



Speaking Out in the Absence of Justice:

A Reading of the Palestinian Feminist Response within the 1948 Territories to Cases of Sexual Harassment Involving Public Figures

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Introduction

The writing of this research paper coincided with elections to the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel, which is regarded as the highest representative body of Palestinians in the 1948 territories.* The elections, which resulted in the selection of a new chair,¹ drew opposition from a large number of feminist activists from the moment the candidates' names began to be announced. Among the most notable responses was a statement issued by civil society organization Women Against Violence,² which was widely shared by activists, academics, women leaders, and young women. The statement expressed anger toward national and party leaders over the persistent male-dominance of the Follow-Up Committee, and argued that it was not enough for a candidate merely to have a record of national commitment; the candidate must also be "a model of integrity and public responsibility, free of any suspicion relating to violence and sexual harassment, polygamy, patriarchal practices, or ties to the criminal underworld".³ This intervention sought to redefine national commitment⁴ to encompass personal ethics as well, on the grounds that a person cannot claim to be committed to protecting their people while perpetrating violence against members of that same people. The statement also rejected the exclusion of women from any national body, affirming that they would not remain silent in the face of any attempt to justify complicity in excluding them from decision-making positions.

One outcome of these responses was the candidacy of former Knesset Member and political activist Neveen Abu Rahmoun, supported by dozens of women activists, women leaders, feminist leaders, and feminist organizations who circulated her candidacy statement.⁵ Following the announcement of Abu Rahmoun's decision to run, Women Against Violence issued an additional statement,⁶ emphasizing the importance of her candidacy. The statement described her candidacy not merely as a symbolic step, but as

* We extend our sincere thanks to Dr. Yasmeen Daher and Dr. Himmat Zoubi for their valuable comments, which helped refine and enrich this paper.

** Also referred to as Palestinian citizens in Israel, and Palestinians of '48.

1. The High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens elected Jamal Zahalka as its chair in November 2025.

2. Women Against Violence [نساء ضد العنف Women Against Violence]. (2025, October 26). On the eve of the opening of nominations for the chairmanship of the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens [...]. **Facebook**. [Women Against Violence](#). [in Arabic]

3. Ibid..

4. The terms "national" and "nationalist" are used here in the context of the Palestinian national movement and the collective struggle of Palestinians living under conditions of national oppression and colonial domination. They do not refer to the exclusionary or ethnonationalist politics commonly associated with some contemporary nationalist movements in Europe and elsewhere.

5. For Neveen Abu Rahmoun's statement announcing her candidacy, see: Abu Rahmoun, Neveen [نيفين أبو رحمون], (2025, November 4). Candidacy Statement– Feminist and Political Activist Neveen Abu Rahmoun. **Facebook**. [Neeven Abu Rahmoun](#). [in Arabic]

6. Women Against Violence. Reference No. 2.

a revolutionary political act that could pave the way for a historic transformation in the representation of Palestinian women in senior leadership positions. It further described her candidacy as a direct challenge to a power structure from which women had been excluded for decades, and as a reminder that genuine gender justice is integral to the national struggle.⁷

These criticisms indicate that the Follow-Up Committee elections lacked precisely the values that should have been at their core: justice, protection, transparency, and accountability. Yet values and standards were not all that was missing from these elections; entire sectors of society were absent as well. Given that these elections concern what is regarded as the highest leadership body of the Palestinian community in the 1948 territories, the issue is not simply a serious flaw in an electoral process, but a profound problem with the elites that govern and control the fate of our people.

This serious dysfunction helps explain the public support for the statement issued by Women Against Violence. The statement both echoed and built on testimonies published as part of a campaign launched in 2019 by Assiwar, a Haifa-based Palestinian feminist organization that works to combat gender-based violence generally and sexual assault against women in particular. The campaign, called *Every Day a Testimony*, addressed sexual assault and harassment in general, with a focus on cases involving public figures. Among the materials it published were two separate testimonies, each signed by the woman who provided it and explicitly naming a public figure against whom allegations had been made. Both figures held—and continue to hold—senior representative or leadership positions.⁸

An analysis of the statement and the feminist support it received reveals what feminist organizations and leaders saw as still lacking in representative political bodies. This lack concerned not only the values of transparency, accountability, protection, and justice; the response also reflected an acknowledgment within feminist circles that Palestinian society in the 1948 territories is experiencing a profound political and social crisis. This feminist activism, driven by a sense of deep concern, reflected a multifaceted crisis that is neither temporary nor straightforward, but deeply embedded in the broader political and social structures that shape Palestinian feminist activism movement in the 1948 territories. These structures not only constrain and marginalize feminist action and limit its impact, but also raise more fundamental questions concerning the very meaning

7. This contest also resulted in the candidacy of Rula Daoud, a leader in "Standing Together", which describes itself as a Jewish–Arab movement. Her candidacy sparked considerable debate over eligibility to stand for the position of chair of the High Follow-Up Committee, an issue that falls beyond the scope of this paper.

8. It is worth noting that this campaign was followed by others within Palestinian society in the 1948 territories that named individuals active in the public sphere and raised allegations concerning them. Although these campaigns are beyond the scope of this paper, we mention them to emphasize that the campaign discussed here, and the debates it generated, were not an isolated occurrence, but part of a broader phenomenon that warrants further attention.

of politics and the limits of political agency. This comes at a time when the need for disclosure and critical reassessment has become increasingly apparent, together with the need to mobilize and organize sectors of society that recognize the gravity of what their society is undergoing and instinctively demand a form of agency capable of responding to the present circumstances.

The elections took place at an extraordinarily difficult time, when Palestinians in the 1948 territories were experiencing disorientation, political orphanhood, and existential anxiety as they found themselves exposed and vulnerable in the face of a genocide that forces a reconsideration of established political calculations and longstanding debates.⁹ Within this atmosphere of paralysis, confusion, and political silence, feminist organizations tried to say something— to respond, somehow, to what was unfolding.

However, the Assiwar campaign began well before the elections for the chair of the High Follow-Up Committee, which took place during the genocide. The campaign was launched in 2019 with the publication of testimonies by Palestinians in the 1948 territories influenced by the global #MeToo movement. #MeToo gained widespread prominence as a social movement on social media in 2017 and sought to expose and raise awareness of sexual harassment and sexual assault, particularly when perpetrated by celebrities and other public figures. Among its aims was to encourage survivors — women and men— to share their experiences publicly rather than remain silent, as a first step toward bringing the phenomenon to light. The campaign sought to generate social pressure against harassers and assailants shielded by a culture of silence and cover-up, which forms part of a moral system that places the blame on survivors. The campaign had a clear and concrete demand: to put pressure on national institutions and civil-society organizations to adopt more stringent policies to combat sexual harassment.

In this paper, we trace and document the feminist debate that followed the publication of testimonies by Palestinians as part of Assiwar's campaign. We seek to understand the campaign, its trajectory, and the debates, disagreements, and repercussions it generated, with the aim of strengthening constructive feminist dialogue on sexual harassment and assault within Palestinian society —particularly when the person accused or suspected of harassment is a public figure— and on how such violence should be addressed. More specifically, we seek to contribute to the discussion of approaches to achieving justice for survivors and for society at large. We also engage with questions that continue to preoccupy feminists and the feminist movement five years after the campaign began. We write from our position as two feminist activists who witnessed the launch of the campaign and engaged with it through the broader political and social debate it prompted.¹⁰

9. On the state of disorientation, existential anxiety, confusion, and political silence, see the various chapters in: Zoubi, Himmat; & Hawari, Areen (eds.). (2025). **The '48 Palestinians and the Genocidal War on Gaza: A Critical Inquiry into Silence and Political Agency**. Haifa: [Mada al-Carmel](#). [in Arabic]

10. At the time, Meisa Irshid, one of the authors of this paper, argued that testimonies were both a right and a necessity in the absence of systems capable of delivering justice for women. She made this argument in a post published on her personal Facebook page on December 18, 2019, during the launch of the campaign and the ensuing debate. (A copy of the post is held by the authors). [in Arabic]

We begin by examining academic and theoretical approaches to achieving feminist justice, as well as the associated challenges. These include debates surrounding the #MeToo movement and subsequent changes in the dynamics affecting efforts to achieve its goals in combating sexual harassment. We then turn to the social response to Assiwar's campaign within Palestinian feminist circles in the 1948 territories.

The paper draws on the concept of "alternative justice" as articulated in feminist literature to critically engage with approaches adopted in some of the feminist struggles that emerged in the 1948 territories in the wake of #MeToo. This critical engagement takes account of the Israeli colonial context shaping the Palestinian experience in the 1948 territories, where law-enforcement institutions play a colonial role as a structural component of the governing colonial system. At the same time, recognizing this context does not preclude analyzing the phenomenon through different theoretical approaches.

This paper challenges the prevailing view that the existence of a national struggle automatically (or implicitly) heightens sensitivity in dealing with cases of sexual harassment, and challenges the view that resistance to patriarchal and colonial forces are the same struggle. It argues that the opposite may in fact be true: societal "sensitivities" can impede both accountability, particularly given that sexual harassment also occurs within Palestinian national political and cultural life. Under such conditions, the meaning of nationalism shifts: rather than protecting society, it comes to protect perpetrators within it. Feminism then intervenes as a corrective process that redefines national politics itself.

