

Bullets versus Women's Voices: A Feminist Account of the Armed Conflict in Sudan

Zeinab Abbas Badawi¹



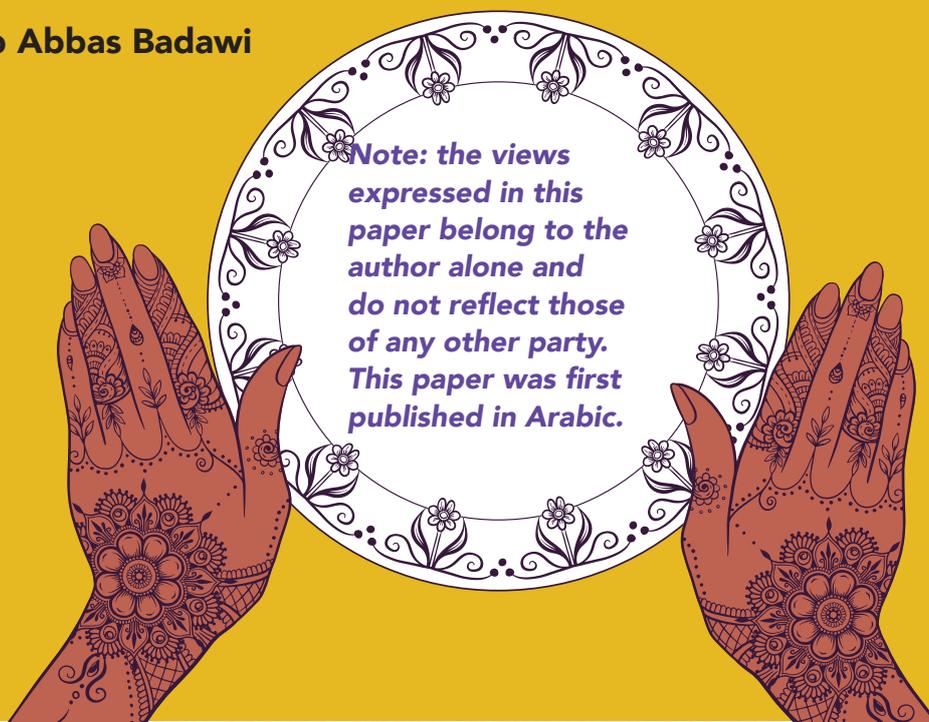
1 A writer and expert in the field of human rights and gender.

My legs were frozen as I felt a mixture of anger and sadness, my heart trembling with hesitation with each step I took as I left my small house in Khartoum five days after the conflict broke out in April 2023. My mind was a raging torrent of sorrow and despair; several times I nearly turned back, but how could I stay in a place where there was nothing but loud sounds of destruction, the stench of death and putridness of human flesh? Not a drop of water, no power to light a single lamp, and the constant fear lurking in a thousand different forms?

My eyes wandered over every corner of the house; the belongings I had amassed with love, sweat and care, my children's things lying scattered around in adorable chaos, my magical library that I assembled over many years and protected from the surveillance of the former regime, the photographs of my relatives, loved ones and friends staring back at me with confusion and pity. Everything there held me rooted to the spot, but how could I stay in a land of such devastation?

I gathered what was left of my composure, wrapped myself in a false semblance of calm and stepped out into the unknown. I left home with nowhere to go.

Zeinab Abbas Badawi



Note: the views expressed in this paper belong to the author alone and do not reflect those of any other party. This paper was first published in Arabic.

Introduction

Despite the magnitude of violations and galling experiences that women have been subjected to throughout the current armed conflict in Sudan, it is fair to say that women's experiences of this conflict have yet to be fully revealed and explored. Those few experiences that have been documented resemble a cinematic tragedy with events that nobody could imagine happening in real life – events that defy our ability to describe them. The women of Sudan possess millions of tales both short and long about the horrors of the conflict, and every woman bears her own personal saga.

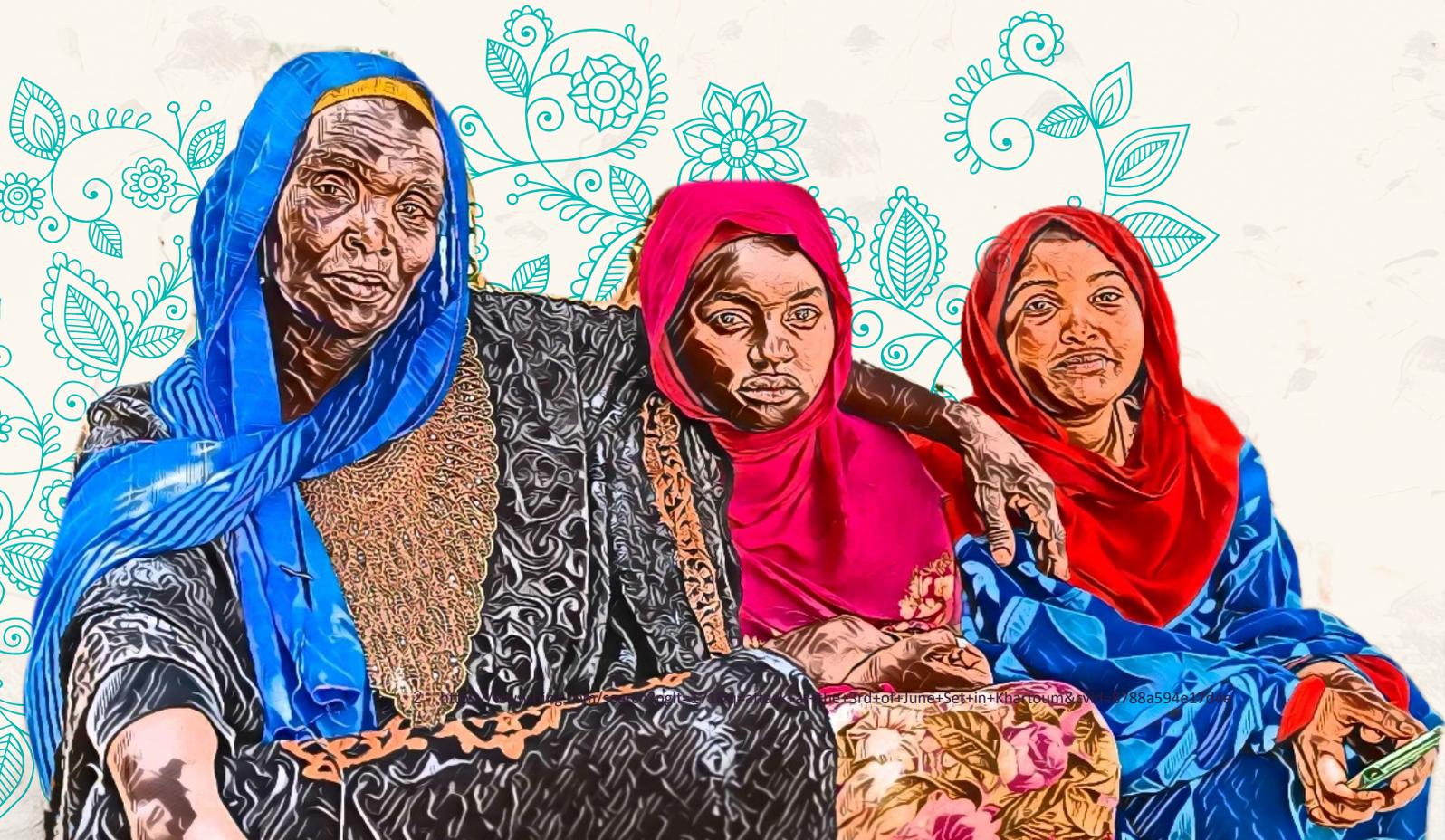
Violence and anguish continue to be a fact of everyday life in Sudan and have a strong presence in women's lives, though they may take different forms. But, ultimately women are facing the brunt of the conflict. There is the armed conflict in the literal sense and there is the war being fought on women's bodies: insidious acts of violence waged against women and fought over their bodies. These are the products of the pervasive systematic and structural oppression deeply embedded in the cultural, social, economic and political norms of Sudan.

