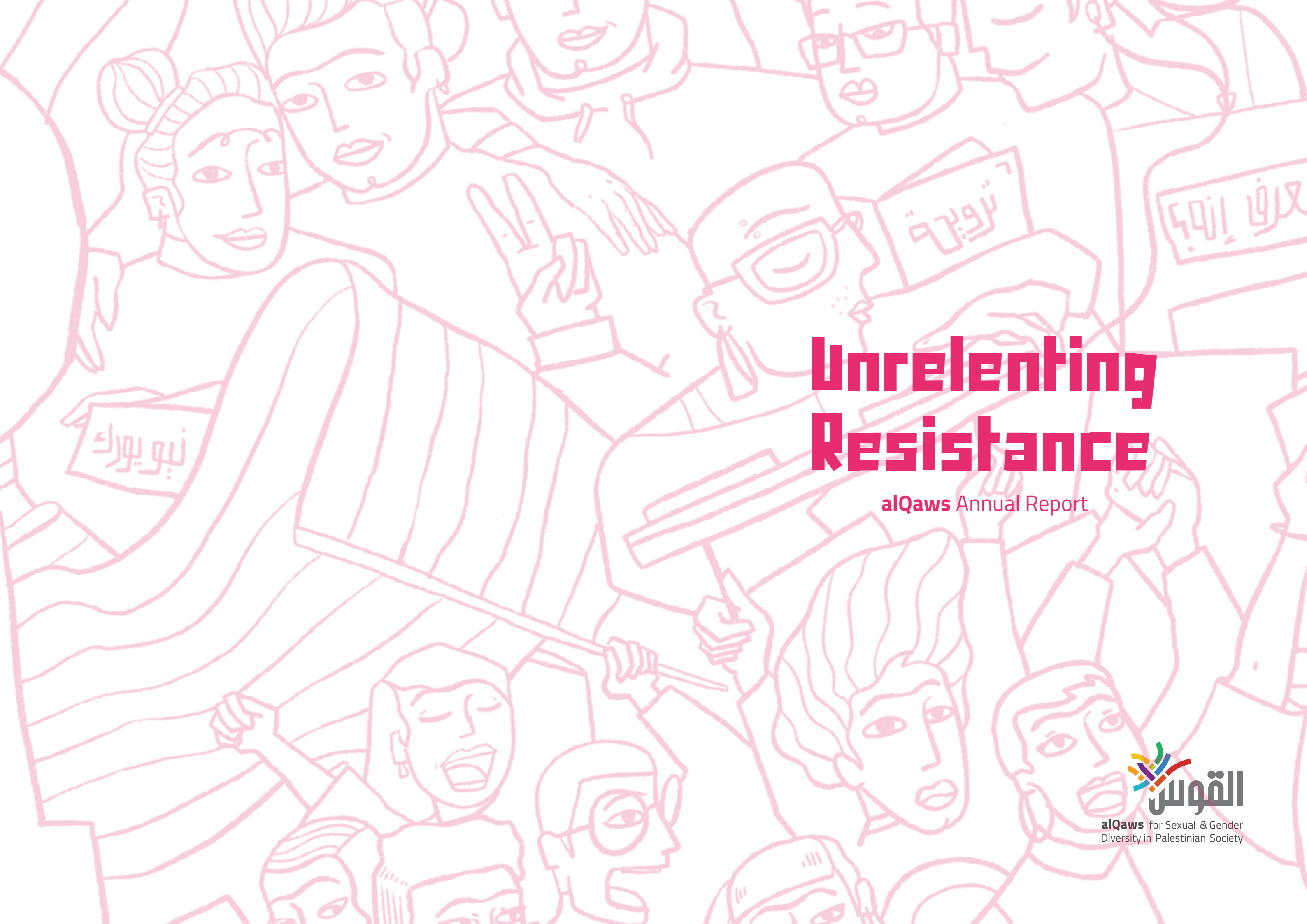




Unrelenting Resistance

alQaws Annual Report



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alQaws for Sexual & Gender
Diversity in Palestinian Society

INTRODUCTION

We are proud to share with you our 2019 Annual Report on the accomplishments we achieved and the challenges alQaws' leadership and activists faced over the last year. While the past few years all have been exceptional and ever-changing, 2019 was a particularly extraordinary milestone and important shift in our journey, progress, and overall organizational work. The most exciting change has been the progress we witnessed in Palestinian society's perception and attitudes on sexual and gender diversity. Our organization and our activism have become more visible to wider masses of Palestinian society, and in this process we have walked with our society through a transition from social denial and renunciation toward a new phase of active, visible, audible engagement with LGBTQ issues.

The main section of this report, "Unrelenting Resistance," presents our reflections and thoughts on advancing our organizing in light of the turbulent year we just experienced. While we have previously written about the violence and persecution we encountered last year, here we provide the most comprehensive account of the violent events we faced in 2019. We share with you the urgent organizational questions we had to address, and the creative ways we found to contend with them.

