

# Restless Development in the MENA Region

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## Advancing Youth Feminist Leadership in Lebanon & Jordan

(January 2021 – December 2025)



# 1. Introduction

The We Lead programme in the MENA region—Lebanon and Jordan—has been a powerful example of how youth-led feminist movements and organisations can lead to meaningful change through collaboration and knowledge exchange. Over the past five years, Restless Development has worked closely, through the We Lead programme, with youth-led local organisations, feminist movements, and consortium partners to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of young women from marginalised communities and promote inclusive youth leadership.

This brief offers an overview of Restless Development's work in the region, highlighting the We Lead programme's achievements, lessons learnt, impact, and collaborations, capturing how young women have taken ownership of the process and shaped its direction.

Through capacity strengthening, partnership building, and meaningful participation in global advocacy spaces, We Lead in the MENA has become a bridge between local realities and global movements, amplifying the voices of young feminists in spaces where they are often excluded. The regional implementation and collaboration led to knowledge exchange, responding to the needs of the organisations and movements involved, and meaningful youth engagement and leadership.



## 2. Regional Context and Our Approach

### Background: SRHR and Youth Civic Space in Lebanon & Jordan

Across the MENA region, and particularly in Lebanon and Jordan, young people continue to face significant barriers in accessing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Restrictive social norms, coupled with legal and institutional limitations, often create huge barriers—especially for young women and marginalised groups.

In both countries, SRHR remains a sensitive and often stigmatised topic, with limited access to comprehensive sexuality education, safe reproductive services, and inclusive public dialogue. At the same time, the youth civic space is shrinking, with limited funding and the absence of meaningful platforms for participation in decision-making.

Despite all of this, young people are at the forefront of change, shaping the discourse and changing the narratives through continuous lobbying, knowledge production, and service provision through civil society work.

## Challenges Faced

Limited and unsustainable funding for youth-led and feminist organisations, particularly in rural areas or working on sensitive rights issues.

Restrictive operating environments where legal and bureaucratic barriers limit registration and advocacy on SRHR.

Persistent gender norms and social stigma that reinforce silence around sexuality, bodily autonomy, and gender identity.

Tokenistic youth participation where young people are often invited to consult but rarely to lead or influence outcomes.

## Our Response: We Lead's Localised Model

To address these challenges, We Lead adopted a localised implementation model built on empowerment and local ownership with an intersectional, inclusive feminist approach.

Through Community of Action (CoA), the programme created a network of youth-led organisations and feminist movements which design, lead, and implement, driving the SRHR agenda in their own contexts. This structure allowed the programme to shift power to local actors, ensuring that interventions respond to community realities and that youth are drivers of change.



# Our Guiding Principles

## 1. Intersectional Feminist Approach

Centring lived experiences and acknowledging how gender, sexuality, ability, and identity intersect to shape young people's realities.

## 3. Safe and Inclusive Spaces

Cultivating environments—online and offline—where youth can express themselves freely, without fear of judgement.

## 2. Meaningful Youth Engagement

Enabling young leaders to set their own goals and advocacy agendas, hold decision-makers accountable, and ensure they are at the forefront of decision-making processes and leading the implementation of the programme.

## 4. Partnership and Collaboration

Working hand-in-hand with local organisations, feminist movements, and consortium partners to build sustainable and equitable collaborations grounded in mutual learning and trust, building on each other's work instead of working in silos.

## 3. Capacity Building

Restless Development delivered a series of tailored capacity-strengthening workshops designed to equip local organisations with practical tools in youth-led research, youth-led accountability, youth power, and meaningful youth engagement. Moreover, based on the demand of the Community of Action (CoA), Restless Development responded to their needs by collaborating with Positive Vibes to develop a Feminist Inclusive Facilitation guide, followed by the rollout of a training in collaboration with Hivos, which provided a structured, values-based approach to creating safer, more participatory spaces. We also developed a Meaningful Youth Engagement (MYE) Code of Conduct with the Jordan CoA to guide organisations in adopting accountable and youth-centred practices.

“Restless Development played a key role in supporting us as we prepared “The Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) survey on sexual and reproductive health among married individuals and those previously married in Jordan”. The Youth-Led Research methodology strengthened our approach to both the qualitative and quantitative components, particularly through its practical guidance on sampling, refining the questionnaire, and adapting evaluation tools to ensure cultural relevance and ethical sensitivity.”

