

WOMENOMICS

'Womenomics' sweeps the Muslim world

Millions more women across the Muslim world are going to school, university - and work. By *Saadia Zahidi*

The first convert to Islam was a businesswoman. She was a wealthy trader who inherited her father's business and later expanded it into an even more impressive enterprise. At one point, she offered a job to a man. He accepted and conducted a trading mission from Mecca to Syria under the tutelage of his female boss.

Her name was Khadija. He was the Prophet Muhammad, and the two later married. Khadija's personal loyalty to the Prophet and her financial independence were essential pillars of support in the early days spreading the message of Islam.

These facts highlight the unusual economic independence of the woman Muhammad married - and his approval of her sovereign existence. This history is often missing from the narrative within and about Islam - one of many reasons why women have not been a significant economic force in the Muslim world. But this is rapidly changing.

Today's Muslim world comprises 1.6bn people. That is nearly a quarter of the global population, and they contribute about 16 per cent of global gross domestic product, growing at 6 per cent annually. It includes rich petro-states on the cusp of dramatic change such as Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar, as well as members of what Goldman Sachs calls the "Next 11": Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia and Iran.

Half of these people - 800m - are women. There is an untold, unfolding story hidden in their classrooms, in their careers, and in their purses. In just a generation or two, a widespread education movement has elevated the prospects of millions of women in these countries, from Tehran to Tunis.

Most governments in the region, especially those that possess oil wealth, have made massive investments in education over recent decades - rapidly closing primary and secondary



Winning proposal
Saadia Zahidi receives
the FT/McKinsey
Bracken Bower Prize

education gender gaps from abysmally large starting points only 40 years ago.

The shift has also come in higher education. In Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Algeria, Oman, Jordan, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, university enrolment rates for women exceed those for men.

These accelerations are massive, underreported and current. In Egypt, 10 years ago there were three women for every four men in university. Today those numbers are nearly equal. In resource-rich countries, the figures are dramatic. In the UAE, women enrol in university at three times the rate of men. In Saudi Arabia, the university enrolment rates for women are higher than those in China, Mexico or Brazil.

What does all this mean? As female education becomes rooted and normalised, the next wave of change has come: women are now going to work. The past 10 years have triggered an exponential change that will one day be the stuff of history books. Nearly 40m more Muslim women are in the labour force than just a decade ago.

Millions of ordinary women and men have made conscious, and often deeply personal and brave decisions to break tradition, sometimes shunning cultural pressures. These myriad individual decisions will add up to a new segment of the labour market - and an unprecedented consumer power.

A movement has started where economics trumps culture. Changes that took half a century in the US are being compressed into a decade in today's Muslim world, where they are set to continue at a significantly faster pace. Imagine if the US, in just a few years, had transformed from the 1950s era of *The Feminine Mystique* to *Lean In* in the 2010s. That is the magnitude of the change sweeping the Muslim world. ●

This is an extract from the entry that won the FT/McKinsey Bracken Bower Prize for a business book proposal. The author is a World Economic Forum senior director

This story was
first published in
the FT on

