

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# Sudan's Civil War: Community Resilience and Role of Women

*Anusha Khurana*

June 20, 2024

## **S***ummary*

The civil war in Sudan has created a humanitarian crisis, leaving millions at risk of gender-based violence. Women and children bear a disproportionate burden due to deep-rooted political, ethnic and economic issues. Addressing gender inequities and empowering women is essential for long-term peace and security. Meaningful engagement for women at all decision-making levels, from grassroots to high-level peace talks, is crucial.

## Introduction

Since 10 May 2024, the humanitarian crisis in Al Fashir and its surrounding areas has dramatically deteriorated due to intense fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). This escalation of violence is part of the larger conflict that resumed on 15 April 2023, following a fragile period of peace, leading to widespread turmoil. The humanitarian crisis in Sudan has led to the world's worst displacement disaster, with 8.5 million people forced to flee their homes, including 1.56 million women and girls of reproductive age.<sup>1</sup> The conflict has exacerbated food insecurity, with approximately 18 million people facing extreme food shortages. The Brief highlights the role of Sudanese women in peacebuilding and community resilience, despite prevalent gender disparities.

## Sudan's Fragile Transition

The year 2019 marked a watershed point in Sudanese history. A military coup successfully deposed Omar al-Bashir, resulting in public protests. Popular pressure eventually prompted the military to form a power-sharing body, the Sovereignty Council, with civilian representatives. This council's principal goal was to ensure a seamless transition to democratic elections which was anticipated for late 2023.<sup>2</sup>

However, the path to democracy proved treacherous. In October 2021, the military, once again, staged a coup, dismantling the transitional government led by Abdalla Hamdok. This act triggered a power struggle between two prominent military figures—the leader of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the commander of the RSF, Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti). While a preliminary agreement for a political transition emerged in December 2021, negotiations stalled. The core impediment stemmed from conflicting visions regarding the integration of the RSF into the mainstream SAF. Disagreements over resource control and security sector reforms further exacerbated tensions. Ultimately, the inability to reach a consensus culminated in open hostilities, effectively derailing Sudan's carefully orchestrated transition to democratic elections.<sup>3</sup>

## International Response

The Sudanese civil war has received inconsistent media coverage. The international community's response to Sudan's civil war has been slow and often ineffective. The

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<sup>1</sup> **“Sudan’s Humanitarian Crisis: The Facts and Figures”**, *Reuters*, 15 April 2024.

<sup>2</sup> **“Power-sharing Agreement, Sudan’s New Beginning?”**, *The Hindu*, 22 July 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Willow Berridge, Justin Lynch, Raga Makawi and Alex de Waal, ***Sudan’s Unfinished Democracy: The Promise and Betrayal of People’s Revolution***, Hurst Publication, 2022.

Security Council, on 8 March 2024, called for an immediate cessation of hostilities by warring parties in Sudan during the month of Ramadan and urged them to seek a sustainable resolution to the conflict through dialogue. Similarly, the UN Human Rights Council's Fact-Finding mission, established in October 2023, has been hampered by incomplete staffing and inadequate funding, limiting its ability to hold perpetrators accountable.

Moreover, the African Union (AU), along with Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), warned of national fragmentation and erosion of Sudan's unity if fighting persists. Despite efforts like the AU's Women, Peace, and Security Conference and the Women's Reference Group, full implementation has yet to be achieved.

The lack of medical and psychological support to women worsens their suffering, and the scarcity of essential resources like food, water and shelter hits women and children the hardest. Displaced women, who make up 69 per cent of the displaced population, struggle with inadequate living conditions and the constant threat of violence.<sup>4</sup> On the humanitarian front, the Jeddah Commitments, made on 11 November 2023, urge warring parties to honour agreements and allow aid access. An international humanitarian conference in Paris on 15 April 2024, along with the EU's mobilisation of an initial €72 million for aid delivery in 2024, has provided some support.

