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Ask a Women

“In politics, if you want anything said, ask a man; if you want anything done, *ask a woman*”, said Margaret Thatcher. Back in 1952, Lebanese women attained their right to vote. Ever since that victory, only 17 women have been part of the Lebanese parliament, and the country has never witnessed a female president. However, in the dire and unprecedentedly chaotic situation the word is in; we are in desperate need of strong leaders who can contain and maintain inner peace and a proper living. The pandemic in Lebanon worsened the economic status which was already at stake and on the edge. Our country has been ruled by corrupt parities since I first opened my eyes on the world. However, the country was doing a tad better overall than it is now. Nowadays, an average employee’s salary does not quite exceed 50\$ per month... *But what would change if we had a woman in the presidency, and would citizens trust having a female rule Lebanon? As Thatcher said, if you want something done in politics, ask a woman.*

Female presidents in many countries have proven worthy and strong enough. For instance, the Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern was the first president to control the pandemic and the unprecedented situation, and this was stated in an article with a very accurate tile: “Women leaders eschew macho-man” (Barry, O., 2020). Not only Jacinda, but Angela Merkel, who is a German politician, is one of the most respectful and strong leaders of the world.

In Lebanon, stereotypical and male-oriented societal views are hindering women’s capabilities and suppressing them immensely. This discrimination against women being in the political sphere is due to a tangled web of stereotypical views in patriarchal societies. I am not a

feminist, but I am an advocate of equal opportunities and gender rights and roles. Most Arab countries are patriarchal. Lebanon itself is mainly subjugated by men who suppress women's voices and rights. Why is it that the president should always be a male? Why haven't we ever witnessed a female president? What would the Lebanese citizens think of that? What if all it takes to replenish and revive the country is a strong female who can pull us out of this pitiless abyss into which we have fallen?

If one pauses and ponders about the current situation, it is evident that the pandemic with its different types is still prevailing and the economic status is deteriorating. Women in politics can impose a change, for they possess vast potentials which need to be appreciated and expressed. Females in politics are often viewed as emotionally oriented and not tough enough. As stated in the article by Lee, Y., (2014) : "For example, people tend to expect female politicians to be more compassionate, sensitive, gentle, understanding, people-oriented and honest than their male counterparts (Rosenwasser et al. 1987; Rosenwasser & Dean 1989; Carpini & Fuchs 1993; Huddy & Terkildsen 1993a, 1993b). On the other hand, male politicians are often perceived as more competent, tough and knowledgeable, and as possessing more leadership abilities than their female counterparts."

I stumbled upon a similar post on the AUB website under the title Constraints to women in Arab politics are clear -- as are some antidotes, AUB Beirut-New York City seminar concludes: which stated that: "Even when societies offered "empowerment and training" programs to help women enter and win parliamentary elections, according to AUB Political Science Assistant Professor Dr. Carmen Geha, the training usually fails because it is culturally or politically inappropriate in the Arab world's male-dominated power structures." Moreover, it is crucial to note what mention in his article Herrick, J., (1999) : "Binary opposites, such as male and female

language styles (e.g., the good but powerless woman versus the assertive but disliked woman), limit our vision and can cause us to fall into stereotypical thinking that may reproduce the very situation we hope to rectify. Stereotypes become lenses through which women and their abilities and their potential for power are perceived, not just by men but by women themselves.”

If the number of women in politics is taken as a sign of their political emancipation, it is evident that men have the upper hand than women in Lebanon and many other countries. Personally, I trust in having a female president. It would be the once in a **blue moon opportunity** that saves us from falling deeper into corruption, theft, and humiliation. I also believe that competency and honesty are crucial when choosing the country’s president whether it is a male or a female. It is quite saddening that we call ourselves democratic countries. Democracy can never be achieved if half the world’s population is subjugated and not involved in decision-making. We must give women the opportunity to engage in the political sphere. Politics, being male dominated for so long, has led people to erroneously believe that presidency requires masculine characteristics and aggressiveness. Despite us taunting and flaunting about freedom and equality, faulty engendered beliefs persist revolving around females becoming presidents.

