

SUMMARY OF GENDER INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION WITH TAREK ZEIDAN

- Workshop by: Helem CEO Tarek Zeidan;
- Host: Lina Abou Habib/Asfari Institute, the American University of Beirut;

SUMMARY:

This event was organized with the collaboration of the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship and the American University of Beirut. Asfari Institute director, Lina Abou Habib commenced the event with a brief introduction of guest speaker Tarek Zeidan, current executive director of Helem – the first LGBTQIA+ rights NGO in the Arab world, founded in Beirut, Lebanon – since 2012.

Guest speaker Tarek Zeidan began by analyzing if language really reflects society, and if so in which ways. He provided examples of the power language has in changing or reifying the existing power structures in society, and that the neglect of inclusive language use invisibilizes people not just in the context of the Arab world, but specifically in the Arabic language as it is heavily gendered.

Zeidan interacted with the audience while providing evidence of cultures that perceive language differently to demonstrate how language can even change spatial perception. Language is connected to space, time, and also gender. According to the speaker, gendered language impacts the perspective even of objects (a table, a feminine word in Arabic, is more likely to be described as elegant, beautiful, or delicate).

Zeidan proceeds to bring up main concepts within gender studies, such as the differences between gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual attraction.

As he continues the lecture, Zeidan discussed the problem with terms like *mankind*, or *manmade*, – which are easily substituted by *humankind*, for instance. Non-inclusive terms may leave many individuals struggling with their identity feeling lost, or excluded, once terms like “non-binary” have a name, a lot more people start identifying with it, and find a path to their identity. The speaker elucidates that language is a manifestation of reality that is tangible to people. The way individuals talk about things impact society, and gender characteristics do not align with expressions, they are two different facets of an individual’s character. However, he points out that the binary is easy to control and easy to identify.

As he engages with the audience in helping them understand how they can accommodate gender-inclusive language in the university space, as well as outside, he stressed how people underestimate the importance of addressing a person by their correct pronouns: “By misgendering someone you

are telling them you don't care who they are, you don't care about their inner struggles, their pain [...]”

It was also important for Zeidan to clarify that people defying gender norms is not an exclusively Western phenomenon, and has existed for the past millennia, even during the Golden Age of Islam, in the court of Harun Al Rashid, for instance. As he continues, Tarek particularly tackled questions on how instructors should address pronouns and gender-inclusive language in the school, and academic environment, to accommodate gender non-conforming students in a sensible manner.

He proceeded to address gendered linguistic expression in the Arabic language, highlighting that the language is not the problem, as it is malleable, what has to be changed is the way people employ it. Zeidan then proposed that gender studies should not be exclusive to the social and liberal arts, and should be discussed by all fields in, and outside academia.

Finally, Zeidan concluded by highlighting the essential place the American University of Beirut had and continues to have in Lebanese policy creation, especially in women's struggle, anti-sectarian policies, and intellectual discussions housed, nourished, and developed by the university.

By Mohamad Hojeje.