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#FEMALEFORWARD

**Sarah
Hermez**

*Catalyst of Creativity
and Social Entrepreneur*

The WOMEN of WEBANON

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
FNF Lebanon and Syria*





When Sarah Hermez graduated from the elite *Parsons School of Design* in New York City, she could have joined the thousands of other ingénues toiling away and competing for a spot on the bottom rung at a major fashion house.

Instead, she opted to return to Beirut, her family's homeland, on a quest to make fashion design accessible.

Hermez's fear was that the fashion industry had become too exclusive, with people unable to join the design community due to a lack of money, rather than the talent they possess.

Believing that 'talent', and not 'privilege', should determine who gets an education in design, Hermez opened a tuition-free fashion school called Creative Space Beirut where anyone was welcome to apply.



**Sarah
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WHEN COUNTESS



SARAH HERMEZ

Creative Space Beirut is a model of alternative and collaborative creative education

by

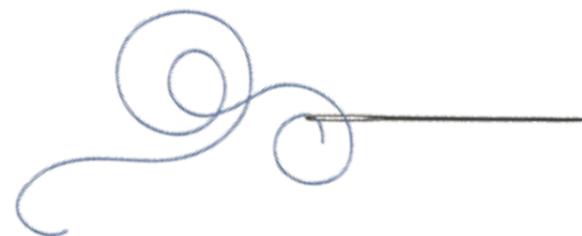
NICOLE HAMOUCHE

Sara Hermez was 24 when she chose to live in Lebanon and found *Creative Space Beirut*, a fashion design school for the underprivileged. She had freshly graduated from the very progressive *New School* in New York majoring in both fashion design and media and cultural studies. In its experiential part, the curriculum took her to Tibet and Cambodia, where she spent time with a refugee family and orphans, respectively. She could not but be impacted by those experiences which became “engraved in her”, as she says. Upon returning to New York, the young woman “knew she couldn’t go for fashion only anymore”, it wouldn’t quench her thirst for social justice. While sharing with her mentor, Caroline Simonelli, a teacher at *Parsons’ School of Design* - who happened to be from Lebanese descent too - her quest to combine her two passions, Simonelli proposed: why not a fashion-design school? In one minute, it became all clear to Hermez: a fashion design school for the underprivileged, moreover, in Lebanon, the country of her origins, which her parents always told her about. Her “sheltered life” in Kuwait and in American schools had left her with a feeling of “lack of sense of belonging” and “craved for roots”, Lebanon would give them back to her.

Sarah Hermez’s family history is one typical of the Middle East, one of migration and encounters. Her grandfather, born in Adena, Turkey, came to Syria as a child and later moved to an orphanage in Lebanon in the 30’s. Later he made his way to Palestine, only to move back to Lebanon with the forming of Israel. “There were no borders then” says, somehow nostalgic, his fair, blue eyed granddaughter while relating her family’s movements. It was her turn to come back to her grandfather’s land in the twenty-first century. Her experiences in the scope of a US institution - the New School

- , in Tibet and Cambodia, countries with similar histories of displacement and exile, war and post war generations lost in translation, had made her reflect on the “question of power and power struggle, on what it meant to come from a privileged position and on the true meaning of equality”. Aware of how fortunate she was to have access to high quality education and to the world, she had the desire to provide education and horizons to those who were not as lucky as her from start. This is how the idea of *Creative Space Beirut’s* model came to her and this is how, filled with enthusiasm and conviction, she embarked on this journey that is now ten years old.

Over the past ten years, the school has become a model of *vivre-ensemble*, and has formed tens of students in fashion design. Eleven graduated, some of which are already rising names in the industry, such as Rony Helou, who won the *Fashion Trust Arabia Award* in 2019 and Ahmed Azher, who was selected to be part of the *Maison de la Mode Incubator in Marseilles*. *Creative Space Beirut* is not officially accredited, it seeks to develop a new type of citizen, conscious of the community and of the necessity of developing soft skills alongside the technical ones. Collaboration and empowerment are at the core of CSB’s approach. The school is already looking at broadening its scope to include visual arts and graphic design as a first of next stages. Through *Creative Space Beirut*, Sarah Hermez aims at helping students “discover their identity and become who they are”, a nod to Nietzsche’s “become who you are”.



Creative Space Beirut students with co-founder Caroline Simonelli



Tell us about your journey and what ignited the idea of CSB?

I studied fashion design at the New School at Parsons and media and cultural studies at Eugene Lang. The latter has a study abroad program that is very much based on experiential learning. I went to Dharamshala, lived with a refugee family, studied Buddhism, it was a one month program designed to dive into the Tibetan struggle. Such an experience, becomes engraved in you. It is different than reading a book. The Tibetan people's exile reminded me of the Palestinian problem, but Tibetans didn't fight because they were non-violent - it is in their culture. Many of them though wanted to fight and were not allowed to do so, this frustration stayed with them. The younger generation had somehow lost their identity. In Cambodia it was the same case, post-genocide in which two million people were killed, but most of the kids didn't even know their history: they didn't know Americans dropped bombs on them during the Vietnam war - there is censorship in education. In the orphanage where we were, children would get attached to us and I felt bad about this as I knew we will be leaving a month down the road. All of this made me reflect a lot, especially on the position of power and the condescendence of foreign authorities coming to teach and impose models in developing countries that are not their homeland. I couldn't go back to New York to do mere fashion, though there is nothing wrong about fashion. Fashion is a big part of one's identity and culture, but it is the way that the industry works that is harmful to the environment, to the planet - I had to integrate it into a larger vision.

