



Fatima, DanniyeH, 25.05.22
Photo: Gabriel Ferneini



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“THE PATRIARCHAL SYSTEM HAS ALWAYS TRIED TO STAND IN MY WAY, AND IN THE WAY OF OTHER WOMEN IN THIS COUNTRY. BUT I’VE CONTINUED TO PUSH THROUGH. I WANT TO LEARN ABOUT EVERYTHING, I WANT TO CONTINUE GROWING. [...]. AND NOW, MORE THAN EVER, I WANT TO UNDERSTAND HOW I CAN TAP INTO THE OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THE COUNTRY’S AGRICULTURE SECTOR.”

FATIMA

Fatima stands tall outside a short trail. Light pours over her face, dancing between the citrus trees and yellow wood sorrel flowers behind her. The trail leads to her family's plot in Minyeh, a stretch of land that Fatima has been working on for years now.

“I have an ancestral connection to this land,” she says. **“My maternal grandfather was a farmer in Akkar, and we learnt a lot from him. I like to focus on the small things: the smell of organic cucumber, how to grow okra, the most delicate way to press olives, what the best type of rosemary is.”** After the economic crisis, Fatima's family started using the land more as a form of self-sustenance. **“Before, it was simply a shared plot that we used leisurely. But when we started to see that we can get to a point in Lebanon where we might run out of food, it became more critical that we think of it as a lifelong agricultural project.”**

Fatima is the eldest of ten siblings. She was married at 16 and got a divorce several years later. Since returning to her parents' home in Minyeh, she has been working on herself nonstop. **“If I had to describe myself in one word, it would be ambitious,”** she smiles. **“I'm a restless woman: I constantly want to work on myself, to become a better version.”** She tells us that her mother is incredibly proud of her. **“It's hard to explain but my mother feels I fulfilled a lot of things she might have wanted to when she was younger. That gives me a sense of strength.”**

She underwent a law bachelor's degree, then an English Literature graduate degree at the Lebanese University. She has also received diplomas and certificates in accounting, journalism, and coaching. **“I want to be versatile. I love language and numbers, I love being practical but also being theoretical.”**

Fatima tells us she loves postmodern and contemporary fiction, as well as parallel or “reimagined” novels—works that fill in the story, plot, or character of an older novel. **“With language, you are allowed to create alternative realities and express yourself in different ways.”**



Fatima, Danniyeh, 25.05.22 Photo: Gabriel Ferneini

Fatima is at a point of juncture in her life now. She's spent years exploring different fields; she's thought of different career options. **“The problem is despite how much work I put in, there is no job market in Minyeh, or even in the entire North of Lebanon. That's not easy, this feeling that you have talented women unable to find the right space for them.”**

The economic crisis changed everything. **“This country humiliates you. Standing in line to get dairy, to get bread, to get anything, it makes you feel so low. I don’t want that for me or my family, I want us to be secure.”** This is why, over the past year, Fatima has been trying to take agricultural work more seriously. **“I no longer want to just plant vegetables, I have bigger plans.”**

But Fatima is not exactly sure about what to do next. She’s been applying and taking part in training sessions and workshops with municipalities, international organisations, and community centres in hopes of building the networks and accessing the resources needed to start work. She’s most interested in making mouneh from organic vegetables and fruits and finding a market to sell her foodstuffs with. **“I’ve been dreaming about this for a while—I’ve been trying it on my own, at home, making zaatar, kishek, pickles, shankleesh, and other types of mouneh.”** She is also interested in learning more about beekeeping, as well as innovative and modern approaches and technologies in agriculture.

There are multiple obstacles: problems with mobility due to the fuel crisis, fragmented supply chain networks, and the lack of capital to expand. **“Sometimes you can go to a hundred training sessions, but if you do not get proper support with finding a job or building the right connections, it can lead to nothing.”** It is this particular tension that Fatima struggles with: the sense of putting herself out there but not finding the space that can appreciate these efforts.

She feels the same when it comes to gender equality. **“I haven’t felt limited because I am a woman. It’s the opposite—I feel strong and confident, I know my capacities. The problem is the society that surrounds me is deeply patriarchal and uncomfortable with change.”** She rejects the notion that the agriculture sector is male-dominated and says that any close look at it illustrates how involved women have always been. “Women understand the land in a way that men don’t; they cultivate, harvest, produce. I’ve seen many women in Minyeh and Donniyeh do it. Women can even begin driving trucks and weeding, of course they can. Soon they will, wait and see.”



