

A Feminist Perspective on the Armed Conflict in Sudan



By Zeinab Abbas Badawi,
writer and expert in the field of human rights and gender
June 2024

Cover art and internal sketches by graphic artist Obada Gumaa Gabir

Introduction

Despite the magnitude of the violations and galling experiences that women have been subjected to throughout the current armed conflict in Sudan, what has been discussed is only the tip of the iceberg. Women's experiences of this conflict have yet to be properly revealed and explored. The 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. And yet the reality is that there are millions of other tales both short and long, and every woman carries a personal and unique saga including horrors and suffering.

Sudanese women played a central role in the December 2018 revolution and the toppling of the Bashir regime in the name of freedom and societal justice. Now, women are faced with a new and harsher chapter as the conflict spreads, becomes more complex, and increasingly reflects racial bias.

War and conflict continue to have a strong presence in women's lives, though they may take different forms. Some, like the current armed conflict, are open, and some are hidden, insidious conflicts waged against women. These are the product of systematic discrimination embedded in cultural, social, economic, and political norms.

Sudanese women played a central role in the December 2018 revolution and the toppling of the Bashir regime in the name of freedom and societal justice. Though women showed their ability to lead and presented a model for creating a new status quo of equality, dignity and making discrimination a thing of the past, the transitional period devolved into a fierce and bloody armed conflict in which the ugliest kinds of crime and violation were committed and many women have lost their homeland. Now, women are faced with a new and harsher chapter as the conflict spreads, becomes more complex, and increasingly reflects racial bias.

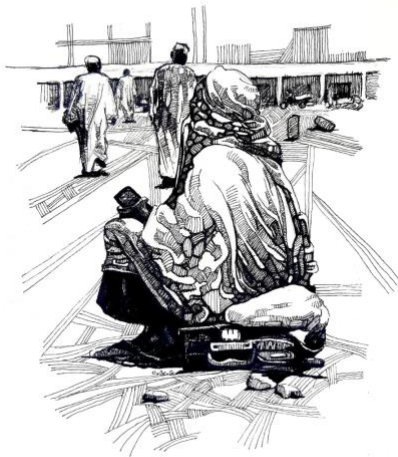
This is not a report on violations of women's rights during the conflict, though such violations do feature in its analysis. Rather, it aims to view the conflict from a female point of view: analyzing the wide-ranging effects of the conflict on power dynamics and gender roles, and the circumstances of Sudanese women. It goes beyond treating women as victims only capable of morally denouncing and condemning male economic, political, and social violence, and assesses their ability, grit, and will to take part in social transformation in which women play leading roles and look beyond the conflict to address its structural causes through their insights and new working approaches.

Old wine in new bottles

The armed conflict that broke out in Sudan on April 15, 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) was not as much of a surprise as many suppose it to be. The perilous face-off between the two factions was expected.¹

Naturally, any attempt to attribute the conflict to a single cause or event, or to characterize it as a simple struggle between two military forces, would be an over-simplification, particularly

¹ 2023 Conflict in Sudan, Wikipedia, <https://shorturl.at/Osa12>



Sketch by Obada Gumaa Gabir

since the conflict has revealed the dysfunctionality of the state. This represents one of the main causes of the war, running much deeper than most observers and commentators appreciate. The state's fragility and the lack of good governance increased its profound social and economic deficit and exacerbated social polarization. This led to the collapse of the Sudanese state and the war.

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. Most of our national governments have risen to, and stayed in, power due to violence, atrocities and crimes that affect civilians and the military alike. Some of those governments held onto power for decades, but this did not change their dependence on force, coercion, and securitization. As such, police repression is an integral part of their

operation.

This comes as no surprise, as most of those governments were dominated by exclusive ideological and social structures rather than inclusive, national ones. These structures have catalyzed conflicts and dragged our country to the brink of violent extremism and terrorism. Most of these governments resort to forceful means to re-assert their power over citizens and shut down demands for accountability and transparency.

The conflict also has origins in societal and cultural violence: Sudan is among the most ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse countries in the world. But a willful ignorance of plurality and diversity, and their association with characteristics of racial and cultural superiority, have deepened the state of political, economic, and societal marginalization² and resulted in conflict.³

The structural drivers of these conflicts are still present in Sudan. The main ones are: poverty,⁴ marginalization, and a glaring disparity in living standards. The discrepancy between levels of development in different regions has led to a deterioration of vital economic sectors such as agriculture and husbandry. The scarcity of water resources, along with unfavorable climatic changes play a role in the appearance of armed rebellions and feed conflict, mass displacement, and the spread of weapons.