The second part of the report presents our most significant achievements, including the further development of long-run projects and initiatives, and the launching of new ones. We have witnessed noticeable growth in many aspects of our organizing, such as welcoming thousands of new followers on all of our social media platforms as we expanded the reach of our cultural, artistic, and musical productions as such "Tarwiha: LGBT Youth Comic;" and the hundreds of LGBTQ individuals who have reached out to our "alKhat: Listening & Information Hotline." We have also actively engaged the hundreds of professionals, students, and activists who took part in our sexual and gender diversity training programs led by our devoted, inspiring, and hardworking activists.

With this vast expansion of the scope of alQaws' work and the increased visibility it has garnered, we naturally expanded internally, too. The biggest change was the growth of our community organizing team and the welcoming of two new community organizers to our professional team, who cover alQaws outreach and community building efforts across different areas in Palestine. We also grew our group facilitators' team that runs alQaws' popular youth groups, and we welcomed a new group of trained activists to our dedicated volunteer team responsible for running "alKhat: Listening & Information Hotline." Finally, we also began a restructuring process inside our professional training program that will allow us to expand and strengthen the skills and knowledge of the activist team responsible for providing the training courses.

With more gratitude than we can express, we thank our supporters and all those who stood by, with, and for us this past year. Whether you were at the front lines of a demonstration, or showing solidarity from afar, we are glad you are here and we invite you to explore these pages to become more familiar with all that we achieved in 2019.

We look forward to another inspiring year of work, collaboration, and growth in 2020!

With love,
alQaws' Leadership



UNRELENTING RESISTANCE

There's no way around it—2019 was a challenging year. In this section we describe the most pivotal events we confronted and the hard questions they raised for us, which at the time required urgent response and provided little time to reflect. Nevertheless, we confronted 2019 with all that we had, drawing collective strength from past experiences and shared knowledge, and taking what we learned to fuel our persistent and continued organizing.

In March 2019, a group of alQaws activists distributed flyers titled "[Did You Know?](#)" to spark conversations and raise questions about gender and sexual diversity on university campuses in various parts of Palestine. We created these flyers based on our training experiences, designing them to present five basic questions/statements about biological sex, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity. The flyers generated offline and online discussions. While some accused us of "infiltrating university campuses" and described us as "western agents," many other voices broke through the surface of this charged atmosphere to support us and to denounce the expressions of violence towards our organization, activists, and the "Did You Know?" flyer initiative.



Yet, while the "Did You Know?" flyers successfully reached large crowds in the spring, the conversations they sparked largely took place among student groups. However, when summer came, heated debates sparked into flames and spread widely across society with the news at the end of July of the stabbing of a Palestinian teen. The teen had been stabbed by their own brother near an LGBTQ shelter in Tel Aviv that the teen had been staying in, presumably for reasons related to the teen's gender/sexual identity.

After the news of the stabbing, further violence directed toward LGBTQ people manifested through abusive, insulting, and degrading comments on social media. The incident and public response around it felt to many like a slap to society's face. It was a reality check, wrenching to the surface and shining a spotlight on the violence against LGBTQ individuals. It dispelled the myth that Tel Aviv or other cities are "safe havens," exposing the fact that violence happens everywhere and affects us all. The incident became the subject of considerable debate in Palestinian society.

Again, supportive voices rose up to clearly and visibly reject any and all forms of violence towards LGBTQ people in Palestine. A first-of-its-kind [demonstration](#) took place in Haifa, led by alQaws along with queer and feminist partner institutions. That day, Al-Aseer Square filled with over 200 people who showed up, shared the calls to action, and raised their voices. Accompanying the demonstration was the release of a [statement](#) signed by over thirty Palestinian institutions denouncing and condemning violence towards people with different sexual and gender orientations.

Yet, with barely any time to take a breath, within a month we found ourselves caught up in another storm: the Palestinian Authority police's spokesperson released a [statement](#) declaring a [ban](#) on our activities and outlawing our organization. Inciting further violence, the police suggested that the public should notify police about our activities and alert them to the identities of our activists, clearly intending to criminalize and de-legitimize our work and everything we stand for.

The Palestinian police not only incited social violence (which occurred both offline and online), they also pursued their own violent tactics against alQaws and LGBTQ people—some of our activists were even [kidnapped](#) by official PA factions and agencies. In total, we recorded and collected eight incidences and testimonies of direct attacks on individuals and activists as a result of the police statement. The police also targeted our partners and allies, questioning organizations about their ties with us.

Our ties to our civil society sister organizations were tested, but not broken, amidst the political climate of aggressive security measures. Targeting our work and other civil society organizations for their connections to us, the police aimed to inhibit the growing networks, cooperation, and collaborations between civil society organizations and alQaws. Authorities questioned two organizations who had hosted our activities in Ramallah, and targeted three organizations that sold our merchandise, such as our comic book "Tarwiha," which was in stock in many national libraries and stores.

Despite the police attempts to cut us off from our society and relationships—our engagements, alliances, and collaborations with associations, organizations, collectives, and even individuals demonstrated their resilience. After years of prolonged civil and political work, alQaws has established and proven itself as a respectable and reputable Palestinian organization in Palestinian society. This was prominently displayed when over fifty organizations signed four different [statements](#) standing in solidarity with alQaws and denouncing state and social violence against it. This strong base of solidarity was largely built through the many training hours and workshops we have provided over the years to various civil society organizations.

