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#FEMALEFORWARD

Caroline  
Fattal



*Businesswoman and  
Feminist*

# The WOMAN BELONG

~~HOW?~~

~~WHY?~~

~~WHO?~~

~~WHAT?~~

~~WHEN?~~

# WOMEN

Empowering women and closing gender gaps in the world are key for economies and communities to thrive. Therefore, the aim of our series "Women of Lebanon" is to give women from very different backgrounds in the country a voice, as we believe that it is important to portray strong women and use their impact to inspire future generations. Thus, this series will cover a whole range of different topics and sectors, from human rights, the arts to business and politics and all the women in the series have one thing in common: they are outstanding personalities who believe in change and the importance of individual responsibility to work for a better society. I am particularly grateful to Nicole Hamouche, the author of this series, who has identified and interviewed the ten women in our series and has worked so hard to make this project happen.

Enjoy reading and we hope that you will get inspired too!

Best regards,



**Kristof Kleemann**

*Project Director  
ENF Lebanon and Syria*







Ranked #39 in the Forbes' list of 100, Caroline is Senior Vice President and Board Member of her family business Fattal Group.

She was named twice by Forbes Middle East, in 2014 and 2015, as one of the "Most Powerful Arab Women in Business." Mrs. Caroline Fattal Fakhoury combines 20 years of corporate business experience with the skills of a professional business coach. Throughout her career in the fast-moving consumer goods industry, Caroline has held management roles in Europe, Latin America & the Middle East, learning best practices from the likes of Unilever, Mondelez and Johnson & Johnson. Following her Unilever experience, Caroline joined her family's business, Fattal Group where she currently serves as Senior Vice-President and Board Member.

She has branched out into coaching to share her ideas about cooperative leadership and organizational development. Caroline launched the "Stand for Women" initiative advocating for women empowerment and gender equality in the Middle East. Caroline holds a degree in Business Management from Université Paris Dauphine, she is married and has four children.

**Caroline  
Fattal**

# WOMEN OWNERS





# CAROLINE FATTAL

**The soft oriental feminist, an iron hand  
in a velvet glove**

*by*

**NICOLE HAMOUCHE**

One might think Caroline Fattal Fakhoury was born with a silver spoon in her mouth, but she refutes golden cages. Freed by the force of life, she had to make her own way in a world of men, when her father, the President of Fattal Group passed away as she was only eighteen and lived away from her homeland, in France, because of the war. In a household of girls, her mother and two sisters, Caroline feels she “took the man’s role”, a heritage she presumes was bestowed on her at birth, as in her grandfather’s mind, she was supposed to be a boy. More than twenty years down the road, she is ranked by Forbes and for three years, 2014-2015 and 2020 amongst the Middle East most powerful businesswomen. Yet, she is lucid about the Lebanese bluff: “Women here seem more free than in the rest of the Arab world but are actually much less so” and the burden of patriarchy, though subtle, is huge. She had to bear with it, to ultimately choose to fight it in her own soft way, by empowering women and advocating for sisterhood.

Caroline Fattal’s mother’s words never left her: “Beyond your family name, you have to make yourself a fist name”. And so, she did, in her long journey outside of Lebanon, between France, Argentina, Dubai and within the Fattal Group. The family business that she was the first woman in the family to enter “captured her”, becoming the group’s COO and the first and youngest woman to sit on its Board of Directors at the age of thirty-two. However, even within the family group, the path was neither given nor easy.

After 15 full time years in the famous group that spans the entire MENA region, the lady with an iron hand in a velvet glove - who had restructured and returned the Iraqi operations when the country was shivering under ISIS - had to step away from the

management when the decision was made in the group to separate the management from the board. Caroline Fattal Fakhoury chose to stay on the board which is now 66% composed of women. As she left her managerial occupations, she launched in 2017, a digital awareness platform *@Istandforwomen* meant to support women’s economic empowerment.

The magnitude of the August 4 Beirut blast had awakened the social fiber she had always had but “had put between parenthesis during her corporate life” as she says. After the tragic loss of her aunt, Marion Hochar in the blast, Caroline felt the urge to engage more fiercely and with concrete actions in women empowerment and to quickly act to help women whose businesses were hit by the explosion.

When Forbes had ranked her in 2014 and 2015 amongst the most powerful businesswomen in the Middle East, the mother of four and soft-spoken lady, says she first thought there must have been a mistake. Then, the nomination made her reflect on the meaning of this ranking: “*Is it just a number? What does it mean to be a powerful woman?*” This is how in no time, she took the decision to raise funds for the Marion Fund, which so far supports 109 women and whose database – put together in collaboration with UN Women - encompasses 240 names. In what she qualifies as “the second part of her life”, Caroline Fattal Fakhoury has chosen to listen to her inner voice and to pursue her purpose.



## Who is Caroline Fattal Fakhoury behind the Fattal name? What has shaped you? Tell us about your journey.

**M**y life was always a story of reinvention and adaptation. We left for France during the war, where I had to adapt. The Lebanese girl that I was, gave literature and French private classes to French students. I wanted to be independent from the beginning and my parents gave me the sense of responsibility. When I was eighteen, with the passing of my father, who was the President of the Fattal Group, I lost the sense of security. This definitely shaped who I am today. I told myself at the time: "In life you have to be able to get on your feet" and started then, a journey of self-discovery which I summarize in three main objectives: finding my voice, finding my purpose and reinventing myself.