It is no surprise that poverty and inequality should be so prevalent, given that political and economic power are inextricably linked and monopolized by the ruling classes and certain ideological and political groups. In addition, weak state capacities and the spread of armed

² "UNITAMS: More than 160 languages spoken by 123 ethnic groups in Sudan face extinction," Al Hamish, February 21, 2024, <https://shorturl.at/ps0oN>

³ Muhammad Ali Jadin, "Cultural diversity and national unity: national identity in Sudan between Arabism and Africanism," <http://www.sudanbaath.20m.com/diffunity.htm>

⁴ "United Nations: More than a third of the population in Sudan will need humanitarian aid in 2023," February 27, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-64790515>

conflict have intensified the influence of security and military actors into the economy. This has facilitated the spread of corruption nepotism,⁵ and theft of public property.⁶

Social collapse is more prominent than ever before; the country has fractured along fault lines of ethnicity and tribe. Political discourse, hate speech and crude incitement to vengeance have risen. This has led individuals to revert to essentialist identities and has ushered in an era of tribalism

The causes of the conflict cannot be separated from the failure of successive regimes to deliver economic, social and cultural rights, or protection of the rights of the most vulnerable groups like women, children,

the disabled, the aged, and the displaced.

Social collapse is more prominent than ever before; the country has fractured along fault lines of ethnicity and tribe. Political discourse, hate speech and crude incitement to vengeance have risen. This has led individuals to revert to essentialist identities and has ushered in an era of tribalism.⁷

The origins of the current conflict can be traced to “the Islamization of laws” in September 1983, which paved the way for the empowerment of groups inextricably linked to the circles of political Islam. These laws laid the foundations for the current civilizational project in Sudan and the extremism, terrorism and suppression of women’s rights⁸ which has resulted from it.

The current conflict is part of a long history of human rights violations committed with impunity, including international crimes. Despite the fact that successive national constitutions have upheld human rights at various levels, these constitutions have been rendered toothless in practice. The rights and freedoms enshrined within them have been suspended following repeated declarations of states of emergency. Time and again, political interests have undermined the constitution – including the revolt against the transitional constitution of 2019.

Moreover, the lack of extended consultations and the haste with which the 2019 constitutional document was drafted led to fundamental flaws and omissions in the document, which mentioned neither good governance nor substantive reforms of state security and military institutions were vital to facilitate a democratic and just transition.

The same applies to Sudan’s commitments under international and regional human rights conventions. Despite Sudan being party to a number of these, they are not implemented and remain a mere diplomatic show. Sudan has still not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) nor the 2003 protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on Women’s Rights.

The conflict is also closely linked with the fact the 2018 revolution brought factions with different societal, economic, political and cultural interests to power. Some of them have close ties with the old totalitarian regime. This hampered change and meant that the victory of the revolution was shallow and incomplete, making it easier to tear down.

⁵ Al Hamish, “Transparency International: Sudan is one of the most corrupt countries in the world,” January 31, 2019, <https://shorturl.at/7f7F2>.

⁶ UNICEF, Water, sanitation and hygiene, <https://shorturl.at/oviXr>.

⁷ Tribal Conflict in Sudan: For How Long, AA, 2 November 2022, <https://shorturl.at/uKM3k>

⁸ The September 1983 Laws, <https://shorturl.at/ym7Vi>

The conflict is also linked to the role that the forces of the counter-revolution and political Islam played in preventing efforts to build a democratic state and citizenry in Sudan, especially their fear of the power shown by women rejecting the project of political Islam. The forces of political Islam got what they wished for since the forces of the revolution overestimated their own power, while downplaying that of their adversaries (the deep state, the military, the political opposition movement against democratic transformation, and political Islam).

The effect of the conflict on gender relations

When the war broke out, more than six million people in Sudan were “on the brink of famine”,⁹ and 20.3 million (more than 42% of the population) faced severe food insecurity. As for gender equality, Sudan ranked 129th out of 147 states for in the gender equality index.¹⁰ The gender gap is still apparent in all vital sectors: health, education, information technology, communications, politics and so on.

Nobody doubts that the gender gap in Sudan is the result of economic, social, and political structural barriers, as well as a toxic social and cultural legacy which continues to be nourished and perpetuated by policies which are not sensitive to gender and poverty, marginalization and continuous conflict. There is also an astounding lack of gender-disaggregated statistics in Sudan and so it is hard to obtain precise information on women’s circumstances. Women in Sudan still face deep-rooted discrimination within their communities.