In the name of freedom and social justice, Sudanese women played a central role in the revolution of December 2018 and the toppling of the previous autocratic political regime. Though women showed their ability to lead, and presented a model for how to achieve a new status quo, where equality and dignity could prevail, where discrimination could become a thing of the past, the transitional period devolved into a fierce, bloody armed conflict, where the ugliest kinds of crime and violation were committed and the Sudanese people's aspirations came under threat. The conflict has distorted the bid for the revolution and the transition.



It is very important to note that Sudanese Women's participation in the revolution was not a picnic. This participation was a breeding ground for ideological and social disputes. The demised regime accused women of immorality; and some women paid a high price as they were subjected to various forms of abuse and domestic violence. They were subjected to sexual violence during protests and the Khartoum Massacre, which occurred on 3 June 2019². In the transitional government, women were relegated to margins. Now, women are faced with a new chapter, which is harsher, more complex, and harder by far than what came before it, particularly with the spread of the conflict, the increasing complexity of its political and military layout and the clear manifestations of racial bias in the Darfur region.

This paper is not a report on violations of women's rights during the conflict, though such violations do feature in the context of its analysis. Rather, it aims to analyse the conflict from a feminist perspective, the various effects of the conflict, and how it will further entrench unequal power dynamics and gender relations for Sudanese women. It also sets its sights on a new horizon that goes beyond treating women as victims of the conflict who are only capable of morally denouncing and condemning structural violence, and instead views them as true actors who possess the ability, grit and will to take part in a new status quo in which women play leading roles and look beyond the conflict to address its structural causes through the illumination of their female insights and new working approaches.



Old Wine in New Bottles

The armed conflict which broke out in Sudan on the 15th of April 2023 between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) was not abrupt in any way. On the contrary, the likelihood of the situation deteriorating towards an inevitable perilous face-off in a country with two armies was something people of Sudan foresaw³.

Any attempt to attribute the conflict to a single cause, or to the specifics of the events which occurred in the days and weeks immediately preceding the outbreak of the conflict, or to characterise the conflict as a simple struggle between two military generals would be over-simplification. Particularly since the atmosphere of the conflict has revealed the dysfunctionality of the composition and structures of the state. These represent one of the main causes of the armed conflict, running much deeper than most observers and commentators realize. The fragility of the state's structure and the lack of rules for good governance increased its profound social and economic deficit, and exacerbated polarisation in circles of society. This led to institutional and societal collapse, and thence to the collapse of the wider regime of the Sudanese state.

The armed conflict in Sudan is not a surface-level dispute but stems from deeper issues within the state's governance and societal structures. The "dysfunctionality" of the state's composition and structures implies that there are fundamental flaws in how the government is organized and operates. These flaws include ineffective governance, corruption, lack of transparency, and systemic inequalities. These issues create a fertile ground for discontent and conflict, as they fail to address the needs and aspirations of the populace and have led to institutional collapse and ultimately, war.

The causes of the conflict are numerous and complex and have their roots in a lack of commitment to the rule of law and good governance. This led to distortions in the structure of the state, which then opened the door to forces with economic, political and ideological interests to gain power and influence over the state and national institutions.

The conflict also has roots in a long sequence of violent acts and wrongdoings inherent to economic, political and societal structures in our country, including political violence. The rise to power of most of the governments Sudan

3 https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86_2023



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has had, and the practices they employ to stay in power, have consistently been an entry point for violence, atrocities and crimes that affect citizens and the military alike. Some of those governments have been able to hold onto power for decades, but for this they have always depended on force, coercion and securitization. As such, repression has been an integral part of the way the ruling government operates. Therefore, the governance structure is based on the militarised political marketplace such that only men with guns access and stay in power

This comes as no surprise, since ideological and exclusive entities rather than inclusive national ones have dominated most of the governments. This includes dictatorial regimes that have catalysed conflicts and wars and dragged our country to the brink of violent extremism and terrorism, with the sole aim of staying in power. Most of these governments still resort to forceful means to re-assert their power over citizens and shut down any demands for accountability and transparency.

The conflict also has origins in tribal and communal violence: Sudan is among the most ethnically, culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse countries in the world.⁴ For example, though Arabic is widely spoken, Sudan has over 300 languages but ignoring or discounting this diversity has led to deep-seated tensions and conflicts, as different groups feel marginalized or excluded. Their association with characteristics of racial and cultural superiority have deepened the state of political, economic and societal marginalisation⁵ and resulted in conflicts and disputes⁶.

