

Reframing Beauty: The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World and the Miss Lebanon Pageant

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I. Overview

In the spring of 2018, the Lebanese American University (LAU) was approached by the Lebanese TV station MTV with a request to train, support, and enrich women participants in the Miss Lebanese Beauty Pageant in preparation for the event in late September 2018. LAU requested guidance from the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) – and the Institute rose to the challenge. In its quest to change the ways that Miss Lebanon had been produced and filmed in recent years, MTV asked LAU – and the Institute – to conceptualize new ways of “doing” the pageant.

IWSAW was ready to have the opportunity to think through alternative challenges to standard beauty pageants: If we couldn't stop the pageant in its entirety, could we challenge it from the inside? What, if anything, could we arm participants with as part of this challenge from the inside out?

Indeed, IWSAW has a clear position on beauty pageants as well as a long history of addressing the objectification of women in the media. Currently, the Institute is working closely with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to put together a university curriculum on gender, women, and the media, highlighting the powerful implications of gender stereotypes and norms on societal conceptions of women and girls, specifically. The Institute has also organized several issues of *Al-Raida* that focus on gender and media, all fully available for free online. In 2011, IWSAW organized a training for Iraqi journalists, familiarizing and sensitizing them to reporting on issues of gender-based violence (GBV) and gender more broadly in the media. In 2013, again in collaboration with UNFPA, the Institute hosted a four-day workshop for 21 LAU journalism students on how to properly report issues related to GBV, and teaching them about the nuances to reporting such sensitive issues.

The Institute envisioned engagement wherein the Miss Lebanon 2018 participants would participate in a gender equality workshop that not only challenged gender and beauty norms throughout Lebanon, but would give participants a look into just how dangerous these gender norms can actually be. Participants learned how beauty and gender roles are both products of patriarchal control and the control of women's bodies and sexuality, specifically. It is this control over women's bodies and sexuality leads directly to the many different types of gender-based violence (GBV) experienced by women and men, girls and boys every day, worldwide. It is critical, therefore, to break down the links between beauty, gender norms, and patriarchal control if we are to truly understand, and subsequently challenge existing norms.

To that end, the Institute developed two, three hour-long workshops, each including three sessions on issues such as gender and beauty; gender, beauty, and health; and gender and the law. High-level experts, researchers, and global practitioners – alongside IWSAW staff – worked together over the

duration of the workshops to guide participants through subjects that are both difficult and taboo, such as sex, sexuality, eating disorders, and the objectification of women in the media. For many of these participants, it was the first time that they were able to engage both openly and productively on such issues with dedicated experts who helped to guide such conversations, instructing on new terminologies, current activist issues, and ultimately, how they – as individuals in the Miss Lebanon competition – could work to radically alter some of these engrained gender norms and stereotypes. Guest speakers,

While in principle the university, including IWSAW, is opposed to beauty pageants based not only on their superficial nature, but on their perpetuation of detrimental, traditional gender norms, the engagement with Miss Lebanon 2018 and MTV presented an opportunity to both disrupt and reframe a tradition of popular culture that objectifies women based on physical attributes. For IWSAW, these workshops created an opportunity to transform this event – often, one of the most televised events in Lebanon each year – into one that could potentially reflect the global and local momentum around gender and women’s rights. To do this, IWSAW’s work with the Miss Lebanon 2018 participants began with the firm assumption that these women are more than their publicized stereotypes as young women only concerned with their beauty. These young women are powerful in their own right, with influence over popular opinion and access to a national platform – the sheer volume of Twitter activity surrounding the Miss Lebanon competition and the participants is evidence to this. Further, by assuming that these women are complacent and unconcerned with political activism is to deny them not only their right to know and learn about the important gender issues on the ground but assumes an elitist and discriminatory attitude – completely contradictory to a feminist politics. Their participation in a beauty competition – and the necessary focus on, and compliance with normative beauty standards – does not preclude them from working as feminist activists in their own capacities.

While the majority of viewers and participants themselves might enjoy this formal event, they are unaware of the very insidious – and very specifically gendered – dimensions of beauty that undergird such events. Across the world and in Lebanon, beauty norms are underpinned by racist, violent, and often sexist notions of what beauty actually is and who is considered beautiful. In Lebanon, normative conceptions of beauty are stringent, as one feminist activist notes:

In addition to the political sphere, society is also a front in the struggle for gender justice in Lebanon... Lebanese women are inundated with expectations of the female body that adhere to certain beauty norms: blonde, straight hair; small, neat noses; large lips and flat stomachs. Under the weight of tremendous social pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, women suffer huge damage to their self-esteem (El-Hage, 2012-2013, pp. 53).

