

URBAN SYMBOLS AND WOMEN-LED IN THE BEKAA VILLAGES: FRAGRANCE, FIELDS AND FABRICS. PLANNING PATHWAYS TO RESILIENT, LIVEABLE AND SPATIO-ECONOMIC LANDSCAPES

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Image Source: Author

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural territories in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley are confronting intersecting crises: prolonged geo-political instability, economic collapse, infrastructural neglect, and governmental spatial marginalisation. This situation mobilised local women who reclaimed and revitalised the landscape and its socio-economic image through decoding its urban symbols with small-scale place-rooted practices. These women-led initiatives reshaped the domestic porches, rooftops, workshops, fields and archeo-natural pathways as socio-spatial contexts, regenerating liveable systems into neglected villages. They engendered new narratives of rural resilience, spatial identity, and liveability. In this context, the spatial reveals its symbolic: fragrant roses' fields and kitchen gardens, sunlit rooftop with

dried fruits and herbs, and traditional carpet weaving ateliers, all serve not only productive functions but act as embodied, women-inclusive representations of belonging, place-making and potential core for rural planning strategies. These feminine-based interventions emerged from the living systems, often ignored in conventional planning discourse, represent resilient spatial imprints of memory and identity, reshaping the landscape as much as they are shaped by it.

This research explores how women-led practices are converting Bekaa rural landscapes into resilient, liveable, and socio-economically dynamic spaces. The study focuses on three villages: Qsamaba, where women cultivate flowers for fragrance, gastronomy and eco-touristic activities, Deir Al-Ahmar, known for women-led food-micro-industries and eco-tourism, and Al-Fakiha (and neighbouring Aarsal) where traditional carpet (and rugs) weaving is being revived and reimagined across generations.

These three sites were selected to formulate a planning "Trio-Pathway Model", demonstrating how symbolic, community-inclusive performances can serve as replicable spatial strategies for improving rural liveability, sustaining local residents and regenerating resilient landscape. This research is guided by two interlinked questions: How can the rural "spatial" dimension in the Bekaa attract and retain the "social", particularly women and girls, and encourage them to invest in place-rooted economies? Conversely, how can women-led "social" actors adopt and adapt urban symbols and socio-spatial practices to reshape the rural "spatial" into a more resilient, inclusive, and liveable environment for both residents and visitors?

This research aims to highlight how women are not simply surviving, but rather re-generating new spatial models of resilience, rooted in symbolic practices, material culture, and lived geographies.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 URBAN SYMBOLS: ANCHORS OF IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY BELONGING

Representations of places are treated through socio-cultural perspectives and physical boundaries (Bailly, 1990), creating the image of places in the city (Lynch, 2005) and establishing "a crucial concept in the study of the urban symbol" (Nas, 2011, p. 20). Symbolic places gather references to time with spaces and their societies (Debarbieux, 1995). The experience of "home" and "meaningful places" (Relph, 2008), "familiarity" and "inhabiting" (Stock, 2006), the "look and feel of a place" (Helbrecht, 1998), and the "feeling of belonging" (Mueller & Schade 2012), within a "spatiotemporal continuum" (Di Méo, 2002) and through "communication" (Lipiansky, 1993), all contribute to spaces becoming places of identification and anchoring place. While "inhabiting" and "practicing" them (Stock, 2004), identities are decoded through urban symbols.

The “sense of place” often mentioned by designers and planners (Mueller and Schade 2012) motivates inclusivity. Urban symbols bind like a glue people to the place (Hull et al., 1994), granting identity, as Stock (2004) highlights that places often share certain attributes with others. Intangible and tangible components, whether labeled as heritage or not, build identity insights, especially in ordinary landscapes often absent in officially qualified spaces (Mourtada, 2021).

Symbols define the limits of a community and its governance principles (Gill, 2005) and serve as tools of legitimacy for stakeholders such as municipalities, touristic managers, and NGOs, while also being labeled for the well-being of populations (Luginbühl, 2007). Symbolizing communities requires attention to “places and territory” (Guérin-Pace & Guermond, 2006). The identity of a territory (Stock, 2006) develops through socio-spatial associations combining rituals with physical urban elements. Communities invest in such symbols for identity protection and tourism promotion (Mourtada, 2021).

In rural territories, urban symbols act as levers of spatial identity and collective memory: in Qsarnaba, floral terraces planted by women for culinary use; in Deir Al-Ahmar, domestic terraces with preserved goods; and in Al-Fakiha, vividly colored tapestries on porches. Deeply interlaced with daily life, these symbols guide planning pathways toward socio-spatial belonging and resilient landscapes.

2.2 RESILIENT LANDSCAPE AS A SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM

Landscapes are outlined as socio-ecological systems, where human actions are perceptible in the biophysical milieu and community members’ day-to-day actions and reactions. Hence, there is benefits in using landscapes, as a common background for society and science, to overcome the gaps between (inter)national intentions of sustainable development and actual results on the ground (Bohnet & Beilin, 2015). Landscape design must encounter ecological restoration blended with cultural patterns (Nassauer & Opdam, 2008). Within this perspective, resilience could be interpreted in urban design context and projected as the route to create sustainable, inclusive, and safe cities (Lak, Hasankhan, & Garakani 2020, p.4). If we want to conserve economic goods and ecosystem facilities for coming generations, this involves a tolerate landscape system and recognition of the growing epistemology about resilience (Schippers & al., 2015).

The conception of resilience in ecological systems was presented by Holling (1973) and is now an essential approach in modern ecology (Burnside & al., 2022) and urban design. Diversity of landscapes is a crucial factor defining economic and ecosystem resilience (Schippers & al., 2015), however, stability and alertness are considered as the most important keys to urban resilience, guiding cities to be “pro-active instead of being re-active towards intended destiny” (Lak, Hasankhan, & Garakani 2020, p.1). Mark Scott (2013) rejected, in contrast to equilibrium-based approaches,

the concept of “single-state equilibrium” instead he proposed highlighting ongoing evolutionary transformation and adaptive behavior. Thus many tropical ecosystems have diverse and stable populations but are relatively low in resilience, while others in temperate regions with low diversity can show more resilience (Adger, 2000).