With attacks circling around us from both our society and the state, we still managed to swiftly respond to the police actions with clear and confident statements about the legality, legitimacy, and social relevance of our work. The local and international media brought further attention with unprecedented coverage and, again, upswells of support. LGBTQ-related issues became the topic of the hour, discussed in households, universities, workplaces, and the streets. Without intending to, the police action pushed the social discussion forward about these issues.

While negative and violent attacks continued to take place in online and offline spaces, they were countered by hundreds of supportive messages and posts unapologetically posted on social media, marking the first time that such a broad public base—including feminist and political activists, human rights and civil society organizations, as well as queer activists from inside or outside alQaws—clearly and publicly raised its voice against violence, and called to support and engage with sexual and gender diversity issues in Palestine.

Later on December 2019, another violent incident fanned the flames of the social discussion, when a video appeared on social media of transwomen in an area near Ramallah being beaten and insulted. With no time to collect ourselves and regain our energy after the previous events, we witnessed one of the most violent waves on social media about LGBTQ issues. However, while some of the discussions on social media provided extreme examples that demonstrate the long way we need to go as a society to counter these issues, others again made equally visible the important and positive ways these discussions are moving forward.

In the midst of these incidents and the new social atmosphere created in their aftermath, one of the many questions, choices, and tensions that demanded our great ability to reconcile and deal with was the dilemma of safety versus confrontation. While we were fueled by our persistence to continue being outright in our definitive rejection of violence and repression, we also could not overlook the security and safety of our organization and activists. Our sheer existence is a threat to the aggressive forms of settler-colonialism, subordinate local authority and power, and oppressive social constructs that work to police, foreclose, and deny sexual and gender diversity in Palestinian society. That we exist to confront these patriarchal, capitalist, and settler-colonial structures means that we are continuously exposed to possible forms of violence. Well aware of this, we do our utmost to ensure maximum safety and minimum risks and exposure to danger for members of our communities and our supporters.

Still, given the current tense and politically charged environment in which we operate, we must continually ask: What would guarantee that there would be no attacks if we organized a demonstration of condemning and denouncing violence against LGBTQ individuals? How would the colonial authorities respond if we raised the Palestinian flag in the occupied city of Haifa? What are the worst-case scenarios we would face if the Palestinian police continues to pursue us and restrict our activities in Ramallah or elsewhere?

Always keeping these questions about our collective responsibilities to our communities and our safety and protection in mind during our activism, we believe we have reached a reasonable balance between the basic need for safety and the necessary confrontation our work requires. We draw from our vast experiences and practices on the ground, as well as our political understanding and evaluation of each situation, to assess readiness—our own and our society's—for any interventions we initiate. This has been a priority since our earliest work. We have also undertaken serious, deep internal work to ensure a strong and solidified organizational, political, and intellectual infrastructure for our activists and leadership through ongoing programming and discussions around necessary measures of safety and security.

Well-known for preying on and trying to capitalize on the violence we face as queer Palestinians, the colonial Israeli pinkwashing propaganda campaign had also [seized](#) on the violent incidents that took place and the media spotlight on queer issues. Israeli media used this situation in order to promote itself in contrast to Palestinians, building on the ongoing, nearly three decades work of interior Israeli institutions and firms in creating [The Israeli Asylum Myth](#).

Despite the varied malignant colonial tactics, strategies, and policies we faced, we saw the opportunity to emphasize and promote our anti-colonial political vision. We have continuously emphasized and expressed our comprehensive vision of liberation that we so eagerly desire, and we have presented our vision of how feminist, queer, and anti-colonial issues necessarily intersect. This clear commitment to intersectional forms of analyses and practices has shaped and influenced the formation of many inclusive movements and collectives—including our own—this past decade, and especially this last year.

For centuries, colonial policies in Palestine have been enforcing fragmentation and divisive dynamics in our society. We oppose these notions of colonial forced divisions through our vision of a unified and liberated Palestine that is based on our collective historical right and as an ongoing form of resistance to colonial injustices—both past and present. This past year, many questions emerged about the distinctions we see in different geographical areas, especially due to the diverse geographical backgrounds of alQaws' activists, which range from the occupied Syrian Golan in the north, to Shefa-'Amr, Haifa, Nablus, and Ramallah.

Throughout our years-long work, we have learned that violence is present everywhere in Palestine and it comes in different shapes and forms. Countering these contexts cannot be accomplished according to the colonial borders' paradigm of '48/'67. Instead, we espouse a vision and a politics premised on understanding the specificities of each area in order to produce comprehensive work tactics and viable, long-term strategies. We recognize that

OPENING NEW DOORS FOR DIALOGUE IN SOCIETY

alQaws' primary goal as an organization is to create a responsible and broad dialogue in society around the topics of sexual and gender diversity. These strategic dialogues and discussions will eventually lead to a society that is less violent and more accepting of its diverse sexual and gender experiences. Our goal is to lay a foundation that persists despite all obstacles and challenges that might endanger the continuity of these important conversations.