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Lea, St. Rafqa monastery, 23.05.22
Photo: Gabriel Ferneini



I love observing bees—how organised and committed they are, and their awkward waggle dance! Every bee has a specific role to play but also each individual role depends on the collective. There’s a lot to learn from that.”

THE BEE-KEEPER NUN

It was late May when Gab and I arrived at the Monastery of St. Joseph, Tomb of St. Rafqa. A warm day, afternoon light trickling through the almond and olive trees. Sister Lea emerged out of the monastery’s arches and into the courtyard with a light-hearted smile, her black tunic robes trailing behind her. Behind her small frame and swift gait, the monastery was large—implanted on a plateau in the luscious green stretch of Mount Jrabta in the Batroun area North of Lebanon.

One of the first things Sister Lea told us about herself, as we walked through the monastery’s spacious old-stone courtyard, was that she likes to do things in reverse, often the hard way too. **“The idea of having to conform,”** she chuckled, **“it bothers me.”** In retrospect, I realise that one of the reasons Gab and I were immediately taken by Sister Lea’s wit and ease was because somewhere in our heads, we’d folded over the notion that a monastery was perhaps epitome of structure, of conformity. But for Sister Lea, becoming a nun was a calling, an invitation to a life of many possibilities. Her decision, though, had surprised many of the people in her life and was met with deep resistance. **“But once you know,”** she shrugged, **“you know.”**



Lea, St. Rafqa monastery, 23.05.22
Photo: Gabriel Ferneini



Lea, St. Rafqa monastery, 23.05.22
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The monastery has been her home for years now and within it, she's found her peace and pace. When we walked around, the other nuns, as well as the drivers and neighbours, greeted Sister Lea with familiarity and care, often nodding her way with a cheeky smile too. She is known in the monastery as the jack of all trades. Sister Lea overlooks financial and administrative issues, waters the plants, designs and illustrates graphics for events, plumbs, takes care of electricity issues. More than anything perhaps, she identifies as a bee-keeper.

She's long been entranced by bees, how integral they are to our ecosystem. Before becoming a beekeeper—nearly ten years ago now—she studied the patterns and behaviour of bees: how they forage, the way they cover themselves in pollen, their process of transporting nectar pollen baskets to the hive. The nectar, Sister Lea told us, is stored and mixed with enzymes in the bees' guts and then eventually dehydrated to become honey.

In her workshop near the monastery, a modest ground floor stone house surrounded by grape trees, there were endless posters, calendars, and paintings of bees everywhere you look. Books were placed atop dark wooden shelves in the room and most of them, unsurprisingly, were on bees and beekeeping. We noticed soon after that some of the books were actually written by Sister Lea herself. One was *The Sister and The Bee*, the other *Got Celiac? Me Too*.

“Wait. So you're an author too?”

“I guess so?” she laughed.

One of the books is a beautifully animated children's book on celiac disease. When Lea was young, she struggled with digestive issues and no one ever understood what the problem was. **“I hated food. I couldn't look at it.”** Her graphic book follows the life of a little boy who, with the help of his grandfather, finally realises the reason behind his constant suffering. Gluten. **“That little boy is me,”** she pointed at the lanky figure with curly brown hair. **“I wrote this book so others understand what this disease does and how it can be mitigated.”** When she handed us two jars of her golden-colored honey, she chuckled that honey is luckily gluten-free. Her second book, *The Sister and The Bee*, starts with **“Once upon a time, in a monastery far, far away, lived a lazy and unorganised nun named Sister Lea.”**

Today, Sister Lea overlooks 55 hives on a strip of land above the monastery. Her hives are named after meaningful people in her life—living or dead. **“My life,” she said, “has become intrinsically connected to these bees. And bees are intrinsically connected to everything around us. It is deeply spiritual. All animals and humans rely on the pollination process.”**

It is in nature, with her bees, that Sister Lea feels most connected to the world around her. She draws a lot of parallels between the monastery and the bee-hive. What fascinates her most is this web of collectivity, how the roles that bees and nuns take on are all intricately connected and done for the benefit of the community. She also pointed out how nuns in a monastery elect a superior once every three years while bees have one queen for the same duration of time. And ultimately, being a “good” nun or bee means living a life of modesty, servitude, and humility. “If you watch bees, you realise how each one of them has a purpose. There is so much structure and organisation in the world of bees. At the same time, everything is shared by everyone—the honey is for the whole community. It is the same in the monastery. Everything we do is for each other, for God.”

