

**SUDANESE WOMEN IN CONFLICTS: ACTIVISTS AND REVOLUTIONISTS,
NOT ONLY VICTIMS**

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Acknowledgement

I would like to concede that I intended this paper to be a study about the implication of crisis on women and ways in which local Sudanese women could be empowered to avert conflicts. I came with a pre-existing perception that women in conflict and crisis are mostly targets of atrocity with limited agency and power. This initial perception derives from common and media-driven portrayals of women and girls only as mere victims of war and crisis. However, my one-sided view was dismantled when I looked deeper into the history, ongoing activism and wider literature that documented the revolutionary effort, leadership and activism of Sudanese women that overthrew oppressive regimes and brought transformative steps toward an equal and humane Sudan. When there is oppression and violence, ordinary civilians and vulnerable populations, including women and girls, indeed suffer the consequences. However, facts and track records reveal that Sudanese people are resilient and determined to have freedom, peace and equality and women are visibly leading that effort.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisors Professors Eric Schwartz and Dipali Mukhopadhyay for their time, flexibility and thoughtfulness in supporting me to complete this paper. Special thanks also go to my friend and mentor Rania Madani, who has tirelessly shared her lived experience and women's activism in her home country of Sudan: you opened my eyes to an entirely new world of activism and kindness of your beloved Sudanese women, whom I have come to admire their spirit and ongoing fight for freedom, equality and justice. Lastly, I want to thank my two children, Az-Erdene and Anir-Erdene, for supporting me throughout the process of the paper and overall graduate journey. You two possess wisdom and compassion beyond your ages, for that I am grateful.

1. Introduction

Historically, women in Sudan have been active in the peace process, grass root civil society, and political participation. They played an important role in informal and local peace processes, negotiations and talks, including efforts on mediating local and domestic conflicts, rebuilding connections, and raising awareness on peacebuilding and peaceful coexistence among different ethnic groups. Despite the heavy and violent governmental responses, civilian women have been actively and openly resisting violence, war and structural barriers. In short, women are at the center of conflict in Sudan, playing active roles in all three revolutions in 1964, 1985 and in 2019. In the recent outbreak of violence in April 2023, women are at the heart of protesting against the violence perpetrated by both the Rapid Support Force militia and Sudanese Armed Force.

Therefore, women's wartime and peacetime experiences in Sudan are not only as victims but as actors that resist violence and promote peace. However, women are sidelined from formal peace processes despite their forefront effort and contribution for negotiations and peace talks. Men-dominated peace architecture and deeply patriarchal system are failing to establish lasting peace in the country. For Sudan to prevent violence and achieve lasting peace, more people centered peace and state-building processes may be necessary. In this regard, civilian women in Sudan could have more meaningful participation, which could be beyond nominal forms of representation.

This paper will study the previous and ongoing civilian women effort for equality, political participation and peace processes. Furthermore, the paper will present findings on pathways and opportunities for more meaningful participation and representation of civilian women for preventing violence in Sudan.

2. Methodology

This paper relies on review of relevant literature, books, reports and video recordings of panel discussion on women's struggle and activism for gender equality in Sudan. Data collection involved searching and reviewing academic works and publications conducted by professors and researchers of Sudan and other countries. I would like to acknowledge the limitation of this paper as I am unfamiliar with the Sudanese context, while the content and analysis of the paper is limited with available literature without field data. My perspective is very much dictated by written and available literature of other scholars which often do not entirely capture the complexity of the reality on the ground. Due to the lack of published literature on the recent war in April 2023, the paper does not cover extensively about the conflict. Citations and references were used accordingly when the paper cited ideas and quotations of the works of others.

3. Contextual Background

a. Historical background of women's activism in Sudan

Women's activism before the independence of Sudan (before 1956)

Historically, women's civil participation and anti-discriminatory activism has long roots in Sudan, which played vital roles in the country's formation, independence, resistance against colonialism and dictatorships. In the time of ancient Sudan, the country was ruled by queens

including Shankdakhito, Amani Shakhito and Amani Terry ¹. In the Turkish era, women resisted laws that dishonored and denied equal rights of women, while playing a monumental role in resisting colonialism and dictatorship. Moreover, women were part of movements and protests that resisted British rule (Ezeldeen, 2022). Sudanese women activism and feminist movement formally started when Sudanese Women Union was formed in 1952, which is before the country declared independence in January 1956. The main demands and activism focused on equal pay, right for voting, education, and political participation (Ezeldeen, 2022). Sudanese women played a critical role in demanding independence from British rule, and subsequently spearheading protests against dictatorial and military regimes of Ibrahim Abboud, Gaafar Numeiri and Omar Al-Bashir. What is to follow presents the role and participation of Sudanese women in the three major revolutions.