The starting point of our vision is the recognition and insistence that we are an integral and authentic part of society. We lead these conversations with and alongside our society—from within our society—and we value these conversations as a space to share our experiences in a direct and open way with various groups in Palestinian society. These experiences have been shaped and impacted by different power structures and social constructs that we as LGBTQ, interact with and live within. These conversations and spaces are also an opportunity to state our refusal and resistance to the realities of violence many LGBTQ Palestinians experience within our society. We strategically use these conversations to denounce social violence, homophobia and transphobia, and to emphasize the responsibilities of all of us—teachers, CSOs, feminist and political activists, queers and non queers—to end it.

Promoting and opening these spaces for dialogue is a big and not an easy responsibility, especially when it is done in the challenging reality of patriarchal and colonial violence, and harsh socio-economic conditions. In addition to this reality, our responsibility is even bigger due to the fact that we are the only LGBTQ organization in Palestine working with strategies that center social discussions, and at the same time reach large parts of Palestine. Despite all these challenges, we can see very clearly the impact of our cumulative organizing and consistent dialogue efforts. Indeed, over the past year we have seen an important reclaiming of virtual and public space taking place through visible, broad-based public online and offline discussions that have recentered queer issues. This has further emboldened us to speak up and take the necessary measures to confront and challenge abuse and do all we can to prevent any further violent incidents from happening.

Looking back at the last three years, we can safely state that we have made a collective transition from a state of social denial, marginalization, and exclusion of LGBTQ people and sexual and gender diversity issues toward a state of public debate and engagement. We have reached a point where there is no possibility of going back to social denial towards these issues. This new social, cultural, and political environment was undoubtedly shaped by alQaws' growing exposure and the ever-increasing visibility of our organizing, discourse, and leadership.

Over the years we have developed various strategies and ways to shape and lead this dialogue. Here are our most distinguished achievements and initiatives under this category:

“Did You Know?” Sparking a Debate on University Campuses

By the end of March, dozens of activists from all around Palestine distributed thousands of [flyers](#) in Palestinian universities, including at An-Najah National University, Birzeit University, and Al Quds University in Abu Dis, in addition to distributing them to Palestinian students at the University of Haifa, Technion Institute, and Tel Aviv University.

The flyer—titled “Did You Know?”—used popular, approachable language to discuss basic questions and misconceptions about sexual and gender diversity, challenging the sexual and gender social constructs, as well as the dominant sexual and gender binaries in our society.

This initiative sparked broad and new conversations among university students that started on university campuses and spread rapidly to social media. Thousands of university students engaged in these discussions on Facebook groups, and reactions ranged from engaging with the content and calling for dialogue, to violent responses and hate speech. This experience was marked as one of the first times we engaged in a direct confrontation with society, which continued during the summer of 2019. Later that year, these flyers were used to harass and blackmail our activists who attended these different universities.

“Hawamesh” (margins) in the Center

Refusing to sideline the intersectionality between queer and political/social issues, Hawamesh Forum foregrounds it, revealing how such issue affect all of society. Last year's Hawamesh Forums varied in their topics and locations, as its halls were filled with diverse attendees, professionals, scholars, youth, and activists alike.

We opened the year with a Hawamesh forum meeting held in Ramallah that focused on the laws in Palestine in relation to queer politics. After that meeting, we recognized it was time to organize our first [Hawamesh](#) in Nablus. While safety measures sometimes prevent us from sharing the locations of our meetings publicly, these forums nevertheless attract large audiences composed of alQaws' activists and friends based near the event locations.

Another significant milestone in this initiative was the decision to hold a Hawamesh forum in northern Palestine, more specifically in the town of Shefa-'Amr, with a [meeting](#) focused on sexual and gender diversity from an educational framework, and about the presence of these issues inside our schools and school systems. Later on, this step forward was met with another challenge around the announcement of holding a new [Hawamesh](#) forum in Ramallah last November, which led to another wave of persecution and harassment by the Palestinian Authority in an attempt to scare us into cancelling the meeting. We were faced with many political and organizational questions about the Hawamesh forum and our safety, and ultimately decided not to hold this specific event in order to keep our activists safe from any risk of harm.

We closed the year with an enriching Hawamesh forum [meeting](#) in Jaffa that tackled the topic of pinkwashing. [“The Israeli Mythical Safe Space For Palestinian LGBTQ Community Members”](#) forum came as a sequel to a discussion we initiated around an article we published in collaboration with [Metras](#) (a Palestinian media website) titled [“Does Tel-Aviv Protect Gays? Escaping to an Israeli Fairytale.”](#) The meeting discussed the different themes of the article and expanded the discussion to include new questions like our role in combating these myths on the ground and with our work with LGBTQ Palestinian youth who are constantly subjected to pinkwashing narratives through media.

Alongside organizing our Hawamesh forums, in April 2019, we organized an educational [workshop](#) with [The Palestine Festival of Literature \(PalFest\)](#) and in partnership with Al-Quds Bard College for Arts & Science. We shared our experiences and vision regarding the concept of “safe spaces” in organizing, discussing its limitations when working under the reality of the ongoing structured colonial violence.