Damage to self-esteem often results in longer-term health issues, both psychological and physical. Young women and girls feel these pressures acutely – especially if they do not meet the strict beauty standards in their own communities. The pageant’s focus on superficial physical beauty of contestants objectifies women in the media, highlights stereotypical feminine roles, and uses women’s bodies as a

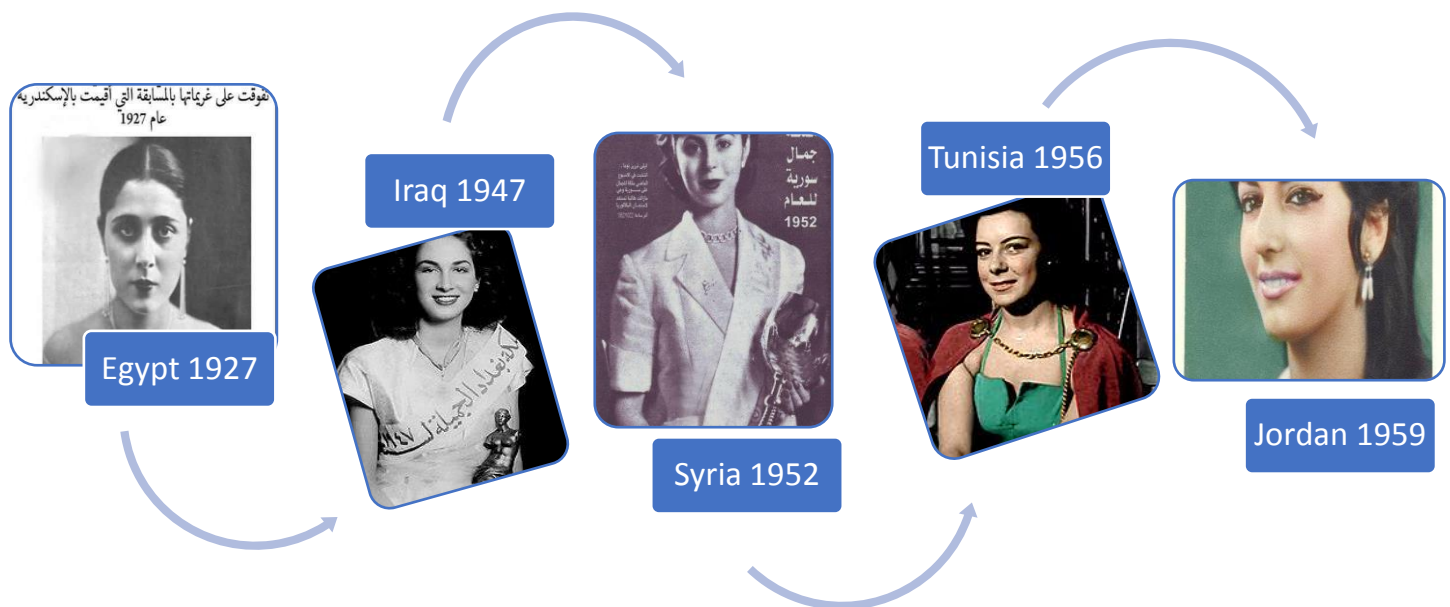
means of attracting audiences and generating revenue. Basing beauty standards on an unattainable ideal of the female body is destructive for women and girls – fueling eating disorders and creating long-term damaging consequences. The only ones who benefit are the beauty industry themselves.

These workshops would raise awareness among contestants about the underlying meaning of such pageants, the responsibility contestants have to serve as positive role models, and ultimately, the radical potential that these contestants have to disrupt the normative practices of such pageants from the inside out.

II. History of Beauty Pageants

Beauty pageants have their origins in the original P.T. Barnum Circus, the first ever held in 1854 in the U.S. In its earliest stages, beauty pageants almost functioned voyeuristically: women were put on display for circus patrons to ogle at, more so when the women were portrayed as “irregular” or “odd” – women who did not fit the mold of “proper” beauty and sexuality.

Beauty pageants have a substantive history in the Arab region, starting with the first ever beauty pageant held in Egypt in 1929, followed by Miss Iraq in 1947, Miss Lebanon and Miss Syria in 1952, Miss Tunisia in 1956, and Miss Jordan in 1959.



Lebanon is no exception to this long history of pageantry. Starting with the first Miss Lebanon in 1952, beauty pageants in Lebanon included Miss South Lebanon; a Mrs. Lebanon since 2000; and a Miss Teen pageant since the early 2000s. Lebanon also boasts a Mr. Lebanon pageants, which started in 1995, as well as a Mr. Teen. In 1955, the first Miss Lebanon – Hania Baydoun – participated in the Miss Universe pageant, and in 1971 Georgina Rizk became the first Miss Lebanon to win Miss Universe.

The Miss Lebanon pageant has taken many different forms over the years, including a formal gala and a reality television show, and includes a different number of participants each year. Winners of the Miss Lebanon contest go on to represent the country at Miss World and, if successful, at the Miss Universe contest. The pageant is traditional in its judging criteria: women are judged according to their looks, including the outfits they are wearing, the way their hair is done, their makeup, and ultimately, how they present themselves at each stage of the contest.

III. Precedents for Change

There have been efforts in other countries to reframe beauty pageants and promote more empowering and body-positive approaches. For instance, the US recently banned the swimsuit competition as part of their pageant. The new chairwoman, Gretchen Carlson, noted that instead of the swimsuit competition, “a live interactive session with the judges” would be included to “highlight [the contestant’s] achievements and goals in life” (Bennett, 2018, New York Times).



Figure 1 Photo of Miss Peru participants, 2018

In Peru, contestants at the Miss Peru contest refused to reveal their body measurements, but chose instead to collectively share disturbing statistics about the prevalence of violence against women in the country. Each participant, beginning with “My measurements are” listed off disturbing statistics on the prevalence of violence against women in Peru. The strategy went viral, turning into a hashtag: #MisMedidasSon. In one case, a contestant announced her “measurements” as: “2,202 cases of murdered women reported in the last nine years” (Cantú, 2017, NPR online).