While "nationalism" risks being reduced to fetishized and abstract definitions, feminism develops a finer sensitivity to individual experience that fosters a closer relationship between individuals and their homeland. It views injustice as stemming not only from the Zionist enemy, but also from the social and political structures that we ourselves produce in cooperation with it. A national struggle that fails to confront these structures is incomplete and distorted. How, then, can a national struggle based on internal cohesion and trust be built in a society whose members do not feel safe within their own community?

This issue is particularly important given that a high proportion of those who commit sexual harassment and assault may be colleagues, relatives, or friends. According to data from the Crisis Center for Victims of Sexual and Physical Violence at Women Against Violence, the victim's home was the most commonly reported location of assault, accounting for 68% of cases reported to the center between January and June 2025, followed by the workplace, at 7%. Together, these locations accounted for three-quarters of the cases reported to the center.¹¹

11. The Crisis Center for Victims of Sexual and Physical Violence. [n. d]. Report of the Crisis Center for Victims of Sexual and Physical Violence at Women Against Violence, covering the period from January through June 2025. [Crisis Center for Victims of Sexual and Physical Violence](#). P. 28. [in Arabic]

At the same time, we recognize that sexual harassment has consequences for victims and their families, but also for members of the perpetrator's own family, who themselves become victims of his conduct. The important question of all responses to the campaign and the sometimes conflicting perspectives that can create obstacles to and undermine feminist work toward a common objective: combating all forms of gender-based violence, the most prevalent of which is sexual harassment.

Since the launch of the campaign—which was regarded as a watershed event—no studies or analytical articles have been published that trace its impact through a feminist lens.¹² This gap underscores the significance of the present paper. Although a substantial body of academic and applied research exists on sexual assault among Palestinians in the 1948 territories,¹³ the specific issue examined here, together with the debates and disagreements concerning how to respond in such cases, has not been the subject of critical or academic analysis. This gap is particularly striking given the extensive debate and disagreement that Assiwar's campaign generated at the time over its approach and strategies. Yet no critical or academic article examining the campaign has since been published.¹⁴

Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative analytical framework that draws on the texts published as part of the *Every Day a Testimony* campaign, together with interviews conducted with campaign organizers and other activists who engaged with it.

Testimonies: Theoretical Approaches

In her book *Complaint!*,¹⁵ feminist theorist Sara Ahmed presents an ethnographic study of complaint as a social and cultural practice, drawing on interviews with women whom she describes as witnesses to how institutions, such as universities, workplaces, and organizations, handled complaints they had made about sexual assaults they had experienced. Ahmed argues that oral or written testimony, and the act of giving testimony, bear witness to a crisis or trauma. Testimony recounts what happened and establishes the facts or truth of the matter. She also regards testimony as necessary for identifying instances of injustice, wrongdoing, or harm, since it bears witness to an

12. One exception is an article by Areen Hawari. See: Hawari, Areen. (2025, September 26). Lam Qamariyya: Sexual Assault and the Deferred Questions of the Body. [UntoldMag](#). [in Arabic]

13. See, for example: Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Nadera; & Maqari-Rinawi, Sa'ida. (2015). Access to Justice for Palestinian Women in Israel: Palestinian Women's Encounters with the Israeli Police. Gender Studies Program—[Mada al-Carmel](#). [in Arabic]; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Nadera; & Daher-Nashef, Suhad. (2015). Sexual Violence, Women's Bodies, and Settler Colonialism. [Jadaliyya](#).

14. It should be noted that when we began considering this issue and working on this paper, Areen Hawari wrote the article cited above (Reference No. 12). Two additional papers were presented for discussion: one written by Meisa Irshid and another by Nisreen Tabari; neither has been published to date. All three papers were presented at the workshop entitled "Lam Qamariyya", held in Nazareth in September 2025. See the report published by [Mada al-Carmel](#). [in Arabic]

15. Ahmed, Sara. (2021). **Complaint!**. Durham: Duke University Press.

experience.¹⁶ According to Ahmed, every testimony constitutes an act of complaint, even when it does not become a formal complaint. Her study further highlights testimony as a form of documentation, an act of witnessing, and an act of resistance that confronts institutional structures despite the obstacles, responses, silences, or forms of support that may accompany it.

For Ahmed, listening to these testimonies does not mean treating each one solely as an individual experience. Rather, it requires attending to the possibility of weaving testimonies together so that they can bear witness to a collective experience. The significance of these testimonies lies in their ability to reveal forms of violence, discrimination, and structural corruption that ordinarily remain hidden, particularly given that formal complaints of sexual assault are either made confidentially or not made at all. Ahmed thus expands the meaning of feminism— or perhaps demands of it a particular sensitivity. The feminist ear, here, is attuned to the force of words and their connotations. A person who testifies to an injustice she or he has suffered becomes especially sensitive to tone and to the responses elicited by her or his testimony, because the very act of challenging authority or power makes her or him a target of disbelief and denial.¹⁷

In addition, feminist activists and theorists emphasize the central importance of written testimony as documentation of events and as an epistemic and political tool, as we discuss below. Testimonies, including oral testimony, also play an important role in preserving the undocumented stories of marginalized women— stories that are often excluded from official records and dominant forms of knowledge and therefore require careful attention and documentation. Feminist voices in academia and activist circles stress that testimonies of women's experiences are not merely narrative sources; they play an active role in producing and reshaping reality and are an essential element in of marginalized groups, particularly women.¹⁸

We fully recognize, however, that testimonies, as a means of acknowledging trauma and as part of the experience of trauma, offer no guarantee of accountability or justice in a given case, nor do they guarantee that the suspect will take responsibility for the assault. Despite this caveat, the post-campaign period was marked by a sense of being let down, particularly among the women behind the campaign, who had hoped that society would exert pressure on the suspects— perhaps prompting them to acknowledge responsibility.

16. Ibid.. P. 24.

17. Ibid.. P. 29.

18. See, for example, the novels of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, including: Ngozi Adichie, Chimamanda. (2013). **Americanah**. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

The #MeToo Campaign and Critiques of It

To understand the climate in which Assiwar's campaign unfolded, it is necessary to consider #MeToo, which originated as a U.S.-based feminist initiative launched by Tarana Burke in 2006 through Just Be Inc., an organization that addresses sexual violence with the aim of fostering solidarity among and empowering women of color who had survived sexual violence.¹⁹ Following the exposure of a sexual harassment scandal in Hollywood, California, in 2017,²⁰ the campaign encouraged people to share stories of sexual harassment on social media, sparking a global movement and an outpouring of testimonies on social media.

This came after many women had become increasingly frustrated with the inadequate responses of legal and judicial systems to complaints concerning sexual harassment. These processes were protracted, exhausting, and often insensitive or even hostile to women complainants. Moreover, judicial, legal, and disciplinary systems, as well as the institutions entrusted with administering them, failed to provide complainants with a sense of safety and protection, particularly as increasing numbers of women came forward with complaints. In addition, growing awareness of the importance of gender equality raised expectations of respectful institutional treatment, though these expectations repeatedly went unmet. Publishing testimonies therefore became a vital act: a means of breaking free from stigma, politicizing sexual violence, and building broad solidarity among survivors.²¹

One criticism of the #MeToo campaign concerned the marginalization of women of color, queer communities, and women with disabilities. This development ran counter to the vision of its founder, **Tarana Burke**, who stressed the need to place marginalized communities at the heart of the movement rather than push them to its margins, and warned against allowing the poorest and most marginalized groups to become little more than a "footnote".²² While the dominant form of the campaign focused on exposing perpetrators and emphasizing individual responsibility, Burke's original vision sought to support survivors as a collective, provide them with the necessary resources, and facilitate their healing through the sharing of stories in a safe environment as a means of understanding the structural and historical nature of misogyny. This conception would have made #MeToo a community-based project that connects the individual acts of perpetrators to deeply rooted and historically entrenched patriarchal structures.²³

19. Dadas, Caroline. (2020). Making Sense of #MeToo: Intersectionality and Contemporary Feminism. [Peitho](#), 22 (3).

20. Warfield, Zenobia Jeffries. (2018, January 4). Me Too Creator Tarana Burke Reminds Us This Is About Black and Brown Survivors. [YES!](#).

21. Kamir, Orit. (2020). "#MeToo" Gives Israeli Feminism and Its Struggle Against Sexual Harassment New Momentum, but Also Imposes a Sideward Deviation. [Orit Kamir](#). [In Hebrew]

22. Castanon, Sienna; et al. (2025, September 15). Ghosted by the Hashtag: The Invisible Voices that Haunt the #MeToo Movement. [Oxford Scholastica Academy & OxBright](#)

23. Dadas, Caroline. Reference No. 19. Pp. 1008– 1010.

There is no doubt that #MeToo helped foster transnational solidarity among survivors, heightened feminist awareness of the culture and definition of harassment, and drew attention to the recurrence of the issue through a flood of social media posts shared by women. In doing so, women also called for changes to the power structures and forms of male domination that enable such sexual violence to occur. Testimony was thus regarded as a means of securing some measure of otherwise elusive justice, as well as recognition of trauma, despite placing the entire burden on the survivor and offering no guarantee that the suspect or perpetrator will take responsibility for the sexual assault.²⁴ At the same time, the campaign exposed a tension between the desire to reform the system and recognition of its limitations: there is a persistent sense among crisis centers and survivors alike that the structure and organization of existing systems tend to obstruct the handling of cases of sexual harassment and complaints arising from them.²⁵

Although the testimonies succeeded in raising awareness of sexual harassment, they simultaneously generated an important question: whether heightened public awareness had actually led to tangible changes in systems of justice in favor of survivors. Criticism centered on what became the principal point of disagreement among feminists during and after the #MeToo campaign, and later among Palestinian feminists: the public naming of individuals suspected of committing assault without a fair process that afforded them an opportunity to defend themselves.²⁶ The public naming of suspects was an innovative step that raised the stakes of Assiwar's campaign and set it apart from the earlier Tuskuteesh ("Don't Stay Silent") initiative, which had also published testimonies.²⁷ The issue thus became a dividing line between supporters and opponents of the campaign, with opposition in some cases escalating into threats against its organizers. It also raised the question of the kind of justice the campaign sought and was actually capable of achieving.