2.3 WOMEN INCLUSIVITY FOR RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND PLACES LIVEABILITY

Within the rural-resilient literature, two key themes emerge: “farming as socio-ecological resilience and community resilience” (Scott 2013, p.602). Resilient communities purposely develop collective and personal aptitudes to respond to transformation, as in Bekaa villages during crises, to renew and sustain the community (Magis, 2010) and to improve new routes for development. Some definitions stress the speed of recovery from disorder, highlighting the difference between “resilience” and “resistance”, the latter being the degree to which disorder translates into impact (Adger, 2000).

Development in rural territories is multidisciplinary, involving not only economic growth but also human behavior, socio-political structures, and their contributions to development (Borodina & Prokopa, 2019). Community development, long discussed in research and strategies, was first defined by the United States International Cooperation (1956) as a process “where members unite to address community problems” (Hassan & Abu Daud, 2008, p.363). The United Nations (1975) expanded it as a practice combining community efforts with governmental and non-governmental support to achieve social, economic, and cultural improvement. Leadership is central, defined as the capacity to “influence followers to achieve certain objectives, ... with differences between male and female leadership styles” (Hassan & Abu Daud, 2008, p.364). In sustainable development, leadership requires participatory approaches targeting empowerment (Barrios, Prowse, & Vargas 2020).

Traditionally, women were confined to reproductive roles (Suwena, Irwansyah, & Suwendra 2021). Yet globally, they improve environmental and life quality through saving fuel, planting trees, managing water, and practicing effective farming, thus contributing to grassroots environmental care (Singh & al. 2022). They are vital in economic (Shinbrot & al. 2019) and sustainable development (UNCED, 1993).

The multi-scalar and spatial variability of socio-natural systems negatively affects sustainability and liveability. Sustainability, a complex and contested concept, has long generated debate (Bellamy & Brown, 2009). Similarly, liveability is multifaceted, encompassing “quality of life”, “well-being”, and “life satisfaction” across economic, social, and cultural levels, linked to natural resource preservation (National Research Council, 2002).

Addressing these challenges requires Dietz, Ostrom, and Stern’s (2003) three functional requirements for socio-natural governance: (1) analytic

deliberation with stakeholders to consolidate social capital and resolve conflict; (2) nesting, or distributing authority through multi-layered institutions; and (3) institutional variety, applying diverse decision-making rules to ensure compliance.

3. METHODOLOGY: FIELDWORK AND WOMEN-INCLUSIVE LANDSCAPE INQUIRY

To examine how urban symbols, women-led practices, and planning Trio-Pathways contribute to resilient and liveable rural landscapes Bekaa. This research adopts a multi-scale, qualitative method rooted in urban landscape planning, women-inclusive spatial analysis, and spatio-symbolic interpretation in a marginalised region.

3.1 CASE STUDY JUSTIFICATION:

Three villages were chosen for their distinctive women-led productive practices and their symbolic value in the physical and cultural landscape; Qsarnaba and its floral fields for culinary production, Deir Al-Ahmar for stored food initiatives, and Al-Fakiha for artisanal carpet weaving. Aarsal was introduced briefly due to field work showing a women interactive role with Al-Fakiha.

These sites constitute a Trio-Pathway model across Baalbek District, representing diverse micro-economies, different topographies, and symbolic identities that can hypothetically be scaled and adapted to other rural areas in Lebanon or abroad.

3.2. DATA COLLECTION TOOLS:

3.2.1 Semi-structured interviews (around 28) with women manufacturers and local actors (NGOs and municipalities' members) to understand the symbolic appropriation, landscape memory, socio-spatial challenges, and to explore perceptions of liveability, belonging, and economic viability in rural marginalised areas.

3.2.2. Spatial mapping and site observation to identify the land use, urban symbols in the landscape and assess their spatial integration and socio-cultural function within the rural fabric.

3.2.3 Strategic plans reports and documents showing the municipalities and governal development rural visions.

3.2.4 Photographic documentation to capture seasonal and ritualistic spatial uses.

3.3 ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The collected data are analysed via comparative perspective across the three villages, thematic coding of community narratives to identify symbolic components and women-led impact on spatiality, and triangulation across different data sources. This methodological structure

