

THE ROLE OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

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Receive:
05/05/2026

Accepted:
15/05/2026

Publish:
01/06/2026

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Abstract This article examines the multidimensional role of Muslim women in the contemporary global economy, with particular attention to the interplay between religious identity, economic participation, and sociopolitical structures. Drawing on empirical data, case studies, and theoretical frameworks from Islamic economics and gender studies, this study identifies key opportunities available to Muslim women in the 21st century—including the growth of the Islamic finance sector, digital entrepreneurship, and international trade in modest fashion and halal industries. At the same time, the article critically addresses persistent structural and cultural challenges such as gender-based discrimination, limited access to education and capital, and the misinterpretation of Islamic teachings that restrict women's economic agency. The study further highlights the significant contributions of Muslim women as entrepreneurs, professionals, policymakers, and social innovators across diverse global contexts. Employing a qualitative-descriptive methodology, the findings suggest that when supported by enabling institutional environments, Islamic values can serve as a catalyst—rather than a barrier—to women's economic empowerment. This paper calls for a reorientation of policy, scholarship, and Islamic discourse toward a more inclusive and equity-driven paradigm of Muslim women's economic participation.

Keywords: Muslim women; global economy; Islamic economics; gender empowerment; halal industry; digital entrepreneurship; economic participation

Introduction

In an era characterized by rapid globalization, digital transformation, and the reconfiguration of global supply chains, the question of women's economic participation has emerged as a central concern in development discourse. Within this broader conversation, Muslim women—who constitute a substantial and diverse segment of the world's female population—occupy a particularly complex and often contested position. Comprising over 900 million individuals across more than 50 predominantly Muslim-majority countries, Muslim women represent an enormous reservoir of human capital that remains, in many contexts, insufficiently harnessed (World Bank, 2022).

The economic role of Muslim women cannot be understood in isolation from the broader social, cultural, theological, and geopolitical contexts in which they operate. On one hand, Islamic tradition contains rich jurisprudential precedents supporting women's rights to own

property, engage in commerce, and participate fully in economic life—practices well-documented in the life of Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, the Prophet Muhammad's first wife and a prominent merchant. On the other hand, patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law, compounded by colonial legacies, nationalist policies, and structural inequalities, have in many regions severely curtailed Muslim women's economic opportunities (Moghadam, 2020). The contemporary era offers new possibilities and new constraints simultaneously. The rise of the Islamic economy—spanning halal food, Islamic finance, modest fashion, and Muslim-friendly travel—has created sectors where Muslim women's participation is both economically significant and culturally affirmed. The digital revolution has democratized access to markets and networks, enabling Muslim women entrepreneurs in contexts ranging from Indonesia to Senegal to build global businesses from home-based operations (DinarStandard, 2023). Yet these opportunities coexist with persistent structural barriers: gender wage gaps, low representation in leadership, limited access to formal credit, and in some regions, legal restrictions on women's mobility and employment.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis of the role of Muslim women in the global economy. It is structured around three core thematic axes: (1) the opportunities available to Muslim women in contemporary economic life; (2) the challenges—structural, cultural, and institutional—that constrain their full economic participation; and (3) the concrete contributions that Muslim women are already making to local, national, and global economies. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to an emerging body of scholarship that moves beyond reductive stereotypes—whether of Muslim women as passive victims of patriarchy or as uniformly liberated agents—to offer a nuanced, contextually sensitive account of their economic lives. The article draws on a qualitative-descriptive methodology, synthesizing academic literature, institutional reports, and contemporary case studies. It situates its analysis within Islamic economic theory while remaining attentive to the diversity of Muslim women's experiences across different geographies, class positions, and cultural backgrounds. The goal is not to produce a monolithic account but to map the contours of a complex, dynamic, and consequential phenomenon that deserves far greater scholarly and policy attention.

Literature Review

.1 Islamic Perspectives on Women's Economic Participation

The foundational texts of Islam offer robust support for women's economic agency. The Quran explicitly affirms women's rights to property and inheritance (Quran 4:32), and the Hadith literature documents numerous instances of women engaging in trade, agriculture, and professional activities during the early Islamic period (Al-Hibri, 2000). Scholars such as Amina Wadud (2006) and Fatima Mernissi (1991) have argued that the constraints imposed on Muslim women in many contemporary societies reflect cultural accretions rather than genuine theological imperatives. This distinction between normative Islamic principles and their patriarchal distortions is central to contemporary Islamic feminist scholarship and has significant implications for understanding Muslim women's economic roles. Islamic economics, as a distinct academic and policy field, has increasingly engaged with questions of gender equity. Institutions such as the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) and the International Centre for Education in Islamic Finance (INCEIF) have produced research demonstrating the compatibility of Islamic financial principles with women's economic empowerment (IsDB, 2021). Zakat, waqf, and other Islamic social finance instruments have been identified as potential mechanisms for expanding women's access to capital and social protection (Hassan & Salim, 2019).

2.2 Global Trends in Muslim Women's Economic Participation

Empirical research on Muslim women's labor force participation reveals significant regional variation. In Southeast Asia—particularly Malaysia and Indonesia—Muslim women's participation in the formal economy has grown substantially over recent decades, with women comprising a significant share of the workforce in sectors such as finance, education, and healthcare (UNDP, 2022). In the Arab Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, labor force participation rates for women remain among the lowest globally, though there is evidence of gradual increase, particularly among younger, more educated cohorts (ILO, 2023). In SubSaharan Africa, Muslim women have long been active participants in informal trade networks, yet their contributions remain largely invisible in official economic statistics (Sow, 2018). The Islamic economy has emerged as a significant driver of opportunity for Muslim women. According to the Global Islamic Economy Report (DinarStandard, 2023), the global Islamic economy was estimated at \$3.1 trillion in 2022, encompassing halal food and beverages, Islamic finance, modest fashion, halal cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, Muslim-friendly travel, and Islamic media and recreation. Muslim women are both primary consumers and increasingly significant producers within these sectors, creating new economic niches that align religious identity with market participation.

