

**BRIEFING** | JUNE 2024

# Support to Sudanese women responding to conflict and crisis

**Karima Fathelrahman Abdien, Reem Abbas, Samar Abushama, Yosra Sabir and Magda Hassan Ali Al-Amin's insights outline the critical issues facing women in Sudan, focusing on gender-based violence (GBV), political participation, economic empowerment and humanitarian assistance. This briefing, compiled from these insights, highlights the efforts of women's rights organisations (WROs) in Sudan and offers recommendations on how to foster a more comprehensive approach to supporting Sudanese women, ensuring their protection, participation and empowerment during and after the conflict.**

On 15 April 2023, war broke out in Khartoum between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group. The death toll continues to rise, and the knock-on effects continue to prove disastrous – particularly for the most vulnerable groups, including women and girls. The conflict has precipitated one of the world's largest internal displacement crises, with women and girls making up 53 per cent of the displaced. It has exacerbated risks of gender-based violence (GBV), hunger and maternal mortality, with over 6.7 million people at risk of GBV and widespread reports – especially in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugee centres – of

intimate partner violence sexual exploitation and trafficking. This conflict has also heightened the risk of what could become the world's largest hunger crisis, with more than 7,000 new mothers at risk of death in the coming months if their nutritional and health needs are not met.<sup>1</sup> In Darfur, sexual violence is deliberately and regularly used as a weapon of war. Despite these challenges, women are pivotal in their communities' survival and resilience – as they were in efforts to resist the oppression of the al-Bashir regime between 1993 and 2019.

This briefing builds on a March 2024 event that Saferworld and partners hosted on ***Sudanese Women: Another Chapter of Resilience and Resistance*** as part of the 68th session on the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Five Sudanese women activists shared their analysis of the current situation with a particular focus on GBV in Darfur – and the work that they and other WROs are doing to advance women's rights and gender equality in Sudan. They put forward recommendations to complement and support their efforts to protect women, enhance their economic and political participation, and advance a gender-transformative peace. This paper presents these recommendations and urges for international support for their protection, economic empowerment and inclusion in decision-making.

# Key Issues

## Gender-based violence (GBV)

Since the start of the current conflict in April 2023, there has been a significant increase in GBV incidents across the country, with the UN reporting that 4.2 million people were in need of GBV services as of October 2023.<sup>2</sup> Women in conflict areas, as well as internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees, are particularly vulnerable. Hundreds of women have been held in inhumane or degrading conditions, subjected to sexual violence, and are at risk of sexual slavery. With the deterioration in all services and supplies due to the war, women lack access to GBV services and sexual and reproductive health care, as well as education and economic resources.

Recent events recall atrocities during the conflict in Darfur in 2003 – including sexual assault, rape, domestic violence, human trafficking and sexual exploitation, particularly against IDPs. This impacts their safety, economic stability and political participation. In Darfur, GBV is often ethnically targeted, with women from specific tribes (particularly from ethnic groups such as the Masalit in West Darfur) facing systematic violence.

Some of the challenges faced by survivors and responders include:

- difficulty accessing affected areas due to insecurity
- a limited number of organisations providing essential aid
- a lack of financial and technical support for women's organisations
- too few centres offering psychological, health and social support – and a lack of capacity among those that do exist
- fear of stigma preventing women from reporting violations
- the absence of a database to monitor and document violations
- difficulty accessing resources, leading to severe poverty and increased violence

## Economic disempowerment, political participation and militarisation

Women's political participation has been severely hindered by a patriarchal culture, economic impoverishment, long-term insecurity and the militarisation of society. The war has deeply impacted women's economic stability and devastated their livelihoods. In a country dominated by men shop owners, merchants and brokers, inequalities that existed before the war have deepened, making the environment even more challenging for women. Many women earning salaries lost their jobs because of the war, and those running home businesses have struggled to restart due to displacement – having been robbed while on the move or having had to leave their tools behind. Most women who were working in the informal sector are unable to continue due to insecurity, heightening their economic vulnerability and vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Increased caring responsibilities and restrictions on movement are further limiting women's economic participation, and those women who have sought refuge in neighbouring countries face difficulties finding work. Some women are able to earn an income in the public sphere, but find themselves at increased risk of violence, including being forced to provide sexual services in exchange for essential needs.