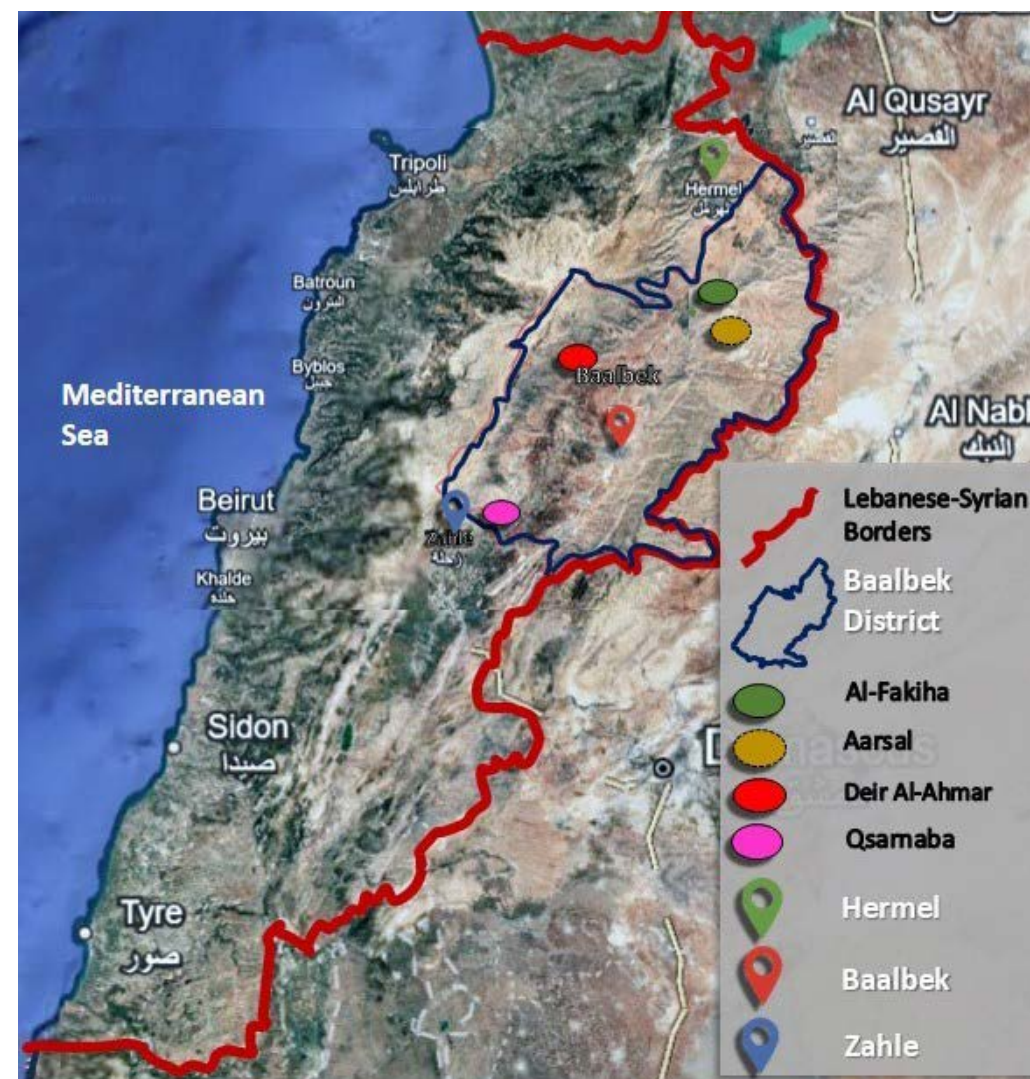


Figure 01 Author graphics on Lebanon's Google Earth Map, showing the four villages (Qsarnaba, Deir Al-Ahmar, Al-Fakiha and Aarsal, in Baalbek District.

forms a nuanced interpretation of the lived experience of rural women (and their families' members) remained in their villages and their relations with the embeded urban symbols in order to reveal the development strategies and a proposed Trio-Pathways' Model allowing an adaptable resilient rural planning tool for rural regeneration.

4. SITE ANALYSIS AND FIELD WORK FINDINGS: SYMBOLIC ANCHORS AND WOMEN-LED SPATIAL PRACTICES IN THE BEKAA

Located between the Mount Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon ranges, the Bekaa Valley is a fertile plateau ranging from 700 to 1,300 meters in altitude. Its

expansive plains support diverse agriculture, from grains to fruits and vegetables, while archaeological sites and rich landscapes reflect a long human presence. Villages such as Qsarnaba, Deir Al-Ahmar, Al-Fakiha, and Aarsal (located in Baalbek district) are inhabited by socially and ideologically diverse populations, including Christians, Sunnis, and Shiites, whose daily life is closely linked to the land.

The repeated Israeli attacks (wars of 2006 and 2024), the proximity to the Syrian border and Daech Attacks (2011 to 2016, and since 2024) exposes the region to geopolitical tensions. The significant number of Syrian refugees, the persistent governmental marginalization, and the economic crisis since 2019 have also accelerated socio-economic pressure and youth migration to urban centres, threatening agricultural continuity and community cohesion.

Despite these challenges, the valley's fertile lands, spatio-symbolic heritage, and community diversity provide critical potential for resilience and liveability. Understanding how landscape, urban symbols and women-based initiatives intersect with economic and geopolitical pressures is essential for planning strategies that foster sustainable rural-urban integration and post-conflict development.

This section explores the distinct spatial, cultural, and symbolic representations of the three selected villages, Qsarnaba, Deir Al-Ahmar and Al-Fakiha (guided us to Aarsal) through the perspective of women-led initiatives and landscape resilience. These villages are analyzed in relation to their urban symbols, productive practices, and socio-ecological values.

4.1 QSARNABA: FRAGRANCE FIELDS AS FEMININE TERRAINS OF IDENTITY

Nestled in the central Bekaa hills, Qsarnaba is a rural town in the Baalbek District, situated on the eastern shoulder of the Western Lebanese Mountain Range near Mount Sannine. Positioned at an altitude of approximately 1,200 to 1,300 meters above sea level, it overlooks the fertile plains of the Bekaa. A key spatial landmark of the village is the Roman temple known as Qasr Al-Banat, the "Castle of Virgins", which symbolically connects the village's archeological heritage with contemporary agricultural and women-inclusive landscapes.

Qsarnaba is renowned for the cultivation of Damascus roses, vineyards, and fruit trees. Its semi-arid Mediterranean climate, with cold snowy winters and hot dry summers, makes it suitable for seasonal agriculture. While these floral fields contribute to the rural economy, they are also symbolic terrains embodying memory, sensory heritage, and women's spatial agency. Around 300 fields (according to the municipality) serve both socio-economic functions, spatio-symbolic roles anchoring memory and place belonging, and agro-tourism destination guiding vacationers through the fields to Qsarnaba Roman temple. Women-led cooperatives have transformed plots into productive spaces through sustainable

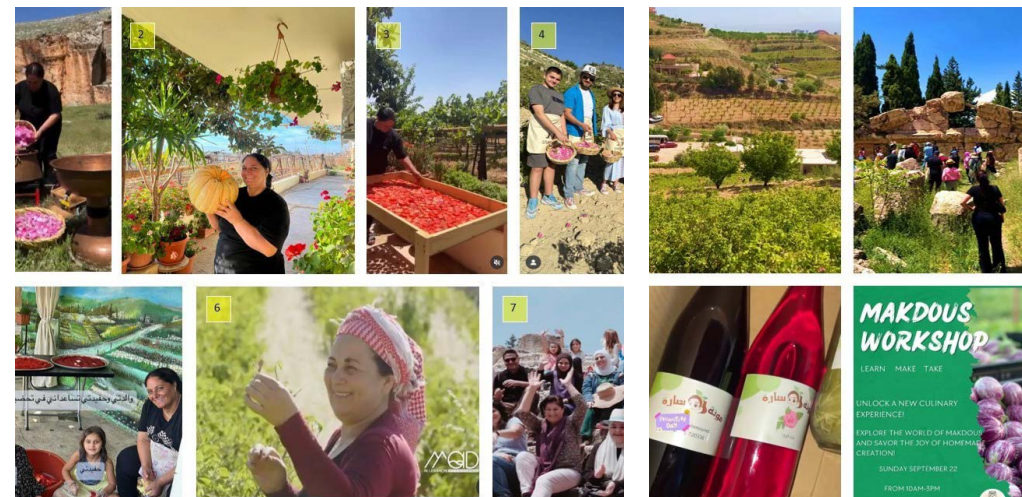


Figure 02 Combining images of women rituals in Qsarnaba: images 1-2-3- showing Emm Adnan while rose distillation and cooking; image 4 showing inter-generation women activities with her mother and grand daughter, images 6-7 showing agro-eco-archeo-tourism tour prepared by Emm Adnan (Source M. Dirani, 2024), image 5 showing Najwa during rose harvest (Source S. Dirani, 2021)

Figure 03 Combining images of Qsarnaba showing in: image 1 Qsarnaba landscape, image 2 Qsarnaba Roman Temple, images 3-4 food industry branding and workshops (Source images 1-2-4 M. Dirani 2024, image 3 S. Dirani 2022).

harvesting, open-air distillation, and tourism activities broadcast via social media platforms.