Opponents of the campaign argue that social media discourse is dynamic, immediate, and unrestricted, allowing women and men alike to engage without constraint, and can therefore become impulsive, aggressive, and confrontational. Critics claim that this feminist discourse appeals to women, particularly young women, who are drawn to the sense of freedom, belonging, and power that #MeToo offers. In this climate of enthusiasm, they argue, one can easily overlook its weaknesses and potential risks to human rights and women's rights.

24. Brown, Erin; & Professor Wood. (2021, April 13). The Politics for Survivors of Sexual Violence: A Critique of the #MeToo Movement. [WMNST 492W](#). P. 34.

25. Jaffe, Sarah. (2018). The Collective Power of #MeToo. [Dissent](#), 65 (2). P. 81.

26. Feminist theorist Orit Kamir was among the architects of the Israeli Prevention of Sexual Harassment Law. She is also among the prominent voices critical of replicating the U.S. #MeToo experience in the Israeli context. While recognizing the importance of that experience in advancing the struggle against sexual harassment, she argues that the campaign loses its authenticity when it is adopted uncritically in Israeli society.

27. [Tuskuteesh](#) ("Don't Stay Silent"), an initiative for publishing testimonies in the digital sphere, was founded by activists Kholoud Khamis and Rima Jaramneh.

Feminist theorists critical of the campaign further ascribe the rapid spread of #MeToo to the rise of a "culture of victimhood", a culture that consistently privileges the victim and affords her immediate credibility while disparaging those perceived as belonging to the group defined as "dominant". They contend that the convergence of these two factors undermines the approach of Human Dignity Feminism, of which Orit Kamir is a leading theorist. This approach is grounded in the idea that human dignity—the intrinsic worth of every human being—is foundational. According to Kamir, unlike respect or honor, both of which are social values, dignity is an absolute and constant value and a natural right of every human being, irrespective of social status or identity.

This approach seeks to move feminist discourse beyond binary framings of feminist issues, such as the struggle between the sexes, patriarchal power, the woman as "victim" or "wronged/ aggrieved", and the man as "perpetrator". Kamir moves beyond this fragmented framing. She regards the dominant discourse as important, while maintaining that it remains inadequate unless it is situated within a framework that respects individual worth and rights on the basis of human dignity. According to Kamir, it is unjust to pursue legitimate feminist struggles at the cost of infringing upon the dignity and rights of others.

Here she refers to persons suspected of committing sexual violence in the #MeToo campaign, particularly those who, she argues, were publicly named with the aim of damaging their reputations. Finally, Kamir criticizes a radical feminism preoccupied with ending prevailing forms of collective injustice without sufficiently attending to individuals and their dignity within feminist struggle itself—what she describes as the "crosswinds" accompanying the #MeToo movement.

The campaign also resonated among Palestinian feminists. Assiwar's campaign gained unprecedented traction and brought sexual harassment, an issue that had previously been marginalized within the broader Palestinian public agenda in the 1948 territories, to the fore. It subsequently attracted criticism similar to that directed at #MeToo. This criticism, however, remained confined to statements and other posts on social media and did not give rise to any critical or academic analysis.

On the Question of Justice

The #MeToo campaign was the subject of intense debate and sharp divisions among feminist activists over fundamental questions concerning holding an individual perpetrator or suspect accountable and the need to punish him for his actions, as opposed to broadening the focus to address oppressive patriarchal structures. This broader approach acknowledges the difficulty of working within systems structured by power and domination, but may itself be interpreted as sympathy for the perpetrator. Debates during the campaign reflected divergent positions regarding the importance of individually punishing the perpetrator, potentially at the expense of his right to due

process, for the sake of the broader objective of achieving social change across the widest possible segment of society and dismantling patriarchy and the structures that enable such violence.

The Human Dignity Feminism approach, for its part, emphasizes the necessity of a fair trial and regards feminism as a movement dedicated to liberating human beings from oppression and repairing the world. As such, it cannot undermine or harm the rights of any individual; its goals must be pursued without compromising its own foundational values.²⁸ This approach, however, does not account for cases in which the circumstances are unclear or evidence of sexual harassment is lacking, and gives suspects the benefit of the doubt.

Sara Ahmed argues that the collection of complaints that documents obstacles and institutional failures is unquestionably a feminist political act.²⁹ It constitutes one tool through which marginalized people may pursue justice, by archiving attempts to challenge oppressive structures and creating a record of the violence inflicted upon survivors of sexual assault. This makes the history of that violence more difficult to erase or deny in the future. Issues of the accountability of suspects and the place of testimony within struggles against patriarchy and violence, however, have received little attention in feminist debate. Indeed, considerable differences persist among feminist currents regarding the means of achieving accountability, the ways justice may be secured for survivors, and the forms of alternative justice being sought. Among the models discussed in feminist literature, we highlight the following:

Transformative justice³⁰ has been characterized as radical because it considers patriarchy, misogyny, and sexual harassment to be institutions in their own right. It rejects punishment and advocates for **addressing the structural conditions** that produced the violence in the first place, including racism, misogyny, and male domination. This model uses testimonies such as those associated with #MeToo to disrupt and destabilize these institutions by exposing their systematic practices, particularly in complex cases of sexual harassment— or what we refer to as "gray" cases, in which there is neither evidence nor certainty.³¹ In this context, collective "truth-telling at personal risk"³² becomes a rhetorical tool for creating a rupture in the patriarchal system. Transformative justice emphasizes that survivors acting individually cannot dismantle the structures of patriarchal domination and power that enable sexual harassment. Transformative justice also replaces the term "perpetrator" with "person who caused harm", in order to foreground accountability and the possibility of change, rather than stigma alone.

28. Kamir, Orit. Reference No. 21.

29. Ahmed, Sara. Reference No. 15.

30. Brown, Erin; & Professor Wood. Reference No. 24.

31. Dadas, Caroline. Reference No. 19.

32. Parrhesia, as Michel Foucault explains, is "a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he regards truth-telling as a moral duty directed toward improving or helping others as well as himself". See: Foucault, Michel. (2001). **Fearless Speech** (Pearson, Joseph. Ed.). Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

Restorative justice,³³ by contrast, focuses on healing through **dialogue between the two parties** (the survivor and the perpetrator) with the aim of achieving interpersonal repair and healing the harm caused. It relies on individuals themselves to address the conflict. The suspect is held accountable within the community and with its support, as the community mediates dialogue between the parties so that the perpetrator assumes responsibility for his actions and takes steps to redress the harm. This model draws on the demands of many survivors for "**acknowledgment and learning**" on the part of the perpetrator, rather than imprisonment alone. This approach rejects punishment as a means of achieving justice in such cases.

Finally, reparative justice is based on **providing redress**, including material compensation and acknowledgment of the harm suffered by the survivor. It therefore entails assuming responsibility for the losses and damages caused by the perpetrator, including loss of income and the costs associated with trauma and its aftereffects, as part of a process of healing and repair. Reparations are understood as a collective process requiring a "historical memory" of what occurred, and as a challenge to institutions to assume responsibility for the harms they caused through years of covering up violence.

Research Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative analytical approach that draws on the texts published as part of the *Every Day a Testimony* campaign, together with the accompanying responses. It also relies on a review of the discussions that took place during three workshops convened to discuss the issues raised by the campaign and the strategy of publishing testimonies,³⁴ as well as social media posts by activists concerning the issue. In addition, researcher Meisa Irshid conducted semi-structured interviews with five feminist activists engaged with the issue between November 13 and December 8, 2025.³⁵

33. Jaffe, Sarah. Reference No. 25.

34. The workshops were organized at the initiative of the Gender Studies Program at Mada al-Carmel. The first was held on September 17, 2025, in Nazareth; the second on November 19, 2025, in Haifa; and the third, organized by Women Against Violence, was held on February 11, 2026, in Acre. Participants included feminist activists from Mada al-Carmel's Gender Studies Program, Women Against Violence, Kayan Feminist Organization, Assiwar, AlQaws for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society, and independent feminist activists. For summaries of the workshops, see: Mada al-Carmel. (2025, October). Mada al-Carmel Organizes a Dialogue Workshop Entitled 'Lam Qamariyya', with the Participation of Feminist Researchers and Activists (September 2025). [Mada al-Carmel](#) [in Arabic]; Mada al-Carmel. (2025, November). The 'Lam Qamariyya' Dialogue Workshop— Second Meeting (November 2025). [Mada al-Carmel](#) [in Arabic]; Women Against Violence [نساء ضد العنف Women Against Violence]. (2026, February 19). On Wednesday evening, February 11, 2026, a consultative discussion meeting entitled "Public Figures Under Suspicion" was held at Al-Laz Theater in Acre to situate and deliberate the feminist movement's position. **Facebook**. [Women Against Violence](#). [in Arabic]

35. The interviewees included directors of feminist organizations and one former director, from Kayan, Women Against Violence, and Assiwar, all of which work on issues of sexual harassment and sexual violence. They also included an independent feminist activist from the movement Tal'at.

