

MAYLI LIBRARY

RECLAIMING RADICAL POLITICS AND COLLECTIVE PRODUCTION

Based on an interview with Yara Ayoub, a feminist activist and co-founder of several grassroots initiatives in the Bekaa. In 2024, she took on the position of project manager at Mayli Library, a cultural hub and community space for women and girls in Baalbeck. The word “Mayli”, translated from Arabic to English, means “Pass by”, a commonly used term to invite someone over.

Throughout her political activism, Yara supported the building of alternative spaces and informal groups outside of the confines of the classical NGO model. This is what drew her to join Mayli feminist library, where she manages a project about spatial justice for women. “Mayli is an informal group, and we are trying to install our grassroots horizontal structure. We make decisions collectively, as a core team, on equal footing”, Yara says.

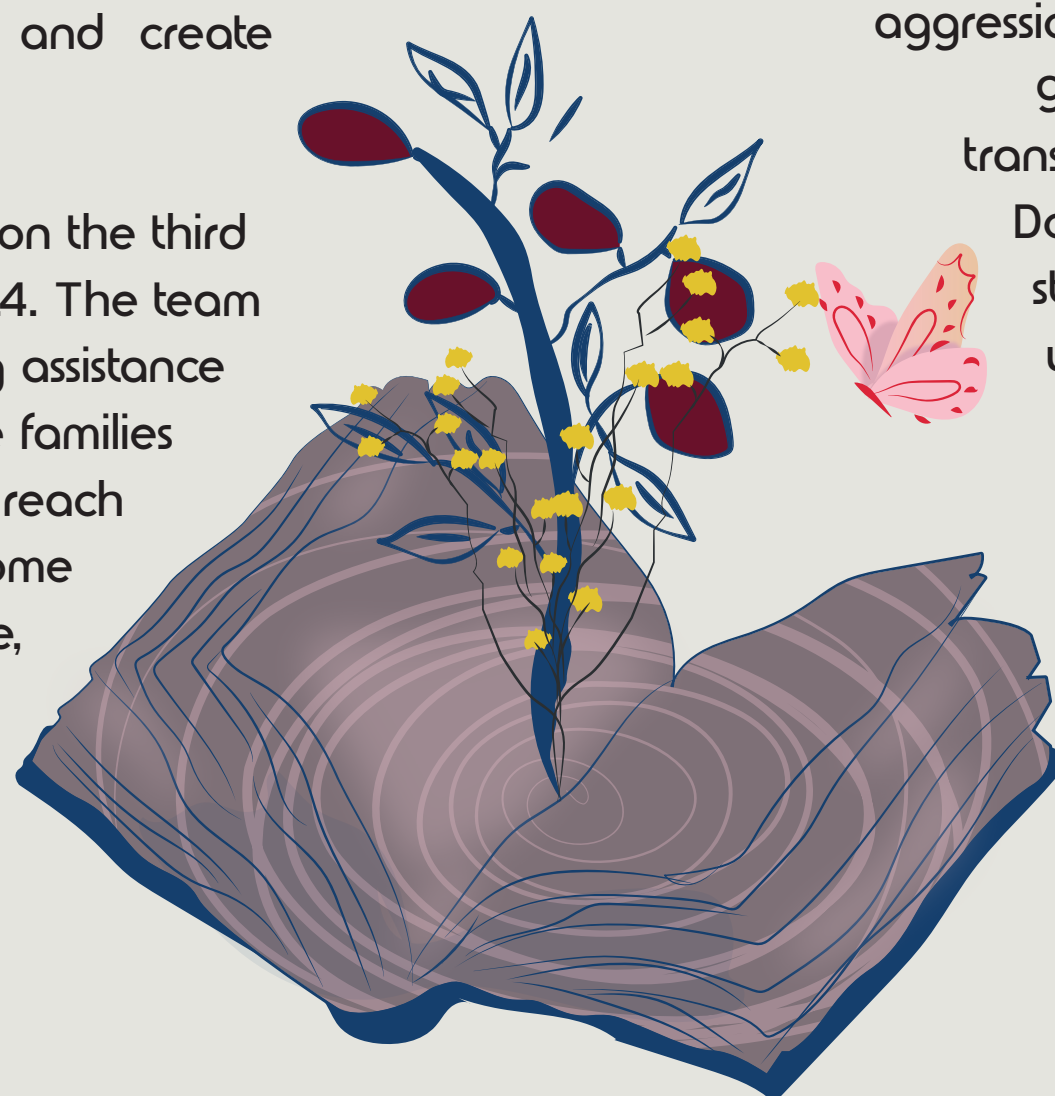
Mayli was founded by a group of feminist activists around the time of the economic collapse and the COVID19– pandemic, to organise a virtual space for collective solidarity and gender justice in Lebanon. Recognising the importance of having a physical space for women to gather and partake in cultural activities and mutual support, Mayli Library was established in Baalbeck, where feminist and inclusive spaces are lacking. The members of the collective are local women and girls from diverse backgrounds and nationalities who lack access to communal spaces due to exclusionary patriarchal dominance that limits women’s mobility. “We want people, especially women and girls, to visit the space to meet and hang out,” Yara says. Cultivating networks of women’s solidarity, sharing and preserving social knowledge are among Mayli’s goals. Guests can enjoy books, cultural resources, and coffee for a nominal fee.

