



# #MeToo Activism as Pragmatic Justice Seeking

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## Abstract

As #MeToo activists took their testimonies of sexual harm outside the legal arena to seek justice, the #MeToo movement has commonly been framed as pitting informal justice-seeking against formal law. This article draws on interviews with Swedish #MeToo activists and focuses on their experiences of justice seeking. It asks the key question: what does justice look like for #MeToo participants? I demonstrate how a binary framework, with formal law on one side and informal community justice practices on the other, does not offer an understanding of the justice interests of activists. The interviews convey how acts of justice seeking are plural, spanning both legal and extra-legal terrains, as well as temporally long-lasting and contextually shifting. The justice-seeking emerges as pragmatic because the #MeToo moment is bound up with the promise that, at *this* rhetorical moment, the act of speaking out will finally be heard on a societal scale.

**Keywords** #MeToo · Narrative activism · Pragmatic justice · Sexual violence · Testimonial injustice · Victim-centred justice

## Introduction

#MeToo has been framed as a movement that pits the shortcomings of criminal legal justice against the opportunities for informal justice offered by social media. Despite decades of legal reform in the area of sexual offences, both in Sweden and internationally, formal law continues to demonstrate inadequacies in dealing with sexual harm. Conviction rates are low and the gap between the numbers of reported cases and prosecutions is widening, including in Sweden (Temkin and Krahe 2008; Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention 2020; Carroll 2022). Sexist and racist

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stereotyping is continually reported in complainants' encounters with the police and within various steps of the formal justice process (see, for instance, O'Neil 2019). Feminist, queer and anti-racist scholarship have demonstrated the biases inherent in procedural law (Spade 2015; O'Neil 2019).

Undoubtedly, social media offers a broadening of justice platforms and allows witness narratives to be linked and aggregated, thus displaying structures rather than individual occurrences (Fileborn 2017; Mendes et al. 2019; Loney-Howes et al. 2021). Actor Alyssa Milano's initial #MeToo tweet galvanised an unprecedented wave of viral hand-raising to showcase the pervasiveness of sexual harassment transnationally: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet." However, at the same time as the initial tweet recognised networked viral justice possibilities, the initial #MeToo tweet and much that followed became mired in formal law talk because 'sexual harassment' and 'sexual abuse' are legally defined terms (Wexler 2019). Formal and informal justice frameworks are entwined in much of the #MeToo discourse, which simultaneously disavows legal frameworks and reinforces them (Cossman 2021). The entanglement of formal criminal law frameworks and informal justice frameworks is much in evidence in mainstream media coverage (Boyle 2019; Lindqvist and Ganetz 2020). The established media provided ample space for #MeToo testimonies to be heard outside the legal terrain, in particular in Sweden, as I will show. On the other hand, the established media also keenly reported high-profile criminal proceedings related to #MeToo and the conviction of Harvey Weinstein was lauded with the words "this is what justice looks like" (Ransom 2020, np).

This article traces #MeToo activists' engagement with the quest for both formal and informal justice. My aim is to track the oscillating justice frameworks around #MeToo and seek to understand them by unpacking experiential narratives of justice-seeking a few years after the eruption of the #MeToo moment. Thus, I seek to capture participants' retrospective thoughts on the justice window that emerged during the eruption, heyday, and aftermath of the movement. The #MeToo activism in focus here consists of the Swedish #MeToo sub-campaigns organised in relation to profession, henceforth referred to as petitions.<sup>1</sup> In-depth interviews with 15 #MeToo activists belonging to different professional petitions form the material for this article. On the whole, for the research participants #MeToo surfaced as a justice window participants could not but open.<sup>2</sup> Most participants had previously disclosed experiences of sexual harm in other contexts, and most had repeated experiences of having their

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Swedish to English have been made by the article's author. The choice to use the word 'petitions' for the Swedish 'upprop' was particularly difficult because the English word 'petition' is not an exact equivalent. However, the English 'petition' has frequently been used in translated #MeToo research (for instance, Hansson et al. 2020). Petition is the word used to designate both the work-sector #MeToo movements that usually used Facebook and Instagram to collect stories and gather signatures and work towards change in their professions, and to signify the sub-campaigns' mission texts that were published in newspaper and work-sector journals and were subsequently used to address politicians and state agencies. 'Upprop' is a specific term that is used in Swedish to designate a signed text document calling attention to a societal problem addressed to a state agency and the general public.

<sup>2</sup> Several participants used the double negative "cannot not join" to describe their decision to become active in #MeToo. In *Complaint*, Sarah Ahmed similarly highlights the recurrence of the double negative in the decision-making process involved in making an official complaint. In Ahmed's words, complaint

reporting of harm dismissed. Hence, their justice-seeking did not begin with #MeToo. I analytically frame their justice-seeking activities as strategically pragmatic in the sense that they emerge in a specific rhetorical moment in which participants assessed what kind of demands and narratives of harm could be publicly recognised and heard *at this particular juncture* of heightened visibility. I will show how the search for justice is pragmatic in the sense that it is situation bound and plural, with formal and informal elements entangled.