We were also hosted alongside other activists by the Palestinian student group “Sayr w Sayroua” at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem to participate in a workshop about the various forms of [invisible violence](#) we experience. Furthermore, we were hosted by alSaraya Theatre in Jaffa as part of its “Yaffaweya” Women’s Festival on a panel discussing [societal methods of protection](#) for women and queers in Palestine, and the different ways society legitimizes violence against women and queers.



Our Training Program: An Intimate Dialogue with alQaws

In the past year we have completed one hundred hours of training attended by over one hundred professionals from different professional and geographical backgrounds. We began a training course for a group of students from Al-Quds University through the Center of Gender Studies, but unfortunately we had to cancel our last scheduled training meeting (the first of 3 scheduled meetings) due to the tension on campus sparked by our “Did You Know?” flyers.

Throughout 2019 we worked with many professional groups who participated in our trainings, such as a group of social workers who work with teenagers from East Jerusalem in areas like Sur-Baher, Jabel Mukaber, and Beit Hanina; these trainings dealt with the complexity of Jerusalem and how it impacts our professional work with LGBTQ people. Moreover, we provided training for social workers and psychologists in the Psychological Services Department of Baqa al-Gharbiyye.

alQaws’ training not only provide spaces to share knowledge about sexual and gender diversity issues, but are designed to address social/personal attitudes around these issues too, and the impact of our personal attitudes on our professional roles and responsibilities. Working with professionals is both challenging and very important. While professionals in these training sessions often use their experience and knowledge to resist new concepts, we recognize the importance of engaging in new knowledge and discourse about sexual and gender diversity.

Our training program included organizing two workshops for volunteers at hotlines run by two feminist organizations—one in Haifa and another in Nazareth—as well as a training for a group of volunteers in the psychological first-aid team at the Palestine Red Crescent Society. We also organized our fifth annual West Bank [civil society organizations](#) training, which brought together 9 organizations working in different fields to discuss how sexual and gender diversity issues intersect with their work, as well as the role of these organizations in engaging with these topics in their social and political work.

There is no doubt that alQaws’ training program has proved itself as one of our most successful long-term projects—it is indispensable and central to the transformative nature of our work. This massive undertaking often requires weeks or months of preparation, networking, and conversations before each training materializes. It also requires long hours on the road, and additional reflection sessions and discussions by our team of trainers, who have been developing and carrying out these training sessions for the past four years. Next year, we are planning to take a critical step forward in restructuring this program and building a new team of activists who have the ability and desire to take on the great responsibility of leading this massive program.

A Dialogue in the Eye of the Storm

Sometimes alQaws goes through difficult and stressful periods, in which we face challenges and dilemmas that require immediate action. We see these incidents as valuable opportunities to initiate discussions about sexual and gender diversity issues. In our experience, these moments usually have positive outcomes despite, or perhaps because of, the tense and charged atmosphere. Throughout the events of last year, we still managed not only to put out constant fires, but also to transform these times of stress into an energy source to fuel our work opening a discussion in Palestinian society.

In the wake of the unfortunate stabbing incident, we managed to lead a [demonstration](#) condemning violence against LGBTQ people, which was organized in collaboration with six Palestinian NGOs: Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, Aswat - The Palestinian Feminist Center for Gender and Sexual Freedoms, Kayan: Feminist Organization, Assiwar: The Feminist Arab Movement, Women Against Violence, and Baladna: Association for Arab Youth. The demonstration had an unprecedented turnout—masses flocked to alAssir Square in Haifa, filling it up with activists holding signs denouncing violence and receiving extensive news coverage. In alQaws speech at the demonstration we stressed the need to reject violence and build a strong society that is inclusive and diverse.

In addition to the powerful stance of the masses at the demonstration, we also witnessed rising support in our institutions and community organizations, following both the stabbing incident and the PA police statement. This growing support is the result of our years-long effort to build alliances and promote discussions, solidifying alQaws as a leading and influential Palestinian organization.



Four statements have been issued denouncing violence and in support of alQaws. The first statement was released by a group of organizations in 48' territories as a response to the stabbing incident. The other three denounced the PA police statement and supported the legitimacy of our work; the first of which was issued by the [Palestinian Human Rights Organizations Council](#)—which includes over ten Palestinian human rights organizations; the second was issued by [civil society organizations](#) working in various fields, and the third was released by the [Palestinian Non-Governmental Organization Against Domestic Violence Against Women](#).

The events of this year and the discussion around them have exposed alQaws to unprecedented visibility through mass media coverage. At a local Palestinian level platforms such as [Ashams Radio](#), [24 FM](#), [Ultra Sawt](#), among others, provided coverage of these events. Regional news outlets such as [The New Arab](#), alSaleet alEkhabari [Monte Carlo Doualiya](#), the Lebanese News, [VICE Arabia](#), and others also provided coverage. Internationally, alQaws was featured on many platforms including [PinkNews](#), [The Electronic Intifada](#), and [Washington Blade](#).

It is important to emphasize that our interaction with the media was neither arbitrary nor random, but rather came after an investment in our work with the media in recent years, and the formulation of a clear and coherent discourse that reaches out to different audiences in order to shift attitudes towards sexual and gender diversity issues.

