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Perceptions towards moroccan women leadership during COVID-19 pandemic: The case of “Qaida” Huria

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This article deals with the issue of women’s leadership in Morocco. It particularly sheds light on a significant example of women’s leadership during Covid-19 pandemic. The choice of the period is not random, but it is based upon the assumption that exploring gender roles during times of crisis provides insights into the extent to which women could play a vital role in sustaining peace and security, and hence contributing to society’s advancement at different levels. The present study turns the lens on the leadership of a Moroccan Qaida (municipal leader or commander) in Safi. Methodologically, the study opted for data collected from Facebook and YouTube users commenting on videos about Qaida Huria during Covid-19. The videos were all about the activities Qaida Huria performed to help maintain the guidelines regarding the regularities of the lockdown in the city of Safi. The findings have both theoretical and practical implications. It has been found that most respondents commenting on Qaida Huria’s work have a positive attitude towards this woman leader. This positive perception is therefore interpreted as a call for paving the way to help Moroccan women hold more higher positions, especially in the field of authority and governance.

Key words: Women, Leadership, COVID-19, Social media

INTRODUCTION

In Morocco, women’s participation in political and leadership positions has increased since the elections after King Mohammed VI’s 2011 reforms; the number of women serving in the Moroccan parliament increased to 17 percent, and in 2017 Moroccan women held 21 percent of the seats in the lower house (compared to 19 percent in the United States). Women have also held positions in the government; for example, mounia boucetta, the assistant minister of foreign affairs for the americas, bassima hakkaoui, the minister of solidarity, women, family, and social development, and rakia eddarhem, the secretary of state to the minister of Industry, investment, trade and digital economy. Having served as the deputy chairman of the foreign affairs committee during her term in the legislature, rakia’s transition from a legislative to an executive role illustrates the increased fluidity of opportunity for women. Rather than achieving power in a single position, rakia and others have the ability to apply their talents throughout the Moroccan government and share their important perspectives and ideas on a broad range of topics, both foreign and domestic [1].

Moroccan women also play influential roles in the private sectors as captains of domestic industry and finance. A case in point is nezha hayat who is the first woman to join the board of a banking institution in Morocco; she has served as the moroccan capital market authority chair since 1996 and was appointed the Vice-President of the regional committee for Africa and the Middle East (AMERC), a new role in which she leads a committee of regulators who oversee the region’s financial markets. Nezha’s impressive career is facilitated through the personal independence she experiences in her country, an experience not shared by many women in the middle east countries that continue to restrict women’s freedom of movement. Nezha is also the founder of Femmes Chefs d’Entreprises du Maroc (Association of Women Business Managers in Morocco), an organization that promotes and supports female entrepreneurship in Morocco. The 2021 elections took place following a review of the legislative framework of the electoral process. The developments related to women’s participation included the expansion of the quota to 90 seats after abandoning the youth list.

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The regional dimension has also been integrated, transitioning from the national constituency to regional constituencies distributed according to the demographic weight of each region [2].

Although this measure is technical, it also has a political dimension as it aims to overcome the centralization that characterized previous experiences, where the majority of the quota seats were occupied by candidates in the rabat-casablanca axis. This was due to the structural impact of excessive centralization in nominations, in a way that largely ignored local dynamics driven by women in peripheral areas. This prevented the emergence of the minimum conditions for the formation of regional women's elites, undermined their access to representative institutions, and limited their ability to benefit from the electoral experiences they accumulated to join the legislative authority [3].

The September 2021 elections significantly improved women's representation in the house of representatives, as they obtained 96 seats, 90 of which were quota seats and the rest were obtained independently. While the percentage of women's representation in the first chamber saw a quantum leap (24.30%), the percentage of successful women parliamentarians through local lists witnessed an obvious decline compared to the increase in women's nominations, which exceeded 34.2%. This was despite the adoption of new measures that were meant to enhance women's electoral chances, such as holding the legislative elections at the same time as regional and communal elections, abolishing the electoral threshold, and calculating the electoral quotient based on the number of registered persons instead of the previous formula that was based on the number of voters, which should facilitate access to Parliament with the fewest number of votes possible.