The Historical and Gender–Political Context

1. The Emergence of Feminist Organizations and the Institutionalization of Work Against Sexual Violence

Gender-based and sexual violence began to be raised as a public issue within Palestinian society in the 1948 territories in the early 1990s, along with efforts to gain recognition of its existence and, subsequently, to support women, raise awareness in pursuit of a society free from gender-based violence and organize campaigns to combat such violence. This development coincided with the establishment of Palestinian feminist organizations in the 1948 territories. Gender-based violence was at the top of their agenda; in fact, some of these organizations were established specifically to combat such violence and defend women's sovereignty over their own bodies.³⁶

Since their establishment, these civil society and feminist organizations have remained active in this field through crisis centers serving women, men, and children who have experienced gender-based and sexual violence; emergency hotlines that have operated seven days a week for decades; educational and awareness-raising programs in schools and other institutional settings; social media outreach; support for women and girls subjected to violence, including through safe shelters; accompaniment through judicial and criminal proceedings; and the provision of professional and psychological counseling.³⁷

Throughout the development of the Palestinian feminist movement, numerous Palestinian women academics have addressed gender-based and sexual violence from an intersectional perspective that situates these phenomena within their gender–political, colonial, and class-based contexts.³⁸

2. Complexity and Compound Discrimination: Colonialism as a Structure of Sexual Violence and Patriarchy, the Power of Stigma, and the Absence of State Protection

Palestinian feminists in the 1948 territories engage with these issues despite the serious challenges they face as a result of the intersection colonial and patriarchal power in

36. For further reading on this subject, see: Jad, Islah; & Hawari, Areen. (2024). "Palestinian Women Movements". In: Dumper, Michael; & Badran, Amneh (Eds.). **Routledge Handbook on Palestine**. UK: Routledge. On the establishment of feminist organizations addressing gender-based violence generally and sexual violence in particular, see: Abdu, Janan. (2008). **Palestinian Women's and Feminist Organizations in the 1948 Areas**. Haifa: [Mada al-Carmel](#). [in Arabic]

37. On this subject, see the websites of the following organizations: [Women Against Violence](#); [Assiwar](#) [in Arabic]; [Kayan Feminist Organization](#); and [AlQaws for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society](#).

38. The scope of this paper does not allow for an extensive review of the literature. For relevant publications, see the works cited in Reference No. 13, as well as Manar Hasan's pioneering article on killings in the name of family honor: Hasan, Manar. (2002). The Politics of Honor: Patriarchy, the State and the Murder of Women in the Name of Family Honor. **Journal of Israeli History**, 21 (1–2). Pp. 1–37.

the sexual violence inflicted on them.³⁹ Kim Jezabel Zinngrebe⁴⁰ argues that the serious challenges confronting Palestinian women as a consequence of the intersection of colonial and patriarchal power in the sexual violence inflicted on them make it difficult for them to find safe spaces in which to speak openly about their personal experiences. Speaking out often entails significant personal costs in the form of social exclusion within Palestinian society in the 1948 territories, including the stigma of shame or of national betrayal. She argues that the lack of effective protection by the state for women generally, and for survivors of sexual violence in particular, leaves women under the authority of a patriarchal system that is presented as a protective framework but may in practice become an instrument of control and harm. In this way, violence is reproduced through practices that mobilize social and national power against Palestinian women's bodies, particularly in a context in which national considerations are prioritized over women's individual experiences.

In summarizing her study of Palestinian feminists in the 1948 territories, based on interviews with a group of activists, Zinngrebe argues that, given the lack of safe spaces and effective protection, personal experiences of sexual violence remain stigmatized even among activists, whether political or social, rendering them more difficult to discuss. Beyond the difficulties of dealing with these experiences, most women, including feminists, are unable or unwilling at present to bear the personal and social costs associated with speaking openly about them. The result is that personal experiences of sexual violence are silenced within Palestinian feminist circles in the 1948 territories, while the personal and the political remain unconnected in feminist practices concerning sexual violence, because of the complex context in which they live.⁴¹

The Assiwar Campaign as a Turning Point: Public Testimony

1. Why the Campaign? How Did It Emerge? Its Relationship to #MeToo and the Response to Institutional Silence

In a courageous challenge to the circumstances described above, Assiwar launched its *Every Day a Testimony* campaign during the annual global *16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence*. The campaign emerged as a means of responding to institutional silence and was influenced by developments surrounding the #MeToo movement and by the stories that had begun to surface on social media. As an Assiwar representative explained, "The campaign is an attempt to bring assaults and harassment out into the open, rather than allowing them to become dust, lost in the archives, or a 'whisper,' and to transform them into a public, written, tangible document— that is, into testimony

39. Ibid..

40. Zinngrebe, Kim Jezabel. (2016). Reflection on the Silence of Palestinian Feminists in Israel. **Feminist Review**, 112. P. 86, 88.

41. Ibid.. P. 91.

and a record".⁴² This is precisely the type of act that Sara Ahmed identifies as an act of resistance.

Even before its launch, the campaign anticipated the social response it would encounter. Its opening statement described a culture of harassment that enables the normalization and justification of harassment through various mechanisms, including casting doubt on survivors' accounts, blaming women subjected to such violence, and subjecting them to scrutiny before scrutinizing the perpetrator or the person accused of assault.⁴³

The campaign was motivated above all by a desire to respond to a social need and to the longstanding injustice experienced by women, as Assiwar itself emphasizes. The campaign emerged in response to prevailing circumstances and developed out of experiences accumulated over years of the organization's work. Most of the published stories were drawn from Assiwar's archives to demonstrate that the phenomenon had persisted over a long period and to shed light on the absence of justice through official and conventional channels. One of the Assiwar representatives interviewed for the study explained:

If we had the privilege of having police that women could turn to without paying a price, where they could file complaints and be believed, then absolutely, every case could go to the police. But the campaign offered another avenue, and its purpose was to provide a space and a voice for women who were willing to speak out, make their voices heard, and have their say. In other words, the organization could be their voice.⁴⁴

42. Interview conducted by the researcher with a representative of Assiwar. (The interviewee's name is held by the researcher). [in Arabic]

43. Statement launching Assiwar's campaign, "16 Days, 16 Stories":

The same incredulous questions: 'Could this person really be a harasser?!' or 'Impossible— he is a patriot; he has spent his whole life serving his country.' Who said that a harasser can't be patriotic and love his country?! Sometimes a harasser loves Palestine deeply, works for it, and devotes himself to his people's causes to the point that he begins speaking in the name of 'the masses.' A society built on masculinist thinking and a patriarchal system sees no contradiction between the two. The culture of harassment and sexual assault remains deeply rooted in this society and closely intertwined with power and control. This is why we so often encounter statements and claims such as: 'So-and-so?! But he is patriotic and has spent his whole life working and striving for his people's causes.' Dear all, any one of us can be a harasser, particularly those who have power. At least, this is what the stories continually reaching Assiwar demonstrate: there is the member of parliament, the director general, the political and social activist, the writer, the critic, the artist, and the sensitive poet who never tires of writing 'love poems' and handing them to underage girls... This culture of harassment is the social environment that enables harassment to be normalized and justified. It operates in many ways, including blaming women subjected to this violence, casting doubt on their accounts, and subjecting the women to scrutiny before scrutinizing the perpetrator or the person accused of assault. To confront this culture of harassment and expose its multiple faces, we must first speak about it publicly; we must tell these stories to everyone, not only to crisis centers. Let each one of us begin with herself. #DownWithTheCultureOfHarassment.

44. Interview conducted by the researcher with a representative of Assiwar. Reference No. 42.

The campaign thus followed longstanding struggles by feminist organizations against the sheer scale of sexual harassment, using the various established mechanisms available to them, including the police, enforcement of existing laws, disciplinary committees, and awareness-raising, but without achieving accountability or punishment commensurate with the scale and prevalence of the phenomenon. This gap, together with the persistence of sexual violence, prompted the development of alternative campaigns and initiatives designed to bypass existing systems that were ill-suited to addressing sexual assault, which often occurs in private and whose perpetrators frequently go unpunished.

2. Distinctive Features of the Campaign and Comparison with the Tuskuteesh Initiative

Assiwar's campaign, which was seen as a Palestinian counterpart to the #MeToo movement,⁴⁵ was not the first initiative to publicly address such issues, although it was perhaps the latest to gain prominence and had distinctive features of its own. Two years earlier, a Facebook page called "Tuskuteesh" had been launched. The page described itself as a safe space for women to share stories of sexual assault and harassment publicly.⁴⁶ What distinguished Assiwar's campaign from Tuskuteesh was that, in two of its sixteen testimonies, the person suspected of assault was publicly named on social media based on the survivor's account.