The uneven economic and population growth across regions in Sudan has also harmed crucial sectors like agriculture and livestock, worsened by water scarcity and climate change. These factors contribute to armed rebellions, civil conflicts, and mass displacement. The climate change-induced resource scarcity has disrupted livelihoods and fuelled migration, both within Sudan and across its borders, particularly into central Sudan

The structural drivers of these conflicts are still constantly present in Sudan. The main ones are: poverty⁷, marginalisation and a glaring disparity in living standards. It is no surprise that poverty should be so prevalent given that political power is inextricably linked with economic power under the monopoly of the ruling classes. These largely belong to certain ideological and political groups, as well as a few rich individuals who control the wealth of the country through trade or other economic avenues like agriculture and mining.

4 Alkhair, Mohammad. (2021). The politics of linguistic and cultural diversity management in Sudan.

5 <https://www.alhamish.com/%E2%80%8F%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B3-%D8%A3%D9%83%D8%AB%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86-160-%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%AB-%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A7-123-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%88/>

6 <http://www.sudanbaath.20m.com/diffunity.htm>

7 <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-64790515>



In addition to this, the weakness of state capacities and the spread of armed conflict has resulted in competitive economic interests into which the security and military sectors have extended their presence. Cronyism and the propagation of networks of nepotism⁸ provides a protective cover for massive interests external to the official economy of the state⁹. The outcome has been the widespread of corruption and an epidemic of theft of public property.

The causes of the conflict can also not be separated from the failure of successive regimes to deliver economic, societal and cultural rights. As well as their failure to protect the rights of the most vulnerable groups like women, children, the disabled, the aged and the displaced. On the contrary, in Sudan destruction of the social fabric is more prominent than ever before; the country has fractured along fault lines of ethnicity and tribe, humanity and dignity. The deterioration of political discourse into hate speech and crude incitements, led individuals to revert to essentialist identities and deep-seated divisions¹⁰.

“The Islamisation of Laws” in September 1983, and the imposition of these laws paved the way for fundamentalist groups to be inextricably linked to the circles of power and advance Political Islam.¹¹ These laws laid the foundations for extremism, terrorism and suppression of women’s rights.¹² Therefore, the current conflict is part of a long history of human rights violations and impunity, including crimes that are punishable under international law. Even though successive national constitutions have ratified documents on human rights at various levels, these constitutions have been rendered useless, as the rights and freedoms enshrined within them are suspended through the frequent declarations of state of emergency. Time and again, political interests have led to revolts against the constitution – including the revolt against the transitional constitution of 2019¹³.



8 <https://www.alhamish.com/%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AF-%D9%85.%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%87-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9>

9 <https://www.unicef.org/sudan/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%87-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9>

10 <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%89-/2727235>

11 Political Islam refers to a wide range of individuals or groups who advocate the formation of state and society according to their understanding of Islamic principles.

12 https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%86_%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%B1_1983%D9%85

13 <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b->

In recent times, the lack of extended consultations and the haste with which the 2019 constitutional document was drafted led to fundamental flaws and omissions in this document, which mentioned neither the subject of good governance nor the substantive amendments to state security and military institutions that should have been established early on to facilitate a democratic and just transition¹⁴.

The same applies to Sudan's commitments under international and regional conventions on human rights. Despite Sudan being party to a number of these, the implementation of the conventions is not afforded any importance and they remain a mere diplomatic commitment which is in practice only implemented to a minimal degree. It must also be pointed out that Sudan has still not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) or 2003 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa otherwise known as the Maputo Protocol.

The conflict is closely linked to the fact that, the political change after the December 2018 revolution brought to power political factions and political forces with different social, economic, political, and cultural interests. Some of these forces are not necessarily supportive of women or gender equality by virtue of their cultural, social, class and political background. Some of them also have close strategic ties with the old totalitarian regime; this has hampered the process of change for the interest of women liberty and gender equality. This means that the victory of the revolution 2018 was deliberately undermined, making it partial and easier to tear down.

The counter-revolution forces and Political Islam are also played a role obstructing the establishment of democratic state and citizenry in Sudan. These forces were particularly apprehensive of the power women demonstrated by rejecting the Political Islam agenda. The forces of political Islam were able to achieve their objectives because the revolutionaries overestimated the extent of their agency and downplayed the power of their adversaries - the deep state, the military, the political opposition movement against democratic transformation, and Political Islam.



14 <https://www.dabangasudan.org/ar/all-news/article/>

The Effect of the Conflict on Gender Relations

When the armed conflict broke out, more than 6 million people in Sudan were on the brink of famine, with 20.3 million (42% of the population) facing severe deprivation of food.¹⁵ As for gender equality, Sudan holds 129th place out of 147 states in the Gender Index.¹⁶ The gender gap is still apparent in all the vital sectors: health, education, information technology, communications, the professional world, political participation and so on.

The gender gap in Sudan is the result of structural barriers in the economic, social and political sector. Toxic social and cultural norms and teachings are upheld and perpetuate policies which are not gender sensitive and just. There is also an astounding lack of gender-sensitive statistics in Sudan, subsequently; it is hard to obtain precise information about the circumstances of women. What is clear is that women in Sudan still face deep-rooted discrimination within their communities, and this is a result of patriarchal norms and unequal and unfair dynamics.

There are no precise statistics on levels of poverty among women. The problem may lie not only with the lack of precision in these statistics, but also the failure to include and recognize women's contribution to the economy as carers, housewives or community support workers. Hence the economic value of work undertaken by women is unappreciated and their economic contribution to the workforce is missing from the equation. However, the undisputable truth is that women across urban and rural Sudan still undertake the lion's share of unpaid work and bear chief responsibility for the care of children and the elderly as well as other household tasks.

Women in rural Sudan face multidimensional poverty due to structural barriers and discriminatory social norms in some regions of the country face, such as limited access to resources.¹⁷ The ongoing conflict worsens their situation, exposing them to heightened risks of sexual violence mainly when doing their daily chores such as farming, fetching water and collecting wood.

Where gender is concerned, there are fundamental gaps in Sudanese

15 <https://www.dabangasudan.org/ar/all-news/article/%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%BA%D8%B0%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%88-6-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86>

16 [wikipedi.org](https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A9%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%88-6-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86) ايديبيكيو - نالوسالاي في نينجالا ني باواسمال مدع

17 https://nelga.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/SUDAN_Women-land-access-rights.pdf





Despite the daunting challenges set against the women of Sudan, throughout the different periods of history of the country has not had comprehensive plans to improve the situation of women and gender equality.

legislation and policy¹⁸. Even though the principles of non-discrimination have been enshrined in successive Sudanese constitutions since the country's independence, in practice, these principles are not observed. Domestic law-making is governed by standards other than those of equality and non-discrimination, and fundamental women's rights are largely swept aside under the banner of religious values or traditions and customs¹⁹. Additionally, there are several obstacles that create a disconnect between women and the legal system.