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 their failure to include women who contribute 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. Furthermore, where gender is concerned, there are fundamental gaps in Sudanese legislation and policy on work.¹¹

Women in rural areas suffer from multidimensional poverty, and though they can partake in production alongside their male peers, structural barriers and discriminatory social norms make them less able to access resources and limit their access to equal opportunities.

In terms of legal rights, even though the principles of non-discrimination have been enshrined in successive Sudanese constitutions since the country’s independence, they are not respected in practice. Domestic law-making sweeps aside women’s rights under the banner of religious values, traditions and customs.¹² Gender barriers cause a disjuncture between women and the law.

⁹ FAO: 6 million people in Sudan are on the brink of famine,” Radio Dabanga, 3 August 2023, <https://shorturl.at/tmal>

¹⁰ www.wikipedia.org عدم المساواة بين الجنسين في السودان - ويكيبيديا

¹¹ قضايا المرأة السودانية في الفترة الإنتقالية جزر نائية وقوارب من ورق <https://www.sudaress.com/sudantribune/25707>

¹² Human Rights Watch, “Unequal and unprotected: women’s rights under Lebanese Personal Status Laws, January 19, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/ar/report/2015/01/19/267959>

Violence against women is still widespread across Sudan; in fact, the state itself played a leading role in exacerbating this violence by enacting discriminatory laws:¹³ the weaponization of rape by the military in Darfur is an example. Armed conflicts have been a fact of life in Sudan, with disastrous consequences for women. Even when peace agreements have been agreed, successive governments have failed to include a protective view of gender, which has led to the perpetuation of armed struggles. Likewise, there has been a lack of political will to put perpetrators of crimes against women on trial.

Throughout its history, our country has never had effective programs or plans to improve gender equality or empower women. There has been no effective institution for promoting women's rights – for example, a ministry or higher council for women.¹⁴

Nonetheless, Sudanese civil groups continue to work steadfastly for women's rights, grounded in their wider history and experience, relying on historical mass organizations. The revolution played a role in increasing people's, especially young women's, awareness of their rights and provided them with platforms and more freedom to organize themselves. New social movements put demands for women's rights at the heart of their agenda.

In politics, the barriers impeding women's political participation remain,¹⁵ with women facing difficulties when working in predominantly male political parties. 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.

In politics, the barriers impeding women's political participation remain, with women facing difficulties when working in predominantly male political parties.

Women in the blast radius

Turning back to current events, women were caught unawares by the eruption of the war and had no time to prepare themselves for its challenges, particularly since the vast majority of women are far 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.”¹⁶

Any semblance of a functioning state disappeared on the first day of the conflict, replaced by a state of uncontrollable insecurity. With the disintegration of the social norms that played an important role in protecting women in the absence of the law and the disruption of legal protections, women lost their day-to-day safety, security, and psychological stability. They were

¹³ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women finalizes mission to Sudan,” 2015, <https://www.ohchr.org/ar/statements/2015/05/special-rapporteur-violence-against-women-finalizes-country-mission-sudan>

¹⁴ Zeinab Badawi, “Sudanese women's issues in the transitional period: Remote islands and paper boats,” Sudan Tribune, June 6, 2020, <https://www.sudaress.com/sudantribune/25707>

¹⁵ قضايا المرأة السودانية في الفترة الانتقالية جزر نائية وقوارب من ورق <https://shorturl.at/bQAKr>

¹⁶ UN News, “In an extraordinary meeting, the Human Rights Commissioner calls for the protection of civilians and peace negotiations in Sudan,” May 2023, <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2023/05/1120272>

confronted with a dark and miserable vision of the near future which plagued them with fears and worries about losing their homeland forever.

Women have suffered the loss of children, spouses, siblings, and other family members, and had to live with violence, death, and the pain caused by not knowing the fate of loved ones. Women in Darfur, especially in West Darfur, experienced their own unique form of suffering: the conflict re-ignited ethnic tensions and sectarianism.¹⁷ Women lost their homes or saw them looted; demolition, looting, and evictions have deprived whole families of their entire economic foundations, but because of their weaker social position, women are more vulnerable than men to these losses.

While it is hard to obtain statistics on the number of women who have been killed or injured during the war, a number of reports document how Sudanese women have been killed, wounded, shelled, arrested, and forcibly displaced and made homeless. Insecurity has made daily essentials unavailable in some areas, and women are going hungry. Malnutrition has dangerous effects on women, particularly those who are pregnant, nursing babies or elderly. Elderly women have had to face their own particular hardships as they are unable to leave the

Women have suffered the loss of children, spouses, siblings, and other family members, and had to live with violence, death, and the pain caused by not knowing the fate of loved ones.

house and reach out to others for help, meaning that some die at home without any help. All of this has happened in the absence of the most basic forms of protection and safeguarding required by international humanitarian law.