Women's role in Sudan's First Revolution (1964)

In October 1964, women participated actively in Sudan's first revolution which overthrew General Ibrahim Abboud who took over the country through military coup in 1958 and established an authoritarian military regime that ruled Sudan from 1958 to 1964. General Abboud's military dictatorship suppressed pluralism and alienated non-Arab and non-Muslim groups, while failing to develop the country upon heavy corruption and mismanagement of resources. Widespread civil unrest emerged in response to the regime's repressive policies, worsening economy and poor living conditions (especially in the southern Sudan that became separated from the united Sudan in 2011). Protests and strikes erupted among urban elites and

¹ Women held respectable and decision-making positions in 800 BC, 11-14th Centuries, 14-19th Centuries. See Elzedeem, p24
https://primo.lib.umn.edu/permalink/01UMN_INST/oqqrhb/cdi_proquest_journals_2769626818

students, and professional women, school girls and housewives participated extensively in the protest in the capital Khartoum, which is widely known as the October Revolution (Al Amin and Magied 2001, Al-Gadal 2016). Women activists, mainly university women and school girls, played a prominent role in the civic protests and civil disobedience campaigns rallying calls for freedom and democracy. High school and college girls marched with male students, breaking gender taboos, joining political protests, and faced arrest and violence by security forces. Female poets like Saadawiya Shaddad wrote revolutionary poems rallying calls for freedom and equality, while student and faculty activists at University of Khartoum declared that they were prepared to sacrifice their lives. Women ululated to motivate protestors and shamed soldiers who used violence against the protestors. Women convened a Congress of the Sudanese Women's Union in 1964 to articulate women's demands for inclusion and gender equality in the new government. The Women's Union was the main women's group with a Marxist ideology that took part in the revolution and advocated for women's right to vote and run for election, which was later granted by the short-lived democratic government in 1965-1969. Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim became the first woman to be elected to Sudan's National Assembly (Al-Nagar and Tonnessen, 2017). Overall, though overlooked in history, Sudanese women were pivotal activists whose contributions were instrumental to the revolution that toppled dictatorial regime and autocracy of General Abboud in 1964.

Women's role in Sudan's Second Revolution (1985)

In April 1985, a revolt against the dictatorial abuse of power of Gaafar Nimeiri, who came to power in 1969 through a military coup that overthrew the democratically elected government. Nimeiri implemented socialist agenda focused on nationalization and Islamic conservatism. In

1983, Nimeiri imposed Sharia Islamic Law that imposed harsh punishments that reduced civil liberties, especially for women and non-Muslims. The Sharia laws were based on the interpretation of Quran that imposed strict bans on public and private life of Muslims, while limiting women's rights in public and workplaces with even amputation for offenses like public indecency. Mass civil resistance and national alliances composed of professionals, trade unions and political parties. Women participated as members of professional unions that organized and prepared for the general strike that took place during the revolution. Many women took part in the demonstrations, while housewives allowed secret political meetings in their homes. However, women's rights were not at the forefront of the revolution as the priority of the strike focused on taking down the regime. The new transitional government excluded women from political decision making based on the notion that they were not a trade union or political party, which discouraged women (Al-Nagaar, 2019). The new civilian government headed by Sadiq Al-Mahdi under the transitional government signed numbers of international human rights conventions² although overlooking the UN Convention against Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)³.

During the civilian democratic rules, women representation in government remained negligible with no female ministers or members of parliaments. As per activist Asha Al-Karib, "women's presence in the transitional and democratic periods (1964-1969 and 1986-1989) was invisible. There was no effort for women as a collective and our agenda was dissolved in the political agenda (Young, 2020). As with the first revolution, women were once again at the frontline of the revolution and participated in all levels from organizing, developing declarations and

² The brief democratic government signed International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (1986) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1986).

³ Sudan still has not ratified CEDAW (as of January 2024).

marching on streets to provide shelter, aid and food. Women's role and participation however got discouraged once again due to patriarchal norms and lack of party support for female candidates (Al-Nagaar and Tonnessen, 2019). This was reflected in women's political participation during the Al-Bashir regime where women activists who belonged to pro-government political parties prioritized the party agenda over women's agenda.

Women's role in Sudan's Third Revolution (2018)

The third revolution started in December 2018, with huge protests in different regions in the country, with a significant participation of women of all ages. In April 2019, this third revolution (also known as the December Revolution) overthrew the dictator and self-appointed head of state Omar Al-Bashir who came to power in the 1989 military coup. His 30-year rule was lengthy and repressive as the regime implemented an even harsher form of Sharia law that cracked down civil liberty, including stoning for adultery and abandonment of religion. The Al-Bashir regime also gave more powers to police and local judges to act as morality enforcers targeting women's dress and public mixing of genders, extensively abusing human rights. As a result, thousands of people have been flogged, fined, and jailed for minor acts. Moreover, economic mismanagement worsened poverty and inequality, and the Al-Bashir regime committed atrocities in the Darfur conflict in 2003 such as sexual violence, ethnically targeted killing (genocide) and burning villages. This led to mass protests that erupted against the Al-Bashir regime, and this time women from various classes, ethnicities and statuses participated in the revolution. Professional and elite women actively participated in the protests, while young girls were at the forefront of street sit-ins and peaceful demonstrations, and housewives and street vendors distributed food to the protestors (Lavrillex, 2019). Sixty-one percent of the Sudanese population were under the

age of 25, and young people constituted the majority of the public marches. Women performed ululations, poems and songs to uplift the protestors and defy the ruthless leaders. Protests spread from southeast and northeast parts of the country to the entire country with slogans “Freedom, Peace and Justice”, “Justice Fall, That’s All”, and “Revolution is the People’s Choice” (Abdalla et al, 2023). Women were the visible leaders in the third revolution which resulted in the fall of the 30-year oppressive regime of Al-Bashir. This was yet another case of Sudanese women’s resistance that successfully overturned an oppressive regime.

