

JEYETNA WE CAN DO THE WORK BUT WHERE IS THE MONEY ?

Based on an interview with Vanessa Zammar, co-founder of Jeyetna, a feminist collective working on menstrual injustice in Lebanon. “Jeyetna”, translated from Arabic to English, means “We have our period”.

Most people grow up being taught that menstruation is a secret that should be kept. Jeyetna has a different story to tell. “We aim to reframe menstrual experiences as deeply political and public,” Vanessa says, a Lebanese-Swiss young feminist activist and co-founder of the collective.

For a long time, TV ads showed girls suffering from pain and being hindered by their periods until the day they “discover” the advertised pad. That’s when their lives turn rosy and carefree. These misconceptions about menstruation are both misleading and outdated. Jeyetna countered them by raising awareness, introducing fresh visual portrayals of menstruation, and debunking myths that either dramatise or romanticise periods.

“We want to portray periods the way people experience them in reality,” Vanessa explains.

With the start of the full-scale war on 23 September 2024, Jeyetna’s team readjusted plans and activities to respond to the urgent needs of thousands of displaced people who lost access to period products. The team jumped to work that same night. They started distributing period products from their storage stock and launched an online fundraising campaign to procure more products to meet the growing needs. After managing to raise 20,000\$ from various sources, Jeyetna deployed trucks to deliver menstrual products to displaced communities in Beirut and Mount Lebanon. The collective coordinated with focal points in remote areas to ensure decentralised and comprehensive distribution. “We thought that big aid agencies would catch up, but we ended up providing period products to 20,000 people in 6 weeks!”

Like many grassroots activists, Vanessa is outraged at bigger organisations and donors who dragged their feet and were too slow to respond. “As grassroots feminist groups, we can do the work, but where is the money? Where are the trucks to dispatch aid? We can’t do everything, and we shouldn’t!” Jeyetna found itself conducting relief work to fill the wide gap caused by the absence or inefficiency of donors and bigger organisations.

“In a donor meeting, I told them that we had to spend the equivalent of a whole annual budget to buy disposable pads. We spent every penny we had on fuel and pads. We didn’t have the luxury to think slowly in offices,” Vanessa passionately says.

Complicated paperwork and bureaucratic procedures set by donors bogged down an urgent relief process at a time when many people were unhoused. Vanessa insists that 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 doing it without salaries?”

All these challenges led Vanessa to be critical of the NGO model, doubting its effectiveness in meeting people’s emerging needs. “The system traps us in small-scale projects and budgets. It doesn’t allow us to tackle the intersectional issues at stake holistically and comprehensively. It also duplicates activities and efforts due to a lack of communication and coordination among organisations,” she explains. As a result, work becomes redundant and inefficient, leading to certain communities being oversaturated with aid, while others get sidelined and deprived.



“However, that only tells part of what happened.” During emergencies, individual activists struggle to juggle their volunteer relief work, their jobs, family duties, physical safety and emotional well-being. “My frustration with larger organisations grew when, as the war dragged on, my friends and fellow activists began to neglect their own well-being.” I saw my comrades not eating or sleeping well. During the first 10 days of the war, many of us didn’t even shower!”

Some Jeyetna team members were stuck in South Lebanon or had their families displaced, affecting both their well-being and the team’s capacity to work. Yet, peer-to-peer care and empathy went a long way in maintaining the team’s resilience. “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,” Vanessa says, highlighting the importance of prioritising activist wellbeing at all times. “I tried to keep a regular schedule of eating, enjoying coffee and taking –15minute breaks away from the phone and laptop. We were all in shock because everything around us was too extreme for our bodies and minds to handle. It’s a difficult conversation to have because of the guilt,” she elaborates.

Vanessa brings up the issue of guilt that many activists struggle with. “There is guilt because we know 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,” she explains. Vanessa’s words are a sobering call for donors to prioritise wellbeing support for activists and community workers.

Despite this tough reality, Vanessa sees feminist solidarity as a pathway for healthier and more productive organising. It means co-designing projects and solutions with communities, collaborating with other collectives, and amplifying their work.