The article is structured as follows: I begin by situating the notion of pragmatic justice theoretically. Subsequently, I provide a contextual background to the evolution of #MeToo in Sweden. Feminist digital activism against sexual violence did not begin with #MeToo. It is imperative to grasp local contexts (legal regulations, state policies on equality, histories of feminist activism) in order to understand how #MeToo activism played out on a local scale. Next, I delineate my material and methods. Finally, I turn to the empirical material and my analytical discussion.

## Parameters of Justice and Situated Rhetorical Action

Theoretically, I situate pragmatic justice seeking in relation to feminist victim-centered understandings of justice (Herman 2005; Jülich 2006, Fileborn 2017; McGlynn and Westmarland 2019, Antonsdottir 2020), epistemic (in)justice paradigms focusing on hermeneutical and testimonial injustices in communicative situations (Fricker 2007; Medina 2013; Gilmore 2017, 2019, 2023; Alcoff 2018), and rhetorical genres studies (Bitzer 1968; Miller 1984; Miller and Devitt 2019). This combination of theoretical fields offers a framework to understand the situated acts of justice seeking at the #MeToo moment.

Justice, in the context of sexual harm and many other offences, is often framed as a linear, culminating in an outcome reached through formally orchestrated steps involving the police and the courts (McGlynn and Westmarland 2019). To hark back to the prosecutor in the Weinstein case who proclaimed that justice had been achieved at the announcement of the guilty verdict (Ransom 2020). However, during the last decades three paradigms of thought, not always distinct, have decentralised criminal law in relation to justice: restorative justice, transformative justice, victim-centered justice (Daly 2011; Antonsdottir 2020). This paper engages mainly with feminist delineations of victim-centered justice, which are often in dialogue with transformative justice principles in their focus on injustice on a structural level, Feminist scholars have turned to lived experiences of sexual violence to build conceptual frameworks of justice with the victim-survivors' conceptualisations as a starting point (Herman 2005; Jülich 2006; Fileborn 2017; McGlynn and Westmarland 2019). In these studies, re-occurring themes emerge with justice interests and justice needs that have not been met by the formal legal system: for instance, recognition as justice, voice as justice, prevention as justice, connectedness as justice. Further, McGlynn and Westmarland veer away from notions of justice as linear by introducing the concept of

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emerges as "saying no to not doing nothing. Doing nothing about 'something that was so wrong' is to let the wrong happen" (2021, 163).

kaleidoscopic justice, “a continually shifting pattern, constantly refracted through new circumstances and understandings. . . . Justice is a lived, ongoing and ever-evolving experience and process, rather than an ending or result” (186). The image of the children’s mirror tube toy illustrates how a specific rotation creates a certain pattern. Victim-survivors may have many different justice interests over time, yet one or a few are focalised at a specific time and place. As I will shortly discuss, my material resonates with the concept kaleidoscopic justice partly by the justice themes brought forward by the research participants. Yet, more fundamentally, my findings resonate with the concept in the ways in which the acts of justice-seeking are both iterative and contextually changing. Participants have broken the silence about sexual harm in various contexts prior to with little effect. However, with #MeToo the possibility to speak and be heard shifted. “#MeToo forced a new hearing,” as autobiography scholar Leigh Gilmore observes (2023, 2). It is the circumstances of justice seeking that shifts with #MeToo, the silence has previously been broken.

For decades, sexual violence scholars have shown how survivors’ witness reporting are tainted by disbelief and controlling images of whom constitutes a proper victim (Mardorossian 2014; Gilmore 2017; Alcoff 2018, 2023; Serisier 2018). Who can speak authoritatively about sexual violence in the public sphere? Who can theorise about sexual violence? Fricker’s broad philosophical delineation of testimonial injustice accounts for how prejudices (regarding class, race, gender, etc.) delegitimise some speakers as knowledge producers. Her core question is: who is recognised as a knowledge producer, what counts as knowledge, and who is granted the capacity to convey knowledge? Fricker’s (2007) term “hermeneutical injustice” captures how subjects and groups have not been recognised in their capacity as knowers and theorists. As will be discussed in the empirical section, the #MeToo moment formed a window for participants to convey knowledge about sexual violence strategically to a broad audience.

Many #MeToo commentators have detractively referred to #MeToo as a moment rather than a movement to condescendingly signal its fleeting character. Others have framed #MeToo as moment among others where feminist concerns momentarily and intensively reach mainstream media (Banet-Weiser 2018; Cossman 2021). Here, I invoke the #MeToo *moment* as a heuristic device to understand sexual violence narration and justice-seeking in a specific rhetorical situation, a specific kaleidoscopic rotation where some particular justice interest(s) can be brought to the fore. Etymologically, pragmatism derives from the Greek word *pragma*, action. “A work of rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task” as rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer states (1968, 196). In rhetorical genre studies (Bitzer 1968; Miller 1984; Miller and Devitt 2019, and see also Alcoff 2018), *storytelling* is brought to the fore, the social and contextual ground for speech as action.

## The Swedish #MeToo Context

The #MeToo moment constituted a transnational feminist ‘flashpoint’, bringing sexual harm into the mainstream limelight (Cossman 2021). #MeToo was transnational in that the hashtag had come into usage in 85 countries within just a few days of the initial celebrity tweet (Fileborn and Loney Howes 2019a, b; Cossman 2021). This transnationality notwithstanding, the #MeToo movement played out in various ways internationally and was not uniform on the national scale.

