

LEBANON



JOURNEYS OF COURAGE

Pains and triumphs of diverse women and girls
in accessing and enjoying SRHR in Lebanon

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Foreword

Planting Seeds, Nurturing Change

This booklet showcases stories of young women who defy silence, oppression, and despair, to transform adversity into activism and positive change. As you turn these pages, you will see how solidarity and courage brought about transformative change in the lives of young women.

In Lebanon, We Lead's Community of Action brought together a dozen feminists and grassroots groups to learn from one another, build their skills, and work collectively to expand sexual and reproductive health and rights for all.

Across the country, activism took root in unexpected places. Menstrual justice became a rallying point when Jeyetna who used art, research, and community support to break long-held taboos. In Baalbek, Mayli turned a café and library into a sanctuary where stories of motherhood, war, and the body were collected and shared. Digital tools, once a luxury, became lifelines when omgyno brought telehealth and self-testing kits to those cut off from care. And in the Bekaa Valley, where displacement once meant silence, refugees transformed their camp-school into a center where values of gender equality and social justice flourished.

Taken together, these interventions show that change is multidimensional: it is about bodily autonomy, creative expressions, inclusive technology, and rebuilding community. Each article in this booklet points to deeper struggles and bigger victories that unfold across communities. It invites you to discover how courage, care, and innovation intersect in Lebanon's most challenging times.

These narratives are bound together not by an absence of hardship, but by the stubborn presence of hope. Lebanon's crises, conflict, economic collapse, entrenched norms, are woven through every story; so is the belief that pain can be transformed into action. Change often starts quietly: a workshop in a refugee camp, a circle of writers, or a telehealth call. But when nurtured by care, courage, and solidarity, it grows beyond imagination. The path forward is not always smooth; there are setbacks and exhaustion. Yet the seeds planted through this program continue to take root because they 

← are tended by the very people who need them most.

I invite you to read these pages with your heart as well as your mind. Let the quiet moments linger: a young woman finding the confidence to speak publicly about her body for the first time; a mother discovering that her story of loss can become a poem that heals others; a young woman learning she can test herself safely and privately at home, and call a doctor who listens. These are small victories, but they echo loudly. Let their courage pull you closer. Speak their names. Share their stories. Carry their lessons into your own community.

In Lebanon, we say *يدين بيشيلوا الجبل* (two hands can move a mountain); imagine what happens when an entire community comes together.

Eliannore Boutros

Steering Committee Member/OMGYNO

Lebanon.

Acknowledgements

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Special appreciation goes to Arthur Okwemba, Faith Muiruri, and Ruth Omukhango, who worked tirelessly to compile, edit, and design the booklet. Your creativity, persistence, and teamwork have made this product both inspiring and memorable.

It is also instructive to note that the Journeys of Courage booklet came to light after the immense dedication of the organizations of the community of Action in Lebanon.

In this regard, we extend our deepest appreciation to all the local and grassroots organizations across Lebanon who dedicated their efforts over the past five years to advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Despite the challenges and shifting contexts, your resilience and unwavering commitment have been the driving force behind this program's impact. Your courage and persistence will continue to inspire and pave the way for future change in communities across Lebanon.

We Lead, to foster change.

Giving hope to women and girls trapped in war

The classroom that once echoed with children's laughter now sheltered families huddled together on cold floors, their possessions reduced to whatever they could carry while fleeing for their lives.

In September 2024, as the Israel-Hezbollah war intensified in Lebanon, bombs and bullets transformed Lebanon's poorest neighborhoods into battlegrounds, sending waves of terrified families scrambling for sanctuary. Schools, those bastions of learning and hope, became overcrowded shelters of last resort, their corridors now filled not with the chatter of pupils, but with the whispered fears of the displaced.

Yet these learning institutions, now their final refuge, were woefully unprepared for the tsunami of humanity that crashed through the doors.

Nowhere was this crisis more acute than in Akkar, a remote and impoverished region in northern Lebanon where economic indicators had long painted a bleak picture. Here, in this forgotten corner of the country, public facilities, including schools, stood as crumbling monuments to government neglect.

