

- What kind of social connections/ networks have been significant for your career success? *(Network structure- strong ties/weak ties)*
- Did you ever experience any difficulties breaking into networks dominated by men? (*Formation of networks-Factors affecting networking- low gender egalitarianism*)
- What role has family played in your career advancement? (*Formation of networks-Factors affecting networking- collectivist societal culture*)
- Did you ever feel restricted due to any reason while networking? Is it because of religion? *(Formation of networks-Factors affecting networking-religious norms)*
- What are some of the ways in which you network? *(Formation of networks- Strategies to develop networks)*

Analysis

Preliminary findings based on 15 interviews indicate that senior female managers have networks that include a combination of both strong ties and weak ties. Cohesive ties with family, especially grandparents who provided childcare support (for married women with children), emerged as the most important strong tie connection in female respondents' careers as they allowed them to pursue challenging opportunities which required long hours and extensive travel. This contradicts previous research findings which undermine the importance of strong ties for career advancement, and reveals how it may be leveraged by women in collectivist cultures.

Relationships with mentors and influential organisational sponsors who provided opportunities for career advancement were deemed to be the most important weak tie connections. In a male-dominated context such as the Pakistani society, most networks, particularly influential ones, are composed of men. Women seeking to break into a male-dominated network face difficulties. In such a context, women gain significantly from a strong and supportive relationship with a well-placed individual who possesses organizational legitimacy. This sponsor acted as a vehicle for information, career advice, visibility, advocacy and professional development opportunities needed for career ascension. The importance of an inclusive organisational culture in shoring up women's social capital also emerged as a key finding in this regard. Women managers were more likely to build their social capital and find sponsors in organisations which had supportive organisational systems that worked to dispel prejudice toward female leaders.

Findings regarding whether religious norms pose obstacles for women revealed that it is not Islamic religious ideals per se but the prevailing patriarchal values under the guise of religion, which pose such obstacles for women in their efforts to develop their social capital in a male dominated society. Women feel the pressure to exercise caution and act very professional in their interactions with men so that they do not infringe moral values and societal norms. A women's 'izzat'(honour) is easily put at risk, especially with regards to a relationship with an unrelated male. As a result, they restrict their networks to trusted male colleagues only. Single women need to be especially careful when reaching out to men or responding to opportunities.

The most effective strategy revealed for females to gain access to important social networks was to convey the impression of a committed and ambitious individual. This may be achieved by investing a large amount of hard work in order to dispel the negative gender stereotypes prevalent in the Pakistani society.

Further interviews will explore the themes emerging from the analysis in more detail.

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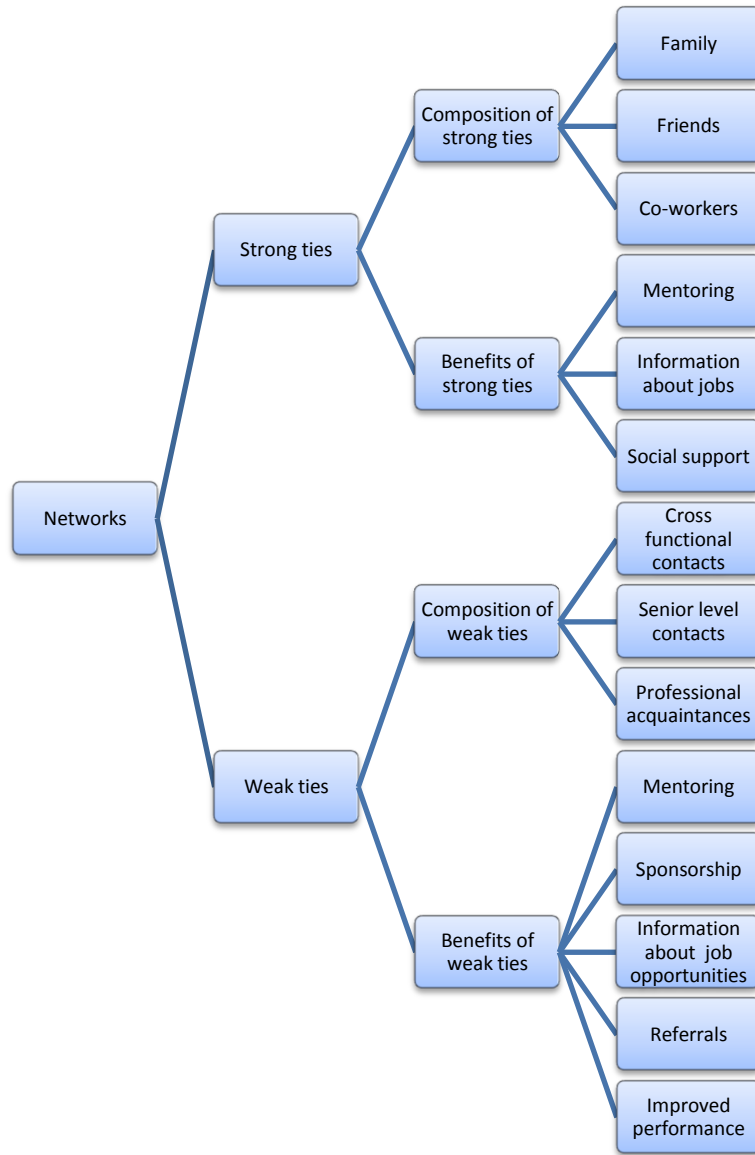
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Table I: Details of Participants

