

Rehearsing Democracy

Participatory theatre, youth voice, and civic practice in Lebanon



United Nations

Democracy Fund

1. Executive Summary

Young people in Lebanon are deeply aware of the political, social, and economic crises shaping their futures. Yet formal politics often feels closed and difficult to influence, particularly for those without inherited access to public life. The challenge is therefore not only to increase youth participation in institutions, but to create spaces where young people can practice the habits democratic life depends on: speaking, listening, disagreeing, collaborating, and acting with others.

This brief examines “Promoting Youth Engagement through Participatory Theatre in Lebanon”, a programme implemented by Seenaryo and SEEDS for Legal Initiatives with support from the UN Democracy Fund between 2024 and 2026.

The programme brought together 15 Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian young people through participatory theatre, civic and legal awareness, collective script development, touring performances, post-show discussions, and local advocacy initiatives. Its final production, *Does it Matter? It Does...*, toured across Lebanon and opened public conversations around rights, participation, identity, belonging, and political frustration.

Drawing on eight interviews and project materials, this brief argues that participatory theatre can be a powerful tool for civic engagement. Rather than examining theatre as a shortcut to institutional reform, it explores how participation shaped confidence, voice, engagement across difference, public dialogue, and civic action beyond the stage. While this study focuses specifically on the civic engagement outcomes of participatory theatre, participants also reported wider benefits. Notably, 63% indicated that their participation had a positive impact on their academic studies.

The findings suggest that the programme’s significance lay less in the messages it delivered than in the process it created. Rehearsals, performances, and post-show discussions became spaces where participants and audiences practiced listening, disagreement, public expression, and reflection. Some effects carried beyond the stage through local advocacy initiatives and everyday civic action. The brief remains cautious about overclaiming impact. Participatory theatre cannot erase social divisions or deliver political transformation on its own. Its effects were often partial, localised, and dependent on skilled facilitation, continued support, and wider civic opportunities.

For donors, policymakers, and practitioners, the implications are practical.

Donors should fund participatory theatre as a sustained civic process, not a one-off awareness activity or symbolic arts add-on. This means budgeting for the full cycle of work: youth participation costs, workshops, rehearsals, civic and legal awareness, performances, post-show dialogue, advocacy support, flexible timelines, and follow-up beyond the project cycle. Policymakers and public institutions should recognise participatory theatre as a credible civic engagement method and make space for it in schools,

municipalities, cultural centres, youth centres, and community institutions, especially where young people have few meaningful channels to speak and be heard. Practitioners and organisations should design programmes with youth ownership, skilled facilitation, civic and legal expertise, post-show dialogue, clear advocacy pathways, and monitoring tools that capture changes in confidence, voice, relationships, and local action.

- **Fund participatory theatre as a sustained civic process, not a one-off awareness activity.**

Support the full cycle of participation, from workshops and rehearsals to performances, post-show dialogue, advocacy initiatives, and follow-up.

- **Budget for meaningful youth participation.**

Effective participation requires practical support, including transport, meals, facilitation, rehearsal time, and advocacy activities, particularly in crisis-affected contexts.

- **Recognise participatory theatre as a credible civic engagement method.**

Create opportunities for participatory theatre within schools, municipalities, youth centres, cultural institutions, and community programmes.

- **Prioritise youth ownership and co-creation.**

Young people should shape the content, themes, and direction of the work rather than simply receive civic messages.

- **Invest in skilled facilitation.**

Strong facilitation is essential for building trust, navigating disagreement, and creating space for multiple perspectives without forcing consensus.

- **Link participation to real civic pathways.**

Connect theatre processes to civic and legal awareness, post-show dialogue, and opportunities to engage with local issues and decision-makers.

- **Measure civic outcomes beyond attendance and outputs.**

Track changes in confidence, voice, dialogue across difference, public expression, relationships, and local action, not just participation numbers.

Ultimately, participatory theatre should be understood not as a substitute for structural reform, but as a grounded method for cultivating democratic culture under difficult conditions. In fragmented contexts such as Lebanon, its value lies in creating spaces where young people can rehearse participation, encounter differences, and experience themselves as active contributors within public life.

2. Why Participatory Theatre?

Participatory theatre is not only about what happens on stage. It is about who shapes the story, whose experiences count, and what conversations become possible through the process.