When hundreds of desperate families sought refuge in these dilapidated buildings, teachers found themselves facing an impossible situation. They were totally unprepared to care for the wave of displaced persons who now called their classrooms home.

It was into this chaos that I'MPOSSIBLE stepped forward.

Founded in 2017 with a mission to build sustainable, prosperous, and inclusive communities in the Akkar region, I'MPOSSIBLE had already seen the area's struggles first-hand. But nothing had prepared them for this.

"The needs kept growing as displaced people were flooding into Akkar, and organizations were not prepared to handle it," recalls Jana Makhoul, co-founder of I'MPOSSIBLE. "We immediately jumped to work, opening shelters and coordinating with municipalities to provide aid."

With the support of We Lead program, the organization managed to provide over 600 women and girls with food, shelter, healthcare necessities including menstrual pads, medical attention for pregnant women and lactating mothers, and access to midwives.

To get the teachers to help in providing these services, I'MPOSSIBLE offered rapid training to teachers, transforming overwhelmed educators into capable crisis responders.

When safe spaces become dangerous

As weeks passed, a darker reality emerged from within the school walls. The very places where women and girls had sought safety were becoming scenes of sexual and gender-





← based violence (SGBV). The crisis had taken a new sinister turn.

The physical structure of schools, designed for education, not emergency accommodation, offered little privacy or security. Some of those men in schools who were expected to ensure the safety of women and girls started preying on them during their most vulnerable state. Women and girls were exposed to these violators, yet they did not have confidential spaces to report violations they were experiencing or seek help.

"Some women told us about a school principal who would enter the classroom without knocking on the door," Jana recalls, her voice

heavy with concern. The lack of basic privacy protocols instilled fear and discomfort amongst the displaced women, many of whom became too frightened to seek support.

The situation grew more troubling. "They did not know how to report these incidents. Neither did they feel safe talking about what happened to them," Jana explains. "Even when we tried to talk to the women, principals and other school workers kept walking by to eavesdrop."

Creating sanctuaries within shelters

Recognizing the urgent need for genuine safety, I'MPOSSIBLE took decisive action. They →

← set up dedicated safe rooms within the shelters: private, confidential spaces where women and girls could seek support with dignity. For the most serious cases of sexual violence, they developed referral pathways to partner organizations with specialist expertise.

"We provided psychosocial support and case management in many instances," Jana notes, "but we could not follow up properly because women returned home after the ceasefire. We lost contact with them."

This challenge of broken continuity highlighted a critical gap in emergency response, one that continues to haunt Jana's reflections on their work.

The experience exposed systemic weaknesses that extend far beyond any single organization's ability to address. Budget restrictions hampered response efforts across the board, with rigid donor requirements creating bureaucratic barriers at precisely the moment when flexibility was most needed.

"We could not act freely to meet our staffing and resource needs," Jana explains with clear frustration. She now advocates for emergency funds with streamlined protocols, allowing organizations to access resources "without complicated paperwork and long waiting periods before approvals and disbursements are made."

Perhaps most significantly, the crisis revealed the cost of poor coordination amongst feminist organizations. Without unified planning, aid distribution became haphazard and inefficient.

"We should have given more priority to strengthening the network," Jana reflects.

"We need to meet, have plans and design an organized way of working as a team," she says. "We must draw lessons from this war and better support each other in the future."

"Lack of coordination resulted in unorganized distribution of aid across shelters."

A vision for the future

Despite the challenges, Jana's vision extends beyond crisis response to fundamental system change. She believes the response to women and girls' needs could have been far more strategic and targeted with better coordination of feminist organizations during emergencies.

"We need to meet, have plans and design an organized way of working as a team," she says. "We must draw lessons from this war and better support each other in the future."

