



# MAYLI: THE FIRST PUBLIC LIBRARY FOR WOMEN IN LEBANON'S BAALBEK

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Mayli is a public library and coffee shop for women and girls in Baalbek, Lebanon. It opened its doors in June 2023, and operates three days a week for free, providing women and girls with a safe and welcoming space to hang out, work, study and run workshops. Mayli has also published a booklet authored by women and girls from Baalbek, sharing real life stories of combating patriarchy, child marriage and harassment, among other experiences.

Baalbek - dubbed the “city of the sun” - is a prominent city located in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, about 65 km northeast of the capital, Beirut. Despite systematic marginalization by the state, the city boasts a rich history, and a diverse, vibrant society. For women and girls, however, like many towns and cities around the world, Baalbek’s public spaces aren’t very welcoming. To challenge this reality, a group of young women and girls sought financial support from Doria Feminist Fund to open the first public library for women in the region: Mayli (which translates in the local dialect to “pass by” or “join us”).

“Whenever women gather, it feels like there is always a kind of surveillance, be it direct or indirect. Women feel watched or eavesdropped on. That’s why we wanted to start Mayli library and coffee shop; so that women can meet up, hang out and talk freely and safely”, says Mihad, one of the space’s founders, a confident and outspoken young woman.

For three days a week, Mayli opens its doors to women and girls from all over the region to work, study and hang out. Over time, solidarity networks organically sprung up. “Some women started leaving clothes they no longer need, or baby formula, for other women to simply pick up”, shares Mihad, who is keen on reflecting the participatory values that drive Mayli.



When Mayli was conceptualized, the founders were keen on making knowledge accessible to women and girls in a safe and comfortable environment. Hence, the idea of a feminist public library was born. “We wanted to practically reach out to women, refugees and other marginalized people in impoverished and neglected regions. I’m from Baalbek, I live here, and I know how needed a public space and a library is – as is the case in other areas of Lebanon. This was our main motive”, Mihad explains.

However, being dedicated to knowledge did not spare Mayli the suspicion from conservative political parties in the region, who felt threatened by a new young feminist space opening amidst their constituencies and bringing up the talk of women’s rights and gender justice. In the face of threats and false accusations of “corrupting women”, Mayli’s team responded with openness and transparency, inviting people to visit the space and examine the activities firsthand. Hostile voices soon subsided.

“We managed to allay fears. By and by, our network has grown to more than 200 visitors and supporters of diverse backgrounds. Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian women visit Mayli. We also created a parallel digital space to interact and stay in touch, in addition to the library itself”, Mihad tells us. This diversity has fostered a deep sense of emotional solidarity and trust. Visitors who attend workshops and social gatherings at the space end up exchanging stories and experiences, finding commonalities and providing mutual support for one another.

In addition to book borrowing, Mayli organizes workshops, discussions, market spaces, trainings and feminist classes that aim at analyzing and combating patriarchy and other forms of violence. “Naming patriarchy unapologetically is a new thing here”, Mihad explains, “it allows us to talk about issues that are still considered taboo”. This transgressive spirit brought by Mayli is helping women and girls realize that the problem really lies not in them, but rather in the patriarchal system that oppresses and violates their minds and bodies. “Such realization is life-changing for many. We have tens of women interested in attending our activities, but we don’t always have enough space”, Mihad laments.

In Ramadan, Mayli had to close its doors in observance of the holy month. “A sweet thing happened”, Mihad tells us, “a young woman passed by to return some books she had borrowed before we go on a break... I saw her hug the library’s wall, she then eagerly asked when Mayli will re-open”.