Taking a cue from both the Miss Peru and the Miss USA competitions, the Institute envisioned a training for Miss Lebanon participants that would highlight some of these internal resistances to beauty pageants from contestants, themselves. Unable to completely stop beauty pageants, these contestants productively and radically challenged the entire paradigm of beauty competitions in ways that attracted global media attention. With this momentum, beauty pageant contestants across the world could potentially make similar challenges (Cohen et. al, 2013; Parameswaran, 2001; Shissler, 2004).

A powerful statement could be made by reclaiming the beauty pageant industry as a place that is safe and respectful, thereby addressing some of the issues our culture often faces with patriarchal and misogynistic undercurrents. Rather than lament the toxic beliefs and behaviors beauty pageants perpetuate, IWSAW sought a positive and proactive way to increase attention and accountability within the beauty pageant industry itself, and more importantly, among the contestants. In short, this engagement with the beauty industry is an unexpected reframe that will spark conversation – and

perhaps controversy – and ensure that people will think (even briefly) about what “beauty” really means.

It is this conversation around issues of beauty and pageants themselves that would spark the Miss Lebanon 2018 contestants to participate in the IWSAW two-day workshops so enthusiastically. For the first time in their work with the pageant, these young women were allowed to discuss, debate, and ultimately, negotiate their own subjectivities within the pageant.

IV. IWSAW Training

The goal of the two-day workshop was to collectively challenge the Miss Lebanon 2018 contestants to think critically about beauty pageants to ultimately challenge normative beauty standards and to promote body positivity. The intent was for Miss Lebanon 2018 participants, by the end of the training, to be familiar with the ties between beauty and gender, and the disproportionate negative impact on women and girls.

Training Agenda: Day 1

To begin Day 1 of the workshop, IWSAW staff and experts led Miss Lebanon 2018 contestants through a warmup exercise called “Vote with your Feet”. This exercise is commonly used by international and national agencies who conduct trainings on gender equality and gender-based violence (GBV) to get participants ready to discuss “touchy” subjects – such as gender and GBV. This activity challenged participants to address the ways that gender and sexuality have become ingrained in our everyday lives, and how beauty uses and perpetuates stereotypical gender roles and relations.

IWSAW staff purposefully asked targeted – and often “wrong” questions – with the aim to get participants talking, both to each other and with facilitators. Participants were given a chance to either agree or disagree with the question or statement IWSAW facilitators posed by standing next to a large poster with “Agree”, “Disagree”, or “Don’t Know” written on them. This led to great discussions amongst the participants themselves, and with IWSAW facilitators more generally. Questions and statements included:

1. Gender and sex have no effect on personal beauty.
2. Women and girls must not get angry or emotional in public.
3. Women make better parents than men.

These questions – many of which were blatantly biased – were meant to purposely incite participants to dissect and analyze such comments using a gender lens, as a means of warming up ahead of the workshop itself. In a few instances, participants were able to productively argue with each other about certain issues and questions; at other points, participants could not agree on just how to respond to, or feel about the questions and comments used during the game. Issues of marriage and childrearing, particularly, proved most problematic for the participants – while some saw motherhood as ultimately

empowering (“mothers have a special role in children’s lives because they are their mothers”), others saw the gendered expectations placed on mothers as wrong (“fathers should be just involved”). At one point, IWSAW facilitators had to end the activity early in order to keep on schedule!

The complicated and often contradictory responses showed the workshop’s experts and IWSAW staff just how deeply engrained societal gender roles and stereotypes were. This exercise would be referenced throughout the workshop as a way of documenting the workshop’s progress, and just how much participants were learning about certain issues and topics.

Following this activity, Session 1 – entitled “So what does gender have to do with it?” – gave an overview of the key concepts and terms that participants would need to be familiarized with in order to get the most out of the training. Participants learned about the differences between gender, sex, and sexuality, and the ways in which these terms can be used differently by different activists, groups, and organizers in ways that can be both useful and, in some cases, perpetuate traditional gender roles.

This presentation outlined just how important gender norms and beliefs – including the terms and concepts we use to define gender and sexuality – actually are in relation to beauty standards, and what society considers to be beautiful.

Participants then learned about the history of the beauty pageant, created by the infamous P.T. Barnum in 1854, the inventor of the circus. After learning this, participants discussed whether or not beauty pageants had developed into something more than just a “display” of women’s bodies as they were back when they were first created by P.T. Barnum. At this point, IWSAW staff presented participants with a history of beauty pageants in the Arab world, highlighting the long history of pageanting in countries such as Lebanon, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt.



