

HAKI NASAWI

ETHICAL CHOICES WITHIN THE NGO INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

Based on an interview with Sarah Kaddoura, a feminist activist, researcher, and knowledge creator.

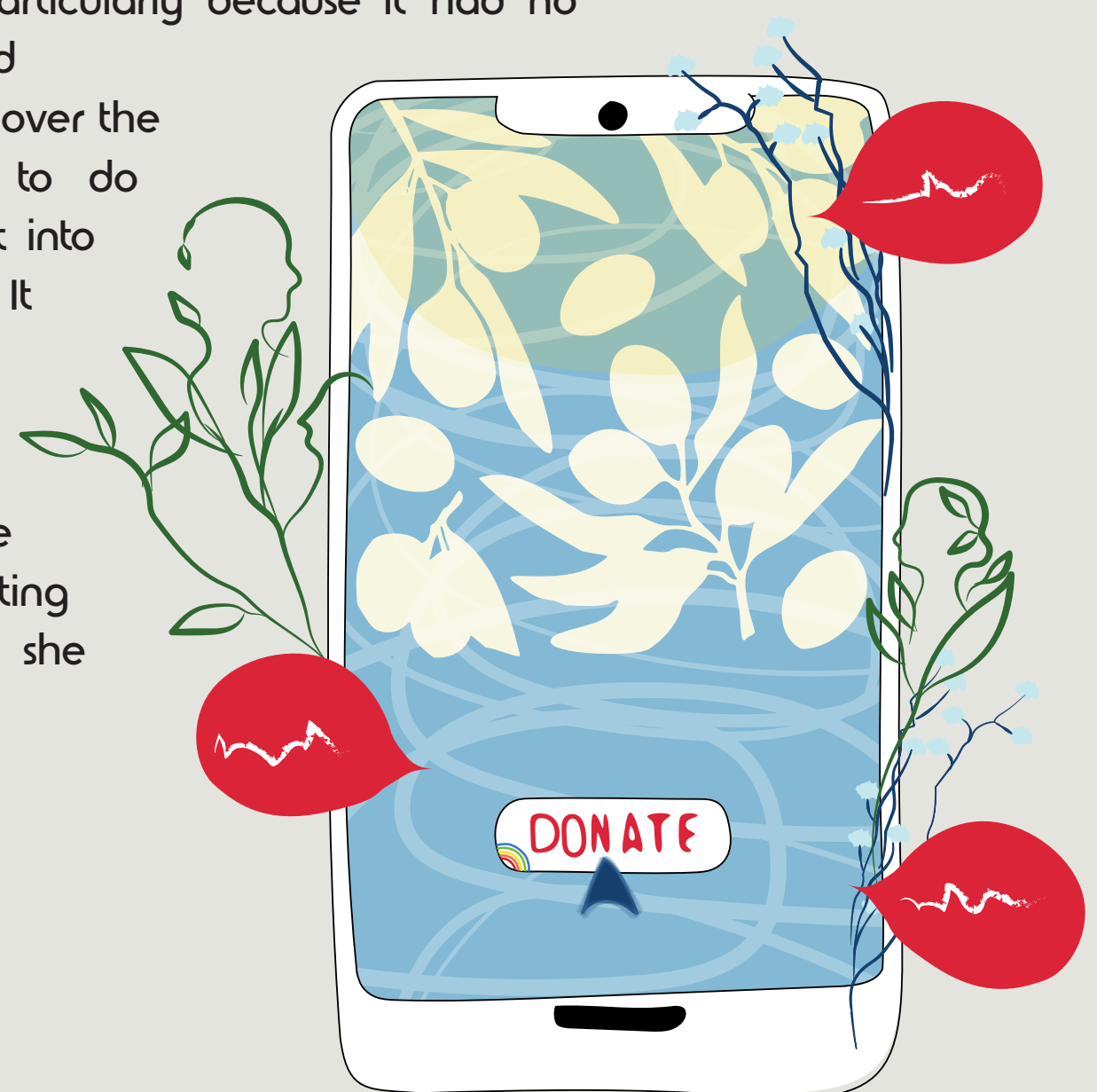
Sarah is a Palestinian refugee who grew up in Lebanon. In 2020, Sarah launched “Haki Nasawi”, or “Feminist Talk”, an online YouTube channel that discusses various gender issues. Sarah also works with the South Feminist Futures organisation, managing a political and popular education programme.