Women’s role in the current conflict (April 2023- Present)

On 15 April, 2023, a conflict erupted between Sudanese Armed Force (SAF) and a paramilitary group known as Rapid Support Force (RSF) for control of the state and its resources. According to Center for Preventive Action, the current conflict that started in the capital Khartoum has now covered the entire country and claimed over 10,000 lives and displaced over 5.6 million people⁴ (Global Conflict Tracker, 2023). The power struggle between the rivaling two leaders General Al-Burhan (current de facto head of state) and Mohamad Hamdan “Hemedti” (the head of RSF) resulted in brutal and indiscriminate attacks on civilians with both forces committing atrocities including targeted killing, sexual violence and forced disappearance in many regions, including Khartoum, West Darfur and even former safe havens such as El Geniena city, Wad Mandani city and Gezira village. While Sudanese civilians are currently displaced and aimlessly moving for safety, civil society organizations, both in and outside the country, are very much active in condemning both military forces, documenting atrocities and supporting victims of the expanded conflict. On 24 December, 2023, thirty three women-lead civil society organizations made a joint

⁴ See more Civil War in Sudan, by Center for Preventive Action, 2023
<https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/power-struggle-sudan>

statement urging the UN and international actors to implement gender-responsive civilian protection framework, establish international criminal tribunal to hold criminals accountable, launch civilian-led conflict resolution process, provide sufficient humanitarian aid, and mediate dialogue between the RSF and SAF (SIHA, 2023)⁵. Amidst the gender-based violence (GBV) and other atrocities that target women and girls, local women-led civil society organizations are actively responding to the needs of the affected communities and providing support to those at risk. Local women's network remains resilient in the face of constant atrocity to provide assistance and referral to GBV survivors. Since the escalation of the current conflict, women peace activists in Sudan have been actively calling for peaceful democracy, and their key advocacy message is not to appease the militias and the aggressor. They call for accountability for the criminal actions of both forces while demonstrating against including the perpetrators at the negotiations tables (Busari, 2023). The ongoing collective feminist activism is taking place across the horn of Africa, especially among the Sudanese diaspora. The deep history of women activism for peace is the main reason that the current adversity is failing to silence women's resilience.

Power and agency of women during conflict: women's civil activism and cultural practices (Darfur Hakkamat)

i) Women's civil activism

Sudanese women's efforts and civil society activism played an instrumental role in organizing grassroots movements and demonstrations during all the conflicts that occurred under different

⁵ See more Statement of Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA network) <https://sihanet.org/statement-condemnation-of-harassment-and-intimidation-of-women-peace-activists-and-the-rapidly-shrinking-civic-space-in-sudan-copy/>

dictatorships. Overall, the women's movement in 1951-1971 was centered on women's right for labor and politics. The women's grassroot movements were in the forefront of resisting oppression, conflict and violence during military regimes, civil wars, military coups and ethnic cleansings. This includes the longest war of 1972-2005 in Africa between the northern and southern part of Sudan, which was ended by the secession of South Sudan in 2011. Due to the oppressive Sharia Islamic law during the Numeiri (1969-1985) and Al-Bashir (1989-2019) regimes, there were a lot of conflicts in different parts of the country, including the wars in Darfur that started in 2003, South Kordofan 2013, and the Blue Nile 2013 (Al-Nagaar and Tonnessen, 2020). What follows explains women civil society's activism and their institutionalization during the two main dictatorships that impacted the country, women in particular.

Women have contributed to the revolutionary efforts that brought down the Numeri military regime while openly raising gender issues and women's right for labor, education and civil participation. Between 1972 and 1989, the women's movement gained public freedom resulting in the formation of various women's associations and political parties which advanced women's participation in education, politics, trade union and academic arenas. During the brief democratic regime between 1986 and 1989, 16 women's NGOs were established and women achieved top positions in government and executive bodies, which further advocated women's health and education. Moreover, women participated in coalitions and peace missions, while pushing CEDAW and other human rights conventions for ratification, though not successful in ratifying CEDAW (Elzedein, 2022).

A relapse of women and civil society activism took place during the 30-year Al-Bashir regime between 1989-2019 following the Islamic Front government abolishment of the democratic system in Sudan. The Al-Bashir regime led the government for 30 years in which the country was in domestic conflict and international isolation. Women were disproportionately governed in public spaces, which resulted in arbitrary arrests, beatings and other various deprivations of women under the Public Order Law⁶. Women resisted the law inside major cities including Khartoum and Darfur, and outside the cities and faced violent confrontation from the government which used detention, abuse and rape against women activists. However, when the government realized that international communities preferred to work with nongovernmental entities rather than the government, they slowly opened a space for nongovernmental organizations to be screened and re-registered. Women civil society used this space to strengthen their activism which instituted the solid ground for engaging and participating in the protests that resulted in overthrowing the 30-year Islamic dictatorship regime by Omar Al-Bashir between 1989-2019 (Elzedeem, 2022).

Furthermore, the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) has given even more space for women's activism to flourish, although the process of the signature of the agreement has overlooked women's role and presence. After the CPA was signed in 2005 and before the independence of South Sudan in 2011, various feminist movements emerged including "Disgust Movement" and "No to Women Oppression" which contributed to overthrowing the Islamist

⁶ Public Order Law was based on harsher interpretation of Quran and heavily based on Sharia Islamic Law which imposed strict moral order targeting women's dress, movement, behavior and public mixing, and offences included harsh physical punishment, fine and jailing. Public Order Law was repelled in 2019 after the women-led revolution that toppled Bashir regime. See more See Elzedeem, 27
https://primo.lib.umn.edu/permalink/01UMN_INST/oqqrhb/cdi_proquest_journals_2769626818

regime. Many other youth-lead protests and movements including Democracy First and Change Now included women activists who played key roles in organizing and marching of the peaceful street marches. Peace negotiations between 2002 and 2005 enabled numerous nongovernmental and independent groups to be formally registered and provided space for 37 NGOs that worked on women's issues. Out of the six women networks established during this favorable time, five groups advocated for peace and women's participation. Among them are Women's Empowerment for Peace Networks (SWEP) and Women in Development networks. Moreover, a major regional network called Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), which is a network organization consisting of over 100 women's organizations across the region of the Horn of Africa, was also established (Yusra et al, 2023).