The war has cut off water, electricity and gas. The resulting conditions have forced women to resort to primitive, spartan alternatives to care for their families, such as carrying water long distances, lighting the house with candles and increased the arduousness of daily housework.

Due to the closure of hospitals, the targeting of medical personnel and the lack of medical aid and medicines,¹⁸ women, particularly the elderly, those suffering from chronic illnesses, and those who are pregnant or nursing, have faced severe threats to their health. Some women have faced the possibility of death in search of a doctor or midwife, or giving birth in perilous conditions.¹⁹ Mothers are overwhelmingly forced to give birth in inhuman, degrading, harsh, and dangerous conditions. Pregnant women are confronted with the likelihood of giving birth without anesthesia, medical precautions or the option of surgical intervention if necessary.

The conflict has had catastrophic economic consequences for women. The war destroyed the country's infrastructure and stopped transport and production. Hundreds of factories have closed and tens of thousands of staff have been laid off. Salaries of workers in the public sector and some private sector institutions have had their wages cut off for months.

Furthermore, the war has deprived women in the informal economy – who represent a considerable proportion of working women – of their sources of income. Rural women have

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, Rapid Support Forces, Allied Militia Rape Dozens, August 17, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2023/08/18/darfur-rapid-support-forces-allied-militias-rape-dozens>

¹⁸ Al Hadath, "Khartoum hospitals are out of service due to Sudanese conflict," 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orPb8PfxE3o>

¹⁹ Al Sharq Alawsat, "Dying on the ground or on the streets: giving birth amidst war in Sudan," 2023, <https://shorturl.at/8yQ5I>

become less able to conduct their agricultural activities due to insecurity and a lack of resources. The number of women who are breadwinners for the family has increased, redoubling the difficulties they face. If a woman's financial situation collapses, she is forced to make difficult choices, such as working in dangerous professions that she would never have considered before.

Despite the lack of trustworthy statistics on women's financial and economic contributions to supporting their families and communities, it is clear that women have made a greater contribution than men in supporting their families and communities during the conflict, particularly in covering the costs associated with displacement. This has had a positive effect, increasing community conviction of the importance of women having jobs. It has also deepened the hardships experienced by women with no financial resources when the war broke out.

If a woman's financial situation collapses, she is forced to make difficult choices, such as working in dangerous professions that she would never have considered before.

Because of 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 neighboring states. As the months have passed, the number of displaced people has increased, reaching around 5.5 million.²⁰ The number of refugees has also increased, reaching around 1.4 million people, at least half of whom are women. The war has doubled the number of internally displaced and refugees, drawing in women from urban areas with no previous experience of displacement.

While travelling, women have risked death from air strikes or artillery fire, and been subjected to looting, harassment, sexual exploitation, and verbal abuse at checkpoints. They have been exposed to scenes of horror, violence, death, and destruction. Relocating has sometimes involved driving cars over corpses, or traveling for days on end without food, water, washing facilities, or even places to rest. Women with disabilities and elderly women have lacked of wheelchairs or other aids. The warring factions have imposed travel bans and deployed checkpoints to restrict freedom of movement, creating specific risks for women, who are hindered from leaving their homes and visiting their relatives and isolating them.

Conversely, the process of relocating and seeking asylum has led to some restrictions on the freedom of movement and travel for women and girls being lifted, as many families have been forced to allow women and girls to flee without being escorted by male relatives. Mothers have been allowed to relocate and seek asylum with their children without their husbands, in a clear break from legal and traditional restrictions. This has increased women's confidence in their 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 centers, or with friends and relatives; for the most part, their scant financial resources do not allow them to find separate accommodation due to skyrocketing prices in over-crowded cities. At the same time, they are beset with numerous difficulties of living with family and relatives: accommodation is cramped and overcrowding often causes sharp tensions, including domestic violence, within

²⁰ UN OCHA, "Sudan Situation Report," <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/>

the family. The responsibilities of both displaced women and female hosts are tripled as they work to feed and perform other household tasks for their temporary lodgers.

Women forced by the war to seek asylum in other countries have been forced to make long and dangerous journeys, crossing international borders on foot. On top of this, conditions are poor in refugee camps which lack some of the most basic living essentials. Refugees face extortionate prices for basic expenses.

In addition, female refugees are affected by changing gender roles. Many men lose their accustomed roles as breadwinners and protectors, increasing the burdens on women.