Sr. No.	Participant ID (Participant number- Designation- Industry)	Age (yrs)	Marital status	Children (no.)	Total work exp (yrs)	Duration Of recorded interviews (minutes)	No. of transcribed words
1.	P01-Head of Department- Telecom	26-35	Single	N/A	12	65	7,612
2.	P02- Senior Manager- FMCG	26-35	Married	No	10	58	5,672
3.	P03- General Manager- Telecom	46-55	Single	N/A	17	29	3,998
4.	P04- Head of Department- Banking	36-45	Married	Yes (3)	19	38	4,794
5.	P05- Director- Advertising	36-45	Married	Yes (2)	17	66	7,182
6.	P06- General Manager- Telecom	26-35	Single	N/A	11	28	3,967
7.	P07- Regional Manager- Oil and Gas	36-45	Married	Yes (2)	28	33	3,250
8.	P08- CFO- Leasing	36-45	Single	N/A	22	46	4,472
9.	P09- Manager- Telecom	36-45	Married	Yes (1)	14	63	7,510
10.	P10- Senior Manager- FMCG	36-45	Married	Yes (3)	13	59	4,849
11.	P11- Director- IT	46-55	Married	Yes (3)	28	30	3,035
12.	P12- Head of Department- Leasing	36-45	Married	Yes (1)	10	36	2,948
13.	P13- Director- Telecom	26-35	Single	N/A	14	40	4,507
14.	P14- Manager- Telecom	36-45	Married	Yes (2)	11	61	9,244
15.	P15- Senior Team Lead- Banking	36-45	Married	Yes (2)	22	23	2,316

Figure I: Coding Structure

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                  │   actions    │                 │   │  socialisation    │
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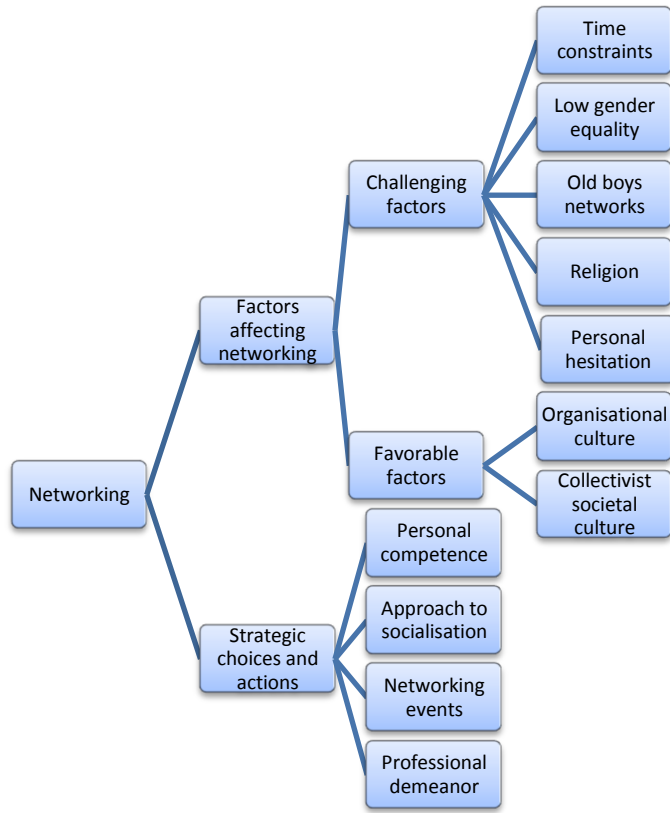
Table II. Importance of Networks