Nevertheless, there are national Swedish contexts that provide important points of reference for understanding the contours and complexities of #MeToo activism nationally: the evolution of work-sector #MeToo petitions, the discourse of Swedish exceptionalism in relation to gender equality, and the landscape of previous campaigns against sexual violence and their relation to legal solutions.

### Work Sector #MeToo Petitions

When #MeToo first emerged in mainstream Swedish media in mid-October 2017, it focused on processes of individual naming and shaming in relation to celebrities (the TV host, the comedian, the arts profile). Yet, within weeks, work-sector #MeToo petitions dominated the media landscape (Pollack 2018; Askanius and Hartley 2019; Hansson et al. 2020; Lindqvist and Ganetz 2020). In early November 2017, the first work-sector petition, the actors’ petition #tystnadtagning/#silencerecording, was published in *Svenska Dagbladet*, a major Swedish morning paper. The actors were soon followed by opera and concert singers, the legal profession, the music industry, politicians, the tech industry, university employees, professionals in the Swedish church, journalists, and restaurant workers just to list the first 10 out of 76 petitions in total, of which 57 were published in the print press. This collective, industry-based organising around sexual harassment in the workplace sets Sweden apart from other ways in which #MeToo played out globally (Hansson et al. 2020). #MeToo in Sweden was able to latch onto historically well-established structures of collective organising, and union organising in particular (Sveriges Television 2021). Further Swedish equality policy and discourse has historically centred on working life (Martinsson et al. 2016).

Many petitions were published in the two major national newspapers in Sweden and in the national evening press, while a smaller number were published in the regional press and industry-specific journals. Prior to publication, these petitions had evolved on social media platforms, most commonly in closed Facebook groups, with administrators making sure that the witness narratives and comments were anonymous. Many of the participants whom I interviewed distanced themselves from the media image of #MeToo by emphasising that the work-sector petitions concern regular people, not celebrities, and that anonymity regarding both participants and perpetrators is a given point of departure and actively maintained by group administrators.

### Swedish Equality Discourse

Sweden has both a national self-image and an international reputation as a strong welfare state with progressive equality and anti-discrimination politics and legisla-

tion (Martinsson et al. 2016). The stronghold that #MeToo quickly established, and the widespread nature of the problem illuminated by the many work-sector petitions have deeply troubled this national self-image. The onslaught of the movement confused the large segments of the population who deemed Sweden to be a nation in which gender equality has been achieved, while providing some affirmation for the large segments of the population who have lived experience of sexual harassment and violence. The notion that gender equality has been achieved “recreates a hierarchical order between an imagined modern, highly developed ‘we’ and a less developed ‘other’” (Martinsson et al. 2016, 6). #MeToo disturbed this image by pointing, not to the other, but to injuries and inequalities amongst the national ‘we’. Acknowledging and reporting sexual abuse within a national discursive context where gender equality is deemed to have been achieved is loaded with shame, which the #MeToo movement eased. In the same breath, #MeToo, as a predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgendered movement, obscured power relations based on sexuality, race, and class (Hemmings 2018; Hsu 2019; Phipps 2021).

### **#MeToo in Relation to Previous Swedish Digital Campaigns Against Sexual Violence and Legal Talk**

Specifically in the USA, but also in other anglophone nations and to a lesser extent in Sweden, a major strand of feminist #MeToo critique has framed #MeToo as part of a feminist zeitgeist searching for legal solutions to structural problems and inequality (Aliko 2018; Katzin 2018; Gruber 2020). In Sweden, #MeToo coincided with a legal reform concerning rape that had been in progress for years prior to #MeToo. In July 2018, a consent-based rape provision came into effect. Previously, force had been required for an act to constitute rape (Andersson and Wegerstad forthcoming 2024). The new law had been in progress for years but was probably speeded up politically by the #MeToo movement in the late autumn of 2017.

Prior to #MeToo, several digital campaigns had mobilised against sexual violence in different ways (#prataomdet/talkaboutit (2010), #fatta/getit (2013), #mörkertalet/underreported (2013). All of these were initiated as reactions to highly mediated rape cases that had not led to convictions (Karlsson 2019). These campaigns started out from a punitive logic; campaigners were furious about the law’s incapacity to recognise sexual violations or measure appropriate consequences for them. Even though the starting point for these campaigns was punitive, they did not call for more severe punishment or further criminalisation. Rather, in a consciousness-raising manner, #prataomdet explored spaces between consent and coercion (Karlsson 2019), a discussion that was somewhat removed from legal provisions and more concerned with structural effects on the psyche. #Fatta, however, explicitly mobilised for a consent-based law and broader structural changes. The aim of #fatta was not further criminalisation, but a more appropriate rape law (Wegerstad 2021). Meanwhile, #mörkertalet showcased sexual assault cases not reported to the police. Åsa, a research participant, compared #MeToo to the #Fatta campaign with these words:

When it came to #fatta/get it, they had a clear goal and purpose. There the goal was to change a particular law. And they sort of went all out for that and it came

through. Here [#MeToo], we sort of deal with everything and all the gendered structures, and where to begin?