The loss of material and social capital and poor living conditions create feelings of distress and insecurity. Women also face numerous legal challenges, as some countries limit basic the rights to work and freedom of movement for refugees. This also put a lot of pressure on both women and men, which increases the likelihood of violence by men against women. When they enter countries illegally, women are vulnerable to harassment and sexual violence by authorities. Many women live in fear that they will be reported to the police, arrested and deported. Some face hate speech and the risk of human trafficking.

Up against these hardships, civilian women's groups, both official and unofficial, have played a huge role in helping civilians, particularly in hosting areas. This includes organizing voluntary initiatives and collecting donations, front-line care work, responding to female victims of violence, and tasks normally performed by men such as working to make ends meet and volunteering in medical and service centers. Women have also stepped up where care work is concerned, making risky journeys outside their homes to secure essentials for their families and neighbors. The war has proven that women are vital actors in humanitarian response, particularly in meeting the needs of women and girls.

The ongoing conflict has had wide-ranging consequences for the education of girls. Many schools and universities have been turned into military barracks or reception centers leaving large numbers of pupils, among them girls, unable to study. As the war continues, there is a growing risk that girls forced from school will return. Many families prioritize educating their boys due to traditional thinking.

Despite this, the effective support that women and girls have provided to their communities and families, particularly medical care and attention and facilitating the use of technology will increase conviction in the importance of educating women.

The current war has left its mark on every aspect of life in Sudan, but perhaps the most serious loss, has been the tearing apart of the social fabric. Domestic violence, divorce and child marriage have increased: 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 because they have limited economic prospects. Perhaps some marry their daughters into host communities to create stronger linkages with them, gain acceptance and stability in their host communities.

Civilian women's groups, both official and unofficial, have played a huge role in helping civilians, particularly in hosting areas. This includes organizing voluntary initiatives and collecting donations, front-line care work, responding to female victims of violence, and tasks normally performed by men such as working to make ends meet and volunteering in medical and service centers.

Often, being displaced or made refugees leads to a breakdown of communication and the splitting of families, increasing divorce rates. Opportunities for marriage are few, and so fertility rates fall. The circumstances of war also drive some women to marry strangers, or troops who take advantage of their positions of military power or the unfavorable economic circumstances for women and may later disappear. These situations may create legal issues related to registering marriages and children and ensuring that the rights of the wife and children are upheld. This may lead to women losing custody of their children and the increase of all kinds of violence against women.

With the increased militarization and an increasing diversity of security forces, staying safe is more challenging than ever. The atmosphere of violence and lawlessness, coupled with feelings of frustration and helplessness, have opened the door to the spread of religious extremism. This has played a part in creating an environment hostile to peoples' liberties, especially those of women.

Courts and civil registry offices have been targets for bombing, looting, theft, and destruction. Damage to files and records²¹ is sure to hinder the justice system for a long time. Given the fragility of women's rights before the conflict, this will be catastrophic for the legal rights and interests of women, particularly relating to land ownership, securing identity documents, inheritance, divorce, alimony, child custody, and other rights. This must be dealt with as a matter of urgency.

Sexual and gender-based violence have been used against women throughout the conflict as part of a toolkit to terrorize and humiliate civilians to control and intimidate men and communities. Reports published by the UN²² and other international organizations have listed counts of rape, sexual aggression, sexual exploitation and physical violence during attacks on women in their homes.²³ Victims of assaults have included not only adult women but also girls²⁴ as young as 12. Some cases of sexual violence constitute torture and inhuman treatment.

Women have also faced sexual harassment and rape in the areas to which they have been displaced. Rape happens in displacement may happen as women search for food, shelter or schools, toilet or bathroom facilities or markets. Despite being socially, economically and politically marginalized, most displaced men and male refugees still enjoy male privilege, unlike their female counterparts.

²¹ Al Arabiya, "Who is behind the invasion of Sudanese courts and tearing up files?" May 28, 2023, <https://shorturl.at/b4p1Y>

²² UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "UN experts alarmed by reported widespread use of rape and sexual violence against women and girls by the RSF in Sudan," August 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/08/un-experts-alarmed-reported-widespread-use-rape-and-sexual-violence-against>

²³ Al Akhbar, "Sudan: the dark faces of war," August 2023, <https://al-akhbar.com/Arab/367910>

²⁴ BBC, "Sudan War: Is sexual violence against women used as a weapon," August 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/interactivity-66565844>



Sketch by Obada Gumaa Gabir

Throughout the conflict, sexual violence has also been linked to the growing incidence of ethnic persecution of women and girls. Sexual violence has also been used as a form of ethnic persecution, aiming to destroy the identity of certain ethnic communities, as happened in Darfur. Reports have detailed kidnappings of women and girls and their forceful transfer to other districts and brutal torture. Some reports have indicated that forms of sexual violence such as sexual slavery and

human trafficking are becoming more common.²⁵ Human rights defenders, journalists and activists have not been spared, being subjected to, or threatened with rape to intimidate them and prevent them from going about their work.²⁶