In Qsarnaba, several women, such as Emm-Adnan (Bayan Sayed Ahmad) aged 60, Khoulood, Chaiman, Sarrah and Najwa Dirani, have emerged as custodians of the village's identity, during times of economic decline and geo-political instability.

For over four decades, Emm-Adnan has produced food provisions for her household. Since 2019, and due to the economic crisis, her son Mokhtar, a master's student in tourism, launched the "Emm Adnan" social media page, branding their domestic practice. Each spring, they host 20 days of rose-harvesting events linking three symbolic nodes: the rose fields, Qsarnaba's Roman temple, and a brunch on their home porch. This integration of agro-archeo-gastro tourism enacts a living spatial identity and a model for rural landscape strategies.

Khoulood Dirani, formerly a volunteer with the Lebanese Reforestation Initiative, currently responsible of afforestation in the village. "I see in every tree I plant the image of authenticity and better life quality for future generations", she notes. Her daughter Chaiman, age 21, a university student, supported her candidacy in the 2025 municipal elections, though Khoulood was not elected. Despite this, Khoulood is now collaborating with the municipality to develop a local youth volunteer group.

Sarrah Dirani, aged 22 and a university student, assists her mother Najwa with food production and has also launched her own brand, "Sarrah

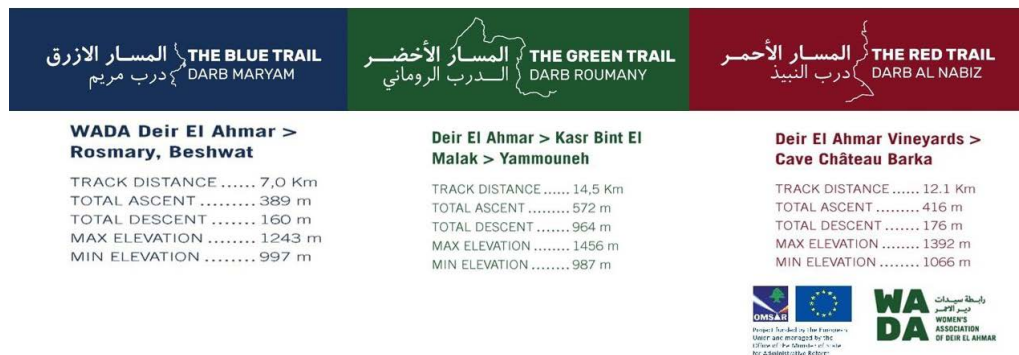


Figure 04 WADA suggested eco-tourism trails from Deir Al-Ahmar (source D. Khoury, 2024)

Mounet". Her father Daher, the village Mayor, sees ventilated home balconies and roses' terraces as connected urban symbols since 300 years, where particularly women's knowledge is spatially performed

According to Mohammad Ali Dirani, the municipal president, the region is experiencing significant migration and land-use transformations. The decline in rose cultivation has been driven by a shift toward vineyards or olive trees, as economic insecurity and geo-political tensions, including the 2024 Israeli attacks, affect traditional practices. He will be announcing a new initiative the "Festival of Roses" to revitalize interest in rose production.

As a member of the municipal council, Ahmad Dirani highlighted the devastating impact of the 2024 Israeli attacks, which destroyed approximately 40 residential units and partially damaged 1400 homes. Many women lost their houses and essential kitchen tools. Yet most have resumed work.

In sum, Qsarnaba exemplifies how rural women act as protectors and producers of landscape identity through rose, food and place-making. Their work sustains both agro-ecological and cultural heritage under adverse conditions. Through these bottom-up initiatives, a rural liveability model emerges, one that anchors spatial resilience in symbolic landscapes, women-led economies, and inclusive forms of heritage-making.

4.2 DEIR AL-AHMAR: HOME FOOD PRODUCTION, TERRACED URBAN SYMBOLS AND CONNECTIVE ECO-TOURISM TRAILS

In Baalbek District, located on the eastern slope of Mount Lebanon, situated at an altitude ranging from 950 to 1050 meters above sea level, Deir Al-Ahmar is characterized by cold snowy winters and hot dry summers. The registered Lebanese population was estimated at about 32,000 in 2016, though only around 9,000 are permanent residents (Berger & GOPA, 2016). The village is named after its distinctive red soil, Deir Al-Ahmar meaning "Red Convent", and is renowned for its terraced landscape and food preservation practices. These sunlit stone terraces, often found adjacent to



Figure 05 Combining images of women rituals in Deir Al-Ahmar: Images 1-2-3 showing women engagement in socio-cultural rituals, images 4-5-6 promoting vineyards and cherry harvesting in Deir Al-Ahmar, images 7-8-9-10 showing women's food production in public and semi-public spaces, image 11 showing villages landscape and stone and clay houses. (Source J. Khalil- managing "ya hala Deir Al-Anmar" on social media, 2018 to 2024)

homes, serve not only as productive spaces but as urban symbols of spatial resilience and adaptation. Women here are active spatial agents who reimagine their private domains as collective urban markers, interweaving economic survival, ecological practices, and community identity.

As one of the earliest women-led initiatives in the Bekaa, WADA (Women's Association of Deir El-Ahmar) began, since 1990, supporting traditional food production and mouneh, anchoring household knowledge within market-based approaches. WADA had expanded to include eco-tourism initiatives and launched three symbolic eco-cultural trails:

- *The Blue Road* focuses on religious heritage, guiding visitors along four historic churches, and ends at the 600-meter-long outdoor rosary (2017).
- *The Red Road* promotes agro-tourism, specifically vineyard cultivation, local wine tasting and regional gastronomy.
- *The Green Road* links eco-archaeological and natural landscapes along the Roman Via Appia. One route leads to the hills of Harf Chlifa and Yammounh lake, and the other to the Baalbek Roman temples.

An interview with WADA's president, Dunya Al-Khoury, emphasized three recurring themes: people, land, and heritage. "The community members of Deir Al-Ahmar are characterized by the distinctive bond they have with their homeland and their hospitable character, this latter frequently mentioned across interviews, constitutes the grassroots basis for eco-tourism, sustainable development, and micro-gastronomic industries.