Sudan's Minister of Finance Gibril Ibrahim told the Sudan News Agency that the 2024 budget will be geared towards financing the war. With less budget allocated to health and social services, women are likely to suffer the most: they will continue to face increased economic vulnerability and a higher risk of gender-based economic exploitation. With numerous warnings about an impending famine and nearly 18 million people facing acute hunger in Sudan, particularly during the lean season in May, there is a pressing question about how this will affect women, who are among the poorest and most economically vulnerable segments of the community.

Insecurity is severely restricting Sudanese women's ability to engage in public and political life. Women both in conflict zones and relatively safe states face limitations on movement due to curfews and emergency laws. The prevailing insecurity also deters women from participating in public events and activism. The infrastructure to protect women has collapsed, with civilian security forces such as police absent from conflict

areas; the judicial system has broken down, with courts and legal institutions having been destroyed or operating slowly; and NGOs are less able to provide critical legal, psychological and social services. On top of this, militarised checkpoints complicating delivery of basic needs, and a lack of essential services in IDP camps, have made women more vulnerable.

The political space in Sudan is dominated by men with military power, limiting women's involvement in governance and political decision-making. This space also thrives on militarised masculinities, fostering violence, insecurity and corruption. Hemedti, the leader of the RSF, famously declared in 2014 that "anyone that doesn't fight doesn't have an opinion". Many women activists, however, strongly disagree – they recognise that the militarisation of the state works against them. For these activists, the only way for women to have a meaningful voice is to re-centre politics and governing structures around civil, non-violent principles. This includes securing the right to representation in state institutions and addressing both the structural and cultural aspects of violence.

## Women's response efforts

Following the outbreak of the war, people have started organising to defend their right to life and to work on obtaining and distributing basic necessities such as food, water and medicine. These initiatives include providing psychological, health and social support to GBV survivors in shelters; training women in negotiation and conflict resolution skills; raising community awareness about women's rights and combatting violence against them through alliances such as the Darfur Women's Platform and the Women for Security and Peace Group; providing essentials such as food and non-food items like hygiene and dignity kits; and documenting violations against women.

Women's rights organisations and networks have been at the frontlines, working to provide humanitarian aid and calling for peace. They are prominent members of emergency response rooms and neighbourhood committees and continue to organise through founding campaigns and alliances, like Women Against the War and the Peace for Sudan Platform, which records human rights violations and demands an end to the conflict. Through programmes like the South Red Sea Organisation Initiative they have

assisted IDPs with basic needs and services and engaged in monitoring and reporting on ceasefire commitments through the Ceasefire Initiative in Darfur. Unfortunately, due to their peacebuilding activities, women activists and human rights defenders are at high risk of targeted violence, including GBV.

Women Advancing Security in Sudan (WASS), a collective of women working on security issues, aims to influence both sides of the conflict and advocate for the inclusion of women in technical committees, such as ceasefire committees, while reminding all parties that war arises from underlying social, economic and political structures.

To address the root causes of violence, peace negotiations must go beyond merely sharing power and wealth or setting quotas for women's participation in peace or political processes. If focused solely on these aspects, the result will only be a power-sharing deal rather than a long-lasting and inclusive peace agreement. Peace efforts should acknowledge and address the lived experiences of women and other marginalised groups and consider environmental, social, economic and cultural dimensions.

## Recommendations for the international community

- Base all programmes, policies and strategies for Sudan on consultation with those most affected by conflict, including women, IDPs and traditionally marginalised groups, to avoid making ineffective decisions that reinforce discrimination and inequality, and to ensure that interventions are contextually relevant, given the diversity of Sudan.
- Find innovative and effective ways to continue partnering with, funding and providing relevant support to local responders in Sudan, including those working on structural inequalities that have increased insecurity for women and traditionally marginalised groups. This should include the provision of core, flexible and direct funding to WROs and other civil society organisations.
- Engage in immediate and decisive action to facilitate the cessation of hostilities and pressure the warring parties to stop committing GBV abuses.