Her roadmap is clear: resource sharing, coalition building, and developing a common vision that, in her words, "unifies us and honors our diversity" ■

Standing ground: A Syrian NGO's fight for refugee rights in Lebanon

The unfinished concrete buildings of Bekaa governorate were never meant to house families fleeing war. Yet as Israel's aggression escalated into full-blown conflict against Lebanon in September 2024, these skeletal structures became lifelines—rented for \$500 a month by an organization desperate to find shelter for the displaced.

"We saw our people stranded in the streets, sleeping in parks and under bridges. It was extremely heart-breaking," recalls Ola al-Jounde, a Syrian feminist activist and founder of Gharsah, a local women's rights NGO.

A country already at breaking point

Lebanon was already buckling under pressure when the new wave of displacement began. The country had been struggling with a massive influx of Syrian refugees for years and now found itself facing an additional crisis as more populations, including Syrian refugees who had found a new home in Lebanon, were forced to flee once again.

This convergence of crises was most acute in Bekaa governorate in Eastern Lebanon, some 50 kilometers from the capital city. The region,

already home to one of the highest densities of Syrian refugees in the country, suddenly faced an impossible situation: more displaced people seeking refuge in shelters that were already overflowing.

The Lebanese government, overwhelmed by the existing Syrian refugee population, was hesitant to accommodate more people seeking shelter in facilities that had reached their limits. This was the seemingly hopeless situation that Gharsah suddenly found itself in.

A decade of building trust

Founded in 2014 with a mission to provide educational support for Syrian refugee children living in camps, Gharsah had spent a decade expanding its reach and impact. The organization had grown beyond its original mandate, working not only to provide shelter for refugees but also to improve their access to education, particularly for refugee children.

More significantly, the organization had focused on empowering Syrian refugee women and girls with economic and other skills while ensuring their safety—experience that would prove invaluable in the crisis ahead. →



← When the September 2024 displacement crisis hit, Gharsah was ready to act. With support from the We Lead program, the organization navigated the shelter crisis by finding alternative spaces, sometimes far from perfect, to serve as temporary homes for the refugees, especially women and girls.

Success, however, came with its own challenges. Lebanese security forces were not pleased with Gharsah's activities and began pressuring the organization to evict Syrian refugees from the schools. This pressure formed part of a broader anti-Syrian refugee campaign that had taken root in Lebanon, with Lebanese citizens increasingly demanding that Syrian refugees return to Syria.

The organization held its ground and managed to resist this pressure until their partner, Frontlines for Change, secured alternative shelters for the women and girls fleeing war.

What proved crucial during these tense moments was something Gharsah had been building for years: trust with local communities. Some of the activities implemented under the We Lead program had helped strengthen this relationship.

The power of community relationships

Ola al-Jounde reflects on how the trust Gharsah had cultivated between itself and local Lebanese communities became their salvation during these grim times. The communities →



in Bekaa allowed Gharsah to run shelters even before securing official approval from the Lebanese government.

"While we struggled with government officials, local community members were supportive," she recalls. "This allowed us to bypass the ban on sheltering Syrian refugees without prior approval."

For Khaled Khansa, Gharsah's program manager, this community support exemplified something deeper. "Solidarity for me is about empathy and understanding. It is about being inclusive, feeling everyone's pain, and organizing for practical solutions."

The funding crisis

Even as Gharsah successfully navigated the political and logistical challenges of providing shelter, another crisis loomed: money. The pressure of supporting refugees quickly exhausted their resources, creating a situation that tested the organization's resilience.

"People fled their homes again, leaving everything behind. We had to provide for them while we struggled with lack of funding and support," Khaled explains. "All relief expenses were covered by our core funds. We only received small additional grants from our regular feminist donors."

The organization was forced, with the little fundings it had, to meet not only foods, but the sexual and reproductive health needs of hundreds of women and girls trapped by this war

The funding shortage during the war presented serious challenges not just for Gharsah, but for many other community organizations caring for Syrian refugees. "We noticed that all groups working with Syrian refugees faced difficulty in securing funds," Khaled observes.

This pattern led many women's rights organizations to suspect that a political decision had been taken not to fund them for assisting Syrian refugees.