Sarah moved from Saida, a city in southern Lebanon, to Beirut at the age of eighteen to pursue her studies. She joined Dammeh, a feminist co-op that closed following the economic collapse that started in 2019. The closure of many collective and public spaces due to the financial crisis and the COVID19-pandemic led Sarah to create her channel, Haki Nasawi, in 2020. “I have always been interested in research and knowledge production. I launched my channel to provide people with democratised online access to information in a country where public spaces are inaccessible or unavailable for political organising.”

According to Sarah, the Israeli genocide in Gaza and the war in Lebanon have put in question long-held priorities in the feminist movement. “Out-of-control, violent events challenge your core belief about organising. You are suddenly doubting everything you know and feel. Some people are trying to understand where their place is, what their feminist principles are, and what the definition of solidarity in a context of war and genocide is,” Sarah says. She calls this a “conflict of identity” in terms of how one defines oneself as a feminist witnessing genocide. “At Haki Nasawi, we’re suddenly wondering what knowledge is, what knowledge production means in the present context, and what kind of knowledge is useful.”

Being abroad for her studies, Sarah strived to support organisers in Gaza and Lebanon by promoting their work and supporting them in crowdfunding. “I helped develop GoFundMe appeals, draughted statements, and connected people to hotlines and grants. I also amplified campaigns, statements, and relevant content on social media”. In addition, Sarah took on logistical tasks with the Accountability Archive, a UK-based initiative that archives anti-Palestinian online content that endorses the ethnic cleansing in Gaza.

Sarah managed to foster a network of connections into which she tapped for support during the full-scale war in Lebanon, but she is still wary of calling it a community. “I feel more like a member of things that are happening. In a similar vein, she is cautious of turning her channel into a career or individual social capital. “This is an issue that many of us face: the risk of turning political work into a monetised product.” Sarah doesn’t view Haki Nasawi as a job, particularly because it had no funding in the first two years and only collaborated with We Lead over the last two years. “It’s a trap to do something you like, then turn it into something you can get paid for. It makes you less passionate about it. That is what I felt when I tried to rely on some funding for Haki Nasawi, the process of planning and writing episodes became very hard,” she says.



While recognising the need for funding specific projects to compensate people's labour and time, Sarah still believes that there should be specific ethical standards and red lines. "Even if you can't challenge the whole funding structure, you can at least set standards and choose whose money you are willing to receive. Donors are diverse; therefore, we can make ethical choices within the system."

For Sarah, the traditional NGO's work model combines the personalisation of social issues and the hierarchy of corporations. In a feminist NGO, I was stuck in a place where I work as if I am not in a corporation, while being subject to hierarchy, wage inequality, and exploitative dynamics of white-collar companies. This structure compromises freedom and growth. Exploitation is even harder to spot and fight because it is challenging to understand workers' positions in a non-profit organisation, so unionising becomes very difficult. "There was an attempt to unionise NGO workers around 6 years ago, and there were conflicts around whether NGO directors should be part of the union," Sarah says. She wonders, within this context, how workers could think of their labour rights and fight for them?

Some labour issues were divisive in the Lebanese civil society ecosystem. Right before the October 2019 uprising in Lebanon, Palestinians in refugee camps all over the country protested in demand of fundamental human rights like the right to work, education, and appropriate housing. The "Camps Movement" saw supporters and opponents in civil society. "There were many discussions within Lebanese civil society, and it was clear that the majority weren't willing to stand with Palestinian refugees in fighting for their basic rights."

A sense of alienation and disillusionment consumed Sarah, but she kept fighting. "Even after the economic collapse in 2019, I still felt I belonged here and wanted to do something." However, when the country slid more into fascist discourse, with the rise of anti-queer and anti-refugee attacks by both state and non-state actors, Sarah felt the urgency to seek better opportunities for herself and her political work. "I felt like things couldn't get any worse. I wanted to leave Lebanon because I didn't want to live my life regretting that I hadn't tried something different," she explains. In 2024, Sarah moved to Spain to pursue a PhD.

Sarah is at a loss for words when thinking of the genocide in Gaza. "I know people in Gaza, and I still can't grapple with the reality of what they are going through," she says. While Sarah was abroad during the Israeli war on Lebanon, Sarah's mother remained in the country, and her aunt's house was destroyed by Israeli bombing. "It is something that I will have to face and reflect on at some point, but so far, I haven't been able to."