VIBRANT QUEER REALITIES

In recent years we have been able to create a vibrant queer scene in various Palestinian areas. To alQaws, creating queer realities involves opening up and sustaining spaces for LGBTQ individuals and groups where they can meet and share their experiences, as well as take part in the process of transformation and social change in public spaces, organizations, collectives, arts & culture productions, or political activism. These queer realities and spaces are based on the energy and spirit of alQaws' activists who are integrated in these organizing efforts at multiple levels. The significance of this vibrant scene comes from the fact that it thrives off our solid base of grassroots queer activists from different parts of Palestine.

Since we laid out our current strategic plan (2019-2021), we envisioned alQaws as a grassroots community-based organization, led by the spirit of activism and by local and national leaderships. This commitment requires extensive and strategic work with our activists and leadership, which led us to rebuild and expand our community organizers team to include two new community organizers working with our local activist base in various areas, especially in our main activist hubs in [Jerusalem & Ramallah](#), and [Haifa & Jaffa](#). This expansion has added a new spirit to our work, and strengthened our approach that relies on harnessing and solidifying the power of different communities of queers in Palestine.

In addition to centering community organizing in the work of our staff, we organized two retreats for our national leadership, which gathers twice a year from across Palestine. This year we worked together to discuss the values of shared leadership and how they manifest in practice, as well as in the recent developments and shifts in alQaws' work in 2019, focusing on the role of our national leadership in taking our impact to new heights.

From providing basic services to Palestinian queers, to maintaining queer political spaces, this year we used different tactics to create this activist-led queer scene, and indeed queer life. Some of these tactics and their impact include:

500 Callers Reach Out to Al-Khat Hotline

From the need to share a queer love relationship that is kept hidden from friends and family, to a caller struggling with their sexual and gender identity, to a person calling to learn about ways to support their friend; "[alKhat - Listening & Information](#)" has been providing its services to our community with great consistency and professionalism for the past ten years.

Year after year, we comprehend the undeniable significance of "alKhat" and its essential and indispensable mission, as evidenced by the growing numbers year after year. In the last year,

the number of callers increased by 200, with a total of more than 500 callers. The majority of callers were youth between the ages of 19-25, a third of which were women, and most from areas in the center of the West Bank, Haifa, and Jerusalem, with the chat platform being the more popular choice over traditional phone calls.

Calls came throughout the year about different topics, with the largest share of calls addressing the violent events we went through this year, as there was a noticeable increase in the number of calls to "alKhat" in times of crisis. Our callers also reached out with: questions and confusion about sexual orientation, sexual relations between partners, feelings of alienation and isolation related to their sexual or gender identity, as well as asking about alQaws' work and how to join us.

We ended this year with our annual [training for new alKhat volunteers](#). We expanded our team of volunteers, with new volunteers from Jerusalem. We start this new year with a renewed energy and a goal to reach more people of different ages, from different places, with different stories, and living diverse sexual and gender experiences.

Pathways to Knowledge and Activism

This year, we launched a series of training courses for our activists interested and invested in bringing social change regarding sexual and gender diversity issues in Palestine. The series comprises three main courses, each covering different theoretical and practical aspects of queer activism; beginning with basic concepts related to sexual and gender diversity, moving into a closer look at queer and feminist theory and practice, and finishing with the tools and principles that activists need in any social movement.

The significance of this series stems from the necessity to invest in alQaws' current and future activists, since they make up the foundation of our work as a grassroots political movement. The program provides activists with the necessary knowledge and tools for them to take lead in alQaws' work and the Palestinian queer movement. For this reason we insisted on conducting this new initiative in different areas in Palestine—Jaffa, Ramallah, and Haifa—to further strengthen our nation-wide foundation.

In 2019, we conducted the course "[Introduction to Sexual and Gender Diversity](#)" in Haifa, Jaffa, and Ramallah, and our second course titled "[Advanced Knowledge in Sexual and Gender](#)



[Diversity: Movements & Theories](#)” in Haifa and Ramallah; with the plan to continue with this courses program in more areas—including Jerusalem—in 2020. The courses are created and conducted by activists from alQaws’ team of trainers, as well as friends and allies with relevant professional, theoretical, and activism backgrounds.

Support and Community Spaces

In addition to the activist training series mentioned above, our youth groups “Myself, My Sexuality, and Society: Exploration, Knowledge, and Impact” have remained an essential space for queer Palestinians for the past eight years. These groups serve as a first stop for many young queers to meet, share their experiences and reflect on them, understand the layers of their various identities, and envision personal and collective opportunities to grow.

We started 2019 with a group in [Jaffa](#), followed by another group in [Jerusalem](#), addressing the lack of Palestinian queer spaces in the two cities. We also started at the beginning of 2020 with a new youth group in [Haifa](#). The three groups included an average of ten people from each city and its neighbouring towns and villages.

Amongst our most significant achievements during 2019 in regard to our youth groups was expanding our team of professional group facilitators, with the aim to include individuals with distinct expertise in working with queer groups. This expansion further enriched our team of facilitators in terms of age and geographical background. During 2019 we welcomed three alQaws activists with backgrounds in group work and a lot of passion to work with youth to the new team of youth groups’ facilitators.

