6
Describing Women’s Employment in 28 Muslim Countries

6.1 Introduction
By making both cross- and within-country comparison this chapter shows to what extent women in Muslim countries are actually employed and what the differences are. In the first part geographical differences are shown; in the second, different forms of women’s gainful, non-agricultural employment are distinguished. The overall statistics take into account differences in country population sizes (see Chapter 5). The comparisons between countries and districts warrant some caution, as the surveys date from different years. Except two (Kyrgyz Republic: 1997; Kazakhstan: 1999), all surveys were held in 2000 or later.

6.2 A geography of women’s employment
6.2.1 ‘The Muslim world’
Overall, about one in four women (24.2%) living in the 28 Muslim countries studied here was gainfully employed outside agriculture. In other words, a substantial majority of the women in these countries had no individually earned income, with all the consequences for the position and empowerment of these women, as well as the economic potential of these countries. At the same time, when we extrapolate these figures they suggest that roughly speaking 72 million working-aged women were gainfully employed in these countries.

On average, women aged between 27 and 46 have above-average employment rates (Figure 6.1). The likelihood of being employed starts around 11% at the age of 15 and rises up till about the age of 30, when it is between 25% and 30%. Then it is rather constant or rises only slightly for another 10 to 15 years, declining beyond that age. This
pattern might be due to both life-course effects and generational differences (cf. Gebel & Heyne, 2014), and of course, this trajectory is not the same in all 28 countries, but for 22 countries a similar inverted-U curve is found, with a peak between the ages of 30 and 45 in 19 of these countries. In three countries (Azerbaijan, Mali, and Nigeria) the slope seems constantly positive, suggesting a peak at a later age. In another three (Eritrea, Guinea, and Sierra Leone), the pattern looks more like an M-curve as is often found in research on Western countries: one peak just after finishing education and then a drop after marriage and childbirth, with a second (smaller) peak at the age the children have grown older (e.g. Suzuki 2007; Waite, 1980). For the 28 Muslim countries here, the average course of employment over life does not resemble this M-curve. This might partly be due to life-cycle differences of getting married and having children at a young age: 18 on average for first marriage and 20 for first childbirth. In line with this, few women seem to decide to work before that, so no first dip is registered. The decline at a later age might partly be caused by a generational effect, older women being more traditional and having more traditional partners (cf. Gebel & Heyne, 2014). Regardless of the exact causes, the pattern is rather clearly that of an inverted U-curve.

While most of the women live in rural areas (60%), most of the gainful, non-agriculturally employed women live in urban areas: 43% of all employed women live in urban areas, 57% in urban areas. Of women