



Women's Movement and the Challenges of Democratic Transition and Peace

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Introduction

This paper examines the role of Sudanese women in shaping peacebuilding and political process during the country's democratic transition. It argues that women's interests must be addressed not only through symbolic representation but through substantive reforms in programs, laws, and budgets. Crucially, this includes women from marginalized regions and communities, whose voices should not be reduced to case studies for reports or donor appeals, but recognized as active agents in defining priorities and strategies for peace and rights.

The intertwined issues of war, peace, and constitution-making lie at the heart of Sudan's transitional phase. Achieving a just and lasting peace is essential for the success of the transition. Historically, one of the main reasons democracies has failed in Sudan since independence has been the neglect of peace as a national priority. Prolonged wars have obstructed political, social, and economic development, while authoritarian regimes have exploited conflict to violate human rights and squander national resources. Women particularly those in conflict-affected areas bear the greatest burdens of war, yet their participation in peace processes has remained minimal. Any peace process that overlooks women's concerns or denies them a decisive role in setting priorities will inevitably remain incomplete.

First: Women and War in Sudan

Violations and abuses against Sudanese women during wartime are neither new nor confined to the ongoing conflict that erupted in April 2023. From Sudan's first post-independence war in 1955, reports documented systematic abuses committed by the Sudanese army, with women consistently bearing the brunt of violence. During the second civil war, beginning in 1983, similar practices were carried out by the Sudan Armed Forces and allied militias, often with tacit approval from leadership. These acts amounted to forms of modern slavery, intertwined with entrenched racism and discrimination deeply rooted in Sudanese society yet persistently denied by political elites.

Even within emerging women's movements and activist circles, selectivity has been evident. During the current war, for example, many focus exclusively on violations committed by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), while overlooking abuses perpetrated by the Sudan Armed Forces and their

allied radical militias. This pattern of impunity has long been entrenched, as seen in the Nuba Mountains during the 1990s and in Darfur after 2003, where crimes were committed without accountability. Disturbingly, some commanders who perpetrated such acts later ascended to political leadership positions.

Women are often described as natural peacemakers, and much literature emphasizes their interest in peace and their suitability for promoting it. Yet these assumptions have rarely translated into practice. Women's involvement in peacebuilding and constitution-making has remained marginal. In Sudan, most initiatives concerning women and peace have been externally driven, often lacking credibility or local ownership. This raises a pressing question: why does women's role in practical peacebuilding remain so weak, despite their disproportionate suffering in war?

Key Implications

- Historical continuity of abuse – Violations against women have been a consistent feature of Sudan's wars since 1955, carried out by state forces and allied militias with systemic impunity.
- Entrenched impunity - Commanders implicated in abuses have often risen to political leadership, reinforcing a culture of unaccountability.
- Selective advocacy - Even within women's movements, responses have sometimes been selective, focusing on certain perpetrators while ignoring others, which undermines credibility and inclusivity.
- Marginalized participation - Despite being disproportionately affected, women remain sidelined in peacebuilding and constitution-making, with most initiatives externally driven and lacking local ownership.
- Urgent need for accountability and inclusion - Sustainable peace requires confronting impunity, ensuring women's voices from all regions are represented, and embedding gender justice into transitional processes.

Second: Women's Movement in Sudan

In recent years, women's activism has grown, with organizations and activists advancing gender issues. They succeeded in securing 25% representation in legislative councils under the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Yet this representation was largely symbolic, failing to influence laws or practices. Activists have continued to demand equality based on international conventions and Sudan's accession to them. Meanwhile, discriminatory laws remain in place, restricting women's social and political roles.

Women in marginalized areas, especially conflict zones, face compounded suffering: systemic violence, traditions bordering on enslavement, and social restrictions that hinder progress despite their central role in families. Addressing the realities of women in rural and marginalized Sudan is essential to tackling the roots of exclusion.

Third: Engendering Peace and democratic Processes

Several gender-focused peace initiatives have emerged globally, most notably **UN Security Council Resolution 1325** and the Dutch government's "**Gendering Peace**" program. These frameworks emphasize the importance of women's participation in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, yet their translation into practice in Sudan remains limited.