## Impact of Civil War on Women

Nearly 6.7 million people are at risk of gender-based violence in Sudan, with displaced, refugee, and migrant women and girls being particularly vulnerable.<sup>5</sup> The Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which are affiliated with the Sudanese government, have been linked to horrible acts of sexual abuse against women and girls. According to reports, RSF soldiers committed rape, sexual slavery and other forms of gender-based abuse.<sup>6</sup> The tragedy of seven young ladies kidnapped in ElGeneina, West Darfur, which happened in May 2023, is symbolic of Sudanese women's struggle. These ladies were held captive for two months, subjected to horrific misery while forced to cook, clean, and do domestic activities for their captors. They were subjected to sexual violence and abuse. The conflict has torn apart families and communities, making women and girls vulnerable to additional exploitation and abuse.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> **“Sudan Conflict Situation Report #16”**, International Medical Corps, 1 March 2024.

<sup>5</sup> **“Sexual Violence and Conflict in Sudan: A War on the Bodies of Women and Girls”**, UNFPA, 18 June 2024.

<sup>6</sup> **“One Year of War in Sudan”**, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, 14 April 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Raga Makawi, **“In Sudan, Women's Bodies have long been the Battleground”**, *New Internationalist*, 21 March 2024.

Sudan's legal structure, shaped by patriarchal and religious doctrines, exacerbates women's condition. Legislation such as the Public Law Order (PLO), introduced during Omar al-Bashir's regime, restricts women's freedom and subjects them to harassment and arrest. Women are targeted for simply wearing trousers, leaving their hair uncovered, or associating with male friends.

The militarisation of communities exacerbates women's vulnerability. Despite international efforts to broker peace, the crisis in Sudan continues, trapping women and girls in a cycle of violence and persecution. With accounts of rape, enslavement and murder, particularly in areas like Darfur, Khartoum and Kordofan, the problem is further intensified by the heinous use of sexual violence as a strategy of war.<sup>8</sup> The magnitude of these atrocities has been unequivocally denied by both the Bashir dictatorship and the military.

### **Role of Local Women's Groups**

As the violence rages on, the essential role of women contributions to peacebuilding and community resilience must be encouraged. Addressing gender inequities and strengthening women is critical to attaining long-term peace and security in Sudan. The conflict has been driven by deep-rooted political, ethnic and economic issues, with women and children bearing a disproportionate burden. This is especially visible in the loss of access to critical sexual and reproductive healthcare.

The international community's tardy and insufficient distribution of humanitarian aid, along with the lack of political will and ineffectual peacekeeping activities, has resulted in severe gaps in the support system for conflict-affected population. This has fuelled the rise and empowerment of local NGOs and women's groups, which have stepped up to meet the immediate needs of impacted population. These grassroots organisations, with their intimate awareness of local dynamics and cultural subtleties, have adopted innovative and long-term solutions customised to the requirements of their respective communities.

They have been especially effective in providing community-based humanitarian aid, advocacy, peacebuilding and protective services. Women-led groups, in particular, have created safe places for survivors of gender-based violence and played an important role in promoting local dialogues for peace and reconciliation. This localised strategy not only meets immediate humanitarian needs but also develops long-term resilience and self-sufficiency, emphasising the importance of grassroots actions in minimising the effects of the conflict when international efforts have fallen short.

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<sup>8</sup> **“Women in Uniform Pledge to Reduce Violence during an UNMISS-facilitated Training in Bentiu”**, United Nations Peacekeeping, 16 January 2024.

### ***Women's Peace Committees (WPCs)***

Women's Peace Committees (WPCs) have been crucial in resolving local conflicts and promoting peace throughout Sudan, particularly in Darfur.<sup>9</sup> WPCs, which are made up of women from many ethnic groups, have successfully negotiated ceasefires, encouraged conversation between opposing parties, and organised community peace festivals. These committees have been successful in creating inclusive platforms where people of the community may express their issues and collaborate to find answers. Their grassroots approach has been critical in sustaining local peace, frequently bridging gaps that conventional peace procedures find difficult to handle.