Åsa recognised that the broad scope of sexism and sexual violence highlighted by the petition does not quite resonate with legal parameters. In this way, the movement built on a well-established feminist understanding of gendered violence as existing along a continuum, a framework initially established by Liz Kelly in the late 1980s (Kelly 1988). This concept suggests that various forms of gender-based violence are interlinked structurally and allows us to speak of a wide range of sexist/sexual abuse under one umbrella. During the last two decades, this understanding, which encapsulates actions that are not necessarily physically coerced, has become a widely accepted understanding of sexual violence, and is used, for instance, by the WHO (World Health Organisation 2022). Yet, despite its being a broadly accepted understanding of sexual violence, Wegerstad has recently pointed out that continuum thinking is somewhat incompatible with criminal law and punitive ambitions because it links events that cannot be readily distinguished or hierarchised (Wegerstad 2021). As will soon be explicated in the empirical section, research participants seek recognition of a sexual violence continuum by the public at large and broad recognition of harm in the courts. Yet, there is no call for further and broader criminalization as could emerge from continuum thinking.

## Materials and Methods

As already established, this article is based on qualitative research that begins with the question: what does justice look like for #MeToo participants? What justice opportunities emerge through the #MeToo moment? Interviews with activists form the primary data, but this paper is part of a larger research project on #MeToo and the mainstream media discourse, and petitions also form part of the larger research corpus.<sup>3</sup>

Interviews were conducted in 2020 with 15 #MeToo petition participants in large cities in various parts of Sweden. I employed a semi-structured interview framework to create a focused yet dialogical and conversational exchange about their experiences of #MeToo activism. In the main, these in-depth interviews lasted for about ninety minutes, with the longest being over two hours and a few just short of an hour. Some of the questions were general and covered the informants' participation in the movement, why and how they decided to engage initially and what their engagement looked like over time, and the outcomes they sought initially and perceived two years after the most active days of the movement. The rest were more focused on participants' descriptions of disclosing experiences of sexual harm in various contexts, including #MeToo. The interviews were conducted in person until the outbreak of the

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<sup>3</sup> The research project is entitled: "The #MeToo momentum and its aftermath: digital justice seeking and societal and legal responses" and is funded by MMW, the Marianne and Marcus Wallenberg Foundation. Ulrika Andersson, professor of Criminal Law at the Faculty of Law, Lund University, is the principal investigator.



Covid-19 pandemic, in mid-March 2020, when they moved to Zoom. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in three major cities in Sweden; the locations for the interviews were chosen by the participants and consisted of various coffee shops and restaurants close to their workplaces.

The criterion for participation in the research project was to be a #MeToo petition participant. This is a broad criterion and could encompass a practitioner who had merely signed a petition or contributed with a brief witness account, as well as individuals who had been involved with setting up the petition initially or administering it over time. The breadth of this criterion was chosen deliberately to secure a broad range of perspectives and acknowledges that activism takes many forms. The initial contacts were formed in late 2019 and 2020, mostly by me contacting a campaign administrator, who subsequently posted information about the project in a still active or semi-active Facebook #MeToo petition group or spread the word through networks, orally and via email. As the fieldwork took place two years after the movement's most active phase, the research participants had, in the main, been highly involved in the movement as administrators and initiators or had performed other tasks for the petition. Only two had only participated with a witness narrative. Thus, the level of longitudinal engagement and activism in my sample is very high and could not be considered representative of #MeToo participation across the board. As my interest was not in any specific profession, research participants were involved with different professional petitions, some of the highly mediated variety with numerous members, while others are less well known with smaller numbers of participants. The 15 interviewees stem from seven different petitions in total. To maintain the anonymity of the research participants, I will not disclose the names of the petitions. The research participants are presented using pseudonyms.

All but one of the participants identified as feminists prior to #MeToo, all were female identified and white, middle-class professionals, ranging in age from early 30s to early 60s. None of the participants had previously been engaged in the digital campaigns against sexual violence that preceded #MeToo in Sweden (#prataomdet/talkaboutit, #fatta/#getit, #mörkertalet/theunreported, to name a few). The majority, but not all, contributed to #MeToo by bearing witness to one or several experiences along a sexual violence continuum. Almost all had previously disclosed experiences of sexual harm to friends and family, half of the participants had previously reported personal experiences of harassment within an organisation, and two had experiences of reporting to the police. Three participants had previously left their workplaces due to personally experienced harassment. Their ability to exit the workplace attests to a degree of labour-market security.

As shown, the participants tick the boxes of white, middle-class urban professionals with post-secondary education, and most of them identify as heterosexual. In this way, they appear representative of #MeToo as a predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual, and cisgendered movement. Gender and power, not sexuality, not class, not race, take the foreground. Shared gender identity and profession form the basis for this collective organising. The participants could be said to be representative of prominent #MeToo activism in Sweden yet could not be said to be representative of victims of sexual violence in general. They embody the privilege that many feminist scholars (Hemmings 2018; Hsu 2019; Phipps 2021) have argued limits the vision



of #MeToo and excludes non-whites, trans\*, and the working class from struggles against sexual violence and, more fundamentally, from defining what such a struggle entails.

