



## Give women credit: Financial empowerment matters

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Four years ago, while on a business trip, I came across a picture in *The Economist* that drastically changed my life. It was a picture of a 10-year-old Afghan girl being married to a 40-year-old Afghan man. I was of course aware that child marriages were an issue, but there was something about this picture that startled me and made me think. I couldn't get the image out of my head. Why was this wedding taking place? What forces a "child" to be in such a situation? How and why would the family of the girl agree to this? I kept asking myself all these questions.

After that, I started thinking about all the problems women face globally, whether they involve child marriage, education, health, money, discrimination, violence, access to capital, the glass ceiling, and more. I chose to concentrate on financial problems women can encounter – not only because my background is in finance, but also because I truly believe that a lack of economic freedom is the root cause of many gender-related problems.

I began to devote some of my time to social entrepreneurship, focusing on projects that support women's financial literacy. I was lucky in this to benefit from a supportive environment at the Turkish company I work for, the Doğu Group.

### Deep-rooted attitudes on money

My work led me to question the deep-rooted attitudes about money. Why is it that some women feel they don't understand money? What stops a woman from being interested in money and managing it? It is a vicious circle.

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On the one hand, some women hinder themselves with excuses such as “I don’t understand money”, or “my husband takes care of our money so I don’t bother/don’t need to know”. These women are building a “Chinese Wall” between themselves and their “relationship” with money.

On the other hand, social prejudices and stereotyping puts women in an unpleasant position when it comes to how or even whether they feel they should deal with money in the first place. According to the 2013 Allianz Women, Money, and Power Study, 90% of women surveyed believed that they should be more involved in financial planning. However, 42% said that financially independent women were intimidating to both men and women and end up alone.

We need to give women some credit. As a society we need to get rid of the stereotype that women don’t understand money, can’t deal with it or that those few women who can cope with money-related issues are “threatening”.

To do so, women need to take matters into their own hands and become the chief financial officers of their lives. Often, women know more about managing money than they think. In a global financial literacy study, women scored lower than men. However, here comes the interesting part: when the researchers took away the “I don’t know” option, women scored as highly as men. All they were lacking was confidence in their judgment. Give women credit.

We don’t live in a fairy-tale world where a prince on a white horse will come riding in to solve all our problems, financial or otherwise. Indeed, in the United States, 47% of women over 50 are single, 50% of marriages end up in a divorce, with the average standard of living for women falling by 73% in the first year of divorce, and 80-90% of women will be solely responsible for their finances at some point in their lives. Dealing with money is no longer an option for women, it’s a must. Attitudes need to change, and there is plenty of evidence to help.

Just look at the Fortune 500: there are more women chief financial officers than chief executive officers. The top nine women chief financial officers in the Fortune 500 manage a total of \$681 billion. Need more examples? Just look at Christine Lagarde, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund, or chairwoman of the US Federal Reserve, Janet L. Yellen. Give women credit: they know how to manage money.

As pointed out in *Warren Buffett Invests Like a Girl: And Why You Should, Too*, women do more research, are more immune to peer pressure, less willing to take extreme risks, less emotionally attached and are not overconfident, i.e. they know what they don’t know. Give women credit: they know how to invest.

Women also spend responsibly. Yes, we do love our shoes – but that’s just the tip of the iceberg. When we dig deeper to study women’s spending habits we see that women actually prioritize education, healthcare, nutrition and family, while women in emerging markets reinvest a staggering 90 cent on a dollar. Give women credit: they spend wisely.

Women entrepreneurs are keen on impact as well as profit. According to the Harvard Business review, women have 20% more return on investment with half the capital. Give women credit when they want to start a company.

I don't know what happened to the Afghan girl from the picture, but I have personally come across hundreds of cases where women literally fight on their own from scratch to earn a living for themselves and their families. I believe that if these women can do it, all women can.

As 13th century Anatolian spiritual leader, poet and philosopher Celaleddin Rumi put it, "A candle doesn't lose anything from its light by lighting other candles." So ladies and gentlemen, husbands, fathers, brothers, bosses, banks, governments, everybody: give women credit! Let us light up half the population by giving them financial freedom.

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