While women civil activism has continued in different regions, especially where there are conflicts, women networked among their different levels of CSOs in different regions. They have also included women with diverse backgrounds (age, class, ethnicity, etc.). This played an important role in having women of all ages take part in the street protests in the December revolution, in many shapes and forms, including 18-45 year-old young women constituting a majority of the demonstrators and less than 60 year-old women also participated in the street demonstrations, while elderly women provided food, shelter, funds, emotional support and other accommodations in their capacities (Al-Nagaar, 2020).

Following the greater synergy of diverse women civil society activists and well-established networks, they were well positioned to advance women's agenda and demand women's rights and civil society spaces, namely, MANSAM (Arabic abbreviation for Coalition of Women in

Civil Societies and Political Parties), Al Harisat organization, Noon, 50/50, Gain Women Full Rights, Beja Women Initiative, the Eastern Women, Nuba Mountains Women, Women of Darfur and women involved in the Juba Peace Agreement. All these movements and coalitions demanded equal rights and inclusion of women. So, women have been actively and collaboratively participating in actions and movements to gain control of their lives and peace for the country. Furthermore, in 2019 and after the transitional government was established, the Resistance Revolutionary Committee (RRC) was formalized and led demonstrations demanding democratization, justice and peace achievements in Sudan (Ezeldeen, 2022). Women are active members of these establishments and movements as they organize and participate in the demonstrations, while also providing medicine, food and development of declarations.

Overall, women's movement and coalition are motivated and flourished by the common purpose for change to achieve equality, demanding (i) ratification of CEDAW, African Union Human Rights and Women's Rights Bill and (ii) changes in domestic laws to end discrimination against women, including labor law, criminal law, family law and budget law.

The demands and the result of the women's movement

The demonstrations and main demand of the women's activism in 2018 revolution included: demand for justice for human rights violations including rape, arrest, shooting, and disappearance of peaceful protestors; investigation and change of top police officers who conducted violations; change in laws for NGOs, unions; criminalization of female genital

mutilation (FGM), eliminating criminal law articles that was used to harass and abuse women⁷; change of family law for Muslims; and request for women in decision making and executive office and reach 40% quota for women to be in the ministries as per the constitution (Elzedeen, 2022).

Despite the changes needed time and resources, few of the above demands were achieved, namely: strongly pushed laws that criminalized FGM; changes in laws enabled divorced mother to travel with children without the father's consent; endorsing of action plan to implement UNSCR 1325⁸; passing of decisions to target financial assistance to economically marginalized female-headed households; passing of decisions for banks to target and support with credit loans for poor women; appointment of five women to the ministries and two women in the Presidential Council (which was for the first time in Sudan). As per Elzedeen, women and women civil society's effective, fierce participation to the 2018 revolution were highly recognized and considered to be a women-led revolution which had a positively remarkable achievement that broke the norms for women to openly take part in demonstrations and get respect and acknowledgement (2022).

⁷ Criminal Act, Article 149 (1) "There shall be deemed to commit the offence of rape, whoever makes sexual intercourse by the way of adultery...with any person without his consent. (2) Consent shall not be recognized where the offender has custody or authority over the victim".

Criminal Act, Article 151 (1), "There shall be deemed to commit the offence of gross indecency, whoever commits any act contrary to another person's modesty... may also be punished with whipping, not exceeding forty lashes, and he may also be punished with imprisonment, not exceeding over one year, or with the fine".

Criminal Act, Article 152 (1) "Whoever commits, in public space, acts or conducts himself in an indecent manner, or a manner contrary to the public morality, or wears an indecent, or immoral dress, which causes annoyance to the public feelings, shall be punished, with whipping, not exceeding forty lashes, or with fine, or with both".

⁸ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, adopted in 2000. The resolution promotes women's meaningful participation and inclusion in peace process.

ii) Women's power and agency: cultural practices (Darfur Hakkamat)

In order to give a brief context about the particularity of the case of Darfur and the causes of its genocide that made women's role even more central to peace building and civil activism, it is essential to mention the background on Darfur and its culturally rich practices especially by women who played and continue to play an important public role (UN Sudan Report, 2023). Darfur is the largest region of Sudan that suffered from armed conflict and civil unrest due to active insurgencies and racially targeted ethnic cleansing in 2003. The central Sudanese government long excluded Darfur from political and resource distribution, which further triggered insurgency in 2003 after years of failed peaceful attempts for inclusion. The central government's refusal to the activists' demand and engagement in dialogue led the Darfuri activists to apply armed struggle against the central government. The government responded with violent and racially targeted killing that resulted in 300,000 deaths and over 2 million displacements within the country. The Darfur region, especially the rural villages and ethnic minorities, suffered gender-based violence, including mass rape. The mass atrocity was acknowledged as a humanitarian crisis by the UN, and ICC issued an arrest warrant for the President Al-Bashir⁹, while scholars widely described it as "ethnic cleansing", "slaughter", and "genocide" (Haggan et al, 2009).