Violence against women in its broad sense is still widespread across Sudan. In fact, the state itself played a leading role in exacerbating violence against women by enacting discriminatory laws.²⁰ The weaponization of rape by the military in Darfur or the July 2018 Massacre is an example. Though armed conflicts have always been one of the fundamental facts of life in Sudan, with disastrous consequences for women, successive governments have failed to achieve the kind of peace which adopts a progressive and inclusive view of gender. This has led to the sustenance of violence against women and girls during and post armed struggles in our country.²¹ Likewise, there has been a lack of political will to follow through on procedures and efforts to hold perpetrators of crimes against women accountable in Sudan and international courts.

Despite the daunting challenges set against the women of Sudan, throughout the different periods of history of the country has not had comprehensive plans to improve the situation of women and gender equality. Nor has there been any effective instrument for women's rights, for example, a Ministry or Higher Council for women²².

Nonetheless, Sudanese civil groups continue to work steadfastly for the cause of women's rights. Their cause is grounded in the historical organisations of the masses and extensive experience. The revolution has played a role in awakening people's awareness of their rights, particularly for young women. It has provided them with a drive for more freedom and creative opportunities to organise themselves. New social movements were founded too, and these put forward demands for women's rights at the heart of their agenda.

18 <https://www.sudaress.com/sudantribune/25707>

19 <https://www.hrw.org/ar/report/2015/01/19/267959>

20 <https://www.ohchr.org/ar/statements/2015/05/special-rapporteur-violence-against-women-finalizes-country-mission-sudan>

21 <https://www.reuters.com/article/oegtp-sudan-darfur-rape-ar5-idARAKBN0LF25X2015021>

22 <https://www.sudaress.com/sudantribune/25707>

The barriers that impede women's political participation still stand.²³ Women face challenges in political parties which are male dominated. For, all their differences and standpoints on women's rights, most political parties do not have policies that support the creation of an atmosphere that supports women.²⁴ This quickly translates into a an exclusionary political landscape that discriminates women's voices, engagement and aspirations.

Women in the Blast Radius

Turning back to current events, women have been caught unaware by the eruption of the armed conflict and have had no time to prepare themselves for its challenges, particularly since the vast majority of women are far away from holding political or military decision-making roles, due to exclusion and discrimination. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has described the ongoing violence in Sudan as "brutal... both sides have trampled all over international human rights law, in particular the principles of non-discrimination, proportionality and caution"²⁵.

Any semblance of a functioning state disappeared on the first day of the conflict and was replaced by a state of overwhelming insecurity. The disintegration of social norms, which played an important role in protecting women in the absence of the national law, eroded any semblance safety, security and psychological stability women had. This represented the first violation that women suffered. They were confronted with a dark and miserable vision of the near future which plagued them with fears about the violence that would follow and that they would lose their homeland forever.

The loss of children, spouses, siblings and other family members, while having to live alongside violence and death, as well as the pain caused by not knowing the fate of those they had lost – these are some the cruellest forms of violations that women and the people of Sudan are experiencing.

Women in Darfur, especially in the West Darfur State, are experiencing their own unique form of suffering: the conflict re-ignited ethnic tensions and old sectarianism in their district²⁶. Women were burned alive²⁷ in Al-Geneina as well and subjected to sexual violence.

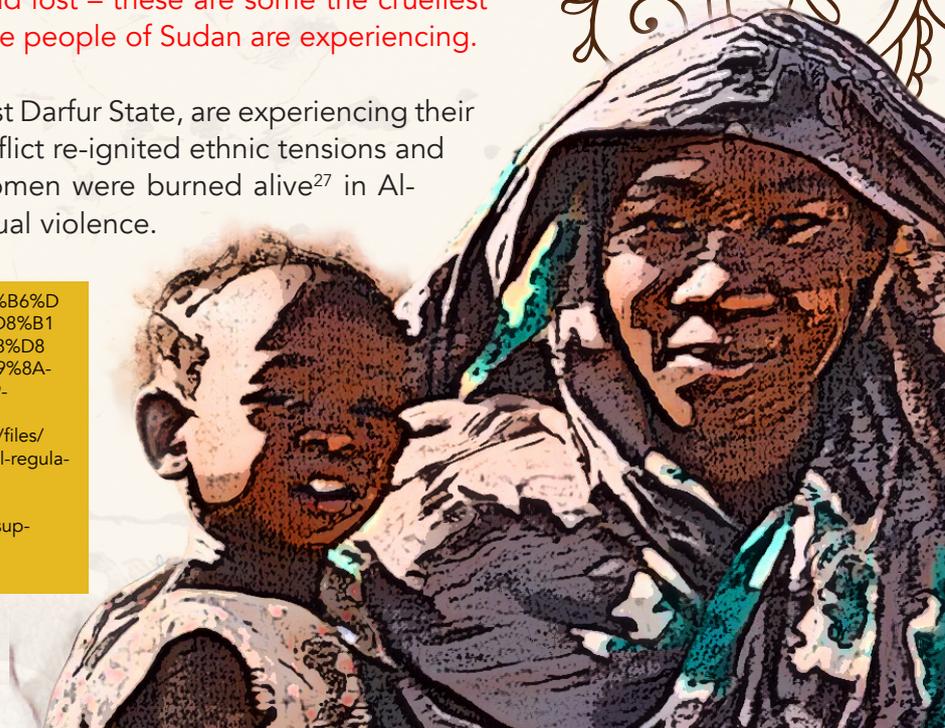
23 <https://newspaper.sudafax.com/111331/%D9%82%D8%B6%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A3%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%90%D8%A3/amp/>

24 <https://www.idea.int.developmentzone.co/sites/default/files/publications/gender-assessment-political-parties-internal-regulations-sudan.pdf>

25 <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2023/05/1120272>

26 <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2023/08/18/darfur-rapid-support-forces-allied-militias-rape-dozens>

27 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/11/1143732>





²⁸ Women in various states have lost their homes through looting, demolitions and evictions. Entire families have lost their entire economic foundations, and due to gender roles relations, women disproportionately affected than men.

