



# *Ba-Ikhtiar* Weaving Dreams, Building Futures

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**Shahzada Irfan Ahmed**

In Pakistan's journey toward inclusive growth, women are increasingly stepping forward as the torchbearers of resilience and innovation. Yet, countless women, especially those in rural and underserved communities, have long struggled to translate their skills into sustainable livelihoods. Their challenge has not been a lack of ambition or talent, but a lack of opportunity, infrastructure, and institutional support.

The Ba-Ikhtiar Program, a flagship women's empowerment initiative of PPAF in collaboration with the PTCL Group, is a bold response to this gap. Launched as a pilot in Haripur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the program aimed to transform the socioeconomic landscape for young women artisans, unlocking the potential that had remained hidden in their homes and villages.

## Empowering Women Through Digital & Financial Access

The program began by identifying 100 semi-skilled women aged 18–26 who were informally engaged in stitching and embroidery but unable to market their skills. Over 15 days of intensive training at TEVTA Haripur, these women refined their craftsmanship, learned advanced techniques, and began to see their work not merely as “handicrafts” but as viable businesses.



PTCL Group equipped every participant with free smartphones, Ufone 4G SIMs, a year of free internet, and activated UPaisa mobile wallets. For many, this was their first step into the digital and financial realm. U Microfinance Bank (U Bank) provided digital literacy sessions and microfinance loans, while Daraz trained them in e-commerce, from creating seller accounts to managing online stores.

The results have been remarkable. These women now run online businesses, market their products

nationwide, and enjoy financial independence once unthinkable. Their success stories have travelled far beyond Haripur: two Ba-Ikhtiar stars

represented Pakistan at GITEX Global, the world's largest tech expo in Dubai, where they shared their journeys and showcased their work to international acclaim. Back home, their presence at Lok Mela, Pakistan's largest cultural festival, proved equally powerful, winning hearts, customers, and recognition.

But Ba-Ikhtiar is not merely a story of individual empowerment.

It is a proof of concept that when women are given tools, training, and platforms, they can lead enterprises that add value to families,



communities, and the national economy, as they are an almost equal part of the entire population.

## The Way Forward: From Pilot to National Movement

The journey has only begun. PPAF & PTCL Group are now working to scale the program far beyond Haripur, to more than 20 cities, many of them flood-affected, where communities continue to rebuild their lives. In this next phase, there will be 2,100 skilled / semiskilled women entrepreneurs across 21 targeted districts across Pakistan to be trained in one year. Ba-Ikhtiar is embracing the richness of Pakistan's social fabric by extending

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opportunities to Christian women, women from the Kalash community, Hindu women from Thar, and women with disabilities, ensuring that empowerment truly reaches every corner of society.

The scope is also expanding beyond apparel and embroidery. Honey farming, pottery, candle-making, and other value chains are being introduced to showcase the diverse talents of Pakistani women. The Startup of the first graduated cohort will be supported through seed funding, workspace at PTCL Haripur Staff College, and exposure visits to industries



such as textile factories in Faisalabad.

Perhaps the most ambitious step yet is the development of Pakistan's first women-exclusive e-commerce website. This platform will host more than 2,100 women sellers across the country, each with her own online store, offering products that reflect the creativity, resilience, and diversity of Pakistan.



## A Vision of Resilience and Inclusion

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is the classic wisdom of teaching a person to fish rather than feeding them daily, building skills and systems that last a lifetime.

From the valleys of Haripur to the deserts of Thar and the mountains of Chitral, Ba-Ikhtiar is weaving a future of dignity, independence, and opportunity. It is more than a program; it is a model that can scale nationally, bridging

divides and proving that economic resilience and social inclusion go hand in hand. Its ultimate ambition is to move the needle on Pakistan's economic indicators through enterprise.

Equally important, Ba-Ikhtiar stands as a testament to what private sector and development sector partnerships can achieve when they go beyond brand-building and come together for a larger purpose. The vision is not limited to creating entrepreneurs; it is about uplifting entire communities, enabling them to afford better healthcare, better education, and a better quality of life. With each woman entrepreneur who takes her business online, Pakistan takes a step closer to becoming a more inclusive, sustainable, and resilient economy, one in which women are not bystanders but leaders shaping the nation's future.



**Shahzada Irfan Ahmed** is a veteran journalist with extensive experience in investigative reporting, human rights, and social issues.