Raneem Hijazi, Projects Manager,  
Hikaya Center

In partnership with consortium members—particularly Hivos and Marsa—we convened the MENA Regional Convention, bringing together CoA members from Lebanon and Jordan. This gathering created a shared space for young leaders to exchange knowledge, learn from one another’s experiences, build cross-border coalitions, and strengthen their advocacy and technical capacities across a wide range of SRHR and feminist leadership themes.

12

young people were trained on Feminist Inclusive Facilitation

13

CoA organisations were trained on Meaningful Youth Engagement (MYE), resulting in the development of a code of conduct for the Jordan CoA

16

people learnt about the Youth-Led accountability methodology

52

individuals received the Youth-Led Research training

“It was wonderful to partner with Restless Development and colleagues across the MENA region in developing the Feminist Inclusive Facilitation Guide. The process was driven by the needs identified by the CoA, grounded in local expertise, and it fostered mutual learning and knowledge-sharing. We look forward to more such collaborations in the future!”

Inger Harber, We Lead Programme Officer, Positive Vibes

## 4. Supporting Young people

### Community of Action Facilitators (CoAFs):

One of our main pillars is supporting and trusting young people to lead change. The Community of Action Facilitators were at the forefront of change, leading the Community of Action. We held regular one-on-one meetings with the CoAFs to provide them with the support they needed, creating a safe space for them to share their concerns, needs, goals, and aspirations, ensuring their skills grow as the programme comes to an end.

Haneen Alfayoumi,  
Jordan CoAF

“I would say the 1:1 provided support on two levels, personal and professional; professional in terms of providing guidance and alternative solutions and a different point of view that sometimes I did not see, which helped navigate some issues with the CoA. In terms of personal support, it provided a space to vent and try to figure out some ways to enhance my work environment, in addition to opening my eyes to maybe goals and interests I have not thought about and pushed me to start thinking of my personal development that I will pursue later on, even after We Lead ends.”

**Young Steering Committee Members:** In the core belief of youth leadership, as stated in the We Lead manifesto: “We deserve a seat at the table. Our perspective should be center stage in the decision making process.” We have had two young women rights holders from Jordan and Lebanon CoAs in the We Lead Steering Committee – the highest decision-making body within We Lead – ensuring their voices, and those they represent, were heard.

**Feminist 30 Under 30:** In collaboration with Hivos, we collaborated with Hivos to document the stories of the young leading voices in the Feminist 30 Under 30 campaign. [Read more here](#) about their inspiring stories!

## 5. Leadership Labs

Designed as a safe, inclusive and youth-led, the Leadership Lab sessions allowed participants to shape both the content and the learning process. Several in-person sessions were organised between the Lebanon and Jordan Communities of Action, offering opportunities to exchange expertise, deepen cross-border understanding, and build on one another's lived experiences. The topics covered were diverse and fully driven by the interests and priorities of the young participants, ranging from: Standing in Solidarity | Feminism in Postcolonialism, HIV in Jordan, The Gender Dimensions of Sexual Violence Against Migrant

Domestic Workers in Post-Crisis Lebanon, Period Talk: myth debunking, intersectional perspective on periods, How to Become a Leader? and SRHR & Women with Disabilities.

These Labs sparked rich and nuanced discussions, where young people critically questioned their own realities, unpacked misconceptions, and challenged the narratives imposed on them. By providing this space, we affirmed our core belief that young people are the experts of their own lived experiences and should be trusted to lead conversations that matter to them.

“Restless Development played a crucial role by offering a strategic, youth-centred perspective that enhanced both the planning and delivery phases of the WeLead project in Lebanon. Their consistent and engaged presence throughout the project cycle brought valuable insights particularly in ensuring inclusive, responsive, and participatory approaches tailored to the needs of rights holders. Their engagement during the closeout event in Lebanon was pivotal, not only in the logistical coordination, but in ensuring that youth voices remain central to the process. Their thoughtful contributions and reflections help shape the event into a meaningful space of learning, celebration, and strategic closure.”



## 6. Partnership and Collaboration

Restless Development has played a central role in strengthening collaboration with other We Lead consortium members, Community of Action members, and host organisations, ensuring that the programme's approach in the MENA region remained responsive to the specific needs of young leaders.

