

The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship presents
the first event of the Feminist Series (Season 2):

DRESS CODE AND BODILY AGENCY

**“Everything that happens to us, as women, doesn’t exist in vacuum,
it happens due to the patriarchal bubble of which it stems from.”**

- Lina Abou Habib, director of the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship.

On the 28th of October 2021, The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship held its first event of the second series of the Feminist Circles Series titled: Dress Code and Bodily Agency, moderated by Sara Abou Zaki – Marsa (Lebanon). Multiple human rights and feminist activists from different organizations: and of diverse backgrounds in the MENA region were invited to participate in the discussion. All of Roula Baghdai – Dawlaty (Syria), Rafah Anabtawi – Kayan (Palestine), Ilaf Nasr – AMNA (Sudan, Maia Helou – PhD Candidate at University of Toronto (Lebanon/Canada), Joudy Ater – American University of Beirut (Lebanon), and Fatima Amro – Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship (Lebanon) contributed to the debate of a subject that is often marginalized as yet another "irrelevant" matter.

In an attempt to answer questions related to feminist activism in the MENA region, the circle provided a safe space for the discussion of multi-layered subjects, taboos, and dilemmas that the female is dogmatically constrained by. The speakers presented an in-depth analysis of a series of questions that investigate the brutal societal expectations and limitations on women in general and examined ways through which females can take back their agency over their own bodies, choices, and actions.

The issues discussed ranged from women's alienation from their own bodies due to forced dress-code as well as related body-image and self-identification hardships, to the woman's agency over her own body in relation to harassment, violence, patriarchy, toxic masculinity, colonialism, religion, and the infantilization of women by enforcing the way they should live and the specific way they are expected to dress.

In addition, the speakers emphasized the social factors that affect the intensity of such matters such as the variation of financial opportunities, educational levels, and religious backgrounds within the community. The discussion would not have been complete without accentuation on the lack of systems and laws that enhance, aid, or even protect women's rights.

As Roula Baghdadi said during our discussion: "We are lacking academic research on the subject of dress-code and bodily agency in terms of protective laws in the Arab world, mostly because of religious and patriarchal/political tyranny." Consequently, it was a clear collective goal of all participants and speakers to highlight the need for a system that rightly gives women back what is theirs: their basic human rights.

Nonetheless, this shift cannot happen without activism and constant discussions and reminders of the severe abnormalities of our day-to-day lives as women.

This is not an "irrelevant" discussion, as it is deemed, except to those who benefit from the system at hand, and those completely unaware and oblivious to the abnormalities this discussion highlights in women's lives. There is no human-rights issue more relevant than the other, especially not when it affects half of the entire population.

As one of our speakers Maia Helou said at the end of the discussion, "Body agency is not inherently for women.; trans and non-binary individuals belong in that conversation. Agency is about people who do not fit the norm. Thus the feminist cause is not just for women, it is for all inferiorated groups - groups that are not inferior by nature but are rather forcefully inferiorated through violence and patriarchy.

There is no right time to choose the feminist battle, it is one continuous battle, and we shall fight.