Participatory theatre differs from conventional theatre because its value lies as much in how the work is created as in the final performance. As Helen Nicholson states, applied theatre is “primarily concerned with developing new possibilities for everyday living”.^[1] Rather than delivering a fixed script or message, the practice of this production served to invite participants to shape stories, characters, meanings, and sometimes the public conversations that follow.

“ Participatory theatre is a process you build collectively with a group... You take into consideration the participant’s emotions, language, history, complexities, struggles, and imagination, and this is where the richness of the work begins.
— Issam Bou Khaled, Director

Through storytelling, improvisation, rehearsal, and collective creation, participants do not simply express ideas; they negotiate them with others. The process becomes a shared exercise in deciding what matters, what should be represented, and how difficult experiences can be brought into public view.

For civic engagement, this matters. Theatre brings questions of rights, representation, belonging, exclusion, displacement, gender, and governance closer to everyday life, making them personal, relational, and easier to engage with.

“ Participatory theatre has the power to condense the variety and nuances of human experiences, and I think we need this especially in the context of war.
— Pascale, audience member

“ Participatory theatre is a political act. We are working with people whose voices are not heard... their existence itself is political.
— Lama El Amine, Seenaryo

This brief approaches participatory theatre not as a route to immediate institutional reform, but as a temporary civic space where democratic culture can be practiced. Through workshops, rehearsals, performances, and post-show discussions, participants engage in dialogue, disagreement, collaboration, and public expression.

“ All of these steps are prerequisite for democratic engagement. When youth have a space and capacity to participate, this is democracy. To have the capacity, to feel safe, to share their opinion without fear.
— Lina Jarrous, SEEDS for Legal Initiatives

[1] Nicholson, H. (2014). *Applied drama: The gift of theatre*, Bloomsbury Publishing, P.4

2.1 Framing the Inquiry

The central inquiry thus is not whether theatre can transform Lebanon’s political system on its own. It cannot. Instead, the brief asks what participatory theatre makes possible within a fractured and crisis-affected context. It examines four dimensions:

- How the theatre process models democratic practice; how participation shapes confidence, voice, critical reflection, and engagement across difference; whether performances and post-show discussions function as meaningful spaces of public dialogue; and what, if anything, carries beyond the theatrical space into everyday civic and community life.

The Case and Context: Participatory Theatre in Practice in Lebanon

3.1 The Case Study

Project Snapshot	
Programme	Promoting Youth Engagement through Participatory Theatre in Lebanon
Partners	Seenaryo and SEEDS for Legal Initiatives
Donor	UN Democracy Fund
Period	2024–2026
Participants	15 young people from Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian backgrounds
Core components	Participatory theatre sessions, political and legal awareness, collective script development, touring performances, post-show discussions, and small-scale advocacy initiatives
Final production	A play titled, “Does it Matter? It Does...”

The programme was not designed as a theatre production alone, but as a wider civic process. It combined theatre-making with political and legal awareness, public performance, dialogue, and local advocacy. Participants were invited not only to learn about rights, governance, and participation, but to put these ideas into practice through storytelling, collective creation, public performance, and engagement with audiences and local actors.

At the centre of the programme was collective creation. Rather than working from a fixed script, the performance emerged through workshops, improvisation, discussion, rehearsal, and reflection. Participants brought their own experiences, concerns, questions, and disagreements into the process, shaping scenes that explored political frustration, social divisions, rights, representation, identity, gender, displacement, and belonging.

Initially designed around Lebanon’s municipal and parliamentary election cycles, the programme encouraged young people to reflect on political participation and public life. As Lebanon’s economic,

political, and security crises deepened, however, the process evolved alongside participants' realities. The focus expanded beyond elections toward wider questions of voice, agency, expression, belonging, and collective experience under crisis.

The final production toured multiple locations across Lebanon,^[2] and was followed by post-show discussions. Participants also developed small-scale advocacy initiatives addressing local concerns, including environmental issues and road safety, providing opportunities to apply elements of the process beyond the stage.

3.2 Lebanon: Visible politics yet limited voice

Lebanon's challenge is not a lack of political expression. Politics is visible, intense, and part of everyday life. The deeper challenge is that many young people experience political life as closed, inherited, and difficult to influence. Participation may exist formally, but meaningful opportunities to be heard, engage across differences, or shape public decisions often feel out of reach. Speaking politically is not the same as being heard; knowing one's rights is not the same as feeling able to claim them.