“The past five years in the MENA region have been marked by rapid and often challenging change. It has been a privilege to lead the We Lead Program alongside Restless Development and the wider consortium. By listening to local voices, prioritizing reproductive health and rights, elevating youth-led advocacy, and designing activities that place rights holders firmly in the driving seat, we were able to adapt and contextualize the program in truly powerful ways.”

Mariam Khalaf, Program Officer, Hivos

Through this collaborative spirit, the region achieved several key milestones: hosted the cross-country MENA Convention that brought together CoAs from both countries; Linking and Learning conference on SRHR with a session focused on Meaningful Youth Participation; delivered joint capacity strengthening workshops; developed the We Lead Knowledge Hub in Lebanon; published the Stories of War; and organised impactful close-out events in Lebanon and Jordan, that celebrated learning, leadership, and collective achievements.

Arab Network for Civic Education (ANHRE)

“Over the past five years, ANHRE has had the privilege of collaborating with inspiring consortium partners who have consistently shared their expertise and knowledge with generosity and commitment. Among them, Restless Development has been an exceptional partner; one that has made a profound and lasting contribution to our collective journey. Through their guidance and collaboration within the We Lead program, ANHRE and the COAs have grown not only as organizations but also as advocates, equipped with the knowledge, tools, and conviction to advance meaningful youth engagement across all levels of social change.”

## 7. Amplifying Youth Voices in Global Advocacy

We supported more than 20 young rights holders from Lebanon and Jordan to participate in major global advocacy spaces—including Women Deliver, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the Commission on Population and Development (CPD), the ICPD30 Global Youth Dialogue, and the International AIDS Conference.

Their engagement in these global spaces led to significant personal and professional growth. Their visibility expanded within international networks, and they were able to meaningfully contribute to global policy conversations—demonstrating the essential role of young people in shaping inclusive, rights-based agendas.

“My participation and attendance at the 56th session of the Commission on Population, Education and Sustainable Development at the United Nations headquarters in New York represented a paradigm shift for me. It set international standards and policies which promote inclusive, equitable and sustainable development all around the world.

This session increased my awareness of the global challenges and issues about development and population, in addition to the social, economic and environmental issues affecting youth, women and society, which are shared by all world countries, especially developing countries. “

Read more about Raghd's story, experience [Commission on Population, Education and Sustainable Development: learnings on SRHR, networking and advocacy](#)

These forums also allow transnational collaboration across movements, building alliances, and providing opportunities for youth-led organisations and movements

“Working across movements is crucial to advancing social, political, and cultural change on a global scale. The importance of collaboration between different movements is crucial to advance intersectionality, amplify voices, build bridges, solidarity and support, and achieve long-term change.”

Read more about [We Lead's Impact at the Women Deliver Conference 2023.](#)

## 8. Expanding the Youth Collective and Regional Learning

Lebanon and Jordan CoA organisations have also become active members of the Youth Collective—a global network of more than 5,000 members across 185 countries. Joining this collective has connected CoA members to a vibrant international community, expanding their access to resources, visibility, and collaboration opportunities.

The collective also provides access to a wide range of capacity-strengthening resources, tailored trainings, and insights generated through Restless Development's youth-led research.



## 9. Reflections, Lessons, and the Way Forward

Over the past years, We Lead in the MENA region has demonstrated that when young people are trusted and resourced, they can transform their communities and realities. One of the key lessons learnt is the critical importance of flexible and sustained funding for youth-led and feminist movements and organisations—funding that recognises the realities and evolving priorities of local actors.

Inclusivity and intersectionality, as main pillars of our work, have proven that nothing can be achieved without ensuring that everyone has access to knowledge and spaces.

We have also witnessed the power of collective care as an essential component of feminist leadership; centring wellbeing and shared learning has not only strengthened engagement but also created safer spaces for young rightsholders to lead. Moreover, regional collaboration has proven vital in amplifying global outcomes—cross-country learning between Lebanon, Jordan, and other We Lead regions has deepened solidarity and inspired joint advocacy.

As the programme comes to an end, our focus shifts toward sustainability and legacy, ensuring that Communities of Action and youth networks continue to thrive independently. Check out the [We Lead Knowledge Hub](#) and [We Lead Jordan](#) to know more about the CoA's work in Lebanon and Jordan.

The lessons learnt now serve as the foundation for the next chapter: one where local ownership, intergenerational solidarity, and feminist leadership continue to shape a more just and inclusive future for all.