The exacerbation and intensification of sexual violence can also be attributed to deep-rooted impunity. Those who have committed violent crimes are confident they will not be put on trial or held accountable, just as they escaped punishment before for the crimes and rapes which they committed in Darfur more than twenty years ago, and in the Khartoum massacre of June 3, 2019, and also because they are fully aware that there are no laws which protect the rights of individuals, and that power in the country belongs to those that hold arms.

The perpetration of sexual violence on a grand scale during the conflict cannot be separated from prevailing attitudes that tolerate patriarchal violence and condone violence against women, where women's bodies are considered to be a space that patriarchal society is free to control. This includes FGM, child marriage, forced marriage and some other traditional practices. Nor can sexual violence be separated contextually from inherited laws which codify this tolerance of violence: the track record of sexual violence cannot be read in isolation from the circumstances which gave rise to the Khartoum District Public Order Act 1996²⁷ or security policies and practices that allow the use of sexual violence against female protestors and political opponents, combined with a state that tolerates and condones violence against women, whether through its failure to enact laws that protect women, or its inaction on implementing those laws which do exist.

There are real challenges in determining the number of women and girls who have experienced sexual violence during the conflict, particularly since obtaining reliable statistics during an ongoing conflict is very complicated. Often, stigma impedes reporting, making numbers seem lower than they are. Social stigma and paralysis resulting from the survivors' trauma make documenting cases difficult, particularly in conditions where brutal violence, intimidation, and

²⁵ ACJPS, <https://shorturl.at/ALdxv>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ History of Sudan, Wikisource, <https://shorturl.at/xXmqS>

widespread lawlessness combine with other challenges to obtaining reliable figures, such as infrastructure collapse, road closures, arbitrary checkpoints, the targeting of medical facilities, poor communications and the difficulty of tracking down survivors who flee, as well as the fear of revenge which prevents survivors from reporting and talking about their experiences. 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 or find or prosecute the perpetrators of these crimes in the prevailing climate of chaos and atrocities.

In some cases which combine sexual violence and murder, the sexual violence is overlooked and not correctly documented or reported in mortality statistics or official medical documents, especially where forensic services are not available.

Medical, psychological, and legal support offered to female victims of sexual violence is lacking. Women with pregnancies resulting from rape face particular difficulties. Though Article 135 of the Sudanese Criminal Code 1991 grants rape survivors the right to abort pregnancies resulting from the assault in the first 90 days, services are non-existent. There is no option of recourse to the law because courts and police stations are defunct, and procedural complexities get in the way of aiding these women.

The exacerbation and intensification of sexual violence can also be attributed to deep-rooted impunity. Those who have committed violent crimes are confident they will not be put on trial or held accountable, just as they escaped punishment before for the crimes and rapes which they committed.

The repercussions of sexual violence will extend far beyond the end of the conflict, manifest in psychological and neurological trauma, in the refusal of families and communities to accept pregnancies and children born as a result of rape, and suicides and forced suicides of women (under pressure from their husbands or members of their communities). Even after hostilities cease, soldiers of all factions represent a grave danger to their women and others: most soldiers are scarred mentally and psychologically by the horrors of war, instilling in them a propensity to violence. Too often the victims of this violence are women.

The continue of this propensity to violence can continue for years, as children that spend their formative years amidst a brutal and bloody conflict often internalize this violence and go on to practice it on the women and girls around them. Children's access to education is restricted and armies, armed groups and tribal militias are free to recruit them; they are exposed to extremism and violent and hateful language. This generates favorable conditions for violence against women.

Sexual violence in armed conflicts is considered a war crime and forbidden by the Geneva Convention of 1949²⁸, and its 1977 protocols, and customary international law applicable in 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, organized 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.