Assiwar's campaign emerged after years of confronting a deeply rooted structural injustice surrounding cases of sexual violence with which activists working in this field engage closely. Two representatives of Assiwar emphasized that the public disclosure of testimonies had long been an aspiration within the organization, but one that had remained buried. As one of them stated: **"It is unacceptable that almost all women in hospital psychiatric wards were subjected to sexual violence at a young age; and if we look more closely, we find that this is documented in almost all the medical files and recorded in the system, and yet it is ignored. So how do we break this pattern?!"**.⁴⁷

The campaign was also distinctive for its challenge to the social immunity readily afforded to prominent public, political, or cultural figures. The campaign's opening statement, entitled "16 Days, 16 Stories," began with a rhetorical question: "Who said that a harasser can't be patriotic and love his country?!"⁴⁸ In doing so, the campaign exposed forms of patriarchal power shielded by the rhetoric of "anti-colonialism", showing how, in many cases—as elsewhere around the world—nationalist credentials can grant individuals immunity from allegations of sexual assault.

45. This does not mean that the organizers of the campaign themselves referred to it in these terms.

46. Tuskuteesh [تسكوتيش]. [n. d]. **Facebook**. [Tuskuteesh](#). [in Arabic]

47. Interview conducted by the researcher with Leila Jaroushi Hassan of Assiwar. (A record of the interview is held by the researcher). [in Arabic]

48. Assiwar statement entitled "16 Days, 16 Stories". [n. d]. (A copy is held by the researcher). [in Arabic]

What was particularly striking about the campaign was that, although most of the women who shared their stories were Palestinians from the 1948 territories, the only two women who identified themselves by name when recounting harassment they said they had experienced at the hands of Palestinian public figures were non-Arab women from outside Palestine. Both had worked or volunteered in Palestinian civil society organizations in the 1948 territories. This may lend further support to Zinngrebe's argument, discussed above, concerning Palestinian feminists' avoidance of open public engagement with issues of sexual harassment.

The Power of Testimony: From the Individual to the Collective (Breaking Silence as Empowerment)

At the end of its opening statement, Assiwar emphasized the importance of testimony in breaking the silence at both the individual and the collective levels: "To confront this culture of harassment and expose its many faces, we must first speak about it openly; we must tell these stories to everyone, not only to crisis centers. Let each of us begin with herself".⁴⁹ Here, the organization makes clear that speaking publicly is itself a strategy. The implication is that it is not enough to discuss the culture of harassment solely with crisis centers or behind closed doors.

As one of the women who testified as part of the campaign explained in her interview: "I saw that women were coming forward with testimonies, and that encouraged me to speak publicly for the first time about what had happened to me".⁵⁰ She emphasized that the circulation of testimonies was what had emboldened her to participate in the campaign, and that this was the first time she had disclosed her story publicly. Her account underscores the importance of the connection between the personal and the collective, and the power of the collective to empower the individual. She emphasized the sense of collective power generated each time a woman shares her testimony with others— a power that is transmitted to other women and encourages them in turn to share their own experiences.

Although she stressed that the justice she sought through the campaign was personal, and that she had not set out to bring about radical social change, by the end of the interview she nonetheless expressed her disappointment at the response of the "social elite" and its failure to take the issue seriously. As she explained, giving her testimony was, for her, more an act of self-respect than an expression of belief that she was bringing about radical change. At the same time, she stated: "It was the reactions after the campaign that failed to do justice to the women who testified".⁵¹ She emphasized her disappointment

49. Opening statement of Assiwar's campaign. (A copy is held by the researcher). [in Arabic]

50. Interview conducted by the researcher with Salma (pseudonym), an activist in the Tal'at movement. (A record of the interview is held by the researcher). [in Arabic]

51. Ibid..

at what she regarded as the silence of political parties, civil society organizations, and activists, and their disregard for harassment occurring within their own organizations and circles. She also pointed to the "demonization" of women who had summoned all their courage in order to testify, and to the denial of their stories without even nominally questioning the men whose names had been published and whom she described as the perpetrators. She further expressed disappointment at accusations that the campaign had acted irresponsibly and harmed the women who testified, amid the lack of any consideration of the need to change the surrounding culture, whether as part of the responsibility of human rights organizations or as a necessary part of maintaining safe public spaces.

As discussed above, Sara Ahmed argues that a person who testifies to an injustice develops heightened sensitivity to tone and to the responses elicited by their testimony, because the very act of challenging authority or power makes them a target of disbelief and denial.⁵² This dynamic is reflected in the experience of the campaign organizers, who had already been working within Assiwar to address these issues by listening to survivors while also working, in parallel, to hold perpetrators accountable. As one representative of Assiwar stated, in an account also affirmed by her colleague during the interview: **"One of the goals was for us to move beyond the role of the victim... especially after so many years of writing these things in secret, of women approaching us in secret, of maintaining confidentiality and not bringing these things out into the open. So this created a space, a climate, in which we could move beyond that place"**.⁵³

These words indicate that the organization deliberately chose to publish testimonies. Ultimately, after considerable deliberation, a clear decision was reached and the campaign's objective articulated, signaling an escalation in strategy: to lay the ground for holding perpetrators accountable by publishing the names of suspects, listening to women who approached the organization while challenging the established regime of confidentiality, and providing them with an avenue through which to come forward with their testimonies. As Leila Jaroushi Hassan of Assiwar put it: **"We decided to take assaults and harassment out of the realm of whispers and bring them out into the open, where we could read them and see them— in other words, make them public"**.⁵⁴

The campaign's opening statement similarly declared: "Therefore, we often hear statements and claims such as: 'So-and-so!!!! But he's a patriot— he's spent his entire life working and striving for the causes of his people.' Dear all, any one of us can be a harasser, especially those in positions of power. At least, this is what the stories that Assiwar continually receives show us".⁵⁵

52. Ahmed, Sara. Reference No. 15. P. 29.

53. Interview conducted by the researcher with a representative of Assiwar. Reference No. 42.

54. Interview conducted by the researcher with Leila Jaroushi Hassan of Assiwar. Reference No. 47.

55. Opening statement of Assiwar's campaign. Reference No. 49.

Post-Testimony: Fear, Disappointment, Rupture, and Divisions among Feminists

1. The Campaign Organizers: Fear, Anger, and Exhaustion

Fear and anger, compounded by disappointment and exhaustion, enveloped the women involved in the campaign from beginning to end. Lamia Na'amneh described the organization's disappointment as a direct reflection of that felt by the women who had placed their trust in the campaign: **"Here... we hurt alongside the women who come to us. We go through the entire process of being let down that they go through— we go through it too"**.⁵⁶

She was referring to disappointment at the "silence" and complicity she saw within the circles surrounding the perpetrator, including those who were aware of the truth yet still chose to continue supporting him. Leila expressed anger mixed with disappointment at the continued public legitimization of perpetrators, including by the media, and at the double standards displayed by some working in the field of human rights. She described several instances in which Palestinian legal organizations in the 1948 territories ignored harassment cases for the sake of "professional interests".

Fear, meanwhile, stemmed primarily from the threats received by Assiwar's leadership. Na'amneh described these threats as "absolutely criminal".⁵⁷ There were also attempts to "dissuade them [members of Assiwar's leadership]" from continuing by exerting pressure on them professionally. Na'amneh described an atmosphere so charged with danger that there were even veiled threats of violence.

Yet the interviews with the two Assiwar representatives made especially clear that the need to expose the sheer scale of sexual harassment within civil society and among political parties and national movements was both at the heart of their anguish and the driving force behind the campaign, despite the costs it entailed. The campaign did so by drawing attention to the fact that people in positions of responsibility within political parties, human rights organizations, and civil society institutions were themselves harassers and perpetrators. Na'amneh asked: **"What does this say about the credibility of our human rights and civil society community, especially when we share it with sexual perpetrators who have never been held accountable?"**.⁵⁸

Both representatives emphasized that silence was not an option. One described the fearlessness with which they approached the campaign in the following terms: "At one point, we were verging on suicidal in the way we approached our activism... we didn't care about anything".⁵⁹

56. Interview conducted by the researcher with Lamia Na'amneh Semnioka of Assiwar. (A record of the interview is held by the researcher). [in Arabic]

57. Ibid..

58. Ibid..

59. Interview conducted by the researcher with a representative of Assiwar. Reference No. 42.

2. Internal Conflict: "The Struggle Against Harassment Tears at Our Souls as Women First"

Behind the scenes, however, Assiwar's organizers acknowledged that they faced internal conflicts of their own. They described a shared sense that each of them had "a knife lodged in her back because there is a harasser close to her".⁶⁰ This image underscored both the prevalence of sexual harassment and the close-knit nature of Palestinian civil society and political circles in the 1948 territories, making it likely that each of them would regularly have to interact with a harasser. That person might be someone in their immediate circle— a father, brother, husband, or respected colleague. This gave rise to a dilemma: women expected one another to take the initiative in acting against harassers, for example by publishing testimony implicating them, even when this meant acting against someone close to them.

Here, the conflict and inner division experienced by women working to combat sexual violence emerge with particular clarity. On the one hand, there is a desire to publish testimonies that implicate the perpetrator; on the other, there is an unwillingness to make personal sacrifices on the altar of the broader cause and the ultimate goal of creating a society free from sexual violence.