Sister Lea wakes up at around 6 a.m. By 7:30 a.m., she—along with the 22 other nuns—has finished her morning prayers. Afterwards, each of the nuns has a certain task to do. “We complete one another,” she said. It is only when her tasks as a nun are finished that Sister Lea visits her precious bees. On a weekly basis, Sister Lea inspects her hives. She makes sure the colony is growing, the queen bee is laying eggs. She overlooks the worker bees to ensure they are developing their honey stores.



Lea, St. Rafqa monastery, 23.05.22 Photo: Gabriel Ferneini

In between her visits, she continues to learn about beekeeping and its tricks, which she told us is an evolving art. “Every visit to the bees, I learn something new. Being a beekeeper means remaining flexible and attentive. Any chance, whether in the weather or something else, affects bees.” Understanding bees better means understanding the specific landscape and climate we inhabit. This entails learning about local diseases and mites, weather patterns, and survival rates. “When you are a bee-keeper, you become attentive to everything.”

Certainly the art of beekeeping is local, intimately connected to an area’s geography. But in Lebanon, apiculture has historically been male-dominated which, Sister Lea reminded us, is ironic considering how female-dominated the world of bees is. When Sister Lea joined a 50-member WhatsApp group for beekeepers in Lebanon to coordinate and share knowledge with one another, she was surprised to find only one other woman on the group. “I don’t really think about my gender though. For me, a woman can do anything. She just needs to want to, and then needs to take matters into her own hands.” Ultimately more women in Lebanon are turning to beekeeping as a source of income-provision and the idea of bee-keeping as an industry reserved for men is swiftly changing.



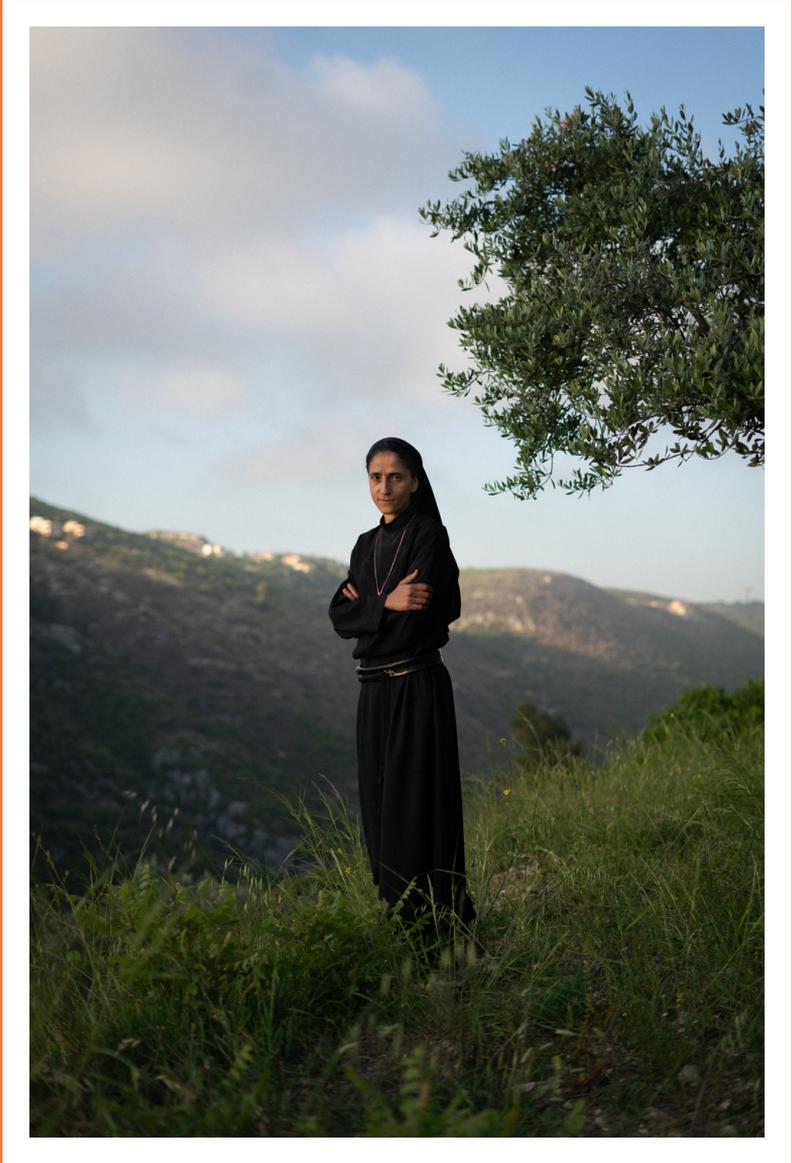
Lea, St. Rafqa monastery, 23.05.22
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After our tour of the monastery, we drove up to her bee-hives, where the sun hovered low. The road was bumpy, even in Sister Lea's four-wheel Lada, and we stuck our heads outside the window to swallow the tangy air. Before we stepped out, we covered our faces with the bee-keeping gear she had lent us. Sister Lea then opened the hives to introduce us to her bees and they swarmed around her arms like swirls of smoke. She told us to come closer, assured us they were well-behaved today.

