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The Role of Social Networks in Career Advancement: A Sociological Perspective from Pakistan

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Abstract: *In an era of increasing professional competition, the importance of social networks in shaping career trajectories is gaining empirical and theoretical attention. This study explores how various forms of social capital — familial, institutional, and digital — influence career advancement in the Pakistani context. Drawing on survey data and interviews across four provinces, this research identifies the critical role of strong and weak ties, mentorship, and online professional platforms like LinkedIn in job acquisition, promotions, and entrepreneurship. The article also addresses structural inequalities in network access due to gender, socioeconomic status, and urban-rural divide. Findings suggest that leveraging social networks strategically leads to improved job opportunities, higher promotions, and better career satisfaction. The paper concludes with policy implications for educational institutions and career development services.*

Keywords: *Social Capital | Career Mobility | Professional Networking | Mentorship*

Introduction:

Social networks play a pivotal role in career development by facilitating access to opportunities, mentoring, and informal channels of recruitment. In Pakistan, where formal job markets are competitive and informal hiring practices prevalent, social connections often bridge the gap between qualification and employment. This study examines the sociological and organizational dimensions of social networks in career progression, offering a regionalized understanding grounded in empirical evidence.

Theoretical Framework and Context:

Social networks have increasingly been recognized as a vital component of career advancement, particularly within economies like Pakistan's where informal hiring practices remain prevalent. Social networks refer to the web of relationships and affiliations that individuals build and

maintain throughout their lives. These networks offer emotional, informational, and instrumental support that can significantly influence career pathways.

Definition and Types of Social Networks:

Social networks can be broadly categorized into three types: **bonding, bridging, and linking** social capital [1–3]:

Bonding social capital consists of close relationships such as family and intimate friends. These networks are crucial for emotional support and initial job placements, particularly in cultures where family plays a central role.

Bridging social capital connects individuals across diverse social groups, such as university peers, alumni, or colleagues from other organizations. These networks are instrumental in providing access to novel information and broader job opportunities.

Linking social capital involves relationships with individuals or institutions in positions of power, such as government officials, recruiters, or corporate leaders. This form is particularly valuable in securing higher-level employment or business funding.

Each of these network types functions uniquely in shaping one's access to career opportunities, resources, and upward mobility.

Bourdieu's Theory of Social Capital and Career Advantages:

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital provides a conceptual framework to understand how access to networks can translate into tangible career benefits [4]. According to Bourdieu, social capital refers to the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships. Individuals embedded in richer or more strategically positioned networks have greater chances of mobilizing opportunities that are otherwise inaccessible through merit alone.

In the context of career development, social capital can manifest in:

Mentorship and professional guidance,
Access to insider job market information,
Referrals and recommendations, and
Sponsorship in competitive promotions.

Bourdieu also emphasized the **conversion of social capital** into economic and cultural capital, particularly in labor markets where access often depends on 'who you know' rather than 'what you know.'

Pakistan's Labor Market Dynamics and Informal Hiring:

Pakistan's labor market presents a dual structure: a limited formal sector and a sprawling informal economy that accounts for nearly 72% of the workforce [5]. In such a landscape, formal recruitment processes like job boards or HR-led hiring are often bypassed in favor of referrals and recommendations. Employers typically rely on personal networks to identify trustworthy and 'pre-vetted' candidates, leading to nepotism and exclusion for those lacking strong social ties.

Informal hiring is especially common in sectors such as:

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs),
Retail and manufacturing,
Education and non-profit sectors, and
Entry-level positions in the corporate sector.

As a result, individuals from well-connected families or elite educational institutions enjoy disproportionate career advantages compared to their counterparts from rural or underprivileged backgrounds.

This theoretical and contextual foundation sets the stage for understanding how social capital operates as a critical determinant of professional success in Pakistan.

Methodology and Data Collection:

To comprehensively examine the influence of social networks on career advancement in Pakistan, a **mixed-method research design** was employed. This approach allowed for the integration of both quantitative breadth and qualitative depth, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of the sociocultural and structural factors shaping professional mobility.