There has been a to-and-fro movement between the empirical material and theoretical frameworks. The empirical material, based on interviews with feminist activists, is itself theoretical as several participants theorised and built upon theory to understand sexual violence and what justice could be. After transcription, the interviews were read individually several times before the process of coding and generating themes in line with reflexive thematic analysis began (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019).

### **The Justice Window of #MeToo: A Moment to Educate the Public**

#MeToo participation did not surface as the starting point for justice-seeking for most participants. Neither justice-seeking nor injustice was described as a one-off occurrence. Their first encounter with the emerging movement in mid-autumn of 2017 was often described as a particular collective justice opportunity, and the most prominent justice seeking theme that emerged revolves around the possibility of being heard *this time*. Research participants conveyed the epistemological need and often expressed a moral obligation to strategically and pragmatically seize this opportunity and communicate experiential knowledge about what sexual harassment is, and to convey to the public that sexual harm exists. They further convey how they as privileged white professionals with some security in the labour market have a structural chance of being heard this time, even if they, as will soon be discussed in the following section, have had their witness accounts neglected in other contexts. The discursive norms of gender equality render these voices hearable, yet at the same time the research participants illustrate how their previous acts of witnessing have largely been ignored. Speaking two years after the heyday of the movement, a participant reflects on who spoke and who was heard at the moment of #MeToo in Sweden:

It was mostly white. Perhaps from the upper middle class, from Stock... , from the major cities. I only generalise, I haven't made a fact check, [but that] was my experience. And it was also those who were heard in the public debate, absolutely.

Participants often referred to the purpose of the petition as simply being in line with the original #MeToo formulation, speaking out of one's own experiences along a sexual harm continuum to make visible the extent of the problem, to connect their individual experiences to the structure. Many spoke of the moment when the movement erupted as a moment when they needed to reassess the conditions of speaking out and being heard. As one participant explained: "You wake up in a way. Your whole body wakes up, your mind, the tentacles are out there, what's happening, what goes on, *how do other people receive this?*" (my emphasis).

Participants convey how the rhetorical occasion of #MeToo affected both what they could tell, how they can tell it, to whom and why. They often spoke of their contributions to #MeToo as providing examples, not as telling their 'one' story. Let

us have a closer look at Lisa's account of how she carefully premediated her #MeToo witness account(s).

[The phrase] #MeToo is distanced in a way. In part because it's in English and in part because it's a phrase that people copy and paste and post on social media... The more I can make this personal so that people see that it doesn't have to be a rape or unwanted touching. ... Things that, for various reasons, one has felt were not big enough to warrant telling, but in a context like this it is worth sharing because it will be received as an assault, just smaller in kind. I exemplified with five or six incidents that I'd been exposed to. I had a pretty clear plan with the stories I chose to share. I wanted to provide sort of a range. Because often there is an image of sexual violence or patriarchal violence which appears in a certain way. And then I was interested in showing that violence has many expressions. So it was very thought through.

Lisa explains how the context of #MeToo enables her to speak of incidents that she had previously deemed "not big enough to warrant telling." Continuum thinking permeates the witness accounts. The #MeToo moment thus provides a rhetorical situation where narratives along a wide sexual violence span are invited and under this umbrella, concisely narrated examples estimated to be read within a changing interpretive framework as sexual assault and would contribute to shedding light on the bigger picture. Thus, #MeToo broadened the sexual assault 'speak-out genre'. For decades, the dominant framework of sexual harm narration has largely been premised on one traumatic event and therapeutic discourse (Alcoff 2018; Serisier 2018). #MeToo narratives do vary in format and length, but as Sofia Wanström argues in her dissertation on #MeToo in Finland, the rhetorical device of experience-stringing, the lining up of various examples of experienced sexual violence is a prominent mode of narration. The linking of various experiences, or in Wanström's words, "experience-stringing," "becomes a means of conveying a more complex view of sexual violence by allowing a variety of experiences to be presented" (Wanström 2023, 163). Lisa explicitly states she wants the examples she chooses to share to speak back to stereotypical notions of what sexual violence entails. Lisa shows how her #MeToo speech act is planned and deliberate. She displays how she has assessed the conditions of speaking and what she prioritises to get across, how and why. Lisa described her motivation to speak out under the #MeToo umbrella as pedagogical, aimed at the public at large, so that "people see that it doesn't have to be a rape or unwanted touching".

The first location for witness accounts is mostly the closed work-sector Facebook groups, but inherent in the contract of speaking out is the understanding that the narrative will be also used in other, more public #MeToo fora, to place demands on the receiver, but also to convey lived knowledge of the problem. In my previous research on the 2010 digital campaign #prataomdet, which focused on the grey zones between coercion and consent, participants spoke emphatically about the learning process involved in seeing one's own story of a difficult sexual situation side by side with others' stories and observing it with structural eyes (Karlsson 2019). However, learning and exploration do not surface as active terms in relation to #MeToo activism.