²⁸ The Fourth Geneva Convention, <https://www.icrc.org/ar/doc/resources/documents/misc/5nsla8.htm>

Below are some fundamental observations about the sexual violence which has occurred during this conflict:

- **there are new kinds of sexual violence, such as sexual slavery, trafficking in women, forced prostitution, and kidnapping.** This is a dangerous development in crimes of sexual violence committed during the conflict in Sudan.²⁹
- though the stigma surrounding crimes of sexual violence is still widespread, the prevalence of violence in conflict has contributed to breaking the silence. Widespread solidarity campaigns have been organized inside and outside Sudan.³⁰
- the issue of sexual violence during the conflict has become highly politicized, with some factions seeking to convert crimes of sexual violence committed against women by their rivals into political points, objectifying and commodifying their suffering and potentially impeding their efforts to receive justice.
- on official and social media platforms, when speaking about their enemies, spokespeople for both sides use feminine descriptions as insults. This in itself shows the patriarchal nature of the conflict, in which name-calling, sexual references and feminization of the enemy are at the core of the dialogue; the enemy is portrayed as feminine as opposed to masculine.
- It will be difficult for women victims of rape and sexual violence to obtain justice in the light of the multiplicity of perpetrators, especially within the horrific daily deterioration of the security situation and widespread civilian mobilization.

Anger and rejection

The conflict in Sudan has now entered its fourteenth month, and across the country, civilians continue to bear the brunt of military hostilities and the illegal practices of the factions. These have destroyed the lives of millions of Sudanese and led to grave violations of human rights and war crimes. At the same time, there has been no indication that the conflict will end any time soon, and there is no effective political solution on the horizon. Nonetheless, there are a number of possible scenarios, none of which are mutually exclusive.

Naturally, the consequences of the ongoing conflict are severe, destructive, catastrophic and long-term. The conflict is likely to lead to deep changes in power relationships, including gender roles, 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. Women who are poor or economically disadvantaged, particularly those who have fallen victim to previous armed conflicts, are the most affected, particularly in the absence of state protection and accountability.

²⁹ African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies, Report on sexual slavery, <https://shorturl.at/E0158>

³⁰ UN News, "Women human rights defenders call on the international community to take action to protect Sudanese women from sexual violence," November 4, 2023, <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2023/11/1125572>

The conflict is the natural product of a mindset which has for many years now turned its back on the prudent approach to citizenship and equality, including gender equality, as strategic concerns for state policy. Although women are particularly vulnerable in the face of danger, victimhood is not their only role. Some have resisted them in a manner that deserves praise and have displayed astonishing capability and ingenuity. Women have become real leaders in difficult circumstances, beset with weapons and violence on all sides. Against this backdrop, they have played active roles in responding to violations and providing protection and care to their societies. These roles have increased confidence in women's abilities and recognition of their leadership among traditional communities.

The violence that women have experienced has affected them in their homes and in safe havens, fueling anger due to the sheer scale of the ill-treatment to which they have been subjected. This anger has galvanized an activist movement involving thousands of Sudanese women and girls both inside and outside Sudan through feminist civilian grassroots enterprises and working groups. Over the last few months, an activist initiative has been formed peopled by these women and their allies.

Therefore, it can be said that the injustices so keenly felt by women during the conflict have

The injustices so keenly felt by women during the conflict have created a burgeoning feminist awareness.

created a burgeoning feminist awareness. The violations that have befallen women have served as the entry point for a feminist consciousness which has managed to truly

revolutionize feminist issues and is set to become a powerful driving force for true and effective inclusion of women in the political process. The movement has also opened up broad new horizons for solidarity against oppression and violations among Sudanese women of different backgrounds and opened the door to a project of real change led by women and following an exemplary feminist agenda.

The role of women in the cessation of the conflict

The conflict in Sudan is a complex, thorny, and multi-dimensional one. Putting an end to it is a difficult and arduous task fraught with challenges some of which are linked to the complex nature of the conflict itself and its political, regional, ethnic, and ideological roots.

Despite constant calls for an immediate cessation of hostilities from Sudanese citizens, particularly women, experiencing the conflict's worst effects, to this day there have been no tangible results to show for these efforts allowing the conflict to wreak continuing devastation.

At the same time, 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 program of work of the limited anti-conflict initiatives currently operating. It has been suggested that these programs are dominated by the conflict's factions while brushing over the views of civilians and direct victims of the conflict – particularly women. Proposed solutions are limited to securitized approaches that lack transparency or the inclusion of accountability for the grave crimes and violations of human rights committed.

Women face the same challenges as all civilians in participating in efforts to end the conflict in addition to some particular to their gender. It is difficult or impossible to conduct civil action in such a militarized and hostile environment. Information is hard to come by, and tends to be accessed through military channels.

In addition, female participation in politics is fundamentally low; thus, women lack the authority to make political decisions. Women may lack protective measures, and face obstacles to participation related to their role in looking after the family, particularly in areas of displacement.