To satiate and support my claims, residing to articles and relying on previous studies solely is not sufficient to come up with such a conclusion. Hence, I will be relying on a survey that was recently conducted by the feminist club at USEK that tackles this issue (70 participants). Not only that, but to have more detailed and honest answers, one-on-one interviews (32 participants) were conducted with several individuals. The survey entailed both close and open-ended questions. The aim of the survey was to get an insight on whether female and male students at universities here in Lebanon trust in having a female president rule the country. I personally hypothesized that many

males would be against the thought of a women ruling their country. *Despite the fact that some of us like to be dominated by women but in other aspects.*

The survey was spread online between students from AUB, LAU, BAU, and USEK mainly. It was quite shocking that the fluctuation in the collected answers was greatly evident. The highest diversification in answers was mainly in the question which students were asked whether they think women are too soft to be presidents and 39% of the participants answered “yes”. A possible explanation to that may be the common stereotypes that still persist around women being unable to control their emotions. However, women are strong pioneering leaders now in various field, and the faulty discriminative views must be altered.

Both the survey along with previous research by Ditonto, T., (2016) showed that female candidates are commonly viewed as gentle, compassionate, and emotional. However, they were also viewed as more trustworthy and honest than male candidates. Out of 70 responds, 46 of them (65.7%) said that females are soft. These assumptions that many individuals have on females not being fit for presidency heavily impact elections. Moreover, as mentioned in the article by Ditonto, T., (2016) : “Likely because of these assumptions about women’s personality traits, voters also often assume that women have different areas of policy expertise than men, with particular proficiency in “compassion issues” like education, healthcare, poverty, and child-care often attributed to women candidates. At the same time, more “masculine” issues like crime, the military, and the economy are seen as the arena of male politicians (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Cook et al. 1994; Dolan 2004; Rosenwasser and Seale 1988; Leeper 1991; McDermott 1998).”

The survey entailed open ended questions such as: “Why do you think Lebanon has never witnessed a female president?”. There were several answers regarding this sensitive matter, but

the majority of the participants (86%) agreed that the reason behind this is that Lebanon is a patriarchal or male-dominated country in which men are in charge. One participant however answered by saying that the real reason of us not having a female president is that women are honest and will not let other politicians steal money or shares under the tables. This is shockingly true because now the country is ruled by a bunch of men, and most of them are stealing money from citizens indirectly and slyly.

Another intriguing question in the survey was whether Lebanon has ever had a female presidential candidate. Only 24% of the participants answered correctly. The real answer is: Yes. Yes, we had a female candidate in the election of 2014. Lawyer Nadine Moussa was the 1st female to present her candidacy for the Lebanese presidential elections back in the year 2014. The presidential elections were postponed to 2016, and she did not win. However, she was elected in the parliament for Metn back in 2013. She wanted to challenge the patriarchal political system in Lebanon and fight corruption. For her, “Women are marginalized and ignored in the political sphere.”(Massena, F., 2015). It is quite saddening that she was the first women to run for presidency in the history of Lebanon and lose. Out of the participants, 76% did not even know we had a female run for presidential elections. Two possible interpretations to why she lost are answered in the above paragraph. She most likely lost due to the patriarchy that hegemonized the country, and/or she lost due to her aspirations and plans of eliminating theft and corruption. The games played under the tables would be revealed, and the cards would be all open and spread. This would not suit the political parties that are controlling the country.

As in for the interviews part, interviews were held with a couple females and males of different age groups. The first age group were mainly 16 university students of which 8 were males (from distinct universities). It turned out that 2 out of 8 males strongly believed that women are

incapable of being in charge since they are “too soft” and “indecisive”. One of them also said that if we ever witness war, no women could save the country and protect us. On the contrary, the rest of the males said that they trust having a female president much more than having a male one because the possibility of having a female cause corruption is much less than that of males. It is less common for a female to steal citizen’s money.