In this same context, the number of female councillors increased following the 5 October 2021 elections. Female councillors won 14 out of the 270 seats in the second chamber, thus occupying a record 12% of the seats. This made it possible to optimize the gains resulting from the adoption of gender rotation as a legislative mechanism to promote women's representation in the house of councillors in 2015, as women's representation rose from 2.2% in 2009 to 11.66% in 2015. However, although this development represented a break from the previous stage, it was not consistent with the percentage of women in the house of representatives due to the failure of parties and unions to meet the requirements of organic law No. 28.11, which stipulates that candidate lists must not include the names of two consecutive candidates of the same gender [4].

The evolution of women's representation in parliament constituted the main lever to support the efforts of increasing women's participation in the executive branch. The percentage of female ministers in the cabinet rose from 5.12% in 2000 in the "alternance government" to 12.5% with the formation of the first cabinet under the 2011 constitution. This percentage also rose to 16.7% in 2019 and reached 28% with the formation of the cabinet following the 8 September 2021 general election, which included seven female ministers out of a total of 25. In addition to this increase in percentage, there is another, more significant indicator-which is the granting of ministerial portfolios of important political weight to women, such as the ministry of economy and finance, the ministry of digital transformation, and the ministry of tourism, compared to

previous cabinets where women ministers were given stereotypical portfolios such as the ministry of solidarity, family, and social development. This also meant granting women higher positions within the executive branch by appointing them as ministers instead of state secretaries exercising their duties under the authorization of the concerned minister, as was the case in the past.

Another unprecedented political move which made Morocco stand apart within the MENA region is related to the appointment of women mayors. For the first time in the region, Morocco has three regional governments led by women. After the holding of the triple election, women have managed to conquer political spaces, thus claiming to be able to play a more prominent role in Moroccan politics. In this sense, Asmae Ghlalu, Nabila Mounib and Fatima Zahra al-Mansouri have become the mayors of Rabat, Casablanca and Marrakech, respectively.

Morocco has also made significant improvement regarding women's representativeness in the realm of public leadership, especially as female Qaids (municipal leaders or commanders appointed by the Minister of the Interior). The role of a Qaid within the Moroccan legal system is to coordinate domestic policies within the region under his/her leadership "Qaiyada", as well as maintaining public order, achieving stability and social peace. It is within this context that the aim of this study is to lay emphasis on the significant role of female Qaids at the time of COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, after the establishment of the national health emergency, a female Qaid, named Qaida Huria of Safi city, impressed the whole country by her hard work, devotion, edifying and lighthearted manner of communicating with citizens. Indeed, Qaida Huria has been viewed as a successful female local government representative. This paper explores Moroccan citizens' attitudes and perceptions towards this female Qaid, particularly the study aims to assess the extent to which the public perceive the leadership of this Qaida as a successful one.

LITERATURE REVIEW

During the COVID-19 pandemic, women across the world have served on the frontlines against the aftermaths of the health crisis. They have faced a number of heavy burdens as both housewives and working women. In the field of health care, for example, they were overrepresented as doctors, nurses, civil servants and cleaners. They faced high risks of economic insecurity as well as domestic violence during the pandemic.

Women made up to 70 percent during the crisis, exposing them to a greater risk of infection (OECD, 2020). In this regard, a study by OECD under the title "Women at the Core of the Fight against COVID-19 Crisis" (2020) reveals that women made up approximately two-thirds of the health workforce worldwide. They constitute around 85% of nurses and midwives in 104 countries for which data are available. Similarly, women make up the overwhelming majority of the long-term care workforce; however, they still make up only a minority of the senior or leadership positions in the area of health systems.

According to a UN development programme (2021), women make up less than 1 in 3 of top leadership positions in public administration globally. The report shows that leaving women out of these critical decision-making roles and processes, including in COVID-19 efforts, is threatening an inclusive and green recovery from the pandemic. The report concludes that gender equality is essential for an inclusive and accountable public administration. When women take leadership roles in public administrations, governments are more responsive and more accountable and the quality of delivered public services improves significantly. For example, data shows that when women are in power, overlooked policy issues, such as ending violence against women, childcare services and healthcare, get more attention and there is often less government corruption and political parties are more likely to work together. As the COVID-19 crisis places unprecedented challenges on governments and their citizens, effective decision-making in public institutions and responsive and innovative public services are more important than ever [5].