Since the end of the Civil War in 1990, Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system has helped preserve stability, but it has also reinforced patronage networks, inherited loyalties, and elite control. For many young people, politics is everywhere, yet meaningful participation remains difficult to access.

These constraints have deepened since 2019. The October 17 uprising created a rare moment of cross-sectarian mobilisation, but the years that followed brought economic collapse, the Beirut Port explosion, political paralysis, displacement, insecurity, and regional conflict. Rather than opening a path to reform, these crises deepened distrust, uncertainty, and political fatigue. Youth disengagement should not be mistaken for apathy. More often, it reflects exhaustion and the realities of daily survival.

This is where alternative civic spaces matter. Democratic engagement is not built through institutions alone; it is also built through spaces where people practice voice, dialogue, disagreement, trust, and shared responsibility. The Seenaryo–SEEDS programme is examined in this context: as a test of whether participatory theatre can create a temporary space where young people rehearse participation, strengthen civic confidence, engage across differences, and carry elements of that experience into everyday life.

Speaking politically is not the same as being heard; knowing one's rights is not the same as feeling able to claim them.

3.3 Methodology and Evidence Base

This study uses a qualitative, interview-based approach, complemented by a desk review of project materials. The evidence base includes eight interviews with people directly involved in or connected to the programme, including Seenaryo staff, SEEDS for Legal Initiatives staff, the director, youth participants and performers, and audience members. Interviews were complemented by programme documentation, evaluation data, and materials related to the theatre process, performances, post-show discussions, and advocacy initiatives.

[2] The locations were as follows: Tripoli (Beit El Fann + Al Rabita Al-Thaqafiya), Bekaa - Khiara (Omar Mokhtar Educational Center), Bekaa Bar Elias (Action For Hope), Beirut (Sunflower Theatre + LAU), Saida (National Evangelical Institute for Girls and Boys), Zgharta (Municipality of Zgharta)

Data collection took place between February and April 2025 amid war, displacement, insecurity, and wider uncertainty in Lebanon. These conditions shaped both the research process and participants' experiences, limiting the timing and scope of interviews. Rather than offering a generalisable assessment, this study provides a grounded examination of one programme and its contributions and limitations. In doing so, it also highlights the importance of spaces where young people can express themselves, remain connected, and engage with others during crisis.

4. What the Case Shows: Participatory Theatre as Democratic Practice

Across theatre sessions, political and legal awareness, rehearsals, touring performances, post-show discussions, and advocacy initiatives, the programme created temporary but meaningful spaces where young people could practice voice, disagreement, collaboration, public expression, and local action.

4.1. Co-creation modelled democratic practice and strengthened participants' sense of "we can"

The programme did not approach democratic engagement as something to be taught through awareness sessions alone, but practice. Early workshops used exercises, storytelling, improvisation, and discussion to help participants build trust, test ideas, and move from individual expression towards collective ownership.

Participation was not symbolic. Participants did not simply share personal stories; they shaped scenes, questioned choices, proposed ideas, and helped decide how the work developed. Their experiences, tensions, questions, and disagreements became the material from which the play was built. In doing so, participants had to listen, negotiate meaning, make choices, and take responsibility for how sensitive social and political issues would be represented publicly.

Young people were not treated as beneficiaries receiving civic messages. They were positioned as people capable of shaping narratives and contributing to public dialogue. Participation became tangible: "having a voice" moved from an abstract ideal to a practice of creation, negotiation, and shared ownership. As Lama from Seenaryo explains, "We practiced democracy from the smallest things, even deciding together what day rehearsals would happen. Everyone had the right to express their opinion, and everyone had to listen to the other person."

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They gave us freedom of choice and trusted our decisions.

— Diyaa

Co-creation also strengthened participants' confidence, voice, and agency. Standing on stage required them to confront fear, occupy space, and take ownership of what they were saying. Some performed perspectives they did not fully agree with, forcing them to engage with complexity rather than retreat into fixed positions.