In addition to our youth groups, we provided another space where queer individuals could [get acquainted with alQaws’](#) work, and explore opportunities to get involved in activism and support our movement; taking into account different capacities, needs, and aspirations. Two gatherings were held in Ramallah and Haifa, attracting 10-12 participants from each area. We learned that these spaces are more comfortable and safe for new activists who are interested in slowly joining our group/s.

Two Decades of Queer Community Parties

One of the first activities alQaws organized—dating back to almost twenty years ago—is alQaws’ Queer Party, which was launched in Jerusalem by the very beginning of our establishment (2002–2003). These parties have expanded, later aiming to reach out to different people from different areas in Palestine, which resulted in the decision to relocate it into a more accessible and central area. Thus, it has been held for years in the city of Jaffa as a hallmark of the party.

In 2019, we organized five parties, about one every two months, with new exciting changes and energy in the production team, the DJs and music, as well as in the drag performances. We are proud of how the continuity and sustainability of our queer parties, because we believe there is a great importance in sustaining spaces of queer celebration and diversity, as they attract extremely diverse crowds of queer folks varying in their backgrounds, identities, and lifestyles. Moreover, these parties are important because they often mark the first meeting point between alQaws and some queer folks, and because sometimes it is a more comfortable space due to its informal nature. alQaws queer parties are a space where we celebrate our queerness, and take a break to enjoy good music, dancing, and watch drag performances by alQaws’ activists, and other Palestinian drag performers, and most importantly a space to be together.



Stronger Ties with Palestinian Communities Abroad

Despite our priority to work with local communities in Palestine, we see great importance in building bridges and ties with the Palestinian Diaspora and other ally movements, so as to exchange knowledge and share experiences about social change, sexual and gender diversity, and anti-colonial organizing in general. We realize that we have distinct political and organizational experiences that are worth sharing, as it enriches us and also broadens our horizons to become acquainted with new ones.

In recent years, we formed steady networks of Palestinian activists and ally movements in New York City, and specifically a network of LGBTQ Palestinian youth activists based in the US. The success of [two fundraising](#) benefit shows we organized in NYC in the last couple of years

showed great commitment of activists from these new/old networks, and great engagement from allies and friends who attended and supported these events. This prompted us to translate these efforts into a practical initiative to strengthen our ties with these communities. So, to complement and sustain these efforts, we launched at the end of last year a [new fellowship program](#), "Palestine Through the Lens of Queer Politics," in order to work with a fellow queer Palestinian individual from the diaspora in our office in Jerusalem.

We received applications through the end of January 2020. After acceptance, we will take on a fellow during the three months of summer 2020 to engage in a shared learning experience. During this time, the fellow becomes acquainted with alQaws' work and the queer scene in Palestine in general, as well as contributes to the organizing of a fall 2020 fundraising event and supports new projects or further develops existing others, depending on their field of interest, work, and experience.

Through this program, alQaws is determined to working with individuals who share our queer, feminist and anti-colonial values, who are connected and engaged in youth social and political movements, and who are interested in working and learning at both personal and collective levels.



CULTURAL & EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Our efforts to work with LGBTQ communities across Palestine, and our different programs designed to open social discussions with various groups in Palestine, could not be complete without our innovative and solid cultural and knowledge production work. Our cultural and educational programming reflects our intellectual, political, and professional visions through creative art and cultural work that provokes new social discussions and debates around sexual and gender diversity issues. Some of these programs in 2019 included:



“Tarwiha” 2.0: LGBTQ Youth Comic Series

In addition to the activist training series mentioned above, our youth groups “Myself, My For the second year in a row, we launched new episodes of [Tarwiha](#), a comics series we created to center LGBTQ teens’ voices and experiences. The second season came as a sequel to 2018 first season episodes that focused on LGBTQ youth experiences at school, while this year’s edition came to shed light on the complex relationships LGBTQ teenagers have with their families.

Tarwiha does not stop at only presenting the realities of queers in this age range, but has an additional educational and pedagogical purpose that aims to name the multiple dimensions of these experiences, and to break and challenge these experiences’ isolation, alongside serving as a platform to dream and express a more optimistic and better future. We published each of the eight episodes digitally, and each has reached tens of thousands of people, alongside four thousands of individuals from our target audience group.

In addition to the digital editions of the comics, we celebrated the ending of the 2nd season by printing a hard copy of the comic in a [book launch we organized in Jerusalem](#) during September 2019. Over forty people, half of them youth, attended the event, where we hosted different speakers, who presented artistic and educational readings of Tarwiha’s second editions. We distributed hundreds of copies at bookshops and cultural centers in areas such as Haifa, Ramallah, Nablus, and Jaffa.