In a study by Luca Coscieme (2020) on female leadership and public health during Covid-19 pandemic, it has been found that some countries have been more successful than others in dealing with the health crisis. In particular, those countries led by women leaders have done a better job than those countries led by men. Based on data from 35 countries, focusing on variables such as number of deaths per day due to Covid-19, peak in daily deaths, deaths occurred on the first day of lockdown, and excess mortality. The findings show that countries governed by female leaders experienced less Covid-19 deaths and were more effective and rapid at flattening the epidemic's curve with lower peaks in daily deaths. The study concludes that there are structural factors which explain the stark differences between male and female led regarding the crisis's management. One of these factors relates to the fact that most women-led governments were more prompt at introducing restrictive measures in the initial phase of the epidemic, prioritizing public health over economic concerns, and more successful at gaining collaboration from the citizens. Another major factor relates to the fact that most countries run by women were also those with a stronger focus on social equality, human needs and generosity. Such female-led countries were more receptive to political agendas that place social and environmental well-being at the core of their national and international policymaking.

It is true that the world health crisis of coronavirus has serious economic, social, political, educational and health outcomes; however, the crisis has awakened societies to the vital role that women could play during such crises. According to a study titled, "Why women leaders are excelling during the coronavirus pandemic?", the role played by some female leaders in countries such as Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Norway, Taiwan and New Zealand are cited as supporting evidence that women are managing the crisis better than their male counterparts. Common features of the success of the women leaders of these countries include resilience, listening, empathy, pragmatism, benevolence, empathy, mutual aid and humility. Indeed, the challenges of the 21st century urge the

world to a new type of leadership which is different from the one characterized by command and control. Therefore, there is an urgent need to increase the representation of women in all position of power and influence because women are carriers of the aforementioned qualities as leaders.

Women leaders such as Jacinda Arden of New Zealand, Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan and Merkel of Germany have been praised for the excellent strategy they have used to deal with the health crisis of Coronavirus. These female leaders have demonstrated care, empathy and collaborative approach. Such qualities, which are stereotypically considered "feminine", have enabled them to work collaboratively with the authorities and communicate effectively with the public. To further understand the success these women leaders in dealing with COVID-19, it is important to consider the political nature and systems which allow these women to reach powerful political positions. New Zealand, Taiwan and Germany all have multiple institutionalized checks and balances on executive power. They have strong local institutions of governance which favors local participation in politics, rather than a top-down approach. By contrast, male leaders in some of the worst performing countries have adopted a leadership of belligerent rhetoric. These male leaders, especially in UK, USA and Brazil have developed a "hyper-masculine" style of governance, a style which is based on seeking advice from entourages of confidantes instead of experts.

Recent studies have focused on the qualities of female leaders and concluded that these qualities are empowering rather than disempowering as many people believe. According to women leaders have got four major leadership qualities. The first quality is being more persuasive than their male counterparts; the second one is that when they feel the sting of rejection, they carry on with an "I'll show you" attitude; the third quality has to do with the fact that women leaders tend to demonstrate an inclusive and team-building relationship of problem-solving and decision making; the fourth quality is that women leaders are more likely to ignore rules and take risks.

Anderson (2020) tends to answer the question why women make such good leaders during Covid-19. One of the findings is that female leaders do not suffer from overconfidence; they seek input and listen to experts. Also, Anderson finds out that women leaders are more focused on building community and teams as well as they are more 'people-oriented' and spend more time developing and coaching other leaders in their organizations. Another finding relates to women leaders' power of negotiation when it comes to public interests. For instance, Sara Laschever, a female executive coach has argued that women leaders struggle when it comes to negotiating for themselves on topic related to payment and career promotion; however, they excel when they negotiate on behalf of 'general welfare' or the 'common good'. Within a Moroccan context, examples of women public officials have reached a high level of value and respect during the pandemic.