“ Standing on stage and performing a monologue is not easy... but through it, participants become more in control of their voice, their pauses, and their speech, and more able to raise issues publicly in front of others.
— Issam Bou Khaled

For young people navigating political fatigue and social marginalisation, this mattered. The programme did not move participants directly into formal politics, nor was that its purpose. Rather, it helped some recognise their capacity to speak, contribute, and act. As Diyaa put it, “The project created a personal conviction in me: that I can actually make change.”

Political and legal awareness sessions reinforced this process by helping participants connect personal experiences to wider questions of rights, governance, and responsibility. Theatre made civic questions feel lived and relatable; awareness sessions helped participants situate those experiences within broader public realities. The contribution was therefore foundational rather than institutional: it strengthened the capacities that make civic participation possible.

Confidence, voice, and agency are not “soft” outcomes. They are part of the civic infrastructure young people need before they can participate meaningfully in public life.

4.2. Sustained interaction across difference disrupted “us versus them” dynamics without forcing consensus

The programme brought together Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian young people from different regions, religious communities, and social backgrounds. Participants included Sunni, Shia, and Christian youth, as well as Syrians living in Lebanon, many carrying very different experiences of conflict, displacement, identity, and belonging. Some came from communities shaped by longstanding sectarian tensions, while others had experienced more recent violence, displacement, and insecurity. Participants therefore entered the space with different assumptions, experiences, and forms of distance from one another, reflecting wider divisions around sectarian identity, displacement, nationality, gender, and political belonging.

Initial interactions sometimes reflected implicit “us versus them” dynamics. Over time, shared rehearsals, retreats, collective problem-solving, and the demands of performance created conditions where participants had to engage one another beyond initial assumptions and rigid social categories.

“ At the beginning, I felt there was a divide between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and I even thought about withdrawing from the project. But over time, we got to know one another and created something meaningful together.
— Diyaa

“ When I came to Beirut and entered (the) theatre, I realised that we are different, but that difference does not have to intensify conflict. Theatre helped me see Syrians as people living struggles similar to ours, and it taught me to understand life from other people’s perspectives.
— Ghina

Disagreement was central to this process. Discussions around politics, identity, displacement, religion, gender, and social norms could be uncomfortable, but the programme did not treat discomfort as failure. Facilitators surfaced tensions, held them respectfully, and redirected them into the work. As Zahraa reflected, “We used to get into debates, but I never took them personally. The discussions with Issam between rehearsals and scenes were political, but they opened space to think differently.”

Participants were encouraged to engage with perspectives they did not necessarily share, and sometimes to perform positions that challenged their own assumptions. Different viewpoints were allowed to coexist without forcing agreement.

**“ Sometimes I intentionally provoke discussions... but with respect for people’s ideas and convictions... because if we don’t address these differences openly, relationships become hidden and unhealthy.
— Issam Bou Khaled**

The finding is not that participatory theatre dissolved social divisions. It did not. Rather, it created temporary conditions where young people could practice a different way of relating across differences. In democratic terms, this matters: pluralism is not the absence of disagreement, but the ability to remain in dialogue despite it.

Participants were not expected to erase political, regional, sectarian, or personal differences in order to belong. Instead, disagreement, discomfort, and negotiation became part of the collective process. As Lama from Seenaryo reflected, “Nobody lost their identity. They did not need to pretend to be someone else in order to belong.”

Dialogue across differences should not be measured by whether participants agree. Its value lies in whether people can stay in the room, listen, disagree, and continue creating together.

4.3. Touring performances and post-show discussions functioned as temporary “mini-publics” for reflection and debate

The democratic significance of the programme did not remain inside the rehearsal room. Through touring performances and post-show discussions, it moved into public space. Audiences were not simply invited to watch a completed play; they were invited to respond, question, interpret, and connect its themes to their own lives.

The performances became more than message-delivery events. They created public encounters around political frustration, rights, belonging, displacement, gender norms, exclusion, and public responsibility. Presented through story, humour, conflict, emotion, and contradiction, these issues became easier to enter and harder to dismiss.

Post-show discussions were central to this process. Audience members sometimes challenged viewpoints expressed on stage or strongly disagreed with aspects of the performance. Rather than shutting these moments down, facilitators and performers kept the conversation open. Their value often lay less in resolution than in the fact that people remained in dialogue despite discomfort or difference. This was also reflected in audience feedback surveys, where 96% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the performance helped them better understand and empathise with communities other than their own.