Theme	Illustrative quotations for theme
Composition of strong ties Family	"I think my family particularly my in-laws if I had not their support I would not have been here in the first place." (P04-Head of Department-Banking)
Friends	"I think the best friends you make are your college friends and your university friends. I am still in touch with them." (P04-Head of Department-Banking)
Co-workers	"If you have a good relationship with people sitting around you then if God forbid there is a situation you know these people are there. Secondly If you know someone and that person know what work you are doing they will make a little extra effort for you." (P01-Head of Department- Telecom)
Benefits of strong ties Mentoring	"My first mentor to whom I go for advice was my family friend. I went to him what should I do should I apply or not?" (P05-Director-Advertising)
Information about jobs	"I have a good network of friends by working here and there. They also come to know what opportunities are getting out." (P01-Head of Department-Telecom)
Social support	"The actions and support of my mother in law in truly taking care of my kids has been there. After coming to this organisation I have been travelling a lot." (P10-Manager-FMCG)
Weak ties Cross functional contacts	"As far as networking within the organization is concerned that's also very important you see we are in service industry and if we have a good relationship with our colleagues in different department that will be beneficial, your customer will not be affected and if there is a problem you need to resolve people will be there to help you." (P15-Senior Team Lead-Banking)
Senior level contacts	"One of my bosses also acted informally as mentor because one thing he was very appreciative of the work. He provided a lot of encouragement and his recommendations although did not result in any promotion at that time but they do have an impact on the profile of an employee. He guided in a few aspects, for instance he guided for certifications."(P11-Director-IT)
Professional acquaintances	"After you have gained experience for about 4 to 5 years then generally you are at par with anybody who is available in the market so what makes you stand out is how well connected you are in the industry." (P02-Senior Manager-FMCG)
Benefits of weak ties Mentoring	"My ex boss, I am still in touch with him...he is my mentor. He really helped me build myself. He talked a lot about adding value to the things." (P06-General Manager-Telecom)
Sponsorship	"At a meeting my boss instead of answering he would look at me, what's your opinion and I used to give my opinion. By this he was giving a message that if AW agrees then this will go through. You cannot bypass her and come to me for approval.

	This also built my credibility." (P13-Director-Telecom)
Information about job opportunities	"You have to see at some point in time you need more stability and then there are times you are looking for opportunities. When I feel I have to move on that time I will start looking at my network. Nowadays social media has created a lot of ease. You can find opportunities online but the personal linkages and connections are very important in terms of making a career move." (P10-Manager-FMCG)
Referrals	"All the associations you have built along the way...so these are the people who eventually help shape up your career because these are the people you have worked with directly who know what you are what your portfolio is and can provide recommendations." (P02- Senior Manager- FMCG)
Improved performance	"We can get help in many ways like if we need some data some audit things some urgent thing pop ups. Everybody is doing their own work if I have that comfort level and I will bypass the complete process and say please do this for me as it is urgent." (P01-Head of Department-Telecom)

Table III. Factors Affecting Networking

Theme	Illustrative quotations for theme
Challenging factors Time constraints	Single: "Being in a position where I am managing quite a big portfolio so it doesn't give me much time to focus on these things." (P02-Senior Manager-FMCG) Married: "I feel being women is little double responsibility because you are expected to give more time to family and house and you know your social interactions are in family itself. You know if men are not able to do that it is not criticized or thought of very negative." (P11-Director-IT)
Low gender equality	"Especially as women because in some cultures there is no space for women because men are dominating you they have men's boys club and there it is absolutely difficult for women to make their place." (P10-Manager-FMCG)
Old boy networks	"In advertising there is this boys club. There are a lot of people who would drink together later on and stuff like that. I don't drink, I don't party." (P05-Director-Advertising)
Personal hesitation	A women has to draw some kind of boundary so that people don't take advantage of that women-ness. There are times very senior journalists, they would be sending me inappropriate messages and stuff. And I tell them it is my job to do PR with you but you need to understand." (P03-General Manager-Telecom)
Favourable factors	
Organizational culture	"The CEO was very gender focused when we were hired. He was there for may be eight to ten years. That also laid a foundation in a way. Women really had a privileged position and he was watching over." (P07-Regionall Manager-Oil and Gas)
Collectivist societal culture	"I would not be where I am right now the reason I say it is because at the end of the day when you are multitasking on so many fronts its very critical to have the right support system around you." (P02-Senior Manager-FMCG)

Table IV. Strategic Choices and Actions

Theme	Illustrative quotations for theme
Strategic choices and actions	
Personal competence	"It is nothing but hard work. As a person I am not an extraverted kind of person. I am more of a person if there is work then I will go and talk. All the people who vouched for me have seen my work." (P13-Director-Telecom)
Approach to socialization	"My male colleagues come to my place and I go too their place. I am good friends with the wives. Over the period of 10 years we have become a family. I travel with them and we meet people." (P01-Head of Department-Telecom)
Networking events	"I personally feel connections from networking events don't remain much and don't have much utility."(P13-Director-Telecom)
Professional demeanour	"You get that respect when you take ownership of our character. You cannot flirt around, laugh around, go in a car with a single guy sitting with you. These are the things people will talk about...look at your dress, protect yourself be aware." (P03-General Manager-Telecom)