3. Division within the Feminist Field over Trial by Public Opinion, Public Shaming, and Doubt

In the aftermath of the campaign, Palestinian feminists were divided between two sharply opposed positions, particularly around the question of how justice should be pursued in relation to suspects.⁶¹ At times, this had a negative impact on relationships among organizations and activists, as well as within political parties. The campaign also generated disagreements within feminist grassroots groups active at the time. These groups had initially embraced the campaign and its objectives but subsequently became inactive or disappeared, amid disagreements over how to respond to the circulation online of informally compiled lists of unknown origin containing additional names,

60. Interview conducted by the researcher with Leila Jaroushi Hassan of Assiwar. Reference No. 47.

61. It should be noted that we regard these differences, and at times conflicts, as part of any process involving confrontation with socially and culturally entrenched forces by oppositional movements that occupy a weaker, and at times marginal, position within the hierarchy of power. Such movements pursue a project of justice and change while simultaneously experiencing tensions, difficulties, and human complexities. Our analysis therefore begins from an understanding of the movement as seeking to achieve justice, while recognizing the need to remain alert to the dangers of romanticization and idealization. From this perspective, we regard these dynamics as a structural part of such a process.

including those of comrades, colleagues, and relatives alleged to be harassers.⁶² As the interviews made clear, none of the feminist organizations endorsed these lists.

The split was not limited to feminist circles; the broader public response was also divided. On the one hand, reactions reflected a sense of relief among girls and women, who saw the campaign as amplifying their silenced voices. According to the campaign's concluding statement, hundreds of women engaged with the campaign on social media and through direct contact with its organizers and praised it for having made history and given them a sense of liberation. One woman even described it as "the most important thing in the history of Palestine".⁶³ The campaign also inspired hope among activists working in this area.⁶⁴

On the other hand, the broader public response was also marked by confrontations that turned into personal and collective disputes, as was particularly evident from the campaign's concluding statement. Assiwar reported that it had been subjected to an unprecedented attack and challenges to its legitimacy. Those leveling these accusations argued that publishing the testimonies amounted to trial by public opinion and the public defamation of people suspected of harassment in the absence of oversight mechanisms or procedural safeguards, and that it constituted a misuse of the digital space. These attacks also questioned the credibility of feminist organizations, accused them of pursuing "suspect agendas", cast doubt on the testimonies, and ultimately escalated into threats and intimidation against the organization's staff and volunteers, as noted above.

To the authors' knowledge, no discussion forums were organized in the aftermath of the campaign and the divisions within feminist circles to address the ramifications of the campaign or the consequences of publishing testimonies that named individuals; nor was there any collective forum for dialogue on the issue involving political organizations and feminist activists. Several factors helped perpetuate this silence. The first were confusion and a reluctance to confront disagreements, followed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which came to dominate the public sphere and prevented the face-to-face encounters needed to engage with such difficult issues. Later, the genocidal war against

62. The decline or disappearance of feminist grassroots groups cannot be attributed solely to internal disagreements. In recent years—from the Dignity Uprising of May 2021, through the onset of the genocidal war on the Gaza Strip and up to the present day—grassroots youth movements, popular committees, and political organizations more generally have experienced a significant reduction in activity for several reasons, first and foremost repression by the Israeli authorities. On this subject, see: Anabtawi, Khaled. (2024). **Uprising Amidst Liminality: The Karamah [Dignity] Uprising of May 2021 and Popular Insurrectionary Action Among Palestinians Within the 'Green Line'— A Sociological Perspective**. Haifa: [Mada al-Carmel](#). [in Arabic]

63. Concluding statement of Assiwar's campaign. (A copy is held by the researcher). [in Arabic]

64. "Going against the grain— Assiwar, what you did was liberating"; "Assiwar did the most important thing in the history of Palestine: for the first time, the harasser began to think twice"; "I genuinely felt that this campaign made history, and on a personal level I felt ready to take any risk and face any challenge; something strengthened my self-confidence"— as quoted in Assiwar's concluding campaign statement. [in Arabic]

Palestinians in Gaza further entrenched this silence, as every other issue, however important, appeared secondary in comparison. The catastrophic war eclipsed all else to such an extent that many people of conscience around the world felt uncomfortable even broaching any other public concern.⁶⁵

The first initiative to bring the different sides together to discuss the issue was organized by the Gender Studies Program at Mada al-Carmel, in cooperation with feminist groups and organizations, in September 2025. It was followed by two additional workshops, one held at Kayan Feminist Organization in Haifa and another initiated by Women Against Violence and held in Acre. These workshops provided a safe space in which to reopen the issue and discuss the disagreements surrounding it.⁶⁶

Nisreen Tabari, the director of Kayan Feminist Organization, argued that feminist dialogue among Palestinian women in the 1948 territories following the campaign was too narrow to accommodate dissenting views on the campaign's strategies. She added that she had personally faced considerable criticism and attacks that went so far as to call her feminism into question. She expressed her frustration in the following words: **"I'm accused of not being feminist enough... If the price of the justice I'm talking about —at least as I understand justice— is having my own feminism called into question, then I don't want feminism... because justice is broader than that".**⁶⁷

In discussing her vision for the future, Nisreen —despite acknowledging that she is not optimistic, which she attributes to the absence of a Palestinian national movement— emphasized the importance of continuing to respond and demand accountability when conditions allow, while taking into account the dissatisfaction with the dynamics that accompanied feminist activism at the time. In her view, the police, judiciary, and institutions alone have not delivered justice to survivors and will not do so. She also called for concerted feminist efforts to establish alternative pathways to justice that need not conform to her own conception of procedural justice. In her words:

65. For further discussion of the emotional and political dilemmas involved in approaching feminist issues and gender-based violence at a time of genocide, from the perspective of one of the authors of this paper, see: Reference No. 12.

66. The three meetings included in-depth discussions of issues of violence and harassment, including the principle of giving initial credence to survivors' testimonies, the limits of community accountability, and the possibilities for achieving justice outside formal judicial frameworks in the Palestinian context. Participants also discussed the role of national institutions and the feminist movement in confronting these issues, as well as the challenges arising from the intersection of feminist work with party-political and broader political activity, while emphasizing the need to protect feminist voices and support activists facing targeted campaigns and intimidation. The meetings concluded with an emphasis on the importance of continuing dialogue and networking among feminist groups and organizations, and developing clear mechanisms and protocols that strengthen accountability, protect women, and reinforce collective feminist action. For further discussion, see: the references in footnote 34.

67. Interview conducted by the researcher with Nisreen Tabari of Kayan Feminist Organization. (A record of the interview is held by the researcher). [in Arabic]

If there is no system, then it is my duty to create the system... It is the duty of each one of us— me and you, Assiwar, Women Against Violence, Kayan, community leaders, influential women, everyone... I call on everyone who opposes the exclusion of women, the exploitation of women, sexual harassment, and violence against women to sit around the table and think.⁶⁸

Tal'at: From Support to Mirroring the Divisions

Several months before the campaign, Tal'at ("Women Stepping Out") was established as an independent feminist movement. It actively supported the campaign on its social media pages and worked to combat violence against women and sexual harassment. It rejected the idea of deferring these issues or subjecting them to a hierarchy of priorities in the Palestinian national struggle, as well as reducing this struggle to opposition to colonialism, while emphasizing the role of the social environment in enabling such violence to continue.

Tal'at first became active in the Haifa area, before expanding its activities to other areas, culminating in the organization of a large-scale demonstration on September 26, 2019,⁶⁹ which attracted considerable public engagement and attention. The demonstration took place approximately two months before the launch of Assiwar's campaign. Tal'at took shape as a movement while Assiwar's campaign was ongoing, and subsequently helped amplify the campaign and its testimonies. Tal'at later organized demonstrations in multiple locations in the West Bank and the wider Arab world, extending as far as Berlin.⁷⁰

One former Tal'at activist recounted how they had felt alone in the face of a barrage of destructive criticism, a lack of support from feminist groups, political parties, or civil society, widespread competition among activists, and claims of exclusivity over feminist issues such as the killing of women and sexual harassment. In her words, the movement was "demonized" in response to its support for the campaign and its public denunciation of individuals accused of harassment, whom it identified by name. She added that they were told: "You're women— what do you know about politics, to tell us what our priorities should be in liberating Palestine?!".⁷¹

68. Ibid..

69. Helwa, Rasha. (2019, September 26). "Why Are Palestinian Women 'Tal'at?". [Raseef22](#). [in Arabic]

70. For further discussion, see: Al-Natsheh, Rawan. [n. d]. "What Happened to Tal'at? A Feminist Uprising in Palestine and Its Legacy Five Years Later". [HuMENA](#). [in Arabic]

71. Interview conducted by the researcher with Salma. Reference No. 50.

Feminist and Alternative Justice: A Debate Between Two Approaches

The publication of the testimonies brought the question of "feminist justice" back to the fore, in the context of structural injustices faced by survivors in cases of sexual harassment and assault. Feminist scholarship has proposed multiple conceptions of "relative" or partial justice as alternatives to conventional carceral justice, which is based on criminal proceedings and punitive sanctions such as imprisonment. These alternative approaches, in their various forms, as discussed above, center on repair, healing, and community.

In preparing this paper, we found that there was consensus among the leaders of active feminist organizations that publishing the names of alleged perpetrators in testimonies marked a departure from conventional standards of due process. The disagreement among them concerned the conditions under which departing from due process and accepting a limited infringement of the rights of individuals belonging to the dominant group (in this case, men) might be justified in a context in which women survivors of sexual assault face a complete absence of justice, while judicial and legal processes have proved ineffective and failed to deliver justice. This is what Assiwar sought to challenge, within the constraints of its limited resources, by attempting to shift existing power relations through the digital sphere.

It is noteworthy that, unlike the global movement, the Palestinian campaign was not the product of dispersed, spontaneous individual initiatives, as was the case in the United States. According to its organizers, Assiwar brought to the campaign decades of experience in combating sexual violence, providing legal counseling and psychological support to women subjected to assault, and maintaining an archive of overlapping testimonies in which the names of alleged perpetrators recurred.