Yara voices criticism for the typical NGO mode of operation because it relies mainly on foreign funding, hierarchical structures and surface–level interventions. “The policies, reports and trends that are produced by governments and international agencies fail to represent us, and there’s a significant accountability gap,” she says. “Part of our work is to critique these systems and create alternatives.”

Mayli started their emergency response intervention on the third day of the Israeli war on Lebanon in September 2024. The team initiated a crowdfunding drive and began delivering assistance to all internally displaced individuals. “Non-Lebanese families were struggling to receive aid. We were also afraid to reach out to residents in targeted areas who stayed home without basic necessities”, Yara says. In response, Mayli’s team helped on a case-by-case basis, mindful of their capacity and the overall security situation.

“We’re reviewing our emergency responses to learn and improve. How can we offer ongoing support rather than one-time relief? Food or heating fuel will only last so long. Our approach must move beyond simply distributing donations,” Yara explains.

Opening the space to shelter displaced people allowed Mayli’s community to grow and expand. 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. When the war ended, the team started providing mental health support for internally displaced women and girls, in addition to documenting the stories of women during the Israeli aggression. “We are now going through a transitional period. Documenting our stories is an urgent matter”, Yara says.



Departing from a critical position against neoliberal, capitalist and colonial frameworks, Mayli wants to create radical social change through alternative political organising and feminist knowledge production. “We can’t completely escape the system, because at the end of the day, we work in it. We are trying to find alternatives,” Yara elaborates. Mayli’s team imagines a communal approach to organising and knowledge production. “Production is key, because a community that cannot produce loses its claim to public space and politics,” she says.

Yara sharply critiques the prevailing NGO framework that has shaped Lebanon’s civil society for decades, arguing that it deepens reliance on foreign funding, strips social and political issues of their urgency, and fosters civic disengagement.

“I call it the ‘beggar system’,” Yara comments, “when a single organisation submits to different policies of different donors, this is what depoliticisation looks like. How can you politically align with 3 or 4 donors at the same time?” Yara notices, however, that the 2019 uprising saw attempts to revive significant concepts like political struggle, social work and civil society and redefine what they mean. “If we are to create real change, we need to stop separating the personal from the political. We need to believe in communal and collective production at all levels,” Yara asserts.

The Israeli aggression in Gaza and Lebanon following the October 7 events led many local organisations to be disillusioned with donors and their funding agendas. “Many Western donors aligned with their governments and explicitly supported the genocide in Gaza. So, they don’t deem us human enough to have the right to a good life? What are we even doing here?”

Yara doesn’t take issue with donors’ bureaucratic requirements per se but is rather cautious of political agendas that come with them. For instance, during the war, some donors didn’t approve the use of funds for emergency relief, while others refused to support any work in the Bekaa area, which was heavily targeted by Israeli forces. “Had we not raised money from our community through crowdfunding, we wouldn’t have been able to provide support in the middle of the war!” Yara says, “Shame on us if we were to abandon our community to meet the conditions and demands of donors.”

This experience led Mayli’s team to believe even more in community-based organising and trust as a key for effective work. “What we look for today in any partner is trust, before looking at the amount of money they will give,” Yara explains. It seems that the 2024 war has severed the trust between grassroots organisations, like Mayli, and donors. “We wouldn’t want a million dollars from a donor who doesn’t trust our work,” Yara insists, “because they’re familiar with papers and reports, not with us or our community.” We can’t submit to the authority of an international donor at the expense of our community’s interests”. Yara frankly criticises what she calls a “hierarchical pyramid” of three or four big donors who run the show and set the rules. “That is exactly the hierarchy we are trying to break,” she says.