The touring model strengthened this further. Responses varied across locations, reflecting different political sensitivities, lived experiences, and local contexts. The same scene could generate very different reactions depending on who was watching. Rather than delivering a fixed advocacy message, the performance became a travelling space for public dialogue.

“**The discussion after the performance felt like an organic continuation of the experience rather than a symbolic addition. It shifted the audience from passive reception toward active participation.**
— Amir, audience member

For participants, performing before live audiences also deepened their relationship to public expression. They moved from discussing difficult issues internally to presenting and defending them publicly, turning the stage into a bridge between private reflection and public voice.

Post-show discussions should not be treated as optional add-ons. When facilitated well, they are core moments where theatre becomes public dialogue.

4.4. Participatory theatre strengthened participants’ ability to translate civic engagement into action

The programme’s effects did not end with the performance. What is notable is not that advocacy occurred, these initiatives were an intended part of the programme, but that all three of the programme participants interviewed repeatedly drew on the confidence, relationships, storytelling techniques, and sense of agency developed through the theatre process to carry this work forward in everyday interactions. These shifts were often modest, localised, and difficult to measure, but they are important because they show how theatre-based civic engagement can move from expression toward action.

One clear pathway was through small-scale advocacy and community initiatives. Participants identified local concerns, including environmental issues and road safety, and developed initiatives in response. These activities required them to organise with others, divide responsibilities, engage local actors, and in some cases interact with municipalities, schools, or community groups.

While modest in scale, these initiatives were meaningful. For some participants, they represented a first experience of engaging with local decision-makers or trying to influence a public issue. In a context where formal politics can feel distant or ineffective, they offered a tangible experience of civic agency.

Participants also carried theatre methods into other parts of their lives. Those working in education and community settings used storytelling, interactive exercises, and participatory approaches to create more inclusive spaces. Others described changes in how they listened, communicated, facilitated conversations, and approached disagreement. Zahraa, a science teacher, adopted theatre and storytelling to make complex ideas more engaging and accessible.

**“ In class, my way of teaching is theatre. Science can feel boring otherwise. I use storytelling... storytelling becomes woven into the learning process.
— Zahraa**

In this sense, theatre became more than an activity. It became a method participants could carry into everyday life: communicating, facilitating dialogue, engaging others, and making complex issues more relatable.

4.5. Participatory theatre opened democratic possibilities, but its effects remained partial and shaped by wider constraints

The findings also point to important limits. Participatory theatre is not inherently democratic, nor are its effects automatic. Its value depends on trust, time, participant ownership, skilled facilitation, and the ability to hold disagreement without imposing fixed conclusions. Without these conditions, participation can become superficial or symbolic.

The programme also shows that meaningful participation has practical costs. Long project cycles can strengthen trust, confidence, and collective ownership, but they also require time, energy, mobility, and sustained commitment. In Lebanon’s current context of economic crisis, insecurity, displacement, and limited opportunities, staying engaged can be difficult even when motivation is high.

The touring model created both value and pressure. Multiple performances expanded public dialogue, but they also required planning, travel, and time away from work and other responsibilities. Participation should therefore not be treated as cost-free.

This points to an important design lesson. Financial support is not the only factor that matters, but transport, meals, stipends, flexible scheduling, and performance-related income can make participation more accessible and sustainable. They also recognise participants’ contribution as both creative and civic labour.

Recognising these limits helps define the contribution of participatory theatre more precisely. Its value is not that it solves democratic fragmentation, but that it creates temporary spaces where people can experience and practice forms of democratic life that may be difficult to access elsewhere. For those spaces to be inclusive and sustainable, programmes must be designed around the realities of young people’s lives.

Participatory theatre can help rehearse democratic culture, but only under the right conditions: time, trust, skilled facilitation, youth ownership, adaptive programming, practical support, and pathways beyond the room.



5. Key Recommendations

These recommendations are intended for actors beyond the arts sector, including donors, public institutions, municipalities, schools, civic education actors, peacebuilding organisations, and organisations seeking practical methods to strengthen youth voice and democratic engagement.