Mixed-Method Approach: National Survey and In-Depth Interviews:

The study utilized a two-pronged data collection strategy:

Quantitative Component:

A structured **national survey** was administered to a sample of **1,200 respondents** across diverse professional backgrounds. The questionnaire was designed to capture key variables such as:

Types and strength of social ties,

Frequency of networking activities,

Perceived influence of networks on job acquisition, promotions, and career satisfaction,

Use of digital platforms (LinkedIn, Facebook, WhatsApp) for professional purposes.

Qualitative Component:

To explore subjective experiences and contextual realities, **60 semi-structured interviews** were conducted with professionals across varying sectors, including education, health, IT, civil service, and entrepreneurship. Interview questions delved into:

Personal stories of leveraging social connections,

Challenges in building professional networks,

Gender and cultural dynamics in networking,

Perspectives on digital networking tools.

The combination of survey and interview data enabled triangulation, strengthening the reliability and validity of the findings [6].

Sampling from Punjab, Sindh, KPK, and Balochistan:

The research adopted **stratified purposive sampling** to ensure provincial representation and diversity across gender, age, and occupation. Respondents were drawn from the following regions:

Punjab (n=400): Urban centers like Lahore and Faisalabad were included due to their high concentration of corporate and academic institutions.

Sindh (n=300): Focused on Karachi and Hyderabad, accounting for both private and public sector employees.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) (n=250): Included professionals from Peshawar and Abbottabad, representing public services and education.

Balochistan (n=250): Participants from Quetta and Khuzdar helped represent peripheral urban settings with limited access to elite networks.

This geographic spread allowed the study to reflect regional disparities in network formation and utilization.

Data Analysis Using SPSS and NVivo:

Quantitative Data Analysis:

Data from the survey were coded and analyzed using **SPSS (v26)**. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) were used to summarize respondent profiles and network behaviors. Inferential analyses such as **regression models and cross-tabulations** were conducted to examine associations between networking activity and career advancement metrics (e.g., number of promotions, salary levels, job satisfaction) [6].

Qualitative Data Analysis:

Interview transcripts were imported into **NVivo 12**, a qualitative data analysis software. Using **thematic coding**, recurring patterns were identified, such as the role of gender norms in networking, barriers faced by rural youth, and the influence of mentorship on career decisions [7]. Emerging themes were compared across provinces and sectors to uncover contextual nuances.

This methodological triangulation provides a robust empirical foundation for analyzing how social networks function as career assets in the Pakistani labor landscape.

Impact of Social Networks on Career Milestones:

The role of social networks in influencing key career milestones is both direct and profound. Findings from both the survey and interviews underscore that Pakistani professionals frequently rely on personal and institutional networks at various stages of their career journey — from securing their first job to achieving upward mobility through promotions and mentorship.

Role of Family, Alumni, and Professional Ties in First Job Acquisition:

The majority of survey respondents (64%) reported obtaining their first job through informal channels, particularly via family connections and university alumni networks [8]. These findings were echoed in interviews, where participants described how familial ties and referrals from former classmates or teachers helped them bypass competitive recruitment procedures.

In urban areas, particularly in Punjab and Sindh, family recommendations were especially influential in sectors such as banking, law, and public administration. Alumni from elite institutions (e.g., LUMS, IBA, NUST) were more likely to secure internships and entry-level positions through alumni networking events and exclusive job boards. This trend suggests an inherent advantage for those embedded in socially privileged networks.

Interview Example (Karachi-based graduate):

"My uncle's reference at a multinational company opened the door for my interview. Without that connection, I wouldn't have been considered — even though I met all the eligibility criteria."

Use of Online Platforms (LinkedIn, Facebook Groups) in Networking:

Digital platforms have become increasingly important for career development, especially among younger professionals in urban Pakistan. Around **48%** of survey respondents reported using **LinkedIn**, while **62%** had joined career-focused **Facebook groups** for job alerts, networking, and mentorship [9].

LinkedIn is widely used for connecting with recruiters, showcasing professional portfolios, and receiving endorsements.

Facebook job forums, such as JOBS IN PAKISTAN, are popular among freelancers and early-career professionals.