The link between spatial agency and female leadership, contrasts with formal governance structures. Only one woman, Raghida Khoury currently serves among 15 municipal council members. Raghida emphasized that women's informal leadership is often critical to household economies and helps retain younger generations in the village.

Vice president of the municipality, Tony Habshy, underlined two critical challenges: the agricultural sector's instability exacerbated by water scarcity, and a shrinking local job market that accelerates youth migration. Marcel Fakhri, a member of Deir Al-Ahmar 64 (supported by the FAO since 2016), advocates for preserving agricultural lands and local identities, stressed on encouraging youth to remain and participate in food-related economies.

Rima Berkachi, manager of Rima's Provisions as a producer, trainer, and informal tour guide, actively connects food practices to landscape identity. While Solange Habshi is also a working woman in food provisions, introduced an ecological concept in her industry, built on zero waste, compost recycling and feeding animals.

Jessy Khalil, a volunteer with the local Destination Management Organization, runs the social media platform Ya Hala Deir Al-Ahmar (Welcome to Deir Al-Ahmar). Her posts feature village's community, particularly women in terraces, vineyards, public festivals, outdoor kitchens, and spiritual rituals, subtly turning everyday liveable activities into a visual archive of women-led resilience and spatial culture.

These urban symbols, sun-drying rooftop, urban vineyards, food provisioning terraces and eco-trails, are more than remnants of tradition, they form a vernacular planning model wherein women-inclusive production systems inform adaptive urban and landscape strategies. Despite the limited institutional power of women within official structures, their work, on tangible urban symbols and intangible ones, demonstrates how community-rooted systems offer sustainable alternatives to rural planning and liveable landscape.

In Deir Al-Ahmar, the intertwining of food, faith, and female agency forms a living system of spatial resilience, offering not only an ecotouristic narrative but a community-led planning strategy rooted in symbolic action and landscape identity.

4.3 AL-FAKIHA: WEAVING WOMEN-LED IDENTITY AND GUIDING RESEARCH TO AARSAL: INTER-VILLAGE RESILIENCE

Al-Fakiha, a mountain village located in the northern part of the Bekaa Valley at approximately 1100 meters above sea level, lies near the Lebanese-Syrian frontier. Known for its agricultural terraces, fruit orchards, and historical stone-and-clay houses, the village is particularly symbolic for its traditional carpet weaving craft.

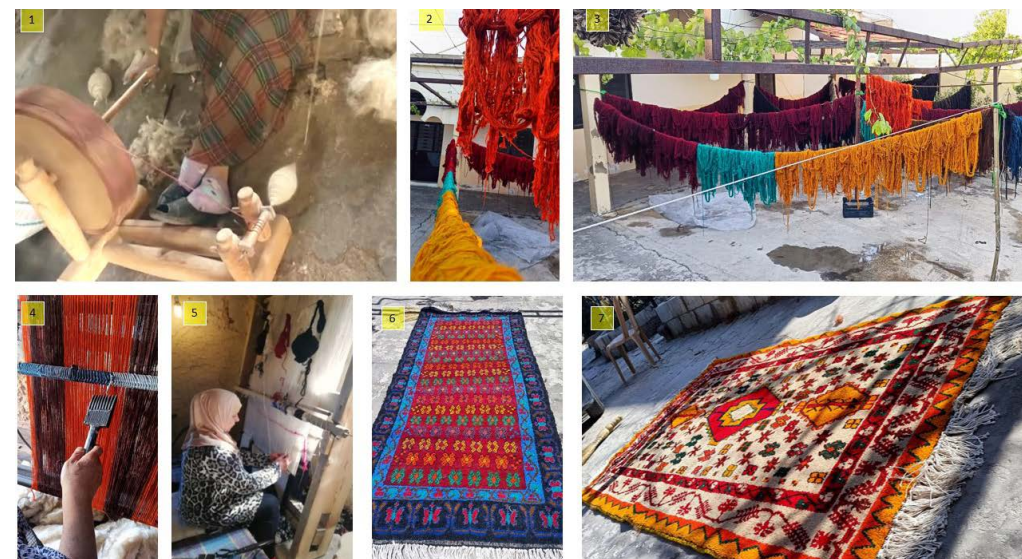


Figure 06 Combining images of Al-Fakiha weaving ateliers and domestic terraces: image 1 showing wool spinning machine, images 2-3 showing dye yarn stretched across porches, images 4-5 showing Emm Omar weaving on her loom, images 6-7 showing the final results carpets (Source O.Sukkaryeh, from 2016 to 2025).

The woven fabric, as literal and metaphorical forms, connects family histories, cultural expression, and economic resilience in a region historically marginalized by national development agendas and destabilized by its geo-political situation. Weaving in Al-Fakiha is not merely a craft, it is a medium through which women's agency is expressed. "When you pass through the village, you see colorful yarn (shkook) hanging over terraces, red, ochre, green, drying under the sun. It's not just wool. It's our presence (women), our village memory and our symbolic landscape image" said Nahla Sukkaryeh, age 65.

She first learned the art of carpet weaving from her mother-in-law after becoming a widow with four children. "I had no choice. I picked up the loom to raise my family, over time, the sound of the shuttle became the rhythm of my days." Her daughter, Baraa, once helped her mother after her university classes. But like many young women from rural areas, she emigrated, marrying and moving to Australia three years ago. She criticised the NGOs preferences, focusing on ecological issues with young women and not on preserving the carpet weaving and by developing this craft.

Another craftswoman, Outour Kbar (age 50), began weaving two decades ago to gain financial independence and safeguard the village's cultural identity. "We asked many times for support from the ministry or NGOs, but our voices echo in silence," she stated. Today, only a few women maintain the practice. The carpet, once the symbolic brand of Fakiha, risks becoming a fading artifact of the past. According to Mahboub Aoun, the municipal president, the town's spatial heritage, porches adorned with colorful wool yarn, agricultural terraces, stone-and-clay houses, and pastoralism natural pathways, form an integrated cultural landscape. However he warns that



Figure 07 Combining pictures of rugs made in Aarsal by Halima Hujeiri, with design inspired from Aarsal landscape, image 2 showing pomegranate trees (Source H. Hujeiri from 2019 to 2024).

Figure 08 Combining two images, to the left aryg made in Aarsal by Halima Hujeiri (Source H. Hujeiri 2024) and to the right the landscape of Aarsal showing rug inspiration (Source TV5 monde 2013/ open source).