The history of pageanting in the Arab Region is spotted, to say the least. The Institute highlighted the example of Miss Saudi Arabia, a young woman nominated by civil society to participate in the Miss Arab World. Following her nomination, however, the 24-year-old received threats over Twitter and other social media platforms criticizing her participation in the beauty pageants. Criticism of her participation, however, was not due to the superficiality of beauty pageants; instead, criticism highlighted her “betrayal” of her “conservative, religious country” (Maza, 2017, *Newsweek*). Even more interesting, the country now has a “Miss Beautiful Morals” pageant – a competition that, “focuses not outward [*sic*] appearances but on inner beauty, and the values that are often given less significance” (Malik, 2010, *The Guardian*). One of the founders of the pageant claims that the, “main objective was to redress this imbalance...that women were increasingly beguiled by vacuous western values propagated by satellite TV, and that a celebration of virtue was long overdue” (Malik, 2010). IWSAW workshop leaders asked participants to reflect on these two seemingly opposite types of pageantry – were the differences

actually substantive? Or did both build on the normative, gendered stereotypes of women?

As part of such a “display” of women’s bodies, participants were asked to think through the many various types of violence that might result from such a voyeuristic practice. This discussion was guided by a discussion on GBV, its many types and forms, and how to understand why such violence happens. Participants learned that globally, one in three women – more than 30% - will experiences physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner. GBV is not specific to a certain “time” in the lives of women and girls: GBV can happen throughout the entirety of the lifecycle in the workplace, in schools, and in the home. While participants were initially shocked, the discussion of GBV triggered an immediate response: participants discussed how GBV had impacted them, their classmates, and their families. The connection between gender norms, beauty standards, and violence was made clear – it is the control over women’s bodies and sexualities that paves the way for such violence to occur.

Participants also learned about the Ecological Model – a model developed to highlight the multi-causal origins of violence across four levels: individual; relationships/partners; communities; and the societal or macro-level. Participants focused on how normative conceptions of beauty, and the gender norms surrounding beauty and especially women’s beauty, all contribute to various types of violence across all four levels of the ecological model – even if such violence was not visible in the form of physical marks on someone’s body.

The last session of Day 1 was lead by the Coaches’ Circle – Women’s Leadership Committee. The Women’s Leadership Committee provides trainings, consultations, and other types of support for professionals in office settings across Lebanon; one such training includes working with women professionals to develop their leadership skills. This session was a variation of the Women’s Leadership Committee’s training on women’s leadership tailored to the Miss Lebanon participants. The session addressed the ways women are expected to behave in the professional labor force, including implied dress codes; workplace behaviors; and the ways that women are often seen not as independent, intelligent workers, but rather as “followers” – not leaders. Participants were very engaged with this session, especially since many of them articulated that they were hoping to soon join the professional labor force in various sectors.

Over all, participants were excited about the content they had discussed on Day 1, and many were “very curious” about what they would learn on Day 2. In fact, many of the discussions had during Day 1 were continued during the lunch that immediately followed: participants sat with both IWSAW staff and the expert speakers, conversing on the issues raised during the sessions, and their excitement for the topics to be discussed during Day 2.

For many participants, this was one of the first times they were able to talk about the issue of beauty and gender, and how they themselves actually felt about it. As one participant told IWSAW staff, “I am so excited to learn about this issue, and will use it if I win to show girls that they can also feel empowered by their beauty.”

Training Agenda: Day 2

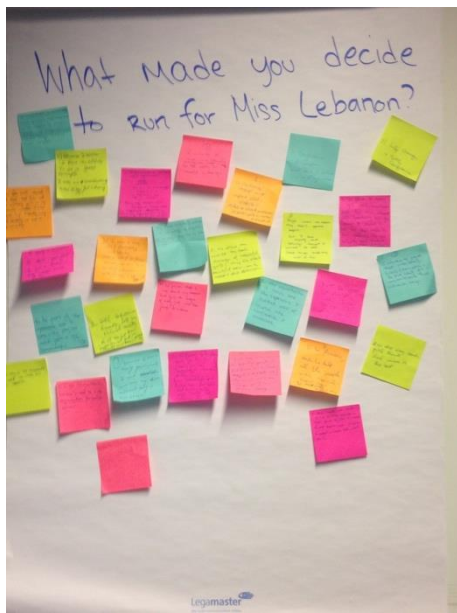
On Day 2, IWSAW moved further into the issue of gender, sexuality, and beauty and who – or what – actually defines what is beautiful. Participants began the day by returning to three reflective questions posed by IWSAW staff on day one:

1. When is the first time someone told you that you were beautiful?
2. When is the first time you felt that you were beautiful?
3. What made you decide to compete for Miss Lebanon?

The reason IWSAW asked these questions was to get participants to really think critically about the differences between when someone else points out beauty compared to when they themselves identify beauty. Participants were allowed to answer their questions anonymously, on small post-it notes of various colors which they then posted on Flip Charts positioned around the room. Participants were allowed a chance to read all of the responses at the end of Day 1, in silence, giving them time to reflect on not only their own answers, but the answers of others.



Participant responses were various, but a few main themes emerged. First, many of the participants felt *empowered* by their position as a candidate of Miss Lebanon 2018. For many of the participants, Miss Lebanon 2018 could serve as a platform not only for what they passionately believed in – whether it be civil rights, human rights, or the rights of persons with disabilities – but as a platform for all young girls and women watching the competition. The way they presented themselves as candidates, many believed, could serve as a powerful reminder that women and girls *did* have power and that they *could* accomplish what they set out to do. Though beauty and beauty standards were often imposed on women, and had violent consequences – many of the participants felt that their own beauty was the key to pushing back against the often-restrictive beauty norms put in place by society.