When funding did materialize, new problems emerged. Khaled describes how the paperwork was complicated and time-consuming, creating additional barriers during a crisis that demanded immediate action.

The fluid war situation made it nearly impossible to comply with standard donor conditions, such as obtaining multiple quotations before procuring services and goods.

Beacons of hope

Against this backdrop of bureaucratic obstacles and funding challenges, certain programs stood out. The We Lead program became what Khaled describes as "a beacon of hope in these difficult circumstances."

He reserves praise for feminist donors such as Hivos, commending their flexibility and participatory approach to social work. "They are supportive, understanding, and truly participatory. They make bureaucratic procedures easy and simple. We do not feel [power] hierarchy with them. Theirs is truly a partnership." ■

When war made periods political



September 2024 turned menstruation in Lebanon from a whispered taboo into a screaming emergency. Israel's aerial bombing campaign preceding the October invasion left thousands of women and girls displaced, desperate for period products.

The same women who'd been taught their entire lives that menstruation was to be kept secret suddenly had nowhere to hide, no supplies to manage their cycles, no privacy to maintain their dignity.

For Vanessa Zammar, co-founder of the Jeyetna women's collective, this was both a crisis and vindication.

Making menstruation political

She'd been trying to make menstruation a political subject since 2021, screening documentaries across six regions, challenging a culture where even saying the word evoked fear and embarrassment. She also organized a collaborative art exhibition to make menstrual experiences visible to the public.

"Most people grow up being taught that menstruation should be kept secret," Zammar says. "We want to reframe menstrual experiences as deeply political and public."

What hasn't dawned on many Lebanese is →



← that menstruation isn't just about women or accessing menstrual pads; it's a societal reproductive health and rights issue demanding that communities, government, and the political class speak openly and take action.

Through "Jeyetna," which in Arabic means "We are our period," Zammar also aims to make periods comfortable for thousands of women who can't afford menstrual hygiene products.

With the support of the We Lead Program, the organization has been raising awareness and promoting new visual representations of menstruation, challenging myths that either dramatize or romanticize periods. "We want to portray periods the way people actually experience them in reality," says Zammar.

We Lead's support included designing advocacy materials with various groups in mind: women living with disabilities, migrant domestic workers, and other marginalized groups.

During emergencies, Jeyetna distributed the materials and a range of menstrual products to help women and girls manage their periods. The organization reached more than 500 people in person with menstruation messages, with thousands engaged on online platforms.

Overwhelmed by war

Their efforts became crucial when Israel declared war on Lebanon. The need for period products reached a crisis level. Zammar's organization swung into action, distributing the pads they had in store while launching an online fundraising campaign. →

← They raised \$20,000 to buy more period products and hot water bottles for displaced women and girls in Beirut and Mount Lebanon. They appointed focal persons to ensure pads reached women in remote areas inaccessible by vehicles.

But the need was overwhelming. Although donors like Urgent Action Fund, Mediterranean Women's Fund, and Oxfam had helped with the purchase and distribution to the over 20,000 women and girls, it wasn't enough. Over 60,000 women and girls needed period products.

This demand put pressure on Jeyetna, with the organization spending the equivalent of a whole annual budget on sanitary pads. "We used every penny we had on fuel and pads," Zammar recalls.

Donors missing in action

What outrages her most is the bureaucratic maze that stood between donors and desperate women.

"Donors should employ a flexible system designed to respond to emergencies. Why are we the ones who always must prove that we are doing the work, when we are actually doing it without salaries?"

The uncoordinated distribution makes it worse. "The current practice of donors leads some communities to be oversaturated with aid, while others get side-lined and deprived," she notes.

And so grassroots feminists gave everything: their money, their sleep, their health. "As the war progressed, my friends and co-activists stopped taking care of themselves, which made me even angrier at bigger organizations," Zammar recalls. "I saw my comrades not eating or sleeping well."