Alongside the main conflict between the central government and Darfuri insurgencies, armed conflicts erupted among different tribes and local ethnic groups in Darfur which has a long root

⁹ The ICC warrant to arrest President Omar Al-Bashir was issued in 2009, although the President retained power until 2019. The warrant is available at: https://www.icc-cpi.int/en_menus/icc/structure

even before the country's independence in 1956. The central government has a prolonged history of siding with one side of clashing tribes in Darfur to gain further favor upon incorporating Arab militias when countering the insurgency. One of the militia was the Janjaweed paramilitary group that committed most of the atrocities during the Darfur violent conflict in 2003 (Khalid, 2009). The central elite used mainly two tactics in Darfur throughout history, which were divide-and-rule and divide-and-destroy tactics, which triggered internal power struggle and violence. Darfuri women have been part of the conflict not as mere victims, but also as actors in reconciliation and mediation (El-Battahani, 2009).

As per Currey, certain women, known as Al-Hakkamat, within all tribes in Darfur have had abilities and power to make their voice heard and participate in decision making in times of war and peace. Breaking the common stereotype portraying women as mere victims, Al-Hakkamat women were seen as real actors that agitated conflicts at times, and at other times settling disputes and forging peace in the community (2018). Historically, when intertribal conflicts erupt over land, livestock and grazing land, this category of women (Al-Hakkamat) mediated between warring tribes and leveraged maternal authority, wisdom, and Quranic principles that brokered agreements. During the Darfur conflict, Al-Hakkamat protected the civilians by providing shelter, aid and early warning of attacks. They called for peace and pressed for humanitarian access, while holding dialogues, joint women's peace marches and negotiating ceasefires among local tribes. Al-Hakkamat women use traditional arbitration of disputes helped and moral principles (based on the Quran) to reduce violence¹⁰. However, their participation was stalled at high-level peace talks such as the Doha peace agreement.

¹⁰ See Musa, see introduction and chapter 2 for insightful information <https://boydellandbrewer.com/blog/african-studies/hawks-and-doves-in-sudans-armed-conflict/>

Challenges to women activism and movement

Globally, women are underrepresented in politics and their advancement in political life is slow. As of January 2024, there are only 30 women as heads of state, and women hold only 26% of all national parliamentary positions. Surveying 141 countries, only 3 countries reached 50% representation of women in local government and (UN Women, 2023)¹¹. It indicates that politics is a men-nominated field that traditionally marginalized women. Various systematic barriers and discriminatory practices based on gender hinder women from participation in politics, namely: socio-economic factors, family responsibility, access to funding, societal norms, religion and electoral system. Studies assert that all religions foster female subordination which eventually affects women's participation in politics especially in countries that have vague separation between religion and politics (Ara, 2019). Moreover, one of the widely shared impediments of women's political participation is their access to finance to fund their political affairs and campaign. As most of the major funders and elite corporate donors are male dominated and prefer to fund other men and their agenda, women generally face the structural barriers even in the funding sphere which then results in lower participation of women in politics (Gomez and D'Antuono, 2023).

As in the case of Sudan, women's activism and revolutions faced various challenges and limitations from reaching their full potential. Among them are intersectionality and differences among Sudanese women, local norms and societal structures that emphasize inferiority of women, patriarchal system of unequal division of labor, conflict and displacement, and weak political representation and participation. Overall, women's activism and contribution to

¹¹ See more "Facts and Figures: Women's Leadership and Political Participation", UN Women 2023
https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures#_edn1

Sudanese independence, revolutions in 1964 and 1985, and most notably to the 2018 revolution were substantial; they still face a sociocultural system and non-democratic environment throughout its 68 years of independence. One of the challenges is the prevailing culture that gives men greater right to make decisions and have control over women and family, while women are obligated to maintain order, obedience and image to show honor. Culturally, Sudan is conservatively and unequally dividing labor and decision making between men and women, imposing reproductive and other domestic household roles as wife and mother, restraining them from paid labor and sidelining women from other meaningful participation at the decision-making level.

4. Part 2: Sidelining women from peace efforts and negotiations

Women around the world are underrepresented in politics and public life. According to the UN Resolution on Women's Political Participation, "*Women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women*" (UN General Assembly Resolution, 2011). Therefore, sidelining women in politics is a shared struggle among every county in the world, not only Sudan.

Despite women's revolutionary efforts and leadership at the critical turning points in Sudanese history, the country's politics are controlled by men and military. Hence, Sudanese women are extremely underrepresented in national political bodies, decision-making and peace-making processes as the country has been dominated by men (Aziz and Alfaki, 2021).

Although Sudanese women played a key role in toppling military dictatorships before (1964, 1985 and 2019), their contribution and presence were quickly sidelined in the peace making and political negotiations that followed (Al-Nagar and Tonnessen, 2019). No women participated in the 1972 Addis Ababa negotiation¹² that ended Sudan's first civil war, and the agreement was signed by male politicians and military officers. During the North-South peace process that established the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), women made less than 5% of negotiators and only 12% of overall delegates. 2011 Doha Peace Process on Darfur was a negotiation among male military leaders and rebel commanders, excluding Darfuri civil society voices and grassroot women's coalition¹³. The same incident of women exclusion happened during the CPA between 2002 and 2005, where women participation has been sidelined and overlooked during this major agreement which resulted in the independence of South Sudan. The slogans used by young women and protestors during Sudanese women demands in the 2019 revolution reflects the reality and exclusion of women as it goes:

"You thank us in demonstrations and forget about us in negotiations"

(Al-Nagar and Tonnessen, 2021).