With frank laughter, one organiser responded to the question about her learning: “No, then I would be making things up.” Rather, the consciousness-raising project within #MeToo appears to be largely directed towards the broad public in an educational effort to stimulate social change. With its emphasis on making the extent of sexual harm visible and teaching the broad public, the justice framework that emerges is very much in line with overarching transformative justice principles, which broadly declare scepticism towards individualising interpersonal victim/offender justice parameters as well as carceral justice provided through the state. Rather, justice opportunities arise through education, prevention, and other approaches to social change (see Daly 2011; Antonsdottir 2020). Scholars of sexual violence have shown how the very act of narration, storytelling, is crucial to victim-survivors themselves becoming theorists of their own experiences (Mardorossian 2014; Alcoff 2018). Lisa clearly shows how her deliberate choices of examples are theoretically driven. Yet Lisa’s reflection also shows how the act of narration at this moment is pragmatic and strategic. Not only does she theorise sexual violence, but her narrative act involves disseminating knowledge strategically, expanding the notion of what sexual violence is to a broad audience.

### **Experiences of Communicative Injustice**

The narratives of previous reporting communicate closely with the concept of kaleidoscopic justice, partly by the justice interests brought forward but also by the way in which they illuminate how different contextual prisms give priority to different acts of justice seeking and different possibilities of being heard this time. All but two interviewees recounted previous instances of disclosure that had not received a fair hearing from either friends and family (very few), organisations (almost all), or the police/in court (a small number). A considerable fraction of the interviews became devoted to earlier experiences of injustice during previous instances of speaking out. Some spoke of disclosing incidents soon after they had occurred, but most spoke of carrying the event by themselves for a very long time before reporting. The time lapse between the most recent incident and the most recent act of disclosing varied considerably among the participants. They showed how their complaints had been told iteratively and had biographies (Ahmed 2021). They showed how breaking the silence by speaking out does not necessarily equate to being listened to. Many spoke of instances of reporting in the workplace where their words “fell flat”, as Erika described the speech act experience. Their experiences of various instances in which their reporting fell flat make them keenly assess the pragmatic possibilities of being heard this time.

Having a voice emerges as central in most victim-centred justice paradigms (Herman 2005; Jülich 2006; Daly 2011; McGlynn and Westmarland 2019). Having a voice is connected to processes of listening, acknowledgment, and recognition: or uptake (Ailwood et al. 2023). It concerns both a concrete speech situation and, more completely and abstractly, “having a stake in democratic life” (Kay 2020, 15). As already suggested, the moment/movement hope that propels activism here is closely connected to an estimation of the possibility that, at this point, a broad audience

might adequately recognize the harm, and this hope is grounded in experiences of testimonial injustice. Recognition, as McGlynn and Westmarland write:

encompasses the significance of the experience being acknowledged, of its power and importance for the victim-survivor and in society more generally. Fundamental is the recognition not just of the significance of this experience, but of the significance of the victim-survivor him-herself. (2019, 188)

Anna's accounts of speaking out in relation to #MeToo and previous instances of speaking out about her experience of sexual harassment in a workplace she subsequently left demonstrates how the search for recognition and acknowledgment changes over time. Some years prior to #MeToo, she had reported sexual harassment at the workplace soon after the incidents occurred. "*In the situation*, I sought someone to take me seriously and see how grave the situation was and take it seriously." As the quote illustrates, at the first time of reporting in the workplace, she expected to be heard and have herself and her complaint taken seriously. Reporting, especially to the police but also in the workplace, has become culturally dominant in Sweden and the Nordic region more generally (Hansen et al. 2021). This framework instructs victim-survivors to report for prevention in the future. Having her credibility questioned within the organisation involved testimonial injustice that Anna had not anticipated. The handling of the situation by the organisation conflicted with her own understanding of her subject position and her expectation of the organisation's willingness to recognise the harm and make amends. At the time of #MeToo, Anna was looking for societal recognition more broadly because the organisation had already been tried and failed and she had moved on to a new workplace.

After I quit, others decided to step forward. And *then* the person was organisationally relocated. ...So. I harboured so much anger. I left a job I loved. When you don't get heard, it affects you so much. It affected me enormously. I noticed that I changed in who I was... Especially when you have an image of yourself as firm and self-secure and ready to take a stance, you notice how something happens to you when you're in a vulnerable position. And then not having your organisation with you.

As telling/reporting is part of the dominant moral discourse about what one should do as a victim of sexual harassment in Sweden, not being heard and not being perceived as credible is particularly damaging. Anna was one of the interviewees for whom bearing witness under the banner of #MeToo was not of utmost importance for herself at this time in her life, having previously reported within her work organisation and in various ways processed the harassment and the lack of organisational response over some years. She described her decision to bear witness in the petition as an act of solidarity and responsibility. Yet, with dry laughter, she pointed out that, even though her story was anonymous, her signature was on the petition, and she relayed mixed emotions as she worried a little that her participation might cause future career problems. Yet, she continued that, at the same time "it also felt good that he would see my name."