“ **Don’t be afraid to work with all segments of society, and don’t give up on young people. Trust them enough to create something meaningful.**
— Lama El Amine, Seenaryo

For donors and funders

- **Fund participatory theatre as a civic process, not a one-off arts activity**

Support the full cycle of work, including trust-building, workshops, civic and legal awareness, rehearsals, performances, post-show discussions, advocacy support, and follow-up. Funding models focused primarily on productions or audience numbers risk missing the civic value that develops through rehearsal, reflection, dialogue, and collective creation.

- **Budget for the real cost of participation: Participation is not cost-free**

In contexts of economic crisis and insecurity, donors should budget for transport, meals, stipends, performance fees, or revenue-sharing where appropriate. Practical support makes participation more accessible, equitable, and sustainable.

- **Support flexibility and continuity beyond the project cycle**

Participatory theatre must be able to adapt to participants, context, and the creative process itself. Donors should allow flexible timelines and adaptive outputs while investing in follow-up structures such as mentorship, peer networks, alumni spaces, small grants, and continued accompaniment. In crisis settings, this also means protecting civic and cultural programming alongside humanitarian response. People need spaces to express themselves, stay connected, and rebuild trust.

“ It’s very important to create spaces for people to express and connect, especially now. If we all move to humanitarianism, the society will be more devastated as we will all be working on basic needs.
— Lina, SEEDS

Humanitarian response is essential, but it cannot be the only investment during a crisis. Civic, cultural, and developmental work also helps people express themselves, stay connected, rebuild trust, and imagine collective futures.

For policymakers and public institutions

- **Recognise participatory theatre as a credible civic engagement method**

Participatory theatre should not be treated as a symbolic arts activity or a soft add-on to democratic programming. When designed well, it can strengthen voice, confidence, dialogue across difference, public reflection, and local action.

- **Open public spaces to participatory cultural programming**

Schools, municipalities, youth centres, and cultural institutions should create opportunities for young people to perform, discuss, and act on issues affecting their communities, particularly where civic dialogue is limited or politically sensitive.

- **Connect youth expression to local decision-making**

Performances and advocacy initiatives are most effective when linked to real opportunities for engagement. Policymakers and local authorities should create channels through which youth-led theatre and advocacy can inform community discussions, municipal priorities, school initiatives, and local campaigns. This is not about turning theatre into policy messaging; it is about taking seriously the issues young people raise.

For practitioners and organisations

- **Give young people real decision-making power**

Young people should shape the content, direction, and messages of the work, not simply participate in it. This requires facilitators who can manage disagreement, navigate power dynamics, support quieter voices, and create space for creativity, play, and connection.

- **Pair theatre with civic expertise and pathways to action**

Participatory theatre is strongest when creative expression is connected to rights, governance, representation, and public responsibility. Practitioners should combine theatre with relevant expertise, treat post-show discussions as part of the intervention, and help participants identify realistic pathways for local action.

- **Invest in skilled facilitation**

Programmes addressing identity, rights, politics, displacement, gender, or exclusion require facilitators who can hold difficult conversations without closing them down. Theatre works best when participants can engage seriously with challenging issues while remaining connected through creativity and play.

- **Measure civic change, not just outputs**

Monitoring and evaluation should go beyond counting participants, performances, and audience numbers. Programmes should also track changes in confidence, voice, listening, collaboration, relationships across difference, and local action, using qualitative tools such as reflective journals, follow-up interviews, and case studies.

Taken together, these recommendations point to a simple lesson: participatory theatre should be supported as a serious civic practice. Its impact depends on time, trust, skilled facilitation, youth ownership, flexible funding, practical support, and pathways that allow young people to carry participation beyond the stage.

As the findings demonstrate, participatory theatre is not simply a cultural activity but a practical civic engagement method. Yet despite its ability to strengthen voice, dialogue, confidence, and local action, it remains under-recognised and under-resourced within democracy, peacebuilding, and youth engagement programming. Addressing this gap would not only support the arts, but expand the range of tools available for building more participatory, resilient, and inclusive public life.

Acknowledgements

This policy brief was written by Zainab Chamoun and Drew Mikhael in collaboration with Seenaryo. Inputs and review were provided by Myriam Ali Ahmad, Siel Devos and Lara Mclvor. It is funded by the UN Democracy Fund as part of a Seenaryo project in partnership with SEEDS for Legal Initiatives.

Photography: Ali Sheikh