Sadly, there is a pattern in Sudan that women are excluded from political and negotiation decision making process afterwards despite their prominent roles in protest movements and revolutions (Yusra et al, 2023). Most of the exclusions from such political and peace negotiation processes are justified by the lack of experience in politics, which motivated civil society to demand for more political representation of women in the transitional government. The younger

¹² Learn more from "What factors contributed to the failure of the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement, 1972"
https://primo.lib.umn.edu/permalink/01UMN_INST/oqqrhb/cdi_cristin_nora_10852_48929

¹³ Read more on The Doha Document for Peace in Darfur, 2011 <https://unamid.unmissions.org/doha-document-peace-darfur>

generation of women and girls often use the term “feminism” which is not generally welcomed and used by the older generation of women activists (Al-Nagaar and Tonnessen, 2021). This indicates how deeply embedded the patriarchy is in all spheres that goes beyond politics in Sudan, showing that there is a perception gap even among women movements and groups. Despite the gap, minimal space and regard for young women activists, the younger civil society group expanded and mobilized synergy by establishing Sudanese Civic and Political Groups (known as MANSAM) which consists of eight political women’s groups, 26 civil society and young women’s organizations, 16 women’s sectors of political parties and 17 civil groups including unions and activists. MANSAM has made a declaration demanding representation of women in government institutions, including executive, judicial and legislative bodies while giving consideration to young women and professionals (Yusra et al, 2023). The young women activists perspective and struggle regarding the age-based discrimination could be heard as below:

“This general gap is indicated in the monopoly of older women in decision-making positions, whether in political parties or women's groups. This has created an over-representation of older women and under-representation of young women in politics. Oftentimes, young women feel that they are not heard by older women and that their concerns are ignored, and these are just justified by their lack of experience”.

Young activist (Interview in Blue Nile State, 2021, c cited from A Regional Insight into Sudanese Women’s Participation in the December Revolution, 2023)

“The generation gap arose due to the tension caused by exclusion of young women from leadership without giving them opportunities to work and build experiences. The guardianship of old women is behind exclusion of the young women from meetings, from participating in public events under the pretext of their young age, lack of experience, and lack of needed wisdom. Also, older women, in advancing their agenda, neglect the interests and priorities of young women”.

Young interlocutor (Interview in Blue Nile State, cited from A Regional Insight into Sudanese Women’s Participation in the December Revolution, 2023)

It can be perceived that the emergence of young women’s activism and motivation for inclusion is not a response to the oppressive political system, but to a deep patriarchy and generational gap in the civil society sphere. Young women’s awareness and effort to dismantle this age-based preference and discrimination calls for advocacy and capacity building for civil societies and women grassroots activism.

The large participation of women in the December revolution (2018) is thereby significant as it entails women’s entry into a domain that has been predominantly male for the majority of Sudan’s post-independence period. Women have seen themselves excluded from political parties and governing institutions, and therefore their activism has been most evident within the sphere of civil society (Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2017). The exclusion of women from decision making or negotiation tables despite their role and contribution in the revolution showcases that Sudan has a deep patriarchal mentality. Women’s presence in policy making and negotiation table would surely have stronger influence for mandating the country to ratify CEDAW and amend

laws that demand accountability for sexual violence and gender discrimination during and after the revolution.

However, their public presence, especially in the streets, has been controlled by a public order regime (SIHA, 2009). Therefore, taking to the streets was a highly political and anti-regime act that challenged the idea of a masculine public domain. It can be interpreted that Sudanese political culture is deeply patriarchal and thus the role of women in higher decision-making levels are excluded based on the argument that women and men are biologically different. As per Reardon, there are two prepositions to achieve human security, to replace patriarchy with gender equality for one, and the other is that nonviolent structure must be “favored” to resolve conflict and abolish war (2019). An authentic national security is human security, and that no patriarchal military system could assure it. Conversely, it is the military system that threatens the human security and wellbeing under the facade to either protect national security against foreign advance (Reardon, 2019). Sudan has a prolonged history of failing to deliver national stability and human security for Sudanese people in general, which resulted in women suffering from various levels of insecurities. Therefore, there is a need to change the status quo.

5. Part 3: Pathways for women’s meaningful participation

Abrogating patriarchal status quo

Sudan has witnessed many changes and progress including overthrowing a Al-Bashir regime that systematically attacked women and girls for 30 years, increasing attention for women’s rights and space for civil society, adoption of a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325) in 2020, gaining support for possible CEDAW ratification and abolishing the

Public Order Law that harshly dictated women's movement and dress code. However, experts and civil society activists still call out for more meaningful participation and inclusion of women at decision making and peace processes, not just symbolic representation. Women's activism often illuminates the point that their effort and intention was to change the overall Bashir regime that practiced unequal and oppressive rule, not just to overthrow Bashir. The following statements reveal the need for more authentic inclusion and participation of women for peace process in Sudan¹⁴:

“Women have always been in the forefront of the frontlines as advocates, protestors, and leaders of civil society organizations as mediators and negotiators. I think women are portrayed as victims, and very often, that is the case, but it is the positive side that we also need to emphasize, to make it understood that women have a large, more than 50% role to play”.

Dr. Vera Jelinek, Divisional Dean of NYU School of Professional Studies Center for Global Affairs

“As we all around the world, as we see currently in Ukraine and Argentina, we see it all around the world. Women are playing a crucial indeed essential role in the struggle for human rights, there can be no peace or prosperity, or sustainable development without women”.