While it is hard to obtain statistics on the number of women who have been killed or injured during the conflict, according to several reports Sudanese women have been killed, wounded, shelled or arrested, and been forcibly displaced from the areas where they used to live and made homeless. Women are unable to access basic essentials due to looting and shelling. Malnutrition has led to dangerous effects on women, particularly those who are pregnant, nursing babies or elderly. In addition, elderly women have had to face their own hardships as they are unable to leave the house and reach out to others. Many have died in because they did not receive help.

The devastation caused by the conflict have caused destruction of essential infrastructure, such as hospitals, schools, water and power plans. The resulting conditions have forced women to resort to primitive, spartan alternatives to care for their families, such as carrying water back home, lighting the house with candles and lanterns and so on – not to mention the arduous task presented by the daily housework.

As of April 2023, UNFPA, the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency, estimated that there were 219,000 pregnant women in Khartoum, including 24,000 women who were expected to give birth in the coming weeks.²⁹ All of this has happened in the absence of the most basic forms of protection and safeguarding required by international humanitarian law.

Women, particularly elderly ones and those suffering from chronic illnesses, as well as pregnant and lactating women have faced severe health threats due to targeted killing of medical personnel and lack of provision of medical aid and medicines.³⁰ Expectant women are forced to give birth in inhumane, undignified and harsh conditions. Pregnant women are confronted with the likelihood of giving birth without the choice of anaesthesia or medical precautions or surgical intervention if necessary. Some women are faced with the threat of dying while in search of a doctor or midwife, or due to giving birth in perilous conditions that increase the likelihood of death for babies or mothers.³¹

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²⁸ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/11/1143732>

²⁹ <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/april-2023/escalating-violence-sudan-shuts-hospitals-puts-pregnant-women-risk>

³⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orPb8PfxE3o>

³¹ <https://aawsat.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A7/4350571-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%B6-%D8%A3%D9%88-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86>

Economic Disruption & Displacement



The conflict has led to catastrophic economic consequences for women. It has destroyed the country's infrastructure and stopped transport and production, and hundreds of factories have been closed, with the result that tens of thousands of staff being laid off. Millions of people in urban areas have also lost their work and positions, while salaries of workers in the public sector and some institutions in the private sector have had their wages cut off for months on end.

Furthermore, the conflict has deprived women in informal sectors – who represent a considerable proportion of working women – of their sources of income. Rural women have become less able to conduct their agricultural activities due to insecurity and a lack of resources. Under the current circumstances, the number of women who are breadwinners for the family has increased, redoubling the difficulties they face for as long as the conflict continues. If a woman's financial situation collapses she is forced to make difficult choices, such as working in professions that she would never have considered before, and which may put her life in danger.

Despite the lack of trustworthy statistics on women's financial and economic contribution to their families and communities, it is known that during conflict, women have made greater contribution than men in providing financial support to their families and communities, particularly in covering the costs associated with displacement and being a refugee. This has had a positive effect in increasing conviction among traditional communities on the importance of women having jobs. But it has also deepened the hardships experienced by women with no financial resources or sources of income.

Due to the fighting and attacks on residential areas, forced displacement and the burning of villages and houses, millions of Sudanese have had to leave their towns and villages, either to more secure regions within Sudan, or to neighbouring states. As the months passed, the number of displaced people has increased, reaching around 7,111,788 internally displaced individuals.³² The number of refugees fleeing out of Sudan has also increased, reaching around 2,111,791 individuals,³³ at least half of whom are women. The conflict

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³² Sudan I Situation Reports (unocha.org)

³³ Sudan Mobility Update (1) | Displacement Tracking Matrix (iom.int)

has doubled displacement and refugee figures in the country and driven women from urban areas with no previous experience of displacement or refugee status into this harsh domain.

During the process of relocating, women risked death from air strikes or artillery fire, and were subjected to looting, harassment, sexual exploitation and verbal abuse at checkpoints. They also suffered from exposure to gross violence, death and destruction that are widespread along most routes. Relocating has sometimes involved driving cars over corpses, or travelling for days on end without food, water, washing facilities or even places to rest. This is compounded by the lack of wheelchairs or aids for women with disabilities and elderly women. The restrictions, closures and travel bans that the warring factions have imposed on the freedom of movement, and the deployment of checkpoints between districts, towns and villages, created numerous risks specifically for women as they attempted to leave their homes. They are also hindered from visiting their relatives, which confines them to an isolated and deprived existence.

The process of relocating and seeking asylum has led to the lifting of some of the restrictions of mobility for women and girls. Many families have been forced to allow women and girls to relocate or seek asylum without being escorted by male relatives; mothers too have been allowed to relocate and seek asylum with their children without being escorted by the father, in a clear break from the legal and traditional restrictions on freedom of movement for women³⁴. This has increased women's confidence in their own ability to act without male supervision.

In the cities to which they are displaced, women have been forced to live either at reception points for displaced people, most often schools or mosques or community centres, or with friends and relatives; for the most part, their scant financial resources do not allow the majority of them to find separate accommodation due to the high price of this: prices have skyrocketed in the over-crowded cities. At the same time, they are beset with the numerous difficulties of living with family and relatives: their accommodation is cramped and the overcrowding often causes sharp tensions within the family, including domestic violence. Also, many women in KHT were able to escape oppressive family settings which is unlikely outside KHT. The responsibilities of both displaced women and female hosts are tripled as they perform additional unpaid care roles such as feeding their temporary lodgers and other household tasks.

34 <https://www.cmi.no/publications/9048-war-in-sudan-women-facing-new-injustices>



Women forced by the conflict to seek asylum in various countries go through horrific experiences. Most of the refugee camps are in poor condition and lack some of the most basic living essentials. In the countries where they seek asylum, refugees endure poor living conditions due to high living costs and the extortionate prices of food and accommodation and so on, particularly if they have children.

In addition to their poor living conditions, female refugees are affected by changes in gender roles. For the most part, men lose their accustomed roles as breadwinners and protectors, increasing the burdens on women. Women's roles expand and have to acclimatize to the countries where they seek asylum. The distress, pressure and anxiety increases the likelihood of violence by men against women. When they enter countries illegally, women are vulnerable to harassment and sexual violence, and many women refugees live in fear of being, reported to police, arrested and deported. Sometimes, refugee women face hate speech and the risk of falling prey to human trafficking networks.

The loss of material and social capital coupled with challenging living conditions that refugee women face in the countries they flee to affect their wellbeing and (in)security. They face numerous legal challenges, for the laws governing refugee status in some countries limit basic freedoms such as the freedom to work and freedom of movement.