The second theme highlighted by participants' responses was that for many of them, it was, "easier to remember when someone else told them that they were pretty." When participants and staff discussed what this might mean, participants agreed that it seemed to indicate, unfortunately, that beauty was quite literally "in the eyes of the beholder" – even if they themselves felt empowered by their beauty, it was also up for consumption by the public.

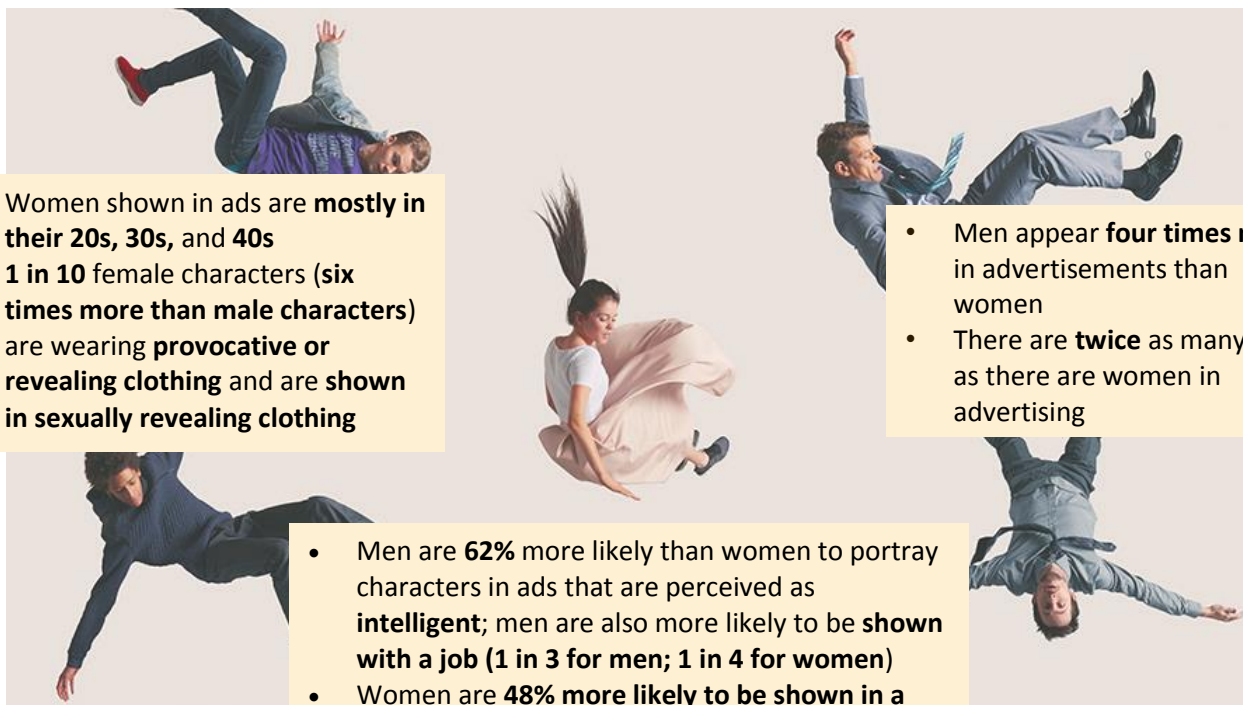
Finally, in response to the question “What made you decide to run for Miss Lebanon,” many participants noted that their choice to participate in the competition reflected their desire to promote causes and beliefs they were most dedicated to. While some wanted to promote a specific cause – such as increasing women’s political rights in Lebanon – others felt that if they won the competition, they would be able to better serve their communities by promoting their causes to a broader, national audience. In a powerful way, these participants reasserted their own identities as young women dedicated to promoting civil causes. They all felt quite strongly that the pageant could serve as a powerful first step for any type of activist work – reaching a wider audience at both the national and international levels could create momentum around certain issues, hopefully resulting in long-term, sustainable change.

Revisiting participants’ answers and reflecting on questions of beauty and who defines it served as a powerful segue into the first session of Day 2, “What is Beautiful? How do we know what is beautiful?”



IWSAW began by discussing beauty in the world of advertising and media, using an audiovisual presentation which presented various examples of how women and girls are portrayed in the media, often in overtly sexualized and demeaning postures. This was supplemented with a discussion of why society accepts such advertisements that continuously position women in sexy clothing – and in many cases, without clothing at all – and in

provocative postures. Participants were asked to think critically about why we have all come to not only accept such advertisements, but to *expect* them. Participants were not only astonished at the ways in which women were posed and positioned in various advertisements, but were upset at the thought that women’s beauty was still being used to sell products as varied as shampoo to dish soap.



- Women shown in ads are **mostly in their 20s, 30s, and 40s**
- **1 in 10** female characters (**six times more than male characters**) are wearing **provocative or revealing clothing** and are **shown in sexually revealing clothing**

- Men appear **four times more** in advertisements than women
- There are **twice** as many men as there are women in advertising

- Men are **62%** more likely than women to portray characters in ads that are perceived as **intelligent**; men are also more likely to be **shown with a job (1 in 3 for men; 1 in 4 for women)**
- Women are **48%** more likely to be shown in a **kitchen scene**

The session then culminated by asking participants “how can we fight back” against such destructive public images of women and girls within the media as overly sexualized and a product of public consumption. First, participants were taken through the changing definitions and standards of beauty over time, watching a one-minute video that showed a young woman’s style changing to reflect the different beauty standards throughout the 20th century in Egypt. Reflecting on just how much beauty standards have changed, participants discussed the potential for women and girls to actively change beauty standards, and how such a disruption might actually work. A few participants even referenced the original example given on Day 1 of the Miss Peru contestants, and their choice to give statistics on GBV instead of their own body measurements.