“without support, the fabric of this place, both literal and figurative, will unravel.” The demographic and geo-political pressures, such as proximity to the Syrian border, economic stagnation, and youth migration, further threaten Al-Fakiha’s socio-spatial integrity.

As municipal member Chafic Khoury aptly summarized, “The name ‘Fakiha’ means ‘Fruit’ and it’s not just about the trees, it’s about what our women harvest from the land, and from their own creativity. That’s the real fruit of this village.” Hassan Kbar, Youssef Khoury, and Youssef Mrad (municipality members) have noted the village’s ideological diversity, home to both Muslim and Christian communities, as a source of richness expressed through shared rituals and public spaces like mosque and church piazzas. However, internal migration continues to challenge community cohesion and economic vitality.

5. TRANSITIONING TO AARSAL: INTER-VILLAGE ECONOMIES AND FEMININE RESILIENCE

Fieldwork in Al-Fakiha led us to a geographic and narrative extension in Aarsal, a larger mountainous town northeast of Al-Fakiha and one of Lebanon’s highest settlements, situated at an elevation of about 1400 meters. Known today for its challenging geopolitical location and cherry orchards. A reciprocal rural economy once connected the two villages: Aarsal’s pastoralists provided raw wool, while Al-Fakiha’s women transformed it into thick, warm carpets suited for Aarsal’s frigid winters. This invisible corridor of material and cultural exchange embodied a gendered model of territorial resilience.

It was during the 1972 that Rasmyeh Hujeiri, a recently widowed woman

from Aarsal, initiated a weaving practice in her village after obtaining a loom from AL-Fakiha. “She brought more than a loom” said her granddaughter Halima Hujeiri (age 60). “She brought dignity into our home. And a way to make ends meet.” Halima, learned the craft by her aunt, is leading today a small collective of six women who are revitalizing and re-imagining carpet weaving in Aarsal. Unlike the traditional heavy carpets of Al-Fakiha, they now design lighter, modern rugs aimed at younger consumers, designed by well-known painters, particularly for urban areas. “We are producing natural dyes. We use pomegranate peel for pink, walnut shell for grey-brown, and turmeric for golden yellow. Even apricot and almond leaves can give us subtle greens”, explained Halima. This circular economy binds agriculture and craft, rooted in environmental stewardship and cultural continuities, and reinforce local sustainability.

According to Munir Hujeiri, president of Aarsal municipality, since the launch of stone and marble extraction in Aarsal’s quarries approximately 30 years ago, a new economic sector emerged, offering alternative income opportunities. As a result, the number of women engaged in traditional carpet weaving gradually declined. However, the visual signature of Aarsal’s textile landscape is also remarkable. In the summer months, rooftops and courtyards are transformed into open-air galleries of vibrant reds, blues, and green. “We lay the rugs out to dry and the entire village looks like a giant patchwork quilt” said over phone Mouna Awdeh (age 45), who was absent, picking cherry, like many of her colleagues in the village. These everyday addition to seasonal rituals constitute double sided urban symbols, representing landscapes of colorful domestic terraces and agro-ecological fields, woven with collective memory and resilient women-based socio-economy.

Al-Fakiha and Aarsal offer a compelling joint narrative of place-making through women labor, inter-village solidarity, and resilience. From the terraces draped with wool in Al-Fakiha to the sunlit rooftops of Aarsal scattered with bio-dyed rugs, these feminine landscapes narrate a history of survival and innovation, offering liveable, meaningful, and adaptive spaces in the face of adversity. In the woven threads of their carpets and the pigments of their dyes, these women map out new geographies of resilience, rooted in tradition, yet open to revitalization.

6. DISCUSSION: COMPARATIVE STUDY, WOMEN-LED SPATIAL RESILIENCE AND SYMBOLIC LANDSCAPES

6.1. SYNTHESIS OF SPATIAL AND WOMEN-LED RESILIENCE

Across the Bekaa villages of Qsarnaba, Deir El Ahmar, and Al-Fakiha/Aarsal, a shared context of marginalisation, borderland exposure, and infrastructural neglect shapes distinct yet interconnected spatial identities. Key patterns observed include:

Urban symbols and spatial identity as memory texts

- Qsarnaba: rose terraces and porches distilleries.
- Deir El Ahmar: fruit gardens, wine cellars, spiritual-community plazas.
- Al-Fakiha/Aarsal: loom ateliers, colorful wool porches, dye-drying rooftops.

Women-led production reshaping socio-economic landscapes

- Women actively create new economies, reviving heritage crafts while generating sustainable income and self-reliance.

Sustainability, community building, and inclusive rural spaces

- Circular practices, e.g., rosewater reuse, vineyard eco-tourism, wool-to-dye agro cycles.
- Ecological integration visible in terrace farming, monastic orchards, and agro-dye plots.

Geopolitical fragility and inter-village resilience

- Border proximity exposes Al-Fakiha and Aarsal to conflict and youth outmigration; Qsarnaba affected by Israeli attacks.
- Al-Fakiha-Aarsal alliance demonstrates informal inter-village reciprocity.

Diversity, agro-ecological typologies, and intangible heritage

- Al-Fakiha exhibits Christian-Muslim coexistence; other villages express cultural depth via oral heritage and rituals.
- Distinct production patterns: rose terraces, viticulture, pastoralism, herb cultivation, and bio-dye carpets.
- Women transmit craft and identity through storytelling, apprenticeship, festivals, and tourism.

This comparative synthesis not only reveals the lived tactics of resilience across fragmented rural geographies, but it also lays the foundation for a place-sensitive planning strategy grounded in symbolic capital, community economies, and spatial storytelling.