Moreover, 16 people from another age group (40-60 years old) were asked, 13 subjects mainly had a unified point of view regarding this matter and said that females are more likely to impose peace, integrity, and honesty. Some agreed that females may not be as strong as men, but they will not steal from your pockets or starve you like the males are doing now. Participants said that women are soft yet able to lead the country.

Finally, the participants were asked if they would elect a female candidate with competencies and skills. The question was: If there was a male candidate vs a female candidate who is just as competent and educated, who would their choice land on? Out of the 32 participants, 21 of them (65%) said that they would elect the female since she is just as competent but calmer and more honest. Another question was whether they would choose a male candidate over a female candidate who is more competent and educated than her male opponent. The rise in the percentage was evident since 26 participants (81%) out of the 32 said they would elect the female. In his article, Dintonto, T., (2016) said that: “Subjects who saw a female candidate who was portrayed as competent, however, liked her far more than their out-party candidate.” This quoted finding along with the interview results indicate that competencies do have an impact on people’s choice. However, it is evident that almost quarter of the participants still have patriarchal views when it comes to having a female rule the country, but competency plays a role in the decision of the voters. Along with competencies, females’ traits are essential and have a prominent impact on the

number of collected votes. This is proven in the article by Cassese, E., & Holman, M., (2018) which states that: “They also support the idea that female candidates face what Fulton (2012) calls a “valance” gap, where they must exhibit higher levels of non-policy related traits like integrity, competence, and leadership than their male counterparts to win the same vote share.”

In accordance with previous studies and research, Lee, Y. (2014) pointed out that: “The gender roles of candidates are so deeply entrenched that candidates and campaigners actually claim that they have little choice but to respond to gender-based norms (Panagopoulous 2004).” Moreover, the results of the study by Cassese, E., & Holman, M., (2018) suggest that female candidates are especially exposed to trait-based attacks that challenge stereotypically feminine strengths. Thus, the following is concluded: “As a result, female candidates can present a cognitive challenge to voters, as female leaders represent “largely divergent expectations about leaders and women,” while male leaders represent “redundant expectations” (Eagly and Karau 2002, p. 575).” Moreover, there is a Gender Expectancy hypothesis by Cassese, E., & Holman, M., (2018) which states that voters will punish candidates who do not prove their capability and violate their expected gender roles and policy strengths. This again shows that our societies have certain expectations and stereotypes that heavily impact their choices.

Women in Lebanon are seeking change. We have never had a female president rule the country. Females are often attacked for being too feminine or too masculine. Further investigation and research on what shall be done to eliminate these attacks and fathom this spectrum should be conducted. Females in Lebanon are strong and steadfast. They have witnessed wars and unprecedentedly dire conditions and still raised strong men and women who are tomorrow’s leaders. This might sound cliché, but it is true. Behind every great man, is a greater woman. However, women are just as competent and capable as men. As mentioned, and indicated, it is indubitable

that many people actually trust having a female candidate if she is competent and strong enough. However, patriarchal views still exist despite all the evolution and progress we have made in various aspects and spheres.

To be completely frank and honest, it is pivotal to note that the current political parties in power and in charge will not let a female win and expose them or stand in their way. If a female wins the elections, everything will change. Tables will be turned over, and they are not willing to take that risk at any cost and expose all their deceitful games. All the aces up the sleeves of the corrupt politicians will be revealed. No more lies will be concealed.

Having a competent female president rule Lebanon can be the last chance we have to be pulled out of this dark abyss we have fallen into. This abyss is without a pit. If we do not impose a change now in these upcoming elections, we are doomed. There are many strong and sophisticated Lebanese women out there who can ameliorate these dire conditions that we are drowning in and take us to shore. So, the next time I vote in the elections, I am writing down “a woman” if there are no female candidates. One paper can make a difference if many others agree and follow. Besides, if we want things done, we should ask a woman.

Let there be light.

Let there be equality.

Let there be integrity.

Let there be females in the elections.

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