Recognition can also entail a response from the offender as many victim-centred justice paradigms have pointed to (McGlynn and Westmarland 2019, Daly 2011). Many did see recognition by the offender himself of the harm done as very much desired, yet most saw it as implausible. Veronica spoke of validation from the offender as inconceivable and simple at the same time. She had left her job ten years previously after reporting multiple incidents of abuse from a colleague in a superior position and finding little support from either the organisation or the union. Eventually, she was offered financial compensation and left the organisation. She said:

Well, it would be very easy. It's just for him to come and ask me: how did you experience this? And then I would say how I experienced it, and then he would be able to say "that was never my intention. But since this is how you experienced it; I need to ask for forgiveness." Or something... That's how bloody simple it is.

Because many interviewees had repeated experiences of disclosing and being met by questioning and belittling of the event and themselves, offering affirming solidarity to others who were perhaps narrating for the first time surfaced as central to their #MeToo activism. Maude explained the safety net provided by the petition community, and simultaneously gave an image of the unclear and hazardous landscape in which one speaks under the banner of #MeToo.

You're sort of jumping out of a plane because you don't know what the reactions will be like. Someone sits at home and writes, perhaps for the first time in their life, about an event that has shaped their life and that is intimately connected to shame and everything else that these sexual assaults comprise. And then you see someone jump out of that plane, just off they go, and there we were at the receiving end.

Among the participants with administrative responsibilities, dignity emerged as a key word in their handling and reception of the story. The organisers behind one of the petitions had developed ethical guidelines to handle the onslaught of stories and media attention. One of them was dignity: "to treat the stories and material with dignity. ... This pre-empted the option to send it all to *Aftonbladet* [an evening newspaper] and hope for the best." Dignity in relation to the handling of stories emerged as a justice theme because the injustices primarily narrated referred to previous injustices involved with telling, which sometimes almost overshadowed the experiences of sexual harassment/violence.

Even though many participants had disclosed their experiences of violence several times across the course of many years, they viewed each instance with different kinds of addressees as involving risks. Most had lived experience of the damage that reporting sexual harassment had done to their careers and wanted others to assess the risks of participating. Most said that signing the #MeToo petition involves taking a risk in the job market and predominantly within their current organisation. Lotta said about disclosing: "Well, breaking the silence is not generally something that pays off. On

the contrary, it's like, why are you creating this weird atmosphere? Everything was fine here before.”

One pattern that emerged was that those who had reported repeatedly, both within their organisation and to the police, and sometimes further on in the criminal justice system as their case had been brought to court, were the ones who expressed the greatest urgency to get their story across fully this time. They did not see the #MeToo witnessing act as one of just providing lived examples. Here, #MeToo emerges as the final tangible window that remained open for their specific story to be heard. For them, reporting within their organisation and to the police had involved losing authority over their story as it was framed and reframed at various organisational levels. Here, my material resonates strongly with experiences of organisational reporting highlighted in Sara Ahmed's *Complaint*: “Making a complaint can feel like becoming a character in somebody else's story; what happens to you is dependent on decisions that are made without your knowledge or consent” (2021, 44). Monica spoke of #MeToo as a chance for her story to exist “at last”. She had run the full gamut of reporting, both within her organisation and in the criminal justice system, and her case did not lead to a conviction. A verdict, she said, is a concise document “that provides so much information to others in a way. Now, it's a wound I will always carry.” Criminal legal justice, she said, annulled her story and misframed her, and now the legal pathway to justice had been closed.

It felt as though this Facebook petition group was going to close at any moment. And I thought: Now. Just now. Perhaps it will close tomorrow. Or something. This is when I have a chance to say the most important parts. And then I thought: What is it I really want to say? And then, well, I listed some bullet points... And then I wrote the text. And I felt that when you read it you will believe me. And then I posted it. Around midnight. And then in the morning a lot of comments and hearts had come in and also longer responses. And that was fantastic. And nobody questioned anything in that text. I could see that there had been a... [shift]. It was as though, now, it existed.

Interpersonal recognition between one speaker and a bounded set of listeners, as in a closed Facebook group (which can sometimes be quite large and have thousands of members), does not overall come across as a justice-seeking focal point for the participants. In the main, the justice seeking is directed towards illuminating the public about the nature and scope of the problem. Yet, Veronica, in an interview two and a half years after the first #MeToo petition speech act, remembered the exact time of day at which she posted and the time at which the first responses came in and how she felt when she saw that both she and the account were believable, that she was received as a credible witness. “A credible witness is one who *can* be believed, not one who must be believed”, as Leigh Gilmore states (2023, 6). Even though the Facebook petition group is not the final destination of the account, it is a crucial first step and considered to be a safe forum for #MeToo participants, many of whom have ample experience of their stories being questioned and changed during previous instances of telling.

## The Lingering Symbolic Promise of the Law

The few participants who had reported to the police did not see the criminal justice system as being able to provide justice in any individual case. Their motivation for reporting was often morally grounded and presented as a necessary step towards prevention and social change. As Monica said: “I would never advise anyone to report. Never ever.... Everybody says, ‘go report’, but really, what happens next? You need to do it for the society and for women, but it’s awful.” Similarly, Helena stated:

Well, intellectually one sort of knows that, even if you were to report to the police, it wouldn’t lead anywhere. And that road towards reparation isn’t open to most. And it might not even be desirable to walk that road, considering the structure of society and knowledge of how the court system functions. So I almost advise against reporting.