"As grassroots feminist groups, we can do the work, but where is the money? Where are the

They raised \$20,000 to buy more period products and hot water bottles for displaced women and girls in Beirut and Mount Lebanon. They appointed focal persons to ensure pads reached women in remote areas inaccessible by vehicles.

trucks to dispatch aid? We can't do everything, we should not."

Feminist solidarity

Finding themselves in this situation, the women leaned on each other. "There is a lot of care in our team. We kept checking on one another and strived to create a safe space for venting and sharing," Zammar says.

This feminist solidarity helped them organize better. It was at the heart of co-designing solutions with communities, collaborating with other collectives, and amplifying their work during emergencies. Guilt of failure made many go beyond their limits to ease the pain for thousands of displaced women and girls.

"We knew that if we don't do the relief work, no one else will. If we don't deliver food and pads ourselves, no one else will," says Zammar ■

When a library became a wartime refuge



The space was never meant for this. Mayli Library was built as a social meeting place where women and girls could hold intimate discussions, network, and strategize on how to strengthen women's rights. Then Israel's war on Lebanon broke out, and it became a refuge from bullets and bombs.

A space for gender justice

The objective was to create a space where women and girls could build sisterhood networks, share and preserve knowledge of women's struggles, and build solidarity in advancing women's rights, especially during difficult times.



◀ Mayli, an Arabic word meaning “pass by” used to invite someone to a place or meeting, had grown to more than 250 women and girl members. But here they could “pass by” to organize and push for gender justice in Lebanon.

“The members of the collective are local women and girls from diverse backgrounds and nationalities who don’t have access to communal spaces because exclusionary patriarchal practices deny them freedom of association and movement,” Yara Ayoub, a project manager at Mayli Library, says.

September 2024: intense Israeli airstrikes across Lebanon

When the bombing started, Yara and her colleagues faced a choice: wait for donors to approve emergency relief funds, or act immediately with whatever they could scrape together.

They chose action. “Had we not raised money from our own community through crowdfunding, we would not have been able to provide support to the people who needed help,” says Yara.

Divergent priorities

The decision came after some donors refused to approve the use of funds for emergency relief, especially in areas like Bekaa, which was heavily targeted by Israel. Yara and her colleagues were livid with the donor funding models. The priorities of donors during the war seemed at odds with those of local civil society organizations. They seemed to have aligned with their governments that were supporting Israel’s aggression against Lebanon.

“Mayli, an Arabic word meaning “pass by” used to invite someone to a place or meeting, had grown to more than 250 women and girl members. But here they could “pass by” to organize and push for gender justice in Lebanon.”

“The present NGO model that has dominated the Lebanese civil society landscape for decades reinforces dependency on foreign funding and depoliticizes social and political issues, creating a sense of social passivity,” Yara says.

Feminist solidarity

So, without donor funding, the Mayli women relied on solidarity, the very principle that had created their library, to summon resources from everywhere so they could help women and girls who had sought refuge at the library.

They gave what little they had and launched a crowdfunding campaign to provide basic needs for hundreds of these displaced women and girls.

“During the war, we translated our solidarity into concrete actions on the ground. We focused on being transparent and accountable to our community as we put solidarity into action,” Yara says. ➔



They reached out to non-Lebanese families struggling to receive aid and access basic needs, especially for women and girls. In total, more than 300 families received blankets, food parcels, and hygiene kits.

Documenting women's resilience

The solidarity that established the library became the bedrock of support for women and girls affected by the war. Yara and her team needed to document the struggles they were making.

Fortunately, Hivos, through the We Lead program, came in to support the documentation of women's resilience stories to use as lessons learned for other women, show what was

happening in Lebanon, and help mobilize support for Lebanese women.

These stories told about women's struggles to feed families, access reproductive health services, and battle mental problems caused by the war.

Moving outside the classic NGO model

But more important, Yara notes, the success of community support and crowdfunding during the war on Lebanon made many women's rights activists believe that community-based organizing, trust, and solidarity between community members, are the best strategies to adopt in managing crises ■