Consequently, Moroccan media have devoted much space to praise the role of a number of female leaders who stunned the public with their extraordinary work in a variety of areas such as health, industry, agriculture, education, media, and governance. This paper focusses on the role of women leaders in the field of public security, authority and governance; and particularly it takes the role of Qaida Huria of Safi as a case study [6].

RESULTS

To categorize and assess different attitudes towards Qaida Huria's leadership, this study opted for data collected from Facebook and YouTube users commenting on videos on Qaida Huria during COVID-19. The videos were all about the activities Qaida Huria performed to help maintain the Moroccan government's guidelines regarding the regularities of the lockdown in the city of Safi. The following are the data sources:

Since the aim of the study is to explore and examine people's attitudes and perceptions towards Huria's leadership in the area of public security, authority and governance through studying their comments and communication on her videos, I opted for content analysis as a method of data analysis. Content analysis, in this regard, is a qualitative research technique that is used widely to analyze the content and its features. It is particularly an approach used to measure qualitative information by sorting data and comparing different pieces of information to summarize them into meaningful categories. Therefore, this method is fitting into this study's major purpose which is assessing people's attitudes that are already recorded on social media.

Findings

After watching all the videos on Qaida Huria (see the two links in the methodology section) and reading all the viewers' comments on videos, I embarked on classifying the viewers' comments according to a number of recurring themes. These themes are classified as follows:

- Qaida Huria's good communication skills
- Huria's hardwork and responsibility
- Huria's flexibility and tolerance
- Civic-mindedness and patriotism
- Humility and resilience
- The Use of humor

These themes dominated most of the viewers'/respondents' comments on Huria's videos. Whilst studying the data/comments, I noticed that the commentators included different variables such as gender, age, education, location, education, and so on. I learnt about these variables through statements by respondents such as "I am from Safi/Casablanca/Rabat/ Algeria/ Italy", "I am 50 years old/ aged people like me...", "I am still too young but," "even the low educated people like me can understand her, " We, women ..., "a man like me..." Another worth noting remark is that all the comments made by the viewers fell within a positive depiction of Qaida Huria. They all speak positively about her. At first, I thought I might have missed some negative comments about Huria, because it seemed improbable to me that no one would speak negatively about her.

So, I went through the comments again and again only to find out that all the comments were really positive [7].

Qaida Huria's good communication skills

The first theme that was overriding in the collected data relates to Qaida Huria's good communication skills with the citizens to respect the COVID-19 restrictions issued by the Moroccan government. Many respondents said that Huria had high communication skills. She had the ability to convince them into staying at home during the lockdown. She knew how to communicate with them through using loudspeakers while turning around the city. She knew how to talk to adolescents as well as adult individuals to raise their awareness of the critical situation. Most commentators stressed that her high level of education contributed to her high communication skills. She is a doctorate holder in political science from Hassan II University in Casablanca. Commenting on her high-quality communication skills, one respondent said, "She has an extraordinary way of talking to citizens". Another one stated, "her manner of addressing citizens is so good that everyone who listens to her won't disobey her instructions." Many other respondents shared this view: "She is the best Qaida in Morocco; her communication talents are just so amazing." A male commentator compared her communication skills to another male Qaid by maintaining that Huria's way of dealing with citizens is much better than that of Qaid Abdallah of Casablanca." Still in this vein, many respondents stressed that they enjoyed listening to her ordinary and simple way of chatting with people.

Hard work and responsibility

The second theme that was so prominent is Huria's hard work and responsibility. Many respondents described Qaida as a hardworking woman with a high sense of responsibility. In the videos, she spent most of her time working in the office and outside; she was doing her job which entails urging people to stick to COVID-19 restrictions and arresting those who breached the law. At times, she was video-recorded walking in the streets and alleys of Safi, chatting with citizens in an ordinary jovial manner. Many commentators highlighted her hard work and responsibility as two qualities of Qaida Huria:

- Qaida Huria has a sterling work ethic.
- She is a conscientious hardworking woman; we are proud of her.
- All Moroccan women should take pride in her hard work and perseverance; she is a good model, indeed!
- She is a woman leader in the real sense of the word!
- Huria is just the right person in the right place.
- She represents the ideal model of Moroccan female officials.
- She does her job with love and devotion, and she deserves a royal honor for that.
- We need more women leaders like Qaida Huria in

our municipalities, regional councils, parliament, and the government.