We are resilient

Against the countless hardships that have resulted from the outbreak of the armed conflict, civilian women's groups, both official and unofficial, have played a huge role in helping civilians, particularly in areas where displaced people and refugees end up. This includes organising voluntary initiatives and collecting donations, front-line care work responding to challenges as they arise, and assistance with tasks normally performed by men, as volunteers in medical centres and service centres, as well as helping survivors of violence. Women have also stepped forward to offer front line care services. They are taking risks and braving death to make ends meet and provide essentials for their families and neighbours. The armed conflict has proven that women are vital and frontline actors in humanitarian response and possess unique knowledge of how to meet the needs of women and girls.

The ongoing conflict has resulted in wide-ranging consequences for the education of girls. Many schools and universities have been turned into military barracks or reception centres for displaced people. This has meant that large numbers of pupils, among them girls, have been cut off from study. As the cogs of war keep turning, economic conditions go from bad to worse and violence spreads alongside the refugee crisis, there is a growing risk that girls will drop out of study never to return. Added to this, many families may prioritise educating their boys due to the prevalence of traditional thinking on this subject. Nonetheless, despite the negative effects of the conflict on the education of young women, the active support that women and girls have provided to their communities and families, against the backdrop of the conflict, will instigate and increase conviction among conservative communities the significance of educating women and girls.

The current conflict has left its mark on every aspect of life in Sudan, snatching away stability and security. It has changed the trajectory of the aspirations of the people of Sudan, put their lives in numerous kinds of danger, threatening the country with total economic collapse and jeopardising the ability of service institutions to offer basic services to the people. **But perhaps, the most significant loss with a wide-range of consequences is the total rupture of the fabric of society. It has far-reaching consequences for women and the people of Sudan some of which is immediate and apparent, but others, which only time will tell.**

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This includes an increase in figures for domestic violence, divorce and child marriage. Parents and guardians have been forced to marry off their daughters at an early age, fearing that they will become a financial burden on the family, or due to limited economic prospects after losing their homes and security. Perhaps some of them hurry to marry off their daughters to the communities that host them in order to create stronger kinship linkages with them, gain acceptance and become closer to members of their new community, and as a way for the displaced family to gain permanent stability in their host community. Either way, women and women's bodies face the brunt of the war.

Often, displacement or going into refugee splits and disconnect families. There is breakdown of communication and an increase in divorce rates. Opportunities for marriage are few, and fertility rates may fall among women. The circumstances of armed conflict sometimes also place women and girls at risk of sexual exploitation by strangers or troops recruited to fight in the area. In war, some soldiers take advantage of their positions and the unfavourable security and economic circumstances to exploit and marry women and girls, but later disappear. These situations result in legal issues linked to registering marriages and children further down the line and ensuring that the mother and children receive their rights. It may lead to women losing custody of their children and the increase of all kinds of violence against women and children.





Religious Extremism & Lawlessness

With the increased militarisation of cities and presence of different types of military and security divisions that now exist, the challenge of safety and social cohesion is more heightened. The growing violence, lawlessness and hostilities coupled with frustration and helplessness, has opened doors to the spread of religious extremism. This has fostered further hostility against peoples' liberties, particularly women's rights, threatening to erode any of the Sudanese women's hard won freedoms and rights.

Courts and civil registry offices in various areas have been targets for bombing, looting, theft and destruction. Damage to files and records³⁵ is sure to lead to the collapse of the justice system and the loss of the interests and rights of litigants. Given the fragility of the situation with women's rights before the conflict, the consequences of all this will be catastrophic for the legal rights and interests of women, particularly rights relating to land ownership, possession of identity documents and issues of personal status such as inheritance, divorce, alimony, child custody and other rights and interests that must be dealt with as a matter of urgency.



Women are not the Enemy



Sexual and gender-based violence has been weaponized and used throughout the conflict to terrorise and humiliate women and civilians. It is used as a toolkit for exercising power over local communities, intimidating and antagonising the men for not being able to defend the women – an ascribed gender role, forcing civilians to leave and seek lodgings elsewhere, particularly since the conflict has entailed the occupation and looting of civilian dwellings. Women's bodies are become the battlefield.

Sexual violence against women has also been used as a form of ethnic persecution and cleansing with the aim of destroying the identity of certain ethnic communities, as happened in Darfur. Reports published by the UN³⁶ and other international organisations have listed counts of rape, sexual aggressions, sexual exploitation and physical violence during attacks on women in their homes³⁷. Victims of assaults have included not only adult women but female minors³⁸ some of whom were no older than 12 years. Some cases of sexual violence went as far as torture and brutal, inhuman treatment.

Women have also faced the dangers of sexual harassment and rape in displacement areas where they have sought asylum, particularly as they are present there without societal protection. Rape happens to displaced and refugee women as they become involved in local life; it may happen as they search for food, shelter or schools, toilet or bathroom facilities or markets. On the other hand, most displaced men and male refugees still enjoy male privileges, unlike their female counterparts, despite being socially, economically and politically marginalised.

Reports have detailed kidnappings of women and girls and their forceful transfer to other districts; they are also subjected to brutal torture. Some reports from Sudan also indicate that new forms of sexual violence such as sexual slavery and human trafficking³⁹. Human rights defenders, journalists and activists have not been spared from this, and have been subjected to rape and threatened with rape to intimidate them and prevent them from going about their work⁴⁰.

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36 <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-e&q=un+ex%5Berts+om+rape+in+sudan++>

37 <https://al-akhbar.com/Arab/367910>

38 <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/interactivity-66565844>

39 <http://www.acjps.org/ar/%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D9%87%D9%86%D9%85/>

40 <http://www.acjps.org/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%>

Women have also faced the dangers of sexual harassment and rape in displacement areas where they have sought asylum, particularly as they are present there without societal protection.

The exacerbation and intensification of the use of sexual violence as the conflict has unfolded can be attributed to many reasons, but most importantly the conviction by those who have committed violent crimes that they will not be put on trial or held accountable for the crimes that they have committed. That they can escape punishment just have done before for the crimes against humanity in Darfur more than twenty years ago, and in the Khartoum Massacre of June 3rd 2019. They are fully aware that the rule of law is absent to protect the rights of individuals and prosecute those who violate them. **The only prevailing power in the country belongs to those that hold arms.**

The perpetration of crimes of sexual violence on a grand scale is anchored in the existence of a prevailing attitude and culture that condones violence against women in all its forms. Women's bodies are regarded as a locus for patriarchy to exert control and exploit through actions that normalize the subjugation of women's bodies. This includes Female Genital Mutilation, Child marriages, forced marriages and some other traditional practices.