This session was followed by a guest lecture by Dr. Ghena Ismail, a specialist on mental health and eating disorders. Dr. Ismail led the participants through an informative session on how beauty norms can actually damage a person’s mental and physical health, resulting in detrimental, long-term psychological issues. It was during this session that many of the participants took the time to actually discuss just how harmful the intense beauty standards applied to them were, and the effects of these standards. For some, discussions on eating disorders, especially, reminded them of cases that had affected friends and family members, or in some instances even themselves. Dr. Ismail’s talk highlighted the ways that the “ideal” woman’s body was actually not possible – to be both thin, tall, with a curvy waste and bigger chest was not the biological norm.

The final session of Day 2 included a guest lecture by IWSAW staff member Myriam Sfeir, who presented on the Personal Status laws, and the many ways that women and girls are often disadvantaged in the face of these laws. Participants were very interactive during this session, as many of them did not have



extensive knowledge of the variations in rules between the different confessional personal codes. Many of the participants did not previously understand the extent of the personal status codes, and how much of their personal lives were controlled by these legal frameworks. Many asked IWSAW staff to provide them with access to more resources on the subject, so that they could not only make themselves more knowledgeable, but so they could pass this information on to other people.

V. Training Outcomes and Reactions

Participant Reactions

In the aftermath of this training, IWSAW received numerous emails and affirmations on the quality of the training. Here are just a few examples:

Dear [IWSAW staff]. I hope you are doing great, and I want to thank you again for such an empowering and inspirational experience that I've gained these passed two days. I would highly appreciate any references and material you may provide me with; specially involving issues, and basic knowledge tackling women's rights, in Lebanon, as well as gender-based violence, and anything in between that you might find useful. Hopefully, I might be able to make a change in case I succeed in this pageant, and if not, I already won the knowledge and awareness that every woman should be cognizant of (Personal Communication with Maya Ready, Miss Lebanon 2018 Winner).

Other participants also took the time to write to IWSAW and share their thoughts on the training: "This is the first time I learned about beauty and violence – I never knew how much it was impacted by the law" (Personal communication with Miss Lebanon 2018 participant). Another contestant, who approached the trainers immediately after the final day of the workshop, told us that: "[The IWSAW presenters] are awesome – I loved listening to you guys, and I would love it if you could send me some of your online resources for more information!

Training participants were consistently engaged throughout the training, especially during some of the activities, which posed challenging questions to get the participants thinking and talking among themselves and with us as facilitators. As one such example, participants actively engaged during the last session of Day 2, which highlighted the ways that women and girls are often disadvantaged in the eyes of the law on account of the Personal Status Codes. Many participants actually approached IWSAW staff after the presentation to ask if they could receive further informational material on the Personal Status Codes in Lebanon.

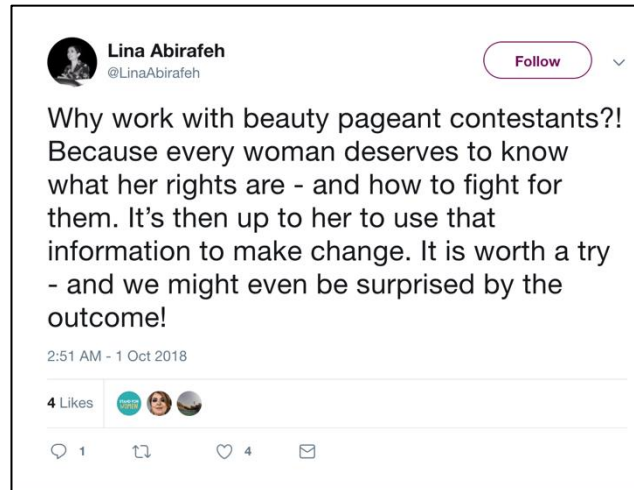
Training participants also requested to view two documentaries that IWSAW staff mentioned during the training, including a documentary done in collaboration with KAFA (Against Me), which highlights various cases of women in different sectors dealing with the Personal Status laws. The second documentary, *Women in Time*, is a film put together by IWSAW that documents the growth of the women's movement in Lebanon, highlighting the many different Lebanese women that actually participated in the Women's Movement and helped women to progress.

In a telling comment, the winner of the Miss Lebanon 2018 competition – Maya Reaidy – wrote to IWSAW staff that:

The training really inspired me and I learned a lot, and this training gave me a push to the mission or "Zadeeyeh" that I chose to pursue, if I get the chance to get the crown. My mission talks about women empowerment and more specifically, in the sense that I want to make sure and reach out to every Lebanese woman, for her to know her rights and through that knowledge she will not only feel more comfortable, and self-confident, in the society but also will give her the power to strive for more and reach higher in terms of laws, and gender equality. I hope I will have the chance to work IWSAW in the near future, and really make a change.