“With the bees I can forget about this country’s misery,” she said. Often she thinks of how much suffering there is in Lebanon, how much pain its communities have had to endure over the past couple of years, the spiritual healing needed in the country. When we asked her how the crisis has affected bee-keeping, she listed a number of issues: the price of bee-keeping gear has quadrupled, the sale of honey has reduced. Even the number of people driving to the monastery has significantly declined because of the fuel crisis. **“Bee-keepers need more support than ever, especially those trying to enter the field.”**

And yet she cannot imagine a world without her bees. For her, if thousands and thousands of bees can live together in peace, then perhaps so can we. Despite the situation, she wants to continue growing her colony. Particularly she wants to work with pollen and propolis for medicinal purposes and also wants to start producing more soap and candles from beeswax.

Once we arrived at the monastery, the sun had set, the night sky tinting everything in navy blue. We complemented her driving skills after we stepped out of her Lada. She told us she loves cars and that in a different world, she might've been a car mechanic in a garage. **“I love to fix broken things.”**



Lea, St. Rafqa monastery, 23.05.22 Photo: Gabriel Ferneini



Sandra, Tripoli, 25.05.22
Photo: Gabriel Ferneini



Success for me is that internal light.
The sense of adding your own touch,
the feeling of being rewarded by that.

SANDRA AOUN

CO-FOUNDER OF SHEGHEL EMMEH

On rusty blue shelves in the middle of a little shop sit jars of peanut makdous, fig and strawberry jams, herbs goat labneh, spicy mango areeshi, wild cucumber pickles, labneh chia seeds. The air is tangy from the jams boiling in the room next door, and creeping vines and flower pots frame the entrance. This is precisely the atmosphere that **Sheghel Emmeh**, a quaint kitchen lab and agri-food family business, wants. To preserve the old with a twist.

The shop started to come together in 2018, straight from May Aoun's kitchen in Koura. For decades, May had been using that kitchen to prepare elaborate Northern dishes and seasonal mouneh, intergenerational lessons that were passed down to her through watching her grandmother cook. **"I love my family,"** May smiles. **"My way of expressing this love is through cooking. This is how I enjoy the passage of time, especially knowing it will bring us together."**

May's son, Claude, a self-acclaimed lover of spices and herbs, came back from Milan several years ago with a bundle of food magazines. He had one request from his mother - to experiment with what she was best at and see where they could go. Sandra, his wife, and the co-founder of **Sheghel Emmeh**, wanted to play along. **"I'm not a foodie,"** she says. **"But I thought, why not go ahead with Claude's sudden excitement, and see how we could best take it forward?"**



May, Tripoli, 25.05.22
Photo: Gabriel Ferneini



May, Tripoli, 25.05.22
Photo: Gabriel Ferneini

And so this little team of three began to put together the building blocks of what would become [Sheghel Emmeh](#). Sandra's attentiveness to detail made her the natural force behind the shop's conceptualisation. She focused on the branding and marketing streams, as well as quality control and the certification process. May spent hours in her small kitchen in Koura rolling dough, wrapping yogurt in cheesecloth, and experimenting with peanuts and mangoes. Claude, meanwhile, worked on the execution of the concept. Even May's husband and daughter began to work in the shop, contributing to the sales and cooking. **"I worked in Lebanon's construction sector for forty years,"** her husband says. **"Shifting from a rigid industry to a more flexible one has been tough, but rewarding. It's like learning a new language."**

By 2020, May's kitchen had become too small—and a kitchen lab, right next to the shop, was officially launched. Both Sandra and Claude love that [Sheghel Emmeh](#) is based in Tripoli. **'Such concept stores are always in Beirut,'** Claude says. **'And we both care about this city, and this city's growth. So for us it's a point of absolute pride that we're located in the North.'** They also wanted to ensure that the shop would rely on and benefit other organic farmers and producers in the North.