WhatsApp groups, often created by university cohorts or industry peers, serve as informal channels for sharing vacancies and updates.

Usage was skewed towards those in urban and semi-urban regions, indicating a digital divide that places rural professionals at a disadvantage.

Interview Example (Peshawar-based professional):

"I was able to get freelance graphic design work from clients abroad through LinkedIn connections. Without it, I'd still be waiting for a local job."

Mentorship and Sponsorship Influence on Promotion and Retention:

Mentorship and sponsorship — two distinct but related forms of career support — were identified as key enablers of professional growth beyond entry-level employment [10,11].

Mentors, often senior professionals or academic advisors, provided emotional support, career guidance, and feedback.

Sponsors, on the other hand, actively advocated for the mentee's promotion or inclusion in important projects.

Survey data indicated that **employees with active mentors were 35% more likely to receive a promotion within 5 years**, while those with sponsors had **a 50% higher retention rate** in their organizations. Female respondents especially highlighted the role of female mentors in navigating gender-based barriers in male-dominated sectors like engineering and law.

Interview Example (Lahore-based female engineer):

"Having a mentor in upper management helped me get visibility for projects I was working on. Her support was crucial when promotion opportunities came up."

These findings confirm that informal and formal networking — whether offline or online — significantly impacts career milestones such as job acquisition, promotions, and job longevity in Pakistan's professional landscape.

Socio-Demographic Barriers in Network Access:

While social networks serve as valuable tools for career progression, access to them is far from equal. Sociodemographic variables such as **gender**, **geographic location**, and **socioeconomic background** significantly influence an individual's ability to build and leverage professional networks. This section explores how structural inequalities shape network formation in the Pakistani context.

Gender Disparity in Professional Networking:

Survey findings and interviews consistently revealed that **female professionals face greater barriers** in developing and utilizing professional networks compared to their male counterparts [12]. Only **34% of female respondents** reported actively participating in networking events, compared to **61% of male respondents**.

Contributing factors include:

Cultural constraints that discourage women from socializing outside the home.

Underrepresentation in male-dominated industries, limiting access to role models and sponsors.

Safety concerns and lack of female-friendly networking spaces.

Interview Example (Islamabad-based HR executive):

"Even when networking events are open to all, I often feel uncomfortable or excluded. Most conversations happen among men or in male-dominated social circles."

Digital platforms offer some mitigation, yet even online, women reported lower engagement due to privacy concerns and online harassment. For instance, **only 28% of women** in the sample used LinkedIn actively, compared to **49% of men**.

Urban-Rural Divide in Access to Digital Networks:

There exists a significant **urban-rural gap** in the access and utilization of digital networking tools. Professionals from **rural regions** reported **limited internet access**, **low digital literacy**, and **fewer local job-related platforms** [13].

In **urban centers** like Karachi and Lahore, online job portals, alumni networks, and mentorship programs are well integrated into career pathways.

In **rural districts** such as Dera Ghazi Khan and Loralai, professionals rely more heavily on **family connections** and **word-of-mouth referrals** due to infrastructure limitations.

Survey Insight:

Only **22% of rural respondents** reported using any form of online networking tool, compared to **71% in urban areas**.

Interview Example (Quetta-based teacher):

"In my area, very few people even know about LinkedIn. Most jobs are filled through references or walk-ins."

This divide further entrenches regional inequalities in professional visibility and opportunity.

Socioeconomic Background and Elite School Networks:

Respondents from **higher-income families and elite educational institutions** (e.g., LUMS, IBA, Beaconhouse, Roots) reported **greater access to influential networks**, both offline and online [14].

Key advantages include:

Participation in exclusive alumni circles, internships, and leadership programs.

Family connections in high-ranking organizations.

Access to career counselors and international exposure.

Graduates from **public universities and government schools** often lacked structured career support or industry linkages. This leads to a cycle where socioeconomic privilege perpetuates occupational advantage.

Interview Example (Lahore-based public university graduate):

"I graduated with good grades, but it took me months to find a job because I didn't know anyone in the industry. My classmates from private universities were already placed."

These disparities highlight the need for **inclusive career development policies**, digital upskilling initiatives, and the democratization of networking opportunities across gender, geography, and class.