A- Women and Human Rights

Sudanese women continue to face significant challenges across multiple domains:

- **Personal Status Law**- Requires male guardian approval for marriage, grants men unilateral divorce rights, restricts custody, and enforces obedience rules that limit women's freedom of movement.
- **CEDAW Debate**-Ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women faces strong opposition from religious fundamentalists.
- **Political Rights**- Women gained 25% legislative representation in 2005, and after the December Revolution some progress was made (e.g., appointments to the Sovereignty Council and judiciary). Yet representation remains symbolic and elitist, excluding women in marginalized areas.
- **Economic Rights** -Women are central to Sudan's rural economy, providing food security and household labour, but remain disadvantaged by discriminatory inheritance laws and lack of land rights.
- **Education and Employment**- High female illiteracy in rural areas limits opportunities. Childcare responsibilities hinder career advancement, often forcing early resignation.
- **Displaced Women**-Refugee and displaced women suffer extreme poverty, exploitation, and legal persecution (e.g., for brewing local alcohol).

B- Barriers to Women's Mobilization

Women face multiple obstacles in pursuing peace and rights:

1. Restrictive laws limiting organization.
2. Economic pressures leaving little time for activism.
3. Logistical challenges in reaching women in remote conflict zones.
4. Social pressures enforcing conservative behaviour and stigmatizing activism.
5. State repression of independent civil society, especially groups documenting sexual violence.
6. Exclusion from decision-making positions in government and private sectors.

C- Women and Political Parties

Women's participation in political parties remains weak:

- Few women hold leadership positions.

- Parties treat women's issues as matters of representation rather than rights.
- Women are expected to comply rather than shape party policies.

Conclusion

The challenges facing Sudanese women—especially those in marginalized regions—require collective action, unified leadership, and structural reforms. Without meaningful inclusion, peace and democratic transition will remain incomplete.

Fourth: Recommendations

1. Accountability and Justice

- Establish independent mechanisms to investigate and document wartime violations against women, ensuring accountability across all armed groups.
- Integrate gender-based crimes into transitional justice processes, guaranteeing survivors' access to reparations and legal redress.
- End impunity by prosecuting perpetrators, including commanders and political leaders implicated in abuses.

2. Inclusive Peacebuilding

- Guarantee women's substantive participation in peace negotiations, constitution-making, and transitional governance—not as symbolic figures but as decision-makers.
- Adopt binding frameworks and quotas to ensure representation of women from conflict-affected and marginalized regions.
- Institutionalize gender units within peace commissions and transitional institutions to monitor and enforce inclusivity.

3. Strengthening Women's Movements and Leadership

- Invest in grassroots women's organizations in rural and conflict zones, enabling them to lead advocacy and shape policy agendas.
- Provide training, resources, and networking opportunities to build sustainable local leadership.
- Establish inclusive national dialogue platforms connecting women across Sudan, with emphasis on youth and marginalized communities.
- Develop long-term strategies for rural and marginalized women's movements to ensure sustainability and local ownership.

4. Holistic Advocacy and Monitoring

- Promote advocacy that documents and condemns violations by all parties, avoiding selective narratives that undermine credibility.
- Support independent monitoring platforms to track abuses across armed actors and ensure transparency.
- Leverage international and regional networks to share experiences, strengthen advocacy, and build solidarity.

5. Protection and Support Services

- Expand psychosocial, medical, and legal services for survivors of sexual violence and exploitation.
- Establish safe spaces, shelters, and livelihood programs for displaced women and girls to reduce vulnerability.
- Integrate survivor support into humanitarian and recovery frameworks.

6. Policy and Legal Reform

- Reform discriminatory laws, including personal status laws and restrictive social codes.
- Align national legislation with international conventions such as **CEDAW** and **UNSCR 1325**, embedding gender justice into transitional frameworks.
- Guarantee women's land rights, inheritance rights, and equal access to economic opportunities.

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