I graduated from Paris Dauphine with a Masters in Business Administration, after which I did an internship at a French multinational where I saw bullying and harassment behind the doors and

then, as I was not recruited in the group – maybe I was too kind - I took off to Argentina as I loved Spanish. I was on the look for my voice and wanted to take some distance from my family, and Spain looked too close. In Argentina, I worked as brand manager and marketing director at a major local consumer goods company, a consecration at this age in such corporates. There, I came in contact with an old friend of my mother who guided me on an introspection journey I undertook. After three years in Argentina and in total 17 years abroad, one of which was a sabbatical, where I explored tango - I loved dance - it was time to go back home. I joined Lever-Fattal, a joint venture between Unilever and Fattal Group, where I headed a sales force of fifteen men, most of which were double my age, I was the youngest and first woman to sit on the Executive Committee of the company. I took Arabic lessons to be respected as I had to speak in Arabic.



## You didn't have a linear career. Can you tell us about your twists and your fast progression in the group?

**B**eing born with a silver spoon in my mouth can sometimes look great from the outside but people rarely know the whole story. In 2001, my uncle who was the CEO of the family group proposed to me to join. I joined first as Assistant General Manager Food & Beverage. I was the first woman to enter the family business, then, four years later, I became the COO of the group and an Executive Committee member. At that point, I did not realize that I was the only woman, the adventure was not easy, I often felt lonely. For instance, governance was not that structured and was not a priority in our family group, I was instrumental in advocating for putting together a Board of Directors. I was 32 years old when I got to sit on the board, I was the first, youngest and only woman. Before every board meeting where I sat with my uncles, the auditors, and the lawyers of the group, I was sick. I had to find my voice to question the way business was done. To feel that I was worthy to be at that table, to comfort myself that I am board material, I took two certifications for Board of Directors: one from Hawkama, the Institute of Directors in Dubai, the other one from the French Institute of Directors.

In 2006, my husband was promoted to a role in Dubai, so, I joined him but felt I was in a golden cage. For me, my fulfillment goes a lot through my

professional engagement. There, I took several coaching certifications as I always thought from my early years in introspection that I would become a coach or a psychotherapist. And, as when you're on your mission, things open up, I could join an international boutique executive coaching firm, where I met Peninah Thompson, the author of "*A woman's place is in the board room*" and a major encounter for me. I love coaching and I am currently one of the coaches of INSEAD Business School and IMD Lausanne. I also do one on one coaching and have integrated it in *Istandforwomen*.

Then, obviously I came back to Fattal, the family group captures you as you are one of it. When the Iraqi operations experienced difficulty and the management asked who would like to go there, I was the only person within the group to raise my hand, even if my safety was at stake. We had 400 to 500 employees there and nobody wanted to go. Little did I know that two months later ISIS would invade Kurdistan. Within eighteen months, I turned around the Iraqi operations. In 2017, the family business decided to separate management from the board, and this is where I had to step down and engage in the second phase of my life. The family business now takes 10% of my time, *I Stand For Women* 70% of it and my coaching activities 20%.

**“I was the youngest and first woman to sit on the Executive Committee of the company.**



# CHANGING THE FACE OF THE WORKFORCE



## Tell us more specifically about your engagement with women causes?

**W**hen I was the COO at Fattal Group, I thought I should walk my talk. I commissioned a gender audit that was carried out by the ILO: Fattal was one of only three companies in the region to do so. The percentage of women on the board of directors now is 66%, in management it is 33% overall. The example of Egypt is interesting: 55% of our management is composed of women and we have an army of 30.000 women who are sales representatives for Tupperware. In Iraq, only 8% of management are women.

Outside of Fattal Group, I took part in a Lebanese women angel fund and I am part of the Lebanese League of Women in Business. Note that 30% of board members are women.

Then I created *I Stand For Women* in 2017, which



I am very proud of, aiming at women's economic empowerment as financial independence enables a woman to make the choices she wants. I also insist on sisterhood, since I wanted to avoid the queen bee syndrome that mirrors male behavior of stabbing people in the back. *I Stand For Women* now has 17.000 Instagram followers and my satisfaction is when a woman interacts with me to tell me for instance that it was thanks to the platform's content that she was able to get a promotion. I have a lot of dreams to expand the scope of the platform but the urgency upon Lebanon's economic crisis and the Beirut Blast has caught up on my dreams. After the Blast, the danger was that women exit the workforce, it was time to go on the ground. Since we promote economic empowerment and believe that we cannot be a country that lives on food boxes, we

chose to support three categories of women hit by the blast: the very vulnerable solo entrepreneurs, the business owners who employ more than 5 people and the ones who have a relation with cultural heritage and that includes designers, jewelers, etc.



How do you conjugate your roles as a mother of four, a wife and a businesswoman? And any inspirational words you would like to share with other women?

As Jacinda Ardern says : "I make it work", and I would like to refer to one of the most read articles of Harvard Business Reviews was one called "If you can't find a spouse who supports your career , stay single". My husband has always been very supportive. As for the inspiration for women, I tell them: Sisterhood is powerful!

“Sisterhood is Powerful!”



## Would you be interested in a public office such as the National Commission for Women or running for next parliamentary elections?

I would answer you with a quote from Nancy Pelosi:  
*"If you reduce the role of money in politics and increase the level of civility in the debate, more women would run for office".*







**Learn more about the Initiative at**

**#FEMALEFORWARD**

[fnf-europe.org/tag/female-forward/](https://fnf-europe.org/tag/female-forward/)