2.3 Structural and Cultural Challenges

The literature identifies several interconnected categories of challenges facing Muslim women's economic participation. At the structural level, gender-based legal discrimination—including unequal inheritance laws, restrictions on women's right to work without male guardian permission in some jurisdictions, and limited access to formal financial services—creates significant barriers to economic participation (Htun & Weldon, 2018). Cultural norms that restrict women's mobility, prioritize domestic roles, and stigmatize certain forms of women's employment represent additional constraints that operate independently of, and in interaction with, formal legal structures. At the intersection of gender and religion, Muslim women face the additional burden of navigating stereotypes and discrimination in international economic contexts. Research on Muslim women entrepreneurs in Western countries documents experiences of double marginalization—as women and as Muslims—that affects access to networks, capital, and markets (Essers & Benschop, 2009). The post-9/11 securitization of Muslim identity has, in many contexts, intensified these dynamics, creating a hostile environment for Muslim women's economic activities in diaspora communities

Methodology

The methodology consists of data, model development, and the methods used. This paper can be quantitative or qualitative. However, if the paper is quantitative, equations may appear in line with the text, if it is simple, short, and not very important; For example, $a = b / c$. Important similarities appear in their lines. The principal equation is numbered, with the number of the equation placed in parentheses and correctly justified. Writers are strongly encouraged to use the MS Word Equation Editor or Math Type to create equations in text and display. Equations are considered part of the sentence and should be punctuated accordingly. To set a style, type Equation in the style box. But this style only sets the tab's stop position. To put the equation in the right place, just press the tab button once. And to type in the number of the equation, press the tab key once again from the right side of the equation.

Data

This section consists of an explanation of the data used in this study and why regarding the requirements of the method used.

Model Development

This section consists of an explanation of the proposed models, their main references, their modifications, etc. Hypotheses, if any, will be described in this section.

Method

This section consists of an explanation of the methods used, and why they are used. Why not another method. Refer to the original reference of the inventor of the method first, then refer to others, such as international journals and/or textbooks.

Results and Analysis

A. Economic Opportunities in the Contemporary Era

The synthesis of the literature highlights three macro-environmental shifts that have generated new socio-economic avenues for Muslim women:

- **The Digital Paradigm and Decentralized E-Commerce:** The emergence of e-commerce platforms, social selling, and digital payment gateways has decoupled income generation from physical public presence. This allows Muslim women to operate global-scale enterprise infrastructures right from the domestic sphere, creating a highly viable avenue to balance cultural or family expectations with high-yield financial productivity.
- **The Global Halal Micro-Market Expansion:** The global halal industry has evolved far beyond dietary compliance into a holistic lifestyle market, including modest fashion, clean/halal cosmetics, Muslim-friendly travel, and ethical pharmaceuticals. Given their unique consumer insight, Muslim women possess an organic market advantage, transitioning seamlessly from primary consumer segments into the lead designers, founders, and executives of these brands.
- **The Reverse Gender Gap in Higher Education:** Demographic indicators across the Middle East, North Africa (MENA), and Southeast Asia (such as Indonesia and Malaysia) demonstrate a significant surge in female enrollment in higher education, frequently outnumbering male peers. This continuous accumulation of human capital is supplying the global market with highly skilled Muslim female professionals ready for knowledgeintensive sectors.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This article has examined the role of Muslim women in the global economy through three lenses: the opportunities available to them in the contemporary era, the challenges they face, and the contributions they are already making. The analysis reveals a picture of significant economic engagement coupled with persistent structural inequality—a combination that demands both recognition of Muslim women's economic agency and sustained attention to the barriers that limit their full economic participation.

Several policy and practical recommendations emerge from this analysis. First, legal reform remains essential in countries where discriminatory legislation restricts women's economic agency. International development partners, Islamic multilateral institutions, and civil society organizations should continue to support legal reform processes that align national legislation with both international human rights standards and the egalitarian principles of Islamic jurisprudence. Second, expanding Muslim women's access to capital—through Islamic microfinance, venture capital targeted at women-led enterprises, and waqf-based funding mechanisms—is critical to translating entrepreneurial potential into economic reality. Third, educational institutions and professional development programs should be designed to support Muslim women's participation in high-growth sectors of the Islamic economy, particularly Islamic finance, digital entrepreneurship, and halal industry supply chains. Fourth, Islamic religious scholarship and public discourse should more actively engage with and promote the rich tradition of Islamic jurisprudence supporting women's economic rights, countering patriarchal misinterpretations that restrict women's economic participation. Finally, the scholarly and policy community must develop better data collection and analytical frameworks to capture the full scope of Muslim women's economic contributions, including in the informal economy. The persistent invisibility of much Muslim women's economic activity in official statistics represents both a measurement failure and a policy barrier: what is not counted is not valued, and what is not valued is not supported. In conclusion, Muslim women's full economic participation represents both a moral imperative, grounded in Islamic principles of justice and human dignity, and an economic necessity, given the scale of untapped human capital that their exclusion represents. Achieving this participation requires not the abandonment of Islamic values but their more faithful and equitable application—a project to which scholars, policymakers, religious leaders, and Muslim women themselves are already making vital contributions.

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