6.2 COMPARATIVE TABLES

Analytical Dimension	Qsarnaba	Deir Al-Ahmar	Al-Fakiha / Aarsal
Urban symbols and spatial identity	Fragrance routes, rose fields, rose distillation, open kitchens, rooftops as olfactory and visual markers, roman temple and agro-archeo-trail.	Open kitchens, wine cellars, socio-cultural rituals, shared church plazas as cultural anchors, eco-tourism, agro-tourism and archeo-tourism tracks.	Loom ateliers, wool-draped terraces, dye-drying porches, weaving as symbolic infrastructure of care and resistance, cherry fields.
Women-led socio-economic micro-industries and development	Women cooperative producing rosewater, essential oils, bridging tradition and innovation, Baalbeki culinary experience, eco-activities, crisis-resistance activities.	Female-led food provision, vineyards, rural guesthouses, collectives revitalizing local economy, eco-tourism initiatives and trails, neighboring networking.	Intergenerational weaving cooperatives, women innovating lighter rugs and bio-coloring for niche markets and climate adaptation women development and cooperative networking.
Sustainability and community-based practices	Agro-ecological cycles around rose cultivation, circular reuse of distillation by-products, and culinary expertise.	Agro-tourism & agro-ecological circuits, eco-viticulture, and spiritual retreats promoting eco-ideo-archeo-linked tourism.	Circular practices in bio-dyeing, agro-plot cultivation, and inter-village wool exchange (Al-Fakiha-Aarsal reciprocal economy).
Resilience collective memory and territorial governance	The scent landscape connects present female labor to ancestral collective memory and spatial identity.	Spiritual ideological symbolism, and agricultural continuity as resilience strategies.	Religious diversity, carpets as memorial female artifacts of domestic identity and history, and resilience sustained through women's inter-village collaboration.
Geopolitical circumstance and development marginality	Situated in the eastern slopes of Mount Lebanon, neglected by national development plans and rural strategies.	Marginally located, often excluded from governmental planning, internal displacement.	Syrian border-adjacent, exposed to conflict spillover, internal displacement, and security fragility.
Ideological and cultural richness	Adjacent to Christian villages, primarily Shia Muslim community with deep agricultural rituals tied to land and flower cycles.	Strong interfaith coexistence with Shia-neighbor villages, fostering cross-cultural practices and community rituals.	Sunni Muslim (Aarsal), mixed Christian-Muslim (Al-Fakiha), adjacent to Shia villages, shared weaving, religious plaza coexistence, and multi-sectarian rituals.
Landscape and agro-ecological typology	Rose terraces, change in agro-land-use, steep farming, micro-hydrological adaptation (shortage in water 2025).	Vineyard slopes, almond fields, religious gardens, and monastic water management systems (shortage in water 2025).	Fruit orchards, pastoralism pathways, terrace farming, and seasonal labor peaks (e.g., cherry harvest during June-July in Aarsal).
Cultural diffusion and Hospitality (Baalbeki hospitable characteristic)	Seasonal festivals and workshops around rose harvest, hosting agro-eco-visitors in homes, especially during spring.	Wine festivals, ideological rituals, eco-agro-archeo trails especially during summer, active social-media pages, and active organisations.	Weaving demonstrations, oral storytelling during limited workshops, and participatory rug-dyeing initiatives, and collaboration with famous artists in Beirut and Baalbek.
Adaptability to inclusive-rural planning model	High potential due to cooperative model, urban symbols re-branding, and youth-women inclusivity.	Outstanding local women-governance, plural identity, and infrastructure for integrated eco-tourism.	Proven inter-village spontaneous collaboration, spatial symbolism, and embedded sustainability allow for replication and rural linkages.
Potential of Trio-Pathway integration	High potential (close to Baalbek city): agro-eco-archeo trip introduced.	High potential (close to Zahle villages): eco-ideo-archeo trails connected to many neighbor villages.	High potential (despite geographical location) : dual node proposing everyday cross-border resilience and inter-village.

Comparative table presenting an analytical comparison between the three villages (source: author-2025)

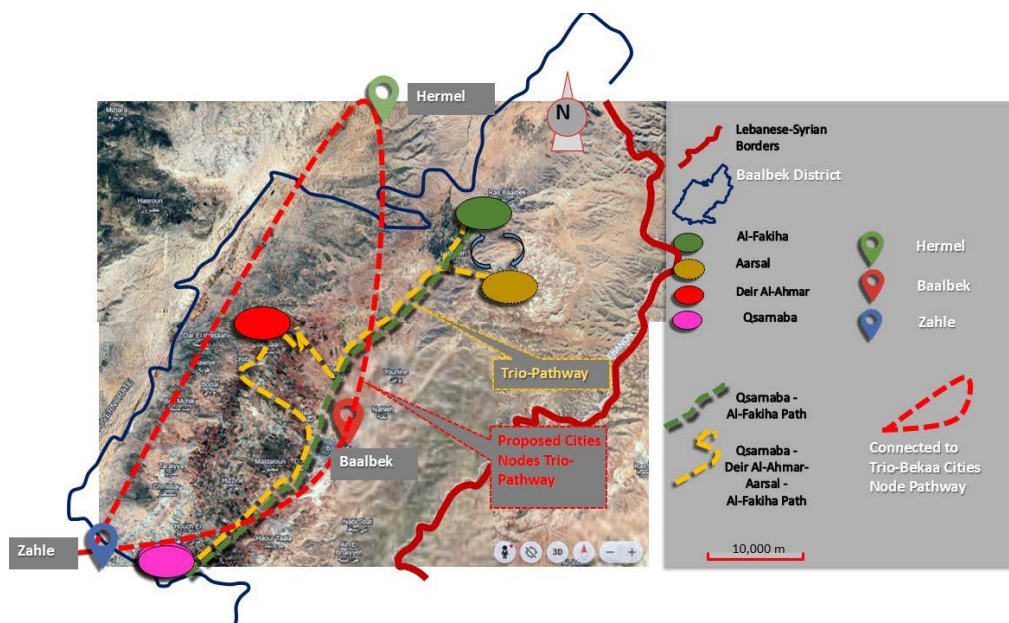


Figure 09 Author graphics on Lebanon's Google Earth Map, showing the four villages (Qsarnaba, Deir Al-Ahmar, Al-Fakiha and Aarsal, Baalbek District borders, the Trio-Pathway, and proposed connections to main cities-nodes like Baalbek, Hermel and Zahle.

6.3. PLANNING FRAMEWORK: A TRIO-PATHWAY MODEL FOR PERIPHERAL REVITALISATION

Drawing on feminist urbanism, relational geography, and socio-spatial resilience theory (Adger, 2000; Badzaban & al., 2021; Barrios & al., 2020), the "Trio-Pathway Model" frames inclusive rural planning. Based on Qsarnaba, Deir Al-Ahmar, and Al-Fakiha/Aarsal, it links symbolic landscapes, women-led economies, and inter-village collaboration to resilient, liveable ruralities. The model emphasizes context-sensitive vernacular strategies and can connect local pathways to main cities-nodes like Baalbek, Hermel, and Zahle.