A Barricade in the Face of Pinkwashing

alQaws has always been actively engaged in exposing the colonial pinkwashing campaign, by first and foremost providing possible models of Palestinian queer life; and at the same time exposing the deceitful and false colonial narrative that exploits Palestinian queers, both locally and internationally. Last year, we launched an [international campaign](#) calling to boycott Eurovision 2019 competition and the activities of “Tel-Aviv’s Pride Week”. The campaign was part of [Pinkwatching Israel](#)’s initiative, which was signed and supported by over one hundred organizations, institutions and queer movements around the globe.

The campaign called artists and performers to boycott and withdraw from the competition and to refuse to lend their art and music to conceal the occupation’s war crimes. Besides calling artists to boycott the campaign, it aimed to urge collectives and groups around the world to shed light on pinkwashing policies and expand the discussion around pinkwashing.

Later on, we launched another campaign calling to boycott the [Tel-Aviv International LGBT Film Festival](#) in collaboration with the [PACBI](#), after achieving great success in previous years through the [withdrawal of many artists and filmmakers](#) in support of our cause.

Furthermore, since four years ago, we have been investing enormous efforts in producing knowledge and promoting awareness regarding queer related issues within a colonial contexts, seeking to contextualize our organizing experience under the colonial context of Palestine in order to frame it in more accessible ways to different communities. Our knowledge production started to be more strategic inside the organizing efforts of alQaws [Academic School](#) “Sexual Politics in the Colonial Context of Palestine” as a space where academics and activists come together every two years to discuss these issues. Moreover, we were able to share some of the progress we made inside the Academic School by publishing two articles; one through [Jadal](#), and the other through [Jadaliyya](#).

This year’s publication took a less academic turn, as we have partnered up with Palestinian [Metras Website](#) to produce content that tackles queer-related issues in a settler-colonial context, yet in a more accessible way that allows us to reach out to new readers. We produced three written materials about different topics with Metras, the first was about the [Eurovision](#) events that we called to boycott, the [second material](#) was an attempt to reframe the pinkwashing campaign as part of a larger violent colonial system, and the third was about [The Israeli Asylum Myth](#), which was preceded by a widely-attended Hawamesh event held in Jaffa (described in more detail above).

Lastly, during August we organized a [workshop](#) on Wikipedia in partnership with writing and editing professionals. The workshop served as a space for alQaws’ activists and allies to become acquainted with the process of editing, alongside understanding the different semantics, terminologies, and sensitivities that should be taken into account when writing about these matters.

We have benefitted from the workshop tremendously, as we have written a well-constructed and informative Wikipedia entry about [pinkwashing](#) in Arabic, alongside developing and enriching pre-existing articles, or challenging some of the problematic Arabic entries about sexuality and sexual and gender diversity issues (like this [Conversion Therapy](#) entry), or the “LGBT rights in Palestine” entry that was mostly written by Zionist Israeli activists. We also worked on adding a new section about pinkwashing to an entry titled “LGBT rights in Israel.”

alQaws Sings: We are an Integral Part of Our Society

In times of rising threats, surveillance, and violence, our determined activists pressed on. We persisted and continued to work on a brand new installment of our musical production project “Singing Sexuality,” aiming to open up another space for challenging discussions in society.

After the first “Singing Sexuality” album in 2013, and another series of singles released in 2018, we revived the project for a third time, as it continues to serve as a popular creative platform for discussion around sexual and gender diversity. We started writing the lyrics for the new production titled “[Minkom O Feekom](#)”-- literally meaning “Part of You & Within You”, which is a colloquial way for us to say we are an integral part of society. The writing process demanded an immense amount of creativity, sensitivity, and accuracy in crafting the messages we wanted the production to convey.

For the third edition of this project, we decided to reclaim songs from our traditional Palestinian and Levantine heritage, and to explore them as a space to reflect our queer experiences. The choice of genre came from our activists’ own personal connection to the musical heritage of the region, which has influenced them both personally and artistically, as we all grew up listening to these songs that brought us both joy and solace.

Once the writing was in its final stages, we started working on the musical composition and arrangement, which itself required serious research and debate. With the expertise and input of alQaws’ team of artists and musicians leading this project, we decided to keep the original rhythmic compositions, but mix them in a way that takes the listener on a journey across the past, present, and future.

Throughout every stage of our work during the past few years, and after the events of this year in particular, it became clear to us that while recognition of queer experiences in Palestinian society has come a long way, these experiences still largely considered outside of mainstream culture. “Minkom O Feekom” comes to punctuate the progress we made as a society in terms of openness to the discussion around sexual and gender diversity. It comes to confront both colonial narratives and societal exclusion. It comes to declare in every note and every lyric that Palestine is where we come from, Palestine is where we belong, and Palestine is where we will stay.

The project sparked broad-based, active discussions on various social media platforms, with more than fifty thousand listeners on [Facebook](#), [SoundCloud](#) and [Youtube](#) in the first week of its release. To celebrate the release of “Minkom O Feekom,” and bring the discussion into offline spaces, we organized an [event](#) titled “Do LGBTQ experiences Have a Space in Palestinian Music and Culture?.” The event was organized jointly with the Arab Culture Association in Haifa, and it was attended by more than 30 participants who discussed the musical and political aspects of this project. It was encouraging and inspiring to see the wide sharing of the music video, as well as the engagement we received from sister LGBTQ organizations from around the region.





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