It is abundantly clear that the participants were not only happy to be a part of the trainings, but were genuinely interested in the information presented to them over the course of the two-day training. For many of the participants, the training was the first time they had the opportunity to not only discuss issues related to gender norms and stereotypes, but just how harmful these stereotypes could actually be. The training gave them the chance to not only discuss these issues, but to think critically about the ways that they – as participants of the Miss Lebanon competition – could productively and radically challenge these gender norms and stereotypes before, during, and after the Miss Lebanon competition.

As Dr. Lina Abirafeh – the Director of IWSAW – noted on Twitter:



Part of the IWSAW training was to *empower* these young participants by giving them access to information and knowledge that they might not have previously had access to. In this way, the Institute can help to build a foundation of critical thought, and ultimately, future activism on behalf of gender and women's rights both in Lebanon, and globally.

VI. Miss Lebanon 2018: Event and Immediate Responses

Promises from MTV that this year's Miss Lebanon competition would be different from past competitions, unfortunately, did not prove completely true. As one example, the jury members chosen were, unsurprisingly, not feminists in their own capacities and subsequently helped to perpetuate the sexist and misogynistic foundations of the beauty pageant. Instead of choosing a jury that included activists, university professors, artists, or others, it included other public figures that seemingly exacerbated the superficiality of the contest. In fact, one of the jury members openly propagates sexist ideas and reiterates the patriarchal jargon about boys being fundamentally different than girls and consequently capable of doing much more than girls can.



In another instance, viewers noted that the jury and announcers actually continued to use the male figure of speech, even though it was a competition targeting young women. Further, instead of highlighting the variety of trainings that the Miss Lebanon participants received from LAU before the competition, videos of participants before the competition show many of them leaving a dental beauty clinic; spas; and a diet center,

highlighting once again the superficiality of the competition and the desire of the young women to “fit” the standardized beauty norm.

Immediately following the Miss Lebanon 2018 competition, IWSAW and LAU received a lot of feedback on the involvement of the university in such a pageant. *Why was the university even participating in such a competition? Should the university and IWSAW have declined the option to conduct a training for the participants of the Miss Lebanon 2018 competition?*

As mentioned earlier, it was – and is – of critical importance that *all* people are knowledgeable of their own rights and are simultaneously *empowered* to claim them. Armed with this knowledge, young men and women can actively participate in the work being done at the local, national, and global levels to advocate for their rights and the rights of others. Organizing a training on gender, sexuality, and women’s rights was a chance for the Institute to set the foundation for these young women to not only learn more about feminism and feminist activism, but to participate in activism in their own capacities. Far from being complacent in the face of the beauty industry and beauty pageantry, the Institute and the Miss Lebanon 2018 participants, together, worked to set a new precedent for the competition this year, and for future competitions. The Institute can only hope that the participants will take this information and use it in the future.

Most importantly, the impact of the training on the Miss Lebanon 2018 participants is undeniable. Not only did participants approach both IWSAW staff and expert practitioners individually after the trainings, but they sent emails to IWSAW staff discussing just how important they felt the trainings to be. However, the Institute recognizes that such a training can only be a *first step* – opening up the channels for discussion on, and engagement with issues such as gender and GBV.



Further, expecting such changes cannot rest on the shoulders of these participants alone: the judges, organizers, commentators, news casters and most importantly, *the audience themselves* must all be committed to changing the existing gender norms and stereotypes that make such beauty pageants possible.

These small changes, however, could be seen in the quality of the contestants’ responses to questions posed by the jurors: both social media and commentary given directly to IWSAW noted that the participants seemed to answer the questions in a more critical manner. For example, a participant’s response to a question of pollution identified the solution as the “responsibility of individuals” in the home, and that we are all capable of using the available recycling techniques made available to use. In another outstanding response, one participant noted that the, “the biggest problem facing youth today

especially in Lebanon is social media.” She continued, “social media projects an unreal image, an unreal world and so it pushes us to emulate this unreal world and unreal standards that really don’t exist.”

These small progressive steps forward in the pageant, accompanied by the consistently superficial and gender-normative components of Miss Lebanon point to the very contradictions inherent in the competition that make promoting feminism at the same time difficult and rewarding.

As one of the trainers at the workshop commented:

It may be tricky to be engaged with an activity like [the beauty pageant] given that on the one side, beauty contests have been critiqued throughout the decades by many feminists for their objectifying women’s bodies...However, if we look at it from another view, the IWSAW tried to engage the beauty contestants and tried to challenge their perspectives (Personal communication, Eating Disorder Specialist and Trainer for the workshop).

Similarly, many partners of the Institute were eager to comment on the work done by IWSAW in advance of the Miss Lebanon 2018 competition. The following feedback serves as one such example:

I received the announcement of LAU IWSAW coaching Miss Lebanon contestants before the ceremony with mixed feelings: should we as feminists and gender equality practitioners boycott such events where focus is mainly put on women’s measurements and external beauty? Or should we try to influence this practice and transform the way the world looks at women? And transform the way these women see themselves? The fact is that these women have an influence on other women - particularly young girls. So it was an effort to infiltrate and influence from within. This kind of change takes time!