How did you found *Creative Space Beirut*, what was the beginning like? Were you on your own?

After a short moment at Bokja, the furniture design company and at ULYP, an NGO that works with youth, I realized I needed to work on a more long-term perspective than NGOs do. I quit and spent a few months writing the proposal of CSB, which I submitted to my parents. As soon as my parents agreed on an initial funding, I visited community centers, NGOs, Palestinian camps and the likes to recruit the first bunch of students to enroll in the program. In three months' time, the students produced thirty garments, then sell them to prove we had a case. Though with no formal training, they went for it. I saw how they were not afraid to cut the fabric the way I was when I first graduated, they were more daring than my colleagues and me who had graduated from major universities, scared to get something wrong. We did a fashion show, had the media over, sold everything and finally generated 17 000 US Dollars. This preliminary work was the occasion for me to see how much talent there is in the country and to ascertain that all that is needed is a platform and the tools.

Who are the students? How do you select them? How many are they?

Most of them went to technical schools, some never finished high school, some went to the Lebanese University, they can't afford to go to CAM or ESMOD. I visited many NGOs and community centers across the country to scout for talents at the beginning. Talent stands out, but the weak public education system, doesn't give them the means to thrive. We would only take 3 or 5 students in the first year of the program, as we didn't have much resources



and only few teachers, all working on a voluntary basis. Now we have 17 students enrolled. Students come from different backgrounds that might have never collided otherwise. When working together, they discover each other, students from the Palestinian camps, from Saida, Jbeil and Bourj Hammoud, many commute every day from remote areas to come to school and they all have bonded with each other.

In your journey as in the one of CSB's students, would you say that the presence of mentors and specific encounters were essential?

Yes, definitely. When I came back, I was lucky to have people around me who gave me good advice: my brothers, teachers. Actually, also Caroline Simonelli, my teacher and mentor, who became a partner in CSB. She offered to come for two months every year to share her experience. It was also an opportunity for her to connect with Lebanon – she is from Lebanese descent but had never visited Lebanon. We are not individuals living in a vacuum. If you are open to your surroundings, encounters are very important to the direction you will choose to take. A word, a conversation with someone can spark an idea. Then, it depends how open you are and how ready you are to take a risk.

“At CSB, this is the mindset I seek to create, one of sharing and exchanging.”



What is the particularity of CSB's curriculum?

The particularity of this curriculum is that it is a mix between academia and experiential learning, though I would like to add more theory in the future. Teachers are designers involved in the scene. We also stress the importance of soft skills: on how to deal with the environment we are living in and how to be collaborative. We look to develop a new type of citizens that is community oriented. Most of our graduates have this social concern, many of them actually are socially conscious, interested in empowering communities and reviving crafts. We have created a community around us: artists and

designers, who are happy to collaborate with us and have become like a family of choice. We have also created a CSB brand that is for profit vs the school that is not for profit. The brand is produced by the team, students and alumnis. People can buy it at the workshop directly or during exhibitions. We launched our online shop in 2019 and we are currently rebranding and reviewing the strategy of it.

In the future, we look to expand the curriculum to integrate graphic design and visual arts and to encompass creativity more broadly.



What is the particularity of CSB's curriculum?

Yes, one of our students Roni Helou has won the Fashion Trust Arabia Award. CSB incubated him for two years for shares in his company. Ahmed Amer, who is an illustrator and fashion designer. He was selected to be part of the incubator of Maison Mode Mediterranee. And for the ones who are not creating their own brands, they are getting jobs in companies or with designers. They are being promoted through CSB's network, which gives them lots of opportunities. Also, some pursue their studies abroad such as Heba Nahle who received a scholarship for Politecnico Milan after graduating from CSB.

Where does CSB stand now, where is it heading?

We are a team of 6 people now and growing, 4 full time teachers and other part-timers and 17 students. We got the support of the Swiss based Drosos Foundation, a 600 000 US Dollar grant, which allows us to expand, sustainability is key in our expansion plan. We had to reflect and re-strategize. We have now a solid partner on our side, whose flexibility and humanness I very much appreciate as well. I would also like to mention that Drosos came to us, **they** found us in 2018, not the other way round. In the past, we had been rejected by so many when applying for grants and here, it came to us without us asking for anything.



What is your thinking after the August Blast and the destruction of your space?

We are moving to a place in Monot street, which fits our spirit – we were at Solidere before, the space was offered - and the owner gave us a rent reduction. We first thought of moving outside Beirut, to the mountains, but then we realized we want to be part of the rebuilding of Beirut, we want to be close.

When I had initially decided to come to Lebanon, it was because Lebanon needed me, it is even more so now. I still feel there are many opportunities and potential. I am going to keep going with my partners: Tracy and Georges which I am so lucky to have. We know we are going to keep on doing everything ourselves – nothing to expect on the government level – we are going to have to build the world we want to live in.

Creative Space Beirut





Learn more about the Initiative at

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