Sandra herself is originally from Donniyeh, a town known for its production of fruits and vegetables. Her parents grow vegetables in Donniyeh, and her brother's mulberry trees stretch across the town. She recalls a bike event she'd organised with the municipality several years before. **"I love my town,"** Sandra adds. **"And that day is special to me because it brought together the community and we experienced a new Donniyeh."** For her, there is an adventurous spirit in Donniyeh that most people do not see. **'My favorite hike is the trail toward Oyoum el Samak.'**

What Sandra is most interested in is the idea of content creation and creativity. [Sheghel Emmeh](#), for her, is not simply a food shop but a concept that is flexible, aware, and continuously expanding. At the same time, [Sheghel Emmeh](#) not just holds on to the past but it valorises. Sandra says, **"Sheghel Emmeh is a product of love, continuity, and family."**



Tripoli, 25.05.22 Photo: Gabriel Ferneini



Sirene, Tripoli, 24.5.2022
Photo: Gabriel Ferneini

“This country is draining; it can take a lot away from you. But there is so much to learn from its history, and a lot of important work left to do. Being an entrepreneur means constantly trying to find a way through despite what comes your way. [...]. And especially During this period, the agriculture sector is flexible and somewhat welcoming, so I want to find ways of modernising it while preserving the lessons and ways of rural communities.”

SIRENE: LOVER OF MICROORGANISMS AND KISHEK





Sirene, Tripoli, 24.5.2022
Photo: Gabriel Ferneini

It was past midnight during one of the strictest COVID-19 lockdowns in Lebanon. Sirene was stretched on a sofa in her apartment, starving, scrolling mindlessly through her phone. She craved something very specific: kishkek. But where to get kishkek from, and how to cook it at this late hour? This is when and how it clicked: ready-made kishkek soup, stored in everyone's kitchen pantry, available at all hours.

Kishkek is a traditional staple in Lebanon made of dry bulgur (cracked wheat) fermented in milk or yoghurt. For centuries, kishkek has been prepared by rural women and consumed across the country. Sirene, who describes herself as a 'Jnoobiyye-Trabelsiyye'—a Southern-Tripolitan—grew up eating it for lunch, breakfast, and dinner. "I don't discriminate," she laughs. **"I love the taste. Love it in soups, as a man'ouche, on its own."**

We were seated at Sara et Karim, a small and colourful cafe in Tripoli's Maarad area, not too far from the sea. When Sirene chose that place for the interview, she told us it was where she comes to for some quietude. It is also close to her house and close to the sea, a space she often returns to. **"I have such a strong connection to water bodies, especially the sea. It is such a privilege to live in a city that is a quick drive from the Mediterranean."**

Even more than the taste, the history of kishkek—what it stands for, how it has been passed down from one generation to the next—fascinates her.

For Sirene, traditional food is a reflection of Lebanon's feminist and rural history.

"Kishkek is prepared in the summer for consumption in the winter. This logic of preservation, I find it beautiful. There's a lot to learn from it, especially in such a fast-paced world." She told us that kishkek is prepared in the summer because the sun is needed to dry the kishk balls. Bulgur is soaked in yoghurt for a couple of days and then chunks of labneh are added. After fermentation, kishkek is rolled into small balls and preserved in olive oil for usage during the winter, or sun-dried and preserved as a powder. There are different ways of preserving kishkek: salting, fermenting, and pickling.

Sirene didn't let the idea of ready-made kishek soup simmer for too long in her head. Soon after her sofa epiphany, she started to research food-processing technologies and gathered together a team of like minded friends. They sat for hours—at cafes and in each other's homes—brainstorming ways to produce ready-made and accessible traditional food.

“It felt more urgent than ever because of the country's food crisis. Suddenly everyone around us felt threatened. We were standing for hours in the line waiting for bread. People were talking about the inadequacies of the agriculture sector. And of course we all knew the state wasn't going to help, it had already proven itself useless time and again. So the question was, what can we do?”