What is sure is that Miss Lebanon this year promoted capacities of women beyond face and body... a first step in the right direction. I’d like to see this as the beginning of a process. I suggested to IWSAW that they continue - and conduct a study on body image. I hope they advance this (Personal communication, Senior Gender Equality Expert and Feminist Activist).

Another long-standing partner of the Institute’s – the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN ESCWA), made a similar comment:

LAU involvement in Miss Lebanon beauty pageant reflects the institution’s commitment vis-à-vis gender issues. Training contestants about the importance of eliminating discrimination against women and girls; and modifying stereotypical images about their role in society; is paramount towards achieving gender equality. When contestants (and the beauty queen) become champions of gender issues – and not only of beauty, society is much better sensitized about this righteous cause. At the end of the day, our society needs more empowered women...and starting with Miss Lebanon, one step at a time... we are getting there (Personal communication, IWSAW from Social Rights Expert)

A powerful indicator of the Institute's initiative with Miss Lebanon, the Director of the UN ESCWA Centre for Women, Mehrinaz Elawady, made the following comment on IWSAW's work:

In a breakthrough initiative IWSAW at LAU helps redefine beauty beyond the face and body. It creates a platform for dialogue with candidates of the Miss Lebanon pageant on human rights and gender equality. Well done on this front. Much of this work is needed.

The Institute also collected feedback from the LAU community including both students, faculty, and staff members.

I personally think it was a great initiative from IWSAW to train miss Lebanon contestants – although it was only for two days and perhaps not enough time for the contestants to gather all the information they needed. It showed the principles that IWSAW stands by, which is non-discrimination and the need to empower all different types of women. Also, the contestants have a great number of following on Social Media which can be put to good use. It was very innovative of IWSAW and in my opinion broadened the definition of being a “Feminist” (Personal communication, LAU Staff).

Students also responded to IWSAW's participation in the Miss Lebanon competition. One student reported the following:

I think it was a very good idea from IWSAW to train the contestants. Beauty must be redefined and that should start from these girls. I think it was good to show them what “beauty” really is and that beauty is not everything they should depend on – their answers must be smarter because being pretty is not the only thing. The training was a start of a change – hopefully – probably a change on how Lebanon and the contestants specifically, perceive beauty. Change starts from within (Personal communication, LAU Student).

As is evidenced both in the above-listed quotes and from input provided by the participants themselves, the training was an important first step in beginning a national dialogue around beauty pageants and their role in the perpetuation of normative beauty standards and gender norms. Further, the trainings served as an important first step in *including* these young women in conversations about gender and beauty, the very issues that affect them directly as participants in the Miss Lebanon beauty pageant. In this way, the Institute has chosen to include the very young women who are so frequently excluded in high-level discussions of gender equality. Instead of assuming that these young women cannot contribute to conversations on gender norms and stereotypes, the Institute foregrounded the importance of including these young women in the discussion. This yielded positive results both during and after the training – the participants were not only happy to participate, but in fact were searching for more information on the topics discussed during the training. The Institute hopes that this training will serve as a precedent for future trainings and work on not only the Miss Lebanon pageant, but beauty pageants around the Arab Region and the world.

VII. Going Forward

IWSAW was proud of the outcome of the training and views this as a spark that could disrupt an industry that historically subjugates women with a view to building a better, inclusive, diverse definition of beauty over the long-term. The response of winner Maya Reaidy to the question of what she would advocate for as winner of Miss Lebanon, we think, highlights the powerful impact of the Institute's training:

[I would work for] women's empowerment and especially legal rights and legal literacy. Women need to be aware of the laws that govern their lives and protect them or discriminate against them. They need to know their rights to be able to achieve more and to be able to be more confident (T.V. interview, MTV).

There is no doubt that the Miss Lebanon competition is a significant event – it is regularly the most-watched event on television in Lebanon. And although the Institute cannot stop beauty pageants from taking place, it can choose to participate in strategic work that can ultimately challenge the foundation of the beauty pageant industry – and by association, the beauty industry overall - by working directly with those most affected by the system: the young women who participate.

The winner of the Miss Lebanon competition invariably represents Lebanon, and is a public figure and role model for women and girls both across the country, across the region, and internationally. She is an ambassador with a responsibility to project an image of Lebanon that represents the future Lebanon we want – one that promotes equality, diversity, rights – not just physical traits. As such, contestants have a responsibility role models – not only for other young women, but for the entire audience of the Miss Lebanon pageant. With the right tools and experience, these young pageant participants will be better able to think critically and differently about their roles and responsibilities in this competition.

Taking on the beauty industry is a feminist undertaking. For too long “beauty” has been defined by those who objectify, stereotype, and objectify women. Through this training, and hopefully others like it in the future, to instigate a critical, courageous, and long-overdue conversation on beauty and gender norms in Lebanon. At the very least, these young women had the chance to participate in a critical discussion on gender norms, stereotypes, and violence; at its best, the training empowered these young women to articulate a radical counter-position to ingrained gender norms perpetuated in the Miss Lebanon contest.

As the Director of the Institute, Dr. Lina Abirafeh writes:

For IWSAW's part, our training was clearly feminist in orientation and involved a wide range of experts across many sectors who participated in the training. Revolutionary change of the beauty industry isn't going to happen overnight, but we wanted to start a new conversation around rethinking beauty. It was a courageous undertaking and we are quite proud of the outcome.