### ***Advocacy Networks for Human Rights and Peace***

Women-led advocacy groups have used social media and other channels to increase awareness and garner international support. The ‘No to Oppression against Women’ campaign, for example, has highlighted the prevalence of gender-based violence and demanded responsibility from the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). This campaign has played a crucial role in raising international awareness of the situation of women in conflict zones and advocating for greater protection measures.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Women for Peace and Development Network (WPDN)***

The Women for Peace and Development Network (WPDN) is a well-known non-governmental organisation that gives help to displaced families, creates safe spaces for women and children, and offers trauma counselling and vocational training. These activities are crucial in assisting women and children to rebuild their lives despite the chaos of war. WPDN helps persons affected by the conflict feel normal and empowered by offering necessary services and support.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Women Relief Aid (WRA)***

In South Sudan, the Women Relief Aid (WRA) organisation, which is backed by the UN Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund's Rapid Response Window, has played a critical role in providing humanitarian aid and promoting women-led projects.<sup>12</sup> Their efforts are particularly focused on addressing the immediate needs of conflict-affected population and promoting sustainable development through women's leadership and participation.

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<sup>9</sup> Suad M.E. Musa, *Hawks and Doves in Sudan's Armed Conflict: Al-Hakkamat Baggara Women of Darfur*, Boydell & Brewer, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Noran Atteya, “[Women, Religion and Peacebuilding in Africa: A Case Analysis of Sudan](#)”, University of Pretoria, 16 March 2021.

<sup>11</sup> “[Sudanese Women for Peace and Development Association](#)”, Reframe.

<sup>12</sup> “[Women Relief Aid](#)”, 2022.

### ***Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA)***

Hala Al-Karib leads the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), which addresses the needs of conflict-affected women and girls. SIHA offers legal aid, psychosocial support, and educational possibilities to survivors of violence.<sup>13</sup> Their complete approach not only helps with immediate rehabilitation, but also inspires women and girls to regain their rights and pursue their goals.

### ***Juba Peace Agreement Negotiations (2020)***

The Juba Peace Agreement negotiations in 2020 were an important step in incorporating gender considerations into peacebuilding. Women's involvement emphasised the necessity of combating gender-based violence and ensuring women's representation in decision-making processes. This inclusion has established a precedent for future peace negotiations, highlighting the importance of gender-sensitive methods to attaining long-term peace.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Prominent Women Leaders in Advocacy and Media***

Asha El-Karib, a prominent journalist and senior strategic advisor of the Sudanese Organisation for Research and Development (SORO), uses media to amplify the voices and stories of women affected by conflict.<sup>15</sup> Her work raises awareness about the effects of war on women and promotes their inclusion in peace talks. Similarly, Sudan's 'Lady Liberty' Alaa Salah became a symbol of the 2019 revolution that ousted President Omar al-Bashir. Salah continues to promote women's rights and active engagement in the peace process.

### ***Nuba Women for Education and Development Association (NuWEDA)***

The Nuba Women for Education and Development Association (NuWEDA) seeks to enhance operational performance in support of women, peace and security (WPS) efforts. NuWEDA strengthens women's ability to contribute successfully to peacebuilding initiatives by holding training sessions, workshops and purchasing required office equipment.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Sudan Women Development Organisation (SWDO)***

The Sudan Women Development Organisation (SWDO) aims to improve institutional capacity through infrastructure development and personnel training. Their efforts include procuring office space, purchasing equipment, and offering training in critical skills like computer literacy, photography, archiving and documentation.

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<sup>13</sup> [Official Website of Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa \(SIHA\)](#).

<sup>14</sup> Zaid Al-Ali, “[The Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan](#)”, International IDEA, 21 April 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Van Lierde, “[Counterterrorism and Civil Society: Thirty Years of Women’s Activism in Sudan](#)”, *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law*, 4 November 2019.

<sup>16</sup> “[National Women for Education and Development Association](#)”, National Endowment for Democracy, 2020.