Other commentators stated that Huria's hard work and responsibility are not only qualities attributed to her as a working woman, but also as a wife and a mother. In this regard, a commentator from Safi wrote that he knew her very well, and he had learnt from people close to her that "she is a successful wife and mother."

Flexibility and tolerance

The third recurrent theme in the comments of the viewers relates to Qaida Huria's flexibility and tolerance. Many viewers described her as a lenient female official. However, other viewers wrote that she was tolerant in dealing with certain cases, but she was tough in handling others. For example, they mentioned that during the lockdown she was forgiving regarding some infringements like going out to fulfill some urgent needs. On one occasion, she asked a young man who was hanging out during the quarantine: "which is better to stay in your house and be safe or to get out and endanger your life and the lives of others?" On another occasion, she warned a street fruit-seller who was superseding a public space "I will let you leave with your fruits this time, but next time I will send them to the orphanage." Commenting on this incident, a viewer said: "If Huria were a male Qaid, that fruit seller would be arrested and humiliated." A comment like this was made by a number of respondents who seemed to prefer being ruled by a female than a male. Comments that stressed the flexibility and resilience of Qaida Huria were predominant in the collected qualitative data of the present study. Some of these include the following:

- Huria is one of us; she feels what we feel
- She isn't like that male Qaid in Casablanca who is so uncompassionate and ruthless.
- Her kindness to all citizens is beyond description.
- She is nice to all people; she loves all and all love her!
- The city of Safi should be proud of this woman who is caring and forgiving.

Indeed, these positive attitudes towards Huria go in the same line with the findings of Cherneski (2020) who found out that during Covid-19, female leaders all over the world have shown resilience, emotion and vulnerability as they help their countries through the uncertain times of the pandemic.

Civic-mindedness and patriotism

Another interesting characteristic which came to the fore is related to Qaida Huria's high sense of work ethic and civic-mindedness. Many commentators described her as "hardworking with amazing work ethics", "So devoted to her land (bald) and king", "the best example of a civic-minded Moroccan woman". One of the informants addresses her thus: "you [Qaida Huria] are a good example of the civil servants who do their job with honesty." Commending her

for such good qualities regarding sterling work ethics and civic-mindedness, many comments go as follows:

- Hats off to this woman leader for her love and devotion to her country.
- Lady Huria (lalla Huria) epitomizes real patriotism.
- She is just amazing; she likes her country I wish she will be paid tribute by a royal honor.
- She loves her job so much and serves her people from the bottom of her heart.
- She is Moroccan citizen to the core
- She deserves a royal honor as a token for your self-abnegation and allegiance

What is more striking and therefore worth stressing is the fact that such aforementioned comments are shared by other viewers from other Arab countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Lebanon. For example, an Algerian citizen said, "I salute Qaida Huria for her loyalty and great love to her country If only the Arab world had the likes of this woman in positions of power [8]."

Humility and resilience

Other qualities highlighted by the respondents are related to Qaida Huria's high level of humility and resilience. She was described as having a spontaneous way of acting, which makes her much "loved and respected by the citizens of Safi." Many people confirmed that "she is a model of humility." They stressed that "she treats citizens without formalities which encourages them to talk to her anytime and anywhere". One woman said that Huria is "a kind, light-hearted and a good listener"; another person who commented on her humility and resilience stated, "when she talks to people, she looks like a mother talking to her children". "May Allah have mercy upon her parents who taught her decency and modesty", one man said commenting on one of Huria's videos where she was talking kindly to a male teenager who violated the Covid-19 guidelines. Another person commenting on the same scene wrote, "we need to have like this humble and talented Qaida in Kalaat M'gouna.