But transitioning into a new company has not been easy. A lot was happening in the country and Sirene, herself, was going through a lot of inner turmoil. Back in 2018, she had joined the Red Cross. Her decision to join the Red Cross came from a place of stagnancy and a desire to be more involved in community work. **“I had returned from Greece, where I was studying sustainable agriculture. But when I arrived in Lebanon, I felt stuck. Even the air around me felt judgmental; I felt I had to conform and mould in order to be accepted. I was full of all these ideas and did not know what to do with them, where to go with them.”** The dedication and commitment of Red Cross volunteers shifted that. She was surrounded by people who wanted to use their time to help others and it helped her snap out of her despondency. But a lot of that changed after August 4. “I was working in emergency services after the explosion. What I saw, the things I heard, they shook me to my core. I wasn't able to return to normalcy after that.”

She had to take some time off from the Red Cross and delve into therapy. In what felt like a sudden change of topic, Sirene begins to tell us about insects and how much she loves them. **“I love earthworms and micro arthropods. I love watching tiny creatures move through the soil.”** Sirene, who had written her thesis on soils and insects and worked as a pesticide and fertiliser engineer for some time, said she had to return to those invisible and hardworking creatures of the earth to remember a crucial philosophy in life: accumulated effort and patience. **“I had to remember that things take time, that my healing wasn't going to happen in a month or even a year, and that I needed to focus on community and continuity.”**



Sirene, Tripoli, 24.5.2022 Photo: Gabriel Ferneini

And so, despite the economic crisis, and the collective PTSD, Sirene and her friends continued to hone the idea of ready-made kishkek. **“We came up with the name Brisky because this adjective means liveliness. We are a young and animated group but at the same time we want to respect the past. So our slogan is heritage with a twist.”** Bit by bit, things started coming together. They attended an accelerator programme and boot camps at the Tripoli Entrepreneurs Club and labs with the World Food Programme, as well as international training programmes, and rented out a space to use different machines at the Chambers of Commerce. They tried out different methods, divided tasks between themselves, revised and rewrote their mission and approach multiple times over. **“It felt like we were creating a world that could go somewhere within a world that was stuck.”**

The challenges, though, keep coming their way. Every time they address a problem, something else arrives. There are the political and economic issues that are shared by entrepreneurs across the country: the weak infrastructure, the difficulty accessing raw material for trials, the fluctuating prices of yoghurt and milk and wheat, the lack of spaces to operate. Two of the cofounders, Nour and Roy, also left the country like thousands of other young people migrating for better options abroad.

On an individual basis, there were also things she needed to account for: what it means to lead a project, how to deal with the gnawing sense of imposter syndrome, how to remain motivated in a place hellbent on bringing you down. **“To start something when everything around you appears to be ending takes a lot of energy and continuous self-work and reflection.”**

By the end of 2021, Sirene and her team members decided to expand their developing technology to other Lebanese traditional meals. They no longer wanted to be stuck in one product—kishek—when the possibilities felt infinite. “Imagine having your favourite homemade meal waiting for you in your pantry and can be made ready in one step, just by adding water,” she says. And so they applied their new concept to the Agrytech Special Edition Accelerator Program, powered by Berytech, and were one of ten startups to win a grant. Today, Brisky is developing high quality, nutritious and convenient meals, that are preservatives free, lightweight, and can be stored outside the fridge. They are targeting people with a busy lifestyle and no time, knowledge, or space to cook their own meals, who are also sick of ordering food and want to decide for themselves what they want to eat for the day, the week, or the month.

Sirene is inspired by her matriarchal family. After her father passed, her mother had to take on a lot of responsibility. **“My mother is such a force. She is a powerful judge in Tripoli which, as you can imagine, is in and of itself a huge feat. She also had to raise us during very difficult times. But I’m inspired by her approach to life, how despite the many challenges that have come her way, she’s remained assertive in a subtle way.”** Sirene herself has reflected on gender multiple times. She knows it is not that common to be a female agricultural engineer in Lebanon, let alone someone with a strong sense of self.



When I had field work in Akkar, some of the farmers I'd work with would be surprised about how I rolled cigarettes. They'd whisper among themselves, wait, what, she rolls? It had a bad connotation for them. But I didn't want to not do it simply to avoid their gazes and questions. And so I kept rolling. I think this is part of what it means to make change, even if it's something as small as this."