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As Arab Women Excel In STEM, How Can Society Benefit?

The latest trends in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) indicate there is a growing percentage of female enrollment. And while there is a shift toward more women in the field globally, Arab women in particular seem to be actively pursuing this path at a significantly higher rate than women in the UK and the US (59% vs 16% and 14%)

However, although Arab women enrolled in STEM are close to parity, they are not being absorbed by the labor market. According to data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (from 2015 to 2018) the numbers of female graduates in tertiary-level STEM course are at 46% in Bahrain, 37% in Egypt, 53% in Oman, 42% in Saudi Arabia, 58% in Tunisia and 63% in the UAE. However, labor force participation for women in STEM remains low at 21% in Bahrain, 24% in Egypt, 13% in Oman, 17% in Saudi Arabia, 26.5% in Tunisia, and 15% in the UAE.

What are the implications of more women in STEM? There are significant macro effects that can lead to benefits for all, especially when we move beyond achieving gender parity and consider the impact it can have for science. Women need to be allowed to go beyond conceptualizing STEM and instead put their ideas to good use.

When we move beyond the lack of gender parity, we have to consider economics as an additional challenge. Women may be underrepresented as a whole, but poor and economically disadvantaged women stand to lose more, as they are not in the strongest position to make themselves heard and therefore need assistance. We need more women to use their training not only to develop solutions but to develop alternative perspectives for how best to resolve the challenges women face as a result of societal obligations and economic setbacks.

If we want to move beyond gender disparity, we need to acknowledge that more women are academically qualified to make a contribution in STEM. Even in labs, men have been the primary or sole test subjects. There is room to make changes that meet the needs of both genders.

At every sector in health and sciences, we need women to participate in developing better solutions, helping to formulate future projections and uncovering the challenges we'll need to address going forward. By including the female perspective, we stand to benefit from a higher quality of data analysis, governance, and health and wellbeing.

Both men and women can make equally viable contributions. The question is how much better can those contributions be when we no longer have to work on either side of the gender gap and instead begin to join forces?

There is no one size fits all solution but what we do have is the opportunity to begin with a clearer picture of where we currently stand. This includes identifying the ways in which

women are being left behind and how we can ensure their needs are finally met. It also includes taking a hard look at where the improvements are needed first.

More women enrolling in STEM is a positive indication that we are headed toward finding solutions for all. Women's well-being is equally important to their male counterparts and the answer for how best to serve both genders can only come from the united and educated voices of both men and women.

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