Dr. Sylvia Maier, Clinical Associate Professor, NYU School of Professional Studies Center for Global Affairs

¹⁴ Watch panel “The Role of Women in Struggle for Sudan: Activists and Leaders” held online in 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkqF9-TqOD4>

“What is happening in Sudan now is that we have the military and other militia groups completely dominating politics and the economy and we have the Sudanese people in the streets who are trying to regain control over their lives”.

Dr. Bakry M. Elmedni, Associate Professor, School of Business, Public Administration and Information Sciences, LIU

*“Customs and traditions, legislations, and religion are the main obstacles for women to effectively and actively participate in political and social life in Sudan. Women do exist in the political bodies but **they do not exist in decision-making positions so its representation, not participation**”.*

Enaz Muzamel, Madaniya Organization

“We say no negotiation, no partnership, and no legitimacy to the military but we also need to say that to the patriarchal values that remain within our revolutionary bodies taking in mind that our resistance committees refused to name the international women’s day protest the feminist march”.

Marine Alneel, Sudanese Activist

“Women in Sudan have a great history of leading initiatives whether in peacebuilding or in bringing stability. Women have been successful in coming up with a common agenda for women when it comes to political participation, economic reforms, and security sector reforms”.

Hanadi Abdelhalim, UN Women Sudan

Overall, Sudan is a patriarchal society, and strict when it comes to women even after their active participation in revolutions and activism throughout the history of the country. Reflecting the women's active role in revolutions and demonstrations, there is a pattern for the women to be sidelined and excluded from decision and peace-making processes. Therefore, the practice and mentality to silence and sideline women from the decision-making process, despite their forefront role and effort in the revolutions, should be tackled from the root cause that is deeply ingrained in the culture, religion and social structure.

As per UN Women Sudan's evaluation report in 2023, more support is needed for the women's network and civil society, especially focusing on disadvantaged and marginalized women, including those outside Khartoum. While the UN Women country office supported women's movement and a broader democratic transition, funders are withdrawing from the country especially given the recent outbreak of conflict in April 2023 (2023). Moreover, the evaluation recommended to assess the changes required and prioritize efforts to provide longer-term and larger projects to strengthen capacity and maximize interventions to support grassroots and rural women-led organizations and activism for the women's political participation and advance Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. This effort includes bridging together women's organizations and facilitating opportunities for diverse women to engage with institutions and accountability mechanisms (12).

Specifically in the area of WPS, UN Women provided technical support, capacity building workshops, and facilitated the participation of women in peace negotiations. As a result, more

women are influencing the process to deliver on the country's commitment on WPS (17).

Women participated in the development of the Blue Nile State Action Plan on UNSCR 1325¹⁵ and the 2020 negotiations with the transitional government peace negotiations, which included women participation in major peace negotiations, namely, 26 women in Juba peace negotiations, 120 women in the Blue Nile State Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 (19).

Overall, UN Women's technical support show contribution for more women's participation in peace processes and talks, the authorities and national stakeholders are still failing to address systematic violence, discrimination against women and impunity for sexual violence against women in Sudan. Therefore, civil society and activists are still calling for women's meaningful participation in peace and political process to overcome the patriarchal status quo.

As war erupted in April 2023, both the Sudanese armed force (Sudanese Armed Force) and the militia (Rapid Force Support, the former Janjaweed) have committed sexual violence against women in Khartoum, Darfur and the rest of rural Sudan¹⁶. This current conflict is a reflection of decades of military occupation and dictatorial rule under the facade of national security, and it is the result of violence against women and girls. The gendered nature of violence against civilians and sexual violence against women are still taking place even after a generations of activism against violence against women and children. Though the country made seemingly positive step towards enhancing women's participation in wider social and political spheres in Sudan with the help of UN Women's technical support and other international organizations' efforts, more long-

¹⁵ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (in year 2000) that urged all actors to include women in the peace and security process. Sudan adopted the National Action Plan to implement the resolution (in 2020).

¹⁶ Read More <https://sihanet.org/statement-by-ms-hala-al-karib-at-the-un-security-council-open-debate-on-women-peace-and-security/>

term and innovative intervention may be necessary to realize gender equality and women's empowerment in a highly militarized and patriarchal system with lack of political will and support. As per Reardon, war and violence against women is a manifestation of patriarchy and thus replacing patriarchy with gender-equal and humane society (2019).

Improving women's direct participation (not only representation)

There is a growing consensus that women's direct and meaningful participation in peace negotiations positively contribute to higher implementation rates and longer lasting peace (Kraus & Branfors, 2018). Statistical research on women's participation provides more evidence that post conflict peace is more durable when women with voice, as negotiator, mediator, witness or even signatory, directly participates (and not just represents) the peace negotiation (Caprioli et al, 2010). Women's participation could increase the probability of violence ending within one year by 24.9% (Stone, 2014). Research on gender inequality and armed conflict, found a positive correlation between women inclusion and lasting peace. While gender inequality is a strong predictor of armed conflict, which suggests that gender equality is a strong predictor of a country's peace (Hudson et al, 2002). The research also suggests that peace processes should include diverse women groups including women civil society activists and representatives of dynamics of women networks and communities. The quality, effectiveness and durability of peace depends on women's inclusion and authentic presence in decision making.