Reporting emerges as a dominant and morally loaded cultural imperative. Helena ‘almost’ (but not quite) advised against taking the incident to the police (see also Hansen et al. 2021). In a sense, the act of reporting to the police serves a similar purpose as bearing witness under the #MeToo umbrella: making visible the pervasiveness of sexual violence: “You need to do it for society and for women”, to reiterate Monica’s words.

Reporting to the police becomes part of the visibility project of showcasing numbers and correcting the dark figures in sexual assault reporting. The overarching interest in justice in relation to formal law reads as a need for societal recognition and acknowledgement, with the court figuring as a metonym for society. The criminal court surfaces as perhaps the most important audience and has the capacity to authorise (or de-authorise) both claimants and claims. Monica stated: “To me, he could have left the court completely free if a just society had said, ‘yes, we see that he’s done this’.” Helena described the response she desired in the following words: “Your reaction and your feelings are completely normal in light of the abnormal and terrible stuff that’s happened to you.” Thus, the participants with experience of the criminal justice process did not link the promise of justice made by the criminal justice system to consequences or retribution.

Similarly, the many participants who did not have experience of engaging with criminal law, but rather with labour law regulations, did not envision the law as providing justice in any individual case. In fact, justice notions of consequences for the offender, either legal or extra legal, were very rarely mentioned. Many suspected that a lot of the incidents along the broad #MeToo continuum of violence spectrum would not be handled by the law. “Of the examples I provided, nothing would be punishable”, Lisa said. Importantly, none of the participants expressed a desire for further criminalisation or longer sentences, although some did mention a general zeitgeist of further criminalisation. The law’s communicative dimension was repeatedly foregrounded. Helena, a petition administrator said:

I’m no proponent of more severe punishment... Well, there are so many who commit sexual crimes in varying... We don’t have [enough] prisons to put them



in. For me, this debate is how to change this. Make people realise that what they're doing is completely wrong. ... And that everybody has to get some kind of updated picture of what's right and wrong and what isn't bloody ok.

In several interviews, the newly established consent-based law (July 2018) on rape/sexual assault was not discussed as being a result of #MeToo, but as a 'parallel thread' that was speeded up politically because of the #MeToo movement. The promise of the norm-changing capacity of this legal change loomed large in most interviews. As Asa put it:

How we create laws and how we express ourselves in legal fora creates norms for how we look at things, and turning things around here, proving that there has been lack of consent rather than force; I think that's huge. Because it creates a different way of talking about this kind of violence.

As shown, the law emerges as multidimensional and, as such, its communicative and norm-steering values hold significant promise. Previous research has shown how disbelief in the promise of the law intersects with inequalities based on race, immigration status, sexuality, and gender identity (Spade 2015; Ray 2020). It is likely that the participants who were interviewed, white, middle-class, cis professionals, represented a cohort of sexual violence victims who are likely to have faith in the legal system and its improbability. The legal justice framework is mostly de-centered in the activism of the petition participants and not part of the pragmatic justice seeking of the moment, yet in most participants long term search for justice, the legal arena is a prominent parallel thread bound up with a search for recognition.

## Conclusion

A binary framework, with formal law on one side and viral community justice practices on the other, does not offer an understanding of the justice interests of #MeToo activists. A carceral framework, with punitive measures stemming either from the court of public opinion or the criminal court, is equally inadequate. Interviews with 15 activists involved with the industry-related #MeToo petitions in Sweden show that formal law and informal justice practices are entangled, and that the justice interests of activists span both. Continuum thinking is in evidence not only in relation to sexual violence, but also in relation to formal and informal pathways to justice. This paper shows how the search for justice is simultaneously continual and contextually shifting, in sum, kaleidoscopic. As the justice window of #MeToo opens, the justice seeking is tilted away from formal justice towards broader societal recognition of both the magnitude and nature of the problem, a largely educational pursuit. #MeToo activists spoke of justice-seeking as having been ongoing prior to #MeToo and pursued through various channels thus attesting to the kaleidoscopic nature of justice which undermines the binary formal/informal. Most research participants had ample experience of communicative injustice in previous formal reporting, and at the emergence of the #MeToo movement assessed that *at this moment* a broad audience

might finally be able to recognise reports of wide-ranging sexual harm. The search for justice in #MeToo is pragmatic in the sense that it is highly situated and strategic, it forms a social action. At once, victim-survivors strive to inform and educate a broad public about structural inequalities and sexual violence. The narrative activism here is both theoretical and strategic to achieve this largely pedagogical aim. Recognition of harm was sought in the extra-legal public sphere but was also desired and had been sought through application of the law, which mainly holds promise at a symbolic level. Retribution does not emerge from the interviews as a prominent justice interest, and, in terms of individual offences, the law was seen as unlikely to provide justice. Legal justice seeking was not prominent at the #MeToo moment but surfaced as a continual justice interest. The justice that was sought, both in the legal arena and the public sphere in general, was bound up with acknowledgment and validation at a structural level; to be heard and contribute to a broadened understanding of sexual violence at an abstract societal scale.

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