These efforts ensure that women's organisations are well-prepared to manage and sustain peacebuilding actions.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Dar El Salam Women Development Association***

The Dar El Salam Women Development Association seeks to increase the ability of women's peace committees in community reconciliation. Their endeavours include organising women's peace conferences, arranging exchange trips, and creating a multi-use women's community centre. These programmes promote a collaborative environment where women may share their experiences and devise solutions for keeping peace.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Darfur Women Action Group (DWAG)***

The Darfur Women Action Group (DWAG) sponsored peacebuilding workshops for women from all ethnic backgrounds. These workshops facilitated the sharing of experiences and the formulation of peace plans, helping to support local peace initiatives and amplifying women's voices in the larger peace process.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Sudanese Women Rights Action (SWRA)***

Throughout the crisis, the Sudanese Women Rights Action (SWRA) has been an outspoken supporter for women's rights. SWRA has intensified international pressure on the Sudanese government and warring factions to address gender-based violence and safeguard women in crisis zones by organising protests, working with international human rights organisations, and campaigning for tougher protection.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Other Notable Women Leaders***

Amira Osman, a prominent activist for the rights of women with disabilities, highlights the unique challenges faced by disabled women during the civil war. Hind Makki's interfaith initiatives bring together women from various faith backgrounds for peace and development projects, fostering mutual understanding and reducing religious tensions. Faiza Mohamed, a Sudanese lawyer and human rights advocate, leads advocacy at the African Union for stronger involvement in Sudan and plays an active role in the Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR) Coalition. Barkhado, a Sudanese activist and 2023 UN youth delegate, has worked on projects supporting democratic transition and transitional justice in Sudan. Astur, founder of the Women's Awareness Initiative in the Blue Nile region, organised the 'Mothers of Sudan' campaign and the first women's protest against the war in Khartoum.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> [“Annual Progress Report Template 2023”](#), Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund.

<sup>18</sup> [“Annual Progress Report Template 2022”](#), Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund.

<sup>19</sup> [Official Website of Darfur Women Action Group](#), 2020.

<sup>20</sup> [Sudan Women's Rights Action](#), OpenDemocracy, 5 October 2020.

<sup>21</sup> [“Women are Leading the Humanitarian Response in Sudan”](#), UN Women: Africa, 5 July 2023.

## Way Forward

In the complicated dynamics of Sudan's civil conflict, women emerge as critical players in promoting peace and stability. Despite their critical role, women confront numerous difficulties that limit their contributions to conflict resolution and reconciliation activities. Among these problems is the persistent exclusion of women from formal decision-making procedures and peace talks. This exclusion not only perpetuates gender inequities, but it also jeopardizes the possibility of creating lasting peace.

The international response to women's predicament during the Sudanese civil war has been inadequate. While humanitarian efforts aim to address the larger situation, they frequently neglect the special needs and challenges that women experience. Furthermore, peace processes organised by external actors typically ignore women's views and fail to incorporate their viewpoints into substantive negotiations, impeding the attainment of inclusive and long-term peace agreements.<sup>22</sup>

To create a progressive route forward for Sudan, it is critical to facilitate meaningful engagement for women in all levels of decision-making processes, from local grassroots efforts to high-level peace talks. Furthermore, comprehensive protection measures and support services must be implemented to meet the urgent and long-term needs of conflict-affected women, including healthcare, psychosocial assistance, legal aid and economic possibilities.

Investments in capacity building and empowerment initiatives led by women's organisations are critical to increasing their agency and efficacy in peacebuilding efforts. Sustained international engagement, together with targeted finance and resources, is critical in creating a climate conducive to women's meaningful participation and furthering gender-responsive peacebuilding efforts in Sudan.<sup>23</sup> By recognising and addressing the challenges faced by women, amplifying their voices in peace processes, and supporting their grassroots initiatives, the international community can contribute to building a more inclusive and sustainable peace that benefits all segments of society.

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<sup>22</sup> **“Sudan’s Worsening Violence, Humanitarian Crisis Could Foreshadow Civil War, Senior Officials Warn Security Council, Calling for Urgent Action to End Conflict”**, United Nations, 13 September 2023.

<sup>23</sup> **“Inclusion of Women in Peacebuilding Processes (Negotiation and Mediation): Women’s Peace and Security Agenda”**, Policy Brief, American Friends Service Committee, October 2023.



## About the Author

**Ms. Anusha Khurana** is Research Intern at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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