Extensive studies indicate that inclusion of women and young people strengthen a country's likelihood and capacity to avert conflicts. Some quantitative and qualitative studies suggest that political exclusion leads to violence. The degree to which women are included in political and

social life determines the country's likelihood for violence and conflict (Vogt et al. 2015 cited in Pathways for Peace, 2018). Therefore, gender inclusion is instrumental to reducing the risk of violent conflict. Other empirical studies have documented the positive role women can play: (i) meaningful participation of women in peace negotiations significantly improve the peace negotiation outcome with lasting peace (Paffenholz, 2015), (ii) including women as negotiators, mediators and signatories increase probability of agreement lasting 15 years by 35% (Stone, 2015), and (iii) increasing number of women with quality participation, instead of quantity, should be the target for more effective and lasting peace (Anderlini 2007). Given the evidence and studies showing authentic and meaningful participation of women determines the propensity for averting violence and conflict, more effort and resources could be dedicated to advocate for more women's participation.

6. Concluding remarks

Women have agency and a proven track record of resistance and revolutions in Sudan. Though women did suffer disproportionately throughout conflicts in Sudan, women also played an important role not just as victims or witnesses of conflicts and wars, but as agents and advocates in the peace process. The 2019 revolution that overthrew the oppressive Bashir regime is widely recognized as a women-led revolution given that over 70% of the protestors were women (Sydney, 2020).

Women worldwide are marginalized from political life, and are struggling to ensure effective and direct participation especially despite all the positive results associated with their participation. The particular dynamics in the case of Sudan is that its politics and official decision-making processes were traditionally controlled by men and military that often undervalued and excluded

women's participation and agenda. The male-dominated and militarized culture of the country's politics constrained Sudanese women's space and voice in their social and political lives despite women's expansive and transformative roles and activism at the grassroots levels. Although women endured years of harsh Sharia law and other atrocities of war, women have successfully participated and challenged state-sanctioned practices such as culture of male domination, Public Order Laws and FGM. Despite women's participation and progress made, men exclude women from critical meetings and decision-making bodies such as the Sovereign Council, which is the highest decision-making body. Women are still fighting for equal rights and representation. Despite significant cultural and legal barriers, Sudanese women have shown resistance and fight for greater equality.

Sudan has diverse ethnic groups with various tribal customs, and one of them is Al-Hakkamat in Darfur region. The Al-Hakkamat are women who possess wisdom and ability and are respected elders in tribes across the region who play an instrumental role in mediating between herders and farmers when there are conflicts over grazing and farming lands. Although Al-Hakkamat women have many social and artistic duties, their ability to communicate across tribes and culture is well documented. Given this local and respected community-based peace practice, there could be potential synergy between such grassroots effort and national peacebuilding. Disarmament and conflict resolution could reflect the Al-Hakkamat's local dispute resolution techniques, improve early warning networks and coordinate peace strategies. Largely, integrating traditional and women-led wisdom might enable the country to achieve gender-inclusive and comprehensive peacebuilding.

War and conflicts are often pursued in the international or national system which are achieved through war-prone, patriarchal and militarized nation state systems. This obstructs human security and gender equality (Reardon, 2003). Therefore, dominant concepts about security need to be transformed into a framework that is committed to achieving human security for all people, including women and girls. Reardon argues that “authentic national security is human security...[which] militarized system of state security can ever really assure it” (2003). Reflecting, it is indeed the military system of state security that threatens and destroys human and civilian security. Armed conflicts affect everyone including women, children and other vulnerable populations. In the context of Sudan, the work that patriarchy assigned is military occupation and regime, unresolved grievances, wars and conflicts. Moreover, the misogynistic military dictatorship has marginalized women, especially from public roles, and asserted unequal values for women and men. Therefore, lasting peace comes when there is transformation from militarized state security to people-center (human) security. A major step towards that transformation is eliminating legally sanctioned gender inequality and the patriarchal system.

Due to the latest conflict that broke out in April 2023, Sudan is facing severe deterioration and a significant amount of peace efforts and humanitarian assistance are necessary to stop the fighting and rebuild the country. As of January 2024, over 131,000 people died, 7.6 million people became internally displaced and nearly 25 million people required humanitarian assistance. The fighting has also caused damage to over 70% of the health care facilities in the country, while devastating other critical infrastructures including water, schools, and electricity¹⁷ (Center for Disaster Philanthropy, 2024). Therefore, the country is in dire need and funding for humanitarian

¹⁷ See more Sudan Humanitarian Crisis, Center for Disaster Philanthropy, 2024
<https://disasterphilanthropy.org/disasters/sudan-humanitarian-crisis/>

assistance and refugee response. Several peace dialogues and attempts were initiated by neighboring countries, coalition groups, the U.S, and Saudi Arabia to end the conflict, but no result has been achieved. Conversely, artillery firing between two sides have been intensified in the capital city, while mass atrocities against civilians including ethnic cleansings in Darfur region have been documented (Reuters, 2024). As atrocities against civilians and devastation of any war calls for humanitarian aids, it is important to note that humanitarian assistance and external interventions should not compromise agency and rights of the local people and actors or especially exacerbate problems. As per Mandaani, humanitarian order lacks to recognize people “...as bearers of rights and active agents in their own emancipation, but as passive beneficiaries of an external ‘responsibility to protect’...[and] recipients of charity” (2010). Therefore, in order to avoid unintended negative impacts of humanitarian and development assistance, future interventions should be carefully designed and carried with the principle of “do no harm”.

7. References

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8. List of Acronyms

CEDAW – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

FGM – Female Genital Mutilation

ICC – International Criminal Court

MANSAM – Arabic abbreviation for Coalition of Women in Civil Society and Political Party

RRC – Resistance Revolutionary Committee

RSF – Rapid Support Force

SAF – Sudanese Armed Force

SWEP – Sudanese Women Empowerment for Peace

UNSCR – United Nations Security Council Resolution

WPS – Women, Peace and Security