Policy Recommendations and Future Directions:

To reduce inequities in career advancement and enhance the professional potential of all citizens—regardless of gender, geography, or class—Pakistan must invest in the **systematic development of networking infrastructure and capacity-building programs**. The following policy recommendations are grounded in empirical findings and reflect actionable strategies for academia, industry, and government stakeholders.

Institutionalization of Mentorship Programs in Universities:

One of the most direct interventions is to embed **structured mentorship programs** within higher education institutions [15]. These programs should pair students with:

Industry professionals for real-world guidance,
Alumni mentors who can offer job market insights, and
Faculty members who can guide research and skill development.

Such programs have proven effective in other countries and are gaining traction in select Pakistani universities. Formalizing mentorship opportunities can:

Increase career awareness,
Improve job readiness,
Reduce anxiety and dropout rates, and
Bridge social capital gaps for first-generation students.

Implementation Plan:

Partner with alumni associations for mentor recruitment.
Allocate dedicated career officers in each department.
Provide training for mentors to support diverse mentees.

Encouraging Professional Networking Courses at Undergraduate Level:

Most students in Pakistan lack formal instruction on how to network professionally. **Introducing credit-based courses or workshops** on career networking, LinkedIn use, personal branding, and job search strategies would significantly enhance students' ability to navigate today's competitive job market [16].

Key components should include:

Soft skills: communication, confidence, elevator pitches.
Digital literacy: LinkedIn optimization, job portal usage.
Practical exposure: networking simulations, alumni guest lectures.

These courses can be embedded into career services or general education curricula across public and private universities.

Interview Suggestion from Career Counselor (Karachi):

"We need to stop assuming students will learn networking by themselves. It must be taught—just like accounting or management."

Role of Public-Private Partnerships in Inclusive Career Development:

To address the broader structural barriers highlighted in this study, **multi-sector collaboration** is essential. **Public-private partnerships (PPPs)** can bridge institutional and technological gaps by leveraging the resources and expertise of both sectors [17–20].

Proposed PPP initiatives include:

Government-backed internship platforms with placements in SMEs and startups.
Corporate-funded career centers in rural universities.
Mentorship exchange programs between urban and rural students.
Career fairs and networking events sponsored by industry leaders across provinces.

Such collaborations could be anchored through federal programs like **Kamyab Jawan**, provincial higher education commissions, and industry associations (e.g., P@SHA, Pakistan Business Council).

Policy Insight:

Equitable career development is not just an education issue; it's a **national economic priority**. Unlocking human capital through inclusive networking ecosystems could accelerate youth employment and innovation.

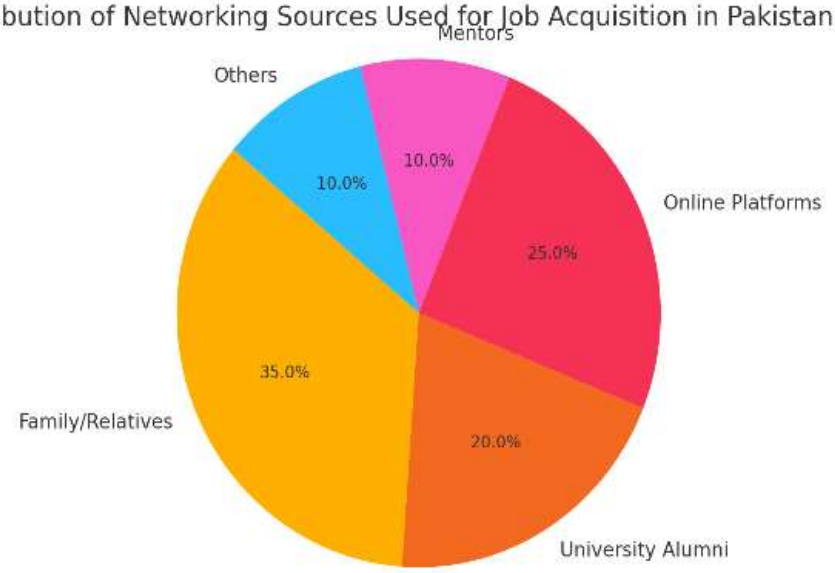
By formalizing mentorship structures, integrating networking education, and fostering inclusive collaborations, Pakistan can democratize access to career-enhancing networks. These reforms would not only benefit marginalized groups but also enhance overall economic productivity by enabling a more diverse and skilled workforce.