The prevalence of sexual violence in Sudan cannot be understood without considering the circumstances that led to the enactment of the Khartoum State Public Order Act in 1996. Nor can sexual violence be separated contextually from inherited laws which codify tolerance towards gender based violence.⁴¹ There are actually security policies and practices that allow the use of sexual violence against female protestors and female political opposition. Essentially the state tolerates and condones violence against women, through its reluctance to enact laws that protect women and inaction on implementing those laws, which do exist.

It can be said that there are real challenges in determining the numbers of women and girls who have experienced sexual violence during the conflict, especially since obtaining reliable statistics during a violent ongoing conflict is a very complicated matter. Often, these numbers do not even reflect the truth, as sexual violence in Sudan is a crime that is not spoken about. The social stigma and trauma make reporting and documenting cases difficult, particularly in conditions of brutal violence, widespread intimidation and lawlessness. It is also difficult to track down survivors and obtain reliable figures due the breakdown of infrastructure, communication facilities, road closures and arbitrary checkpoints. Matters are made worse by the feeling experienced by female victims that there is no point in talking about what happened to them, since nobody can help them to track-down or prosecute the perpetrators of these crimes in the prevailing climate of chaos and atrocities.



D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A9/ 41 ويكي العام (السودان) - ويكي مصدر (wikisource.org)

It is also noted that in some cases which combine sexual violence and murder (or the death of the woman who has undergone sexual violence), the sexual violence is often overlooked and not correctly documented or reported in mortality statistics or official medical documents. This is also especially challenging in conflict situations where forensic services are not available.

Another issue is the absence or limitedness of medical, psychological and legal support offered to female victims of sexual violence. Women with pregnancies resulting from rape face particular difficulties. While article 135 of the Sudanese Criminal Code 1991 grants survivors the right to abort pregnancies resulting from rape, provided that the pregnancy has not reached 90 days, the humanitarian response to the varied needs of women experiencing pregnancy as a result of rape is essentially non-existent because there is no option of recourse to the law, and courts and police stations are defunct. Furthermore, procedural complexities impede the provision of these services.

The repercussions and effects of sexual violence will extend far beyond the end of the conflict, manifest in psychological and neurological trauma. Families and communities tend not to accept pregnancies and children born out of rape. Beyond stigma, there is forced suicide and suicide of women due to the pressure and violence experienced from spouses or members of their communities. Even after hostilities cease, soldiers of all factions of the conflict represent a grave danger to women and other components of society. Most of these soldiers are scarred mentally and psychologically by the horrors of armed conflict, instilling in them a propensity to violence that arises from their use of weapons. They may be liable to violence and can kill women in their own family for trivial reasons but are often not punished for committing these crimes.

The likelihood that this propensity to violence will continue for the foreseeable future is high. Children that spend their formative years growing up amidst a brutal and bloody conflict often internalise this violence and go on to practise it on the persons regarded as expendables: women and girls. Children's access to education is restricted and armies, armed groups and tribal militias instead recruit them. Additionally, religious fundamentalism, extremism and hate speech will fuel hostility and sexual violence against women and girls.

It is widely recognised that sexual violence committed for reasons linked to armed conflicts is considered a war crime and forbidden by the Geneva convention of 1949⁴², the two additional protocols of 1977, and the customary



42 <https://www.icrc.org/ar/doc/resources/documents/misc/5nsla8.htm>

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laws applicable in any international armed conflict. Under international law, compliance with humanitarian law is a specific obligation imposed on anyone who bears arms, whether they belong to the government's armed forces, organised armed groups or peacekeeping forces. It follows that crimes of sexual violence committed during the conflict are fundamentally linked to the absence of the rule of law, which has allowed armies, armed groups and tribal militias to create a state of chaos, raising questions about the extent to which armies in Sudan, both official and non-official, are adhering to the tenets of international humanitarian law.

Across the country, civilians are still bearing the brunt of military hostilities and the illegal practices of the factions of this widespread and complex conflict. These have destroyed the lives of millions of Sudanese and led to grave violations of human rights some of which are serious enough to be considered war crimes. While all of this has been happening, there has been no indication that the conflict will come to an end any time soon, and no effective political solution on the horizon. Nonetheless, there are several scenarios, none of which are mutually exclusive and all of which lie within the bounds of possibility.

Naturally, the broad consequences of the ongoing conflict on our country are severe, destructive, catastrophic, and long-term. The conflict is likely to lead to deep changes in relationships of power, including gender roles and relationships, drawing new blueprints for economic, societal and political relationships.

The extent to which women are affected by the conflict varies depending on their affiliations and backgrounds in terms of class, culture, politics and the region they are from. Women who are in poverty or have less economic or social stability, particularly those that have fallen victim to previous armed conflicts, are the most affected by the current conflict, especially due to absence of state protection and the failure to provide justice and equity for the wrongs they have suffered.



Still we rise: A Feminist Consciousness

Nevertheless, the women of Sudan have not been mere victims and witnesses of the gross violations of the conflict, but have resisted them in a manner that deserves recognition. They have displayed resilience, agency and astonishing capability and noteworthy ingenuity in the wake of this war. During the conflict women have showcased their leadership and problem solving capacities in difficult circumstances, beset with weapons and violence on all sides. Against this backdrop they have played provided protection and care to their communities. They have debunked the traditional conservative narratives and gender stereotypes.

When women were attacked in their homes and safe havens, it fuelled their anger. They galvanised an activist movement amidst the conflict and thousands of Sudanese women and girls in and outside Sudan are coordinating through feminist, civilian and grassroot enterprises and working groups. Therefore, it can be said that the wrongs and injustices so keenly felt by women during the conflict have created a burgeoning feminist awareness. The violations against women have served as a catalyst for a feminist consciousness and have revolutionised the feminist movement. The movement is set to become a powerful driving force in ensuring genuine and impactful participation of women in the political sphere.

The movement has opened up broad new horizons for solidarity against oppression and violations among Sudanese women of all different backgrounds. It has ushered in renewed resolve for real change led by women anchored by an exemplary feminist agenda.