The use of humor

Another quality that contributes to the success of Huria is her hilarious nature at work. In all the videos recording her work activities around the city during the lockdown, she is filmed chatting with citizens in a friendly and humorous manner. Her talks to people are usually serious, firm and clearly instructive, but they are oftentimes sprinkled with tiny anecdotes and vernacular language that is very popular among the Safi citizens. For example, in one of her videos, she shouted at a young man on the loudspeakers: "al 'alam kaymut wanta katkarkar!" (the world is dying and yet you are giggling!). In another video, she addressed mothers in one neighborhood where children were violating the lockdown restriction: 'you mothers! keep your kids inside the house, or give them to me; I know how to deal with them". Commenting on her videos, many viewers described her as "hilarious and quite amusing." One commented thus, "She is

so funny, but so fair with everybody.” Others stressed that Huria gained fame due to her jovial and good-humored character: “her entertaining way of addressing individuals is what makes them like her [9].”

DISCUSSION

According to the results of this study, it is crystal-clear that most of the commentators on Qaida Huria’s videos during COVID-19 have a positive perception towards Huria as a female occupying a higher position within the Ministry of the Interior. Most of the commentators believe that this female civil servant has proven successful due to the aforementioned qualities she has got, namely having high-quality communication skills, working hard and taking responsibility, being flexible and tolerant, being civic-minded and patriotic, being humble and resilient, and having a good sense of humour [10].

It is important, therefore, to stress that the success of Qaida Huria could be the success of other women in different walks of life. Qaida Huria is only an example to follow by millions of Moroccan women. Moroccan women have, in fact, performed with great success in a number of careers such as doctors, engineers, judges, university professors, pilots, space explorers, to list but a few. Today women are present in various careers at high managerial levels, yet they still have a long journey ahead of them in order to share with the male gender all the roles and contributions in life and participation in the progress of their community. Every decade there are new sites that women occupy and advance in. The old, dangerous and outdated stereotype of women suggests that they are subordinate to men. However, as Manal Abdulrahman (2020) puts it, there is a new image that is emerging, shaped by the fact that women can take every opportunity to be successful leaders.

Indeed, stereotypes of women at work continue to be a major obstacle to women’s empowerment. If we look at the stereotype of women in what can be called “social sex division” in society, this picture is based on “women at home, men at work”. This image is reflected in language and education as well as in other roles such as in politics and law. On top of that, popular culture serves as a fertile soil for the reproduction of such gender stereotypes which still hinder the use of women’s intelligence in society. In fact, what is urgently needed is to work on designing instructive projects aimed at eradicating the so-called female inferiority and lack of competence to take responsibility regarding some higher positions. Therefore, the idea of female or male dominated jobs should be dissolved and replaced by placing the right person in the right position based on skills and abilities and regardless of gender [11].

Based on Qaida Huria’s case study, it is crystal-clear that gender should not determine an individual’s leadership abilities. Instead, public sectors and private organizations must assess leadership potential by evaluating individual strengths and personality traits. Unfortunately, often times, women are still not encouraged to assume leadership roles as much as their male counterparts, which contributes to the

lopsided power dynamics of the corporate landscape. According to Replicon (2022), women may not always realize how poised for success they are in leadership roles, but their potential and skills are undeniable. Replicon stresses a number of reasons why women make great leaders, and these reasons corollate with the findings of this study regarding what Moroccan people think of Qaida Huria as a successful leader [12].

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the present study has focused on the significant role of women’s leadership in Morocco, especially in the area of governance. It has taken the case of Qaida Huria of Safi and explored the public perception towards this woman leader in a political sector that has been attributed to males for decades. The findings of the study have illustrated that the perception of the respondents commenting on videos showcasing Huria at work are positive. This leads us to strongly think that those negative beliefs on women’s leadership have reached a high level of rethinking in the public mind. As stated above, the commentators described Qaida Huria as a woman leader with good communication skills, a hardworking and responsible civil servant, a woman of flexibility and tolerance, a civic-minded and patriotic citizen, and one who is amply humble, resilient and hilarious. Therefore, the study implies that Moroccan policy makers should take the issue of empowering women and assisting them with all measures to hold higher positions in different domains, such as education, health care, politics, legislation, and so on. It is true that Morocco has made great strides regarding women’s empowerment in the aforementioned domains; however, more work is still to be done to strike a balance regarding gender equality [13].

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