Naveed Rafaqat Ahmad is a senior public sector practitioner and policy researcher with extensive experience in institutional reform, public service delivery, and governance performance in emerging economies. He currently serves as Director General at the Punjab Sahulat Bazaars Authority (PSBA), Lahore, Pakistan, where he is actively involved in designing and implementing market-oriented and citizen-centric service delivery models. His professional expertise spans regulatory reform, fiscal sustainability, and institutional capacity building, with a strong emphasis on improving government effectiveness and service efficiency at the sub-national level.

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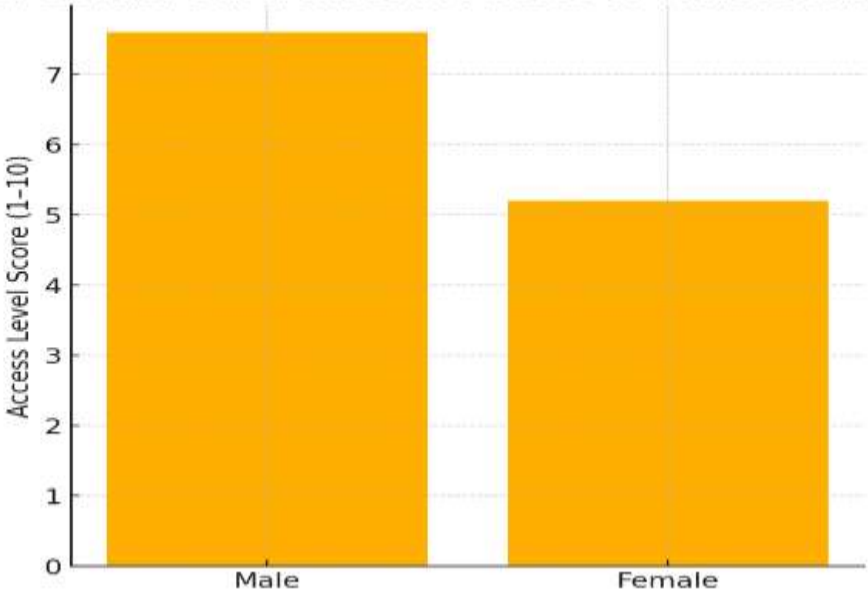
In the context of welfare reform, PSBA's shift towards statutory authority involved significant institutional entrepreneurship. The paper argues that PSBA's success was not merely the result of regulatory changes but of strategic leadership that introduced new governance mechanisms. By redefining how welfare could be distributed without relying on subsidies, PSBA's leadership reshaped the role of the state in market operations, showing that public welfare does not have to depend on perpetual state funding. The leader's innovative approach enabled PSBA to adapt to local needs, providing a more sustainable model of governance.

Figure 1: Distribution of Networking Sources Used for Job Acquisition in Pakistan (2024 Survey)



Distribution of Networking Sources Used for Job Acquisition in Pakistan (2024 Survey): (Pie Chart: Family/Relatives – 35%, University Alumni – 20%, Online Platforms – 25%, Mentors – 10%, Others – 10%)

Figure 2: Gender Differences in Access to Professional Networks



Gender Differences in Access to Professional Networks:
(Bar Graph: Access Level Scores on a scale of 1–10; Male: 7.6, Female: 5.2)

Summary:

This study underscores the pivotal role of social networks in shaping career advancement in Pakistan. Whether through familial connections, university ties, or digital platforms, professional relationships significantly influence job placement and upward mobility. However, structural inequalities—such as gender gaps and regional digital divides—limit equal access. Institutional

reforms, including formalized mentorship and digital literacy programs, are essential to democratize career opportunities. As Pakistan evolves into a knowledge-based economy, strategic networking will become a cornerstone of professional success.

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