The role of women in the cessation of the conflict

There are continued attempts to obstruct any unified people's mass movement to end the conflict, and a complete lack of any information about the peace to be followed by the limited anti-conflict initiatives that do exist. The information available suggests that this process will be limited to the isolated perceptions and narratives of the conflict's factions which brush over the real actors and interests involved and bear no relation to the actual situation or the experiences of the victims of the conflict especially women. The solutions that therefore will be enacted to stop the conflict will be limited to securitised approaches that lack transparency and accountability for the grave crimes and violations of human rights committed

Though women are marginalised and denied their political and decision-making rights, Sudanese women are well aware of the crucial importance of their involvement in negotiations regarding the cessation of armed conflict. Their participation is essential dismantling the existing hierarchical system and challenging the primacy of military might. There are ongoing efforts by women to meaningfully participate and engage in the ongoing efforts to stop the conflict and to identify entry points to guarantee that gender issues are included in agreements on the cessation of the conflict. It is particularly important to note that the limited or non-existent political leverage that women possess on the factions of the conflict is an obstacle. The conflict are fundamentally products of an intersection of patriarchy and militarised masculinities embroidered in neoliberalism, fundamentalism and undemocratic principles. The high number of ideological and tribal detachments and militias that now exist leads to the narrowing of opportunities for women to participate in the conflict cessation process.

For real, effective female participation, it is essential that political and civil leadership groups should have a genuine belief in



the importance of women's political and civil rights and be prepared to make space for women. It is no secret that women often face difficulties while they participate in peace talks, including ones caused by civilian authorities themselves, such as attempts to stereotype them or to determine who and how they will be represented and to spread doubt around their capacities and capabilities.

Essential points on women's participation in ending the conflict:

- **Women do not live single-issue lives.** The solutions in the conflict should address the intersectionality of the experiences of the Sudanese women.
- **Women are not homogenous.** They do not represent a single block whose interests all align perfectly: their interests, whether concerning society, politics or the negotiation, are mixed, and it is important that their racial and linguistic other identities be taken into account, particularly since the ongoing conflict has various regional, tribal and ideological dimensions.
- **Women's positions regarding the factions of the conflict differ from each other.** We must pay attention to the marked polarisation, which has afflicted women, such as attempts to mobilise them as a group or attempts by one or other of the armed conflict's factions to win their exclusive support.
- **Civil society in its broadest sense, including political parties,** represents the main incubator for the women's movement in Sudan. It follows that the task of ending the conflict requires that these parties should articulate an integrated vision to encourage women's participation in efforts to stop the conflict. It also requires that they thoroughly consider the reality of life after the conflict, as well as the experience of the conflict itself and the lessons learnt.
- **Women's participation in negotiations does not mean that women** are responsible for women's issues only. It must be understood that they are participating as the equal members of society and decision-makers. Feminist and gender analysis should be afforded priority during discussions in every area.
- **Any agreements made should contain points that provide for the investigation of crimes of sexual violence suffered by women** as well as any actions that constitute a violation of international humanitarian law or war crimes against women.



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- **Necessary measures should be taken to prevent a repeat of the armed conflict** and the impunity of perpetrators. Transitional justice and reparations must be enacted with a gender lens.
- **Work in isolation must be avoided, and efforts must be made to ensure robust coordination.** There must be ample preparation prior to the talks. This includes use of international and regional frameworks to ensure women's participation in the negotiations and peace talks.
- **The presence of a team of experts on gender at the negotiations must be guaranteed,** to ensure that gender is considered in all agreements both fundamental and subsidiary, and that in the stages following the armed conflict, Sudan recovers and builds back with gender issues in mind.
 - There should be no less than 50% of women's representation at every stage, including preliminary consultations in the run-up to the talks and consultations on a temporary ceasefire preceding the official one, and in the arrangements subsequent to an agreement being reached.
- **Accountability must be prioritised by the opening of immediate, comprehensive,** unbiased and independent investigations concerning the grave and grievous violations of international human rights in order to bring their perpetrators to justice. This should entail the inclusion of measures necessary to prevent a repetition of the conflict, impunity and miscarriages of justice. It also includes ensuring transitional justice and reparations with a gender lens.
- **Any work concerning access to justice should prioritise** and rebuild the protection infrastructure (police/ courts etc) in a gender sensitive manner to ensure women can access justice.

Conclusion

Though the dreadful bloodshed has not subsided yet, all those who truly care about Sudan's future unanimously agree on the necessity of working towards an end to the conflict as a priority. The direct consequences of the conflict for women will linger in their souls, bodies and memories for generations and decades to come. The pain will continue to be renewed as the conflict continues and the frequency of violations rises. The long-term crises of refugees and displaced people and loss of social cohesion and security is likely to foster further divisions and manifestations of tribalism, racism, extremism and violence against women and girls.

There is no denying that the task of moving beyond the ongoing armed conflict in Sudan is a difficult, arduous and long one, particularly given its complex and multipolar nature. Under its wide, expansive surface it conceals numerous latent conflicts that could erupt at any moment. The prolongation of the conflict may also lead to numerous disastrous possibilities including complete collapse of the nation.

Drawing from their experiences of previous peace treaties, Sudanese women have the conviction that writing up political or military peace agreements containing glamorous passages about sharing power, the revolution and security arrangements, or shiny constitutional texts about human and women's rights, does not in any way, shape or form equate to the end of an armed conflict. Rather, conflicts will continue for as long as the structural causes that produced them remain present. Women also realize that they will not find justice for the violations and crimes of sexual violence they have suffered during the conflict merely by putting the perpetrators of those crimes on trial. Rather, they should document the violations, with the support of independent national and international investigatory committees, and be guaranteed access to international instruments of justice for every woman in Sudan.

The work of women towards ending the conflict should be considered as women's contribution and participation in public work and the political processes of Sudan. This participation has taken the form of broad collective action. It is not just symbolic or limited to a small number of women of any class, political, geographical or racial affiliation.

Though women are marginalised and denied their political and decision-making rights, Sudanese women are well aware of the crucial importance of their involvement in negotiations regarding the cessation of armed conflict.

Though the conflict has taken its toll on all Sudanese women in their diversity their experiences have fortified their resilience and solidarity. Their lessons learned are pivotal in shaping a new movement to address root causes of violence and insecurity. With heightened awareness and collective action, Sudanese women have resolved to play a central role in building a more peaceful and just society. Sudanese women represent a new dispensation for women's political emancipation and public participation.

This requires that allies support Sudanese women to challenge any attempts to limit their role in cessation of the conflict. Allies should support us to develop a clear and defined feminist vision for the cessation of the conflict and programme of the peace process which includes the participation of women in fixing the political malpractices that led to the outbreak of the war.

The conflict has not killed but renewed our aspiration for a democratic, equitable and just Sudan.



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