6.3.1 SYMBOLIC INFRASTRUCTURE AND TERRITORIAL IDENTITY

In each village, spatial symbols act as spatial contexts that decrypt history and identity. These symbolic infrastructures (Hull et al., 1994; Helbrecht, 1998; Mueller & Schade, 2012; Mourtada, 2019) are not simply remains of the past but they constitute living infrastructures of socio-cultural resilience and place-making.

"You can just pass in the village and enjoy the colorful yarn on the porches as part of Al-Fakiha's landscape" said Emm Omar. In Qsarnaba, the Damascus rose is not just a crop but a ritualised landscape dynamic and seasonal rhythm. Deir Al-Ahmar, Red Convent vineyards offer a liturgical ritual founding the core for an agro-tourism strategy. By planning with symbolic foundations in mind, we support a territorial narrative economy

(Guérin-Pace & Guermond, 2006; Stock, 2006) where space is socially involved and performatively legislated.

6.3.2 WOMEN-LED TERRITORIAL ECONOMIES AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

Women across all three villages are not only producers but managers of spatial regenerators. Their leadership redefines socio-economic infrastructures as semi-public women-inclusive spaces of learning and needed autonomy. Represented within a feminist planning theory (Hassan & Abu Daud, 2008; Singh & al., 2022; Suwena & al., 2021), this model focuses on embodied planning where women's invisible labor, becomes a motivator for spatial resilience. Emm Adnan from, Qsarnaba said: "I feel that those flower fields are the continuity of my kitchen and my backyard". These feminised economies are particularly adaptive in times of complicated crisis, governmental neglect, economic collapse, conflict, and youth emigration. Their logic is not purely market-driven but relational and place-belonging, retaining youth in villages and craft-based sustainability. Development and planning frameworks should thus identify women as spatial avant-gardists and co-planners, not beneficiaries of top-down aid.

6.3.3 INTER-VILLAGE SYNERGIES AND ADAPTIVE RESILIENCE

The Al-Fakiha/Aarsal carpet track illustrates how rural horizontal networks can offer accessible models for resilience. Here, material flows (wool), know-how (weaving), and ecological practices (bio-dyes) engender a territorial system based on inter-change rather than extraction.

"Aarsal had the wool and Al-Fakiha had the know-how women, it was natural to exchange" said Halima from Aarsal. This challenges the dominant urban-rural dependency model. Instead, a polycentric rurality, appears rooted-in-adaptive resilience (Magis, 2010; Schippers & al., 2015; Lak & al., 2020), feminist economies of mutual aid, and vernacular collaboration. Planning should therefore support inter-village resource sharing, eco-cultural tourism trails, and cooperative branding strategies.

6.3.4 TOWARD STRATEGY: SPATIAL EQUITY AND PERIPHERAL IMAGINATION

The Trio-Pathway Model challenges rural planning approaches that frame peripheries as passive crisis zones. It promotes a performative and relational planning method grounded in spatial symbolism (Mourtada, 2021), women's inclusion (Suwena & al., 2021), and territorial solidarity (Di Méo, 2002). For equitable and resilient strategies, it emphasizes symbolic landscapes, women's socio-spatial practices, inter-village governance, and agro-craft/eco-tourism loops that engage youth and sustain women-led economies. These insights offer replicable frameworks for post-crisis, Mediterranean, and borderland contexts seeking rural regeneration through heritage, spatial identity, and gender equity.

7. CONCLUSION: REVITALISING RURAL LIVEABILITY THROUGH URBAN SYMBOLS, FEMINISED ECONOMIES, AND VILLAGES NETWORKING SOLIDARITY

This research has shown that the renovation of Lebanon's marginalised rural peripheries in the Bekaa Valley, Baalbek district, often treated as neglected, is already emerging through grassroots governance-led by women. In Qsarnaba, Deir Al-Ahmar, Al-Fakiha, and Aarsal, women are not simply engaging with the rural landscape but reshaping it, drawing on symbolic frameworks, socio-spatial innovation, and collective memory. Through agro-ecological fields, food preparation porches, weaving ateliers, and seasonal rituals, women reinterpret spatial identity and create sustainable, liveable milieux that counter central marginalisation and propose inclusive planning models.

Fieldwork demonstrates that rural space in Bekaa villages is dynamic and creative, particularly through women's action. Floral fields in Qsarnaba become eco-touristic destinations; food preservation in Deir Al-Ahmar transform domesticity into economic infrastructure; and weaving ateliers in Al-Fakiha and Aarsal generate inter-village circuits of knowledge exchange. Across these sites, urban symbols are not imported but locally re-generated, infused with renewed meanings through gendered perspectives, resilience, and heritage transmission.

The proposed Trio-Pathway Model synthesises this renovation into three pillars: symbolic infrastructure/spatial identity, women-led socio-economic initiatives, and inter-village collaborations fostering adaptable resilience. This framework skips missing top-down prescriptions, instead rooting strategy in everyday practices that can inform both local and national scales. Its strength lies in flexibility: encouraging planners to engage symbolic spatialities and their socio-economic meanings rather than imposing uniform models.

Importantly, this model is not exclusive to Bekaa villages. Similar pressures, neglect, post-crisis instability, gender inequality, and territorial discontinuity, affect regions like Akkar, the South, and Mount Lebanon borders. Beyond Lebanon, the model resonates with Mediterranean, Arab, and borderland ruralities facing comparable challenges. It offers a context-sensitive, scalable vision that links gendered spatial equity with resilient, liveable systems. To adapt it elsewhere, three principles are crucial:

- Recognising symbolic and heritage landscapes as planning assets rather than cultural remnants.
- Enabling women-led micro-industries as infrastructural economies.
- Promoting inter-village governance to overcome fragmentation and foster cooperative economies and branding destinations.

The Trio-Pathway Model is timely, aligning with global shifts toward community-led ecologies, feminised infrastructures, and post-conflicts

planning. In post-pandemic, post-collapse and post-war, Lebanon, where formal planning often bypasses rural areas, it argues that spatial equity begins not with mega-projects but with grounded micro-practices: rose oil distillation in backyards, yarn drying on porches, and intergenerational food knowledge shared on semi-public areas.

Planners and policy actors must recognise rural women not just as cultural custodians but as territorial designers. By linking public and semi-private spaces, they make symbolic sites accessible and interconnect liveable environments. The Bekaa villages thus resist with rose water, red soil, and woven threads. Far from spaces of deficiency, they embody hidden abundance, offering pathways of sustainability, liveability, and resilience that extend beyond their borders.

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