Through the experience of living in a patriarchal society, Sudanese women are well aware that their involvement in negotiations to end the conflict means involvement in pivotal conversations about breaking up the old patriarchal and militarized structures. There are ongoing efforts by women to ensure their participation in efforts to stop the conflict and to choose the correct entry points to guarantee that gender issues are included and agreement. It is particularly important to note women's limited political leverage over the belligerents, which is fundamentally an armed conflict dominated by a militaristic patriarchal mindset, is an obstacle to their participation, especially given that to date there is no negotiation process open to civilian participation. The proliferation of ideological and tribal movements and militias also narrows the opportunities for women to participate.

For real, effective female participation, it is essential that political and civilian leaders believe in the importance of this and prepare to make space for, and prioritize, women.

For real, effective female participation, it is essential that political and civilian leaders believe in the importance of this and prepare to make space for, and prioritize, women. It is no secret civilian leaders may also undermine women, such as by attempting to stereotype them or pressure them to accept elite or merely nominal representation, or to spread doubt around their capacities and capabilities. Some leaders also try to make sure that they select the women who participate in negotiations. This leads to female representation that simply copies male voices, and is unable to differ in opinion from political allies.

Women's efforts to participate must be built on a deep awareness that this task, particularly in light of the conflict's escalation, is a long one that must address the issues of exclusion, discrimination, oppression, inequality, and structural violence.

Essential points on women's participation

When participating in negotiations, women 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 identities be taken into account, particularly since the ongoing conflict has various regional, tribal and ideological dimensions. Women's positions regarding the belligerents also differ. We must pay attention to the marked polarization which has afflicted women, such as attempts to mobilize or recruit them.

- **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 bringing the conflict to an end requires that these parties articulate an integrated vision to encourage female participation in efforts to stop the conflict. It also requires that

women consider the reality of life after the conflict, the experience of the conflict itself and the lessons learnt.

- **Female 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 makers of decisions concerning the full scope of issues discussed, while being clear that feminist and gender issues should be afforded priority during discussions on every axis. Any agreements should provide for the investigation of, and accountability for, crimes of sexual violence and other violations of international humanitarian law committed against women. Other gender-sensitive transitional justice measures, including reparations and redress, must also be included.
- How effective **this participation is will depend on the ability of women's groups to reach a consensus on the basic issues in preparation for the talks.** Work in isolation must be avoided, and efforts must concentrate on making women's issues and gender justice a priority for all. We must make use of international and regional frameworks for promoting female participation in achieving peace (such as Security Council Decision 1325 on Women, Peace and Security).
- It is important to commit to and work towards **at least 50% female participation in negotiations at every stage, including preliminary consultations in the run-up to the consultations on a temporary ceasefire preceding the official one, and any subsequent to an agreement.** The presence of a team of experts on gender at the negotiations must be guaranteed, to ensure that gender issues are integral in any agreement, and that in the stages following the armed conflict, Sudan recovers and builds back with gender issues in mind.

Conclusion

Though the dreadful bloodshed has not yet subsided, all those who truly care about Sudan's future unanimously agree that the priority is to end the conflict.

The direct consequences of the conflict will linger in women's souls, bodies, and memories for decades to come, and will continue to be renewed as the area of the conflict grows and the frequency of violations rises, as the long-term displacement crises continue, social cohesion and security are lost, injustices and divisions grow within society and the doors open to manifestations of tribalism and racism.

There is no denying that moving beyond the ongoing armed conflict in Sudan is a difficult, arduous and long task; 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 a number of disastrous possibilities such as the complete collapse of infrastructure, the fracturing of Sudan's unity, the break-up of the state, and more.

Through their experiences of previous peace treaties, Sudanese women have been convinced 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, will not in any way, shape or form end the armed conflict. Rather, conflicts will continue for as long as the structural causes that produced them remain. Women are also aware that they will not find justice for the sexual violence and other violations they

suffered by putting the perpetrators of those crimes on trial, but by documenting the violations with the support of independent national and international investigatory committees, and by guaranteeing access to international instruments of justice for every woman in Sudan; and promoting military and security reforms.

The work of women in ending the conflict can also be considered a step-change for female participation in public work and political processes, since this participation has taken the form of broad collective action and was not just symbolic or limited to a small number of women; nor was it exclusively done by women of any particular class, political, geographical or racial affiliation.

The conflict has taken its toll on women of all different backgrounds; consequently, the task of ending must also be diverse. It represents a new period of political emancipation for women and may bring the country nearer to diverse political and public participation. The circumstances, therefore, require women to challenge attempts to limit their to mere words; a clear and defined feminist vision must be developed, as well as a program and agenda regarding the new reality and challenges that will come after the conflict is over, and the participation of women in fixing the political malpractices that led to the outbreak of the ongoing conflict and other conflicts besides.