## On GBV

- Train women's rights defenders on how to document violations, personal security and case management, and provide them with information collected on GBV – through initiatives such as the Human Rights Council Fact-Finding Mission and the UK Atrocity Prevention Hub – for use in their advocacy campaigns. Provide technical and financial support to community-based initiatives for documenting human rights violations, especially GBV cases.
- Support programming that includes thinking on challenging the norms that commodify women's bodies and perpetuate gender inequalities and GBV.
- Fund and provide support to women's groups working with GBV survivors to provide medical, legal and financial support, particularly in remote areas and areas where there is a lack of services.
- Strengthen and invest in life-saving GBV response services in Sudan, as well as in neighbouring countries, including GBV hotlines to provide mental health counselling and case management services to GBV survivors, including IDPs.
- Train health and community service providers in psychological first aid, GBV in emergencies, and GBV case management and referrals, to ensure timely access to multi-sectoral GBV response services, particularly in remote areas and in regions with high numbers of IDPs.

## Economic Empowerment

- Invest in programmes – including those already existing and led by civil society organisations – to support women's economic activities, including microfinance, small grants and vocational training.
- Provide economic support to displaced women – in shelters, IDP settlements and in neighbouring countries – so that they can work to provide for themselves and their families.

## Humanitarian Access

- Continue to exert regional and international pressure on the warring parties to open safe corridors for aid delivery.
- Enhance funding for projects focused on gender-sensitive humanitarian action, which include women's leadership and agency in the decisions around these initiatives.
- Enhance the capacity of emergency response rooms to deliver humanitarian aid and respond to the crisis, with a focus on trauma care, mental health and psychosocial support, personal safety and security.
- Train emergency response room staff on medical neutrality and the elimination of bias in the provision of humanitarian assistance.
- Ensure that emergency response rooms have adequate communication support and supplies of staff, equipment, medicines and other resources.

## Political Participation

- Integrate a feminist approach to peace negotiations, including the environmental, social, economic and cultural impacts of violence.
- Train women and people from traditionally marginalised groups, including IDPs, as leaders in mediation, negotiation and conflict resolution.
- Appeal to the conflict parties to ensure representation of women from diverse backgrounds in peace negotiations, including in technical committees such as ceasefire committees.
- Support initiatives to strengthen the judicial system to provide effective protection, response and services for women, including robust accountability systems.

## Militarisation

- Call for a dismantling of the current power structure that prioritises militarism and power-sharing among armed groups, and promote a return to civilian government.

## Notes

**1** UN Women (2024), 'A year of suffering for Sudanese women and girls', 14 April (<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/statement/2024/04/a-year-of-suffering-for-sudanese-women-and-girls>)

**2** United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'Gender-based Violence (GBV) Sub-cluster Response (April – 15 October 2023)' (<https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/card/5HPiQBSaq/>)

## About Saferworld

Saferworld is an international organisation dedicated to conflict prevention and peacebuilding programming, policy and practice. We collaborate with institutions and work directly with partners across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe to tackle diverse factors that drive violent conflict, injustice and insecurity. We participate in major global policy debates on peace, justice and security to influence change.

This briefing was compiled by Saferworld based on insights delivered by participants at an event organised around the 68th session of the United Nations Committee on the Status of Women. The participants were:




- Samar Abushama, advocate, writer and Project Manager at Adeelafor Culture and Arts
- Karima Fathelrahman Abdien, Programmes Manager at Sudanese Organization for Research and Development (SORD)
- Reem Abbas, journalist, writer and Communications Coordinator for Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)
- Magda Hassan Ali Al-Amin, Executive Manager, Sudanese Women Development Organisation (SWDO)
- Yosra Sabir, Sudan Country Director for Internews

Cover photo: A meeting in Imam Jalala village in Eflashir with members from other neighbouring villages that were part of the women development programmes. Eflashir, North Darfur.

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