Recognizing the importance of taking precautions, the two Assiwar representatives explained that the organization had taken several steps before publishing testimonies. These included contacting the political party or the board of directors of the organization to which each named suspect belonged, and, in some cases, members of their families, as well as informing the suspects about the testimony and giving them a right of reply prior to publication.

Although Assiwar received no response to these approaches before publishing the testimonies,⁷² one of the suspects did subsequently respond to the allegations against him in a post on his personal social media page. In the post, he expressed regret while simultaneously stating that his conduct had not been intentional.⁷³ This response was received somewhat positively by the women interviewed and brought a degree of relief,

72. This is based on the accounts of Assiwar's organizers as provided during the interviews. For further details, see: References 47 and 56.

73. His statement included the words: "I apologize if I was wrong...". [in Arabic]

although they remained skeptical and not entirely satisfied. One interviewee described it as "a smart move, but not enough".⁷⁴

If this response was an attempt to mitigate the repercussions of the publication of the suspect's name, amid public calls for his removal from leadership positions, his conduct may be interpreted as a gesture of goodwill and perhaps as indicating a willingness to cooperate with an alternative process of accountability. The suspect's engagement with the campaign was unexpected given the prevailing climate of denial and victim-blaming, and in this sense disrupted that dynamic, although Assiwar did not regard his response as an acceptance of responsibility. It is important to note that the campaign itself did not include a plan for "the day after"—that is, for what would follow the publication of the testimonies.

The "Benefit of the Doubt": Leaning Toward Survivors versus Protecting the Suspect

During the interviews, responses varied among participants when asked whether a rehabilitative process was possible. Some argued that the guilty party should continue to face long-term consequences, including exclusion from the public sphere and removal from leadership positions. This referred in particular to suspects who continued to be given public platforms, appear on television, and speak on the radio despite the existence of testimonies against them. As one interviewee put it: **"They should have no place in these bodies. That should be the minimum ethical standard in party, political, and national activism"**.⁷⁵

Others argued that professional sanctions should be imposed on perpetrators in civil society institutions, and that this professional exclusion could take place **"when they reject him, when they don't invite him, when they tell him no... that's where the confrontation has to happen"**.⁷⁶

Another participant in the same group took a somewhat more flexible position, arguing that the possibility of a rehabilitative process depended on the individual's position and power. The greater the individual's status, seniority and power, the greater his resources and connections, the more systematic his harassment, and the greater his ability to target activists who expose such conduct. In such cases, she saw no meaningful possibility of rehabilitation. Conversely, the less influence an individual has and the less able he is to evade responsibility, the greater the possibility of a rehabilitative process.

In all cases, the interviewees called for those accused of harassment to be removed from political and civil society spaces and agreed on the necessity of such a step. At the same time, they acknowledged the associated challenges, including the risk that feminist

74. Interview conducted by the researcher with a representative of Assiwar. Reference No. 42.

75. Interview conducted by the researcher with Lamia Na'amneh Semnioka. Reference No. 56.

76. Ibid..

activists could face legal action under defamation law if they publicly disclosed the reasons for their exclusion. The activists also noted that alleged perpetrators sometimes use their power and connections against those attempting to restrict them: **"He uses his power, all his connections, to show that you're the liar... or to cut you down to size... to silence you"**.⁷⁷

It is clear that restricting perpetrators is far from straightforward. This difficulty stems from the particular characteristics of Palestinian society in the 1948 territories, including its relatively small demographic and geographical size and the overlap among personal, professional, and political relationships, as well as from the constraints imposed by defamation law.

Those who oppose the campaign argue that, although absolute truth may remain unattainable in matters of this kind, particularly in cases of sexual harassment, there is nevertheless a reality that must be confronted. According to this view, the costs involved in establishing the truth must be borne, and due process cannot be abandoned. It is preferable, from this perspective, to remain uncertain about the truth of the matter or the reliability of the testimony—giving the suspect the benefit of the doubt and refraining from causing him harm—than to inflict injustice on someone against whom the allegation has not been substantiated. This approach could be seen as effectively granting perpetrators perpetual immunity because sexual assaults typically occur in private and frequently leave no tangible evidence.

Nisreen Tabari, who publicly voiced her opposition to the campaign's strategy at the time and faced sharp criticism over her support for one of the suspects, explains that a distinction must be drawn between the testimony itself—the account describing incidents of harassment—and the publication of suspects' names through what she described as a "virtual avalanche", by which she meant the loss of control that occurs on social media. In her words: **"Taking a testimony seriously and treating it as absolute truth without giving the person accused an opportunity to make his own case are two completely different things"**.⁷⁸

This position favors hearing the suspect's account, even if only as a procedural formality. It argues that doing so also protects the women in the suspect's circle—including members of his family—from the collateral harm that may result. Tabari warned in her interview: **"I don't want to replace one form of hegemony with another... and I don't want to resolve one crisis by creating another"**.⁷⁹ For Tabari, justice is a broader value that must include a fair procedure for suspects, even if this position leads others to question her feminism. She thus declares her unequivocal commitment to procedural justice.

77. Interview conducted by the researcher with a representative of Assiwar. Reference No. 42.

78. Interview conducted by the researcher with Nisreen Tabari. Reference No. 67.

79. Ibid..

Evaluating the Campaign: Conclusions and Future Prospects from the Perspective of Women Activists

(A Complex Success: Breaking the Silence versus the Failure of Accountability)

Years after the campaign, both interviewees who had been involved in organizing it and those who had opposed it agreed that it had achieved its goal of raising awareness, but had failed to hold the accused accountable or ensure that they faced consequences, and consequently to remove them from the political sphere or exclude them from civil society organizations. At the time of writing, those named in the testimonies still hold senior positions within Palestinian society in the 1948 territories, continue their professional and social lives, advance in their political careers, and maintain a prominent public presence without undergoing any process of accountability within the organizations to which they belong.

The campaign organizers regard its **outcomes as complex**: it achieved a moral success in breaking the silence, while failing to secure social and institutional accountability. It succeeded in creating a platform and amplifying the voices of women who had experienced harassment after many years of secrecy, fear, and dealing with such issues in private. The purpose of the campaign was to shed light on the phenomenon and demonstrate its existence, so that these accounts would no longer remain behind closed doors, or, as Leila Jaroushi Hassan described it, to **"create, or invent, a kind of voice for women who have experienced harassment, so that they know they can speak about it... and feel that they are not alone"**.⁸⁰

Another positive outcome of the campaign was that, following the publication of the testimonies, other women were encouraged to come forward and provide the organization with new testimonies. This underscores the importance of the campaign and the role it played in breaking down the barrier of shame and fear. By contrast, the organizers believe that the responses failed to do justice to the women. People close to the activists chose to ignore the issue, to "demonize" the women who had testified, or to cast doubt on their credibility rather than hold the accused accountable.

Salma, who gave testimony during the campaign without publishing either her own name or that of her assailant, identifies the psychological impact on survivors as one of the campaign's most important achievements. She stated: **"Perhaps, deep down, I felt some sense of justice for myself because I was able to confront this great monster inside me and because I was able to write this testimony"**.⁸¹ At the same time, she expressed strong reservations and intense dissatisfaction with the hostile responses to the campaign. She also emphasized its failure to hold the accused accountable for the harassment and its consequences.

80. Interview conducted by the researcher with Leila Jaroushi Hassan. Reference No. 47.

81. Interview conducted by the researcher with Salma. Reference No. 50.

In her assessment of the campaign, Naila Awwad, director of Women Against Violence, argues that its success lay in exposing institutional realities and **hypocrisy**. She stresses: **"Assiwar's disclosure of the testimonies... took the masks off... within feminist civil society... within political parties... within personal relationships"**.⁸²

Awwad adds that the rupture among feminist organizations, and between them and political parties and civil society, was rooted in the principle of believing survivors as a starting point. For her, believing survivors is a feminist principle that should not be open to dispute. In her view, feminist organizations should relate to one another on the basis of reciprocity and a balanced exchange of trust, support, and responsibility. It was therefore unreasonable, she argues, for Assiwar to be asked by other feminists to share confidential testimonies and reveal the identities of the women who had testified in order to prove its credibility and refute accusations that it had fabricated testimonies.

She concluded by describing a deep sense of personal disappointment over the issue. Its source was the expectation that the collective —political parties, civil society, and activists— would exclude harassers from leadership positions and support feminist activism concerning sexual harassment rather than attack and undermine it. At the same time, she herself refused to participate in a proposed committee of feminists to examine the testimonies, after one of the suspects approached her with the proposal, out of concern that the committee might be used to rehabilitate the suspects' public image. For her part, she offered no proposals for alternative pathways to justice, and expressed doubt as to whether absolute justice was ever achievable in sexual harassment cases.

By contrast, Nisreen Tabari measured the campaign's success in terms of **"results and facts"**. Since the facts indicated that the situation of the accused remained unchanged, she regarded the campaign as having failed to achieve either justice or change. Tabari emphasized that the campaign did not do justice to the women who submitted their testimonies; on the contrary, she believed it deepened their crisis. Women who had gathered the strength to speak could now see that those accused remained in their positions and continued to wield influence. Tabari noted that the campaign's objectives included deterrence and the restoration of dignity, and concluded: **"There was no deterrence, no retribution, and no restoration of dignity"**. She added that reality had not changed, since every suspect was still **"sitting in his chair"**.⁸³

Tabari summarized the campaign's ultimate outcome by saying: "At the end of the day, the campaign did nothing. It just kicked up dust".⁸⁴ By this she meant that the commotion generated by the campaign was not followed by any genuine change in the political or social position of the harassers. Instead, she argued, it had negative implications for the future: the campaign's failure to produce tangible results may make women more afraid

82. Interview conducted by the researcher with Naila Awwad of Women Against Violence. (A record of the interview is held by the researcher). [in Arabic]

83. Interview conducted by the researcher with Nisreen Tabari. Reference No. 67.

84. Ibid..

to share their accounts because they have seen that it led to nothing. In her view, the fact that the campaign came to an end undermined its credibility and led some to question its motives, thereby discrediting the genuine efforts of feminist organizations.

However, she also stated—as did representatives of the other organizations—that neither the organization she directs nor she personally had a vision for an alternative process. She nevertheless sketched out, by way of example, the possibility of establishing a fact-finding committee: **"A committee, or... I would call it an investigation, but I mean an inquiry or fact-finding committee to collect evidence, and also hear the accused or suspect, so that he can make his voice heard. Let's see what he did".**⁸⁵

Tabari added that it is the responsibility of every individual and organization working to combat sexual harassment to create an alternative system for achieving justice. In any event, she argued in her interview, if feminist organizations fail to do so, it would be preferable for them to acknowledge their inability and refrain from causing harm to suspects—that is, to refrain from publishing their names and publish only the survivors' names alongside the testimonies, so as not to set off a chain of crises without safeguards.

In response to those who opposed the campaign, organizations supporting it called for breaking with conventional, unjust processes and pursuing alternative routes to justice, which may appear problematic but are nevertheless necessary. One feminist activist expressed this as follows: **"Sometimes you have to do something that isn't fair [i.e., the procedure] in order to achieve a just outcome".**⁸⁶

The same feminist activist criticized responses she saw as protecting suspects, saying: **"The only thing missing was for them to take the testimonies and say that they were not... necessarily true... or that they were fabricated".**⁸⁷

Supporters of the campaign advocated believing survivors as a methodological principle, as a means of helping to restore justice and giving survivors an opportunity—perhaps their only one—to be believed. One feminist leader stated: **"To this day I still say: yes, we believe survivors, and I pay a price for believing survivors".**⁸⁸ This principle rests on the willingness of both the organization and the women who testified to shoulder individual and collective costs in order to bring the truth into public view, with this willingness serving, in this view, as a guarantee of credibility.

The director of Assiwar emphasized this point: **"We are prepared to pay the price again... and the women who published [their testimonies]... they are also prepared**

85. Ibid..

86. Interview conducted by the researcher with a feminist activist. (A record of the interview is held by the researcher). [in Arabic]

87. Ibid..

88. By this, the feminist leader meant that she herself had paid a price for believing survivors, having been attacked for taking this position. Interview conducted by the researcher with a feminist leader. (A record of the interview is held by the researcher). [in Arabic]

to pay the price".⁸⁹ And this is indeed what happened: they were subjected to verbal abuse, physical violence, threats, and harassment because of the campaign.

It is clear that, in assessing the campaign's outcomes and considering the way forward, the debate between the two sides concerns the form of feminist justice sought in the cases in question. Each operates within a zone of uncertainty, namely the absence of material evidence that harassment occurred, because such assaults typically occur in private, making them difficult to prove through conventional means and effectively granting perpetrators *de facto* immunity within conventional processes. While those critical of the campaign prefer prevailing conceptions of justice that give the suspect the benefit of the doubt, those who support the campaign seek instead to challenge the longstanding regime of secrecy imposed on sexual harassment cases and to approach testimony by giving survivors, rather than suspects, the benefit of the doubt. This position relies on the willingness of activists and survivors to bear the costs of publicly confronting suspects, including the attendant legal risks and personal consequences, with this willingness serving, in this view, as a guarantee of credibility.

Assiwar's staff explain that most women who testify do not want to stand alone at the forefront of feminist struggle and shoulder its burden themselves. Yet given the complete lack of justice and the failure of society at large to relieve them of the burden of waging this struggle, the outcomes of Assiwar's campaign demonstrate that speaking out publicly becomes a necessity rather than a choice if the longstanding, structural cycle of injustice surrounding sexual harassment is to be broken. It also serves to fill the void left by the absence of state institutions capable of administering alternative systems that deliver justice to all members of society and bridge the gap between the legal and political context and the reality of sexual assault. This absence pushes women to create initiatives aimed at achieving "relative" or partial justice along the lines of #MeToo.

Ultimately, they emphasize that the costs continue to be borne by survivors, by activists working on sexual harassment issues, and, finally, by those accused of harassment whose names are made public. This must be understood alongside the failure to achieve meaningful accountability, the fact that the careers and positions of the accused remain unaffected, and the broader social repercussions associated with publicly identifying someone as suspected of committing a criminal act of a sexual nature.⁹⁰

In this regard, the two positions may be summarized as follows: both generally support and believe survivors. The distinction is that one position regards believing the survivor or victim as integral to supporting her and also proceeds to condemn the alleged perpetrator without giving him an opportunity to make his own case. The other position likewise

89. Interview conducted by the researcher with Lamia Na'amneh Semnioka. Reference No. 56.

90. Activists also point out that the proliferation of armed crime among Palestinians in the 1948 territories could fundamentally alter the dynamics of feminist struggle around this issue, further complicating it and deterring activists from continuing with this form of public disclosure and confrontation. This issue, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

believes the survivor while offering her support and assistance, but does not rely on her testimony to condemn the suspect in the absence of material evidence or before other procedures have been exhausted.

Conclusion

The *Every Day a Testimony* campaign revealed that the particular circumstances of Palestinians in the 1948 territories produce a double dilemma not faced by feminists elsewhere, as illustrated by the #MeToo movement. Although #MeToo highlighted the shortcomings of the judicial system in delivering justice to women, it arose in circumstances in which that system, despite its flaws, remained a relatively neutral institution that could be pressured to reform itself. For Palestinians in the 1948 territories, by contrast, the Israeli judicial system is not merely deficient; it is a structurally hostile colonial instrument to which recourse is made only rarely and, at times, because there is no alternative. Furthermore, nationalist discourse creates a form of political immunity for public figures under suspicion, whereby survivors' accounts and testimonies themselves are read as threats to national unity or distractions from national priorities. This combination—the colonial nature of the judicial system and suspects' sheltering behind nationalist discourse—produces what we call the *dilemma of besieged justice*: a condition in which not only are pathways to justice absent, but the very question of accountability becomes impossible to raise within the national public sphere without incurring a heavy political and social price.

One approach adopted by the Assiwar campaign in response to this situation was the principle of restoring agency—that is, restoring individuals' capacity to influence their surroundings—and transferring responsibility to civil society organizations, political parties, workplaces, and all other relevant bodies to examine their own internal systems, thereby rejecting the premise that feminist activists should bear sole responsibility. In retrospect, some activists felt that the campaign had demonstrated the importance of prior coordination and mutual support, particularly when undertaking radical campaigns that challenge structural conditions at a time when the feminist movement finds itself increasingly subject to criticism and attacks amid the declining influence of Palestinian political parties and emancipatory political discourse.

In terms of its outcomes, the campaign reinforced the logic of transformative justice, which seeks to transfer responsibility to society by breaking through the wall of silence surrounding suspects and initiating an unprecedented social and political debate on harassment and the accountability of public figures outside conventional legal processes. Among its most significant achievements was breaking the taboo against holding national institutions and public figures accountable—an act of "political disruption" that exposes the fragility of structures whose legitimacy has long been regarded as untouchable—what, in Sara Ahmed's terms, may be understood as an act of resistance. At the same time, there was a clear lack of organized strategies or long-term visions for addressing what

comes after testimony, whether among feminist organizations or within civil society and political bodies. Nor was any vision put forward to address questions of rehabilitation or reintegration under conditions that would ensure safety in the public sphere.

We conclude that placing sole responsibility for constructing alternative pathways to justice on feminist groups and organizations is both unrealistic and unjust. Engaging with these questions requires the participation of human rights organizations, political parties, and representative national bodies, since sexual harassment is not only a feminist issue but a broader social and political one. At the same time, we emphasize that feminist organizations should lead this process. We also call for a collective discussion of the concept of justice and the possibility of realizing it without importing wholesale formal legal concepts; of procedural justice, which places the burden of proof on survivors; and of how to balance the goal of eliminating prevailing collective injustice with the need to attend to individuals and their dignity.

Finally, the campaign cannot be evaluated in binary terms as either an unqualified success or an unqualified failure. It created a space between these two poles, one that encompasses multiple criteria of evaluation: breaking the silence, shifting responsibility for accountability to the public and individuals, reviving the debate on alternative forms of justice, and creating space to accommodate disagreement over strategies, all while maintaining a shared commitment to gender justice and to the right of survivors — women and men— to justice.

Moreover, in the wake of the genocide, it has become impossible to approach any issue that touches on the essence of justice and carries pain with it without coming up against this watershed moment. It has prompted a broad segment of intellectuals to reassess their intellectual assumptions, concepts, and values, while disrupting their priorities and the relative importance they attach to public issues and concerns— and perhaps also to personal ones. At the same time, it continues, with equal intensity, to unsettle their consciences.



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