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## THE LONG JOURNEY OF SUDANESE WOMEN: From the margins of politics to influential roles

*Women in Sudan have played a key part in historic uprisings that have led to major developments in advancing their agency for change. However, a lack of real political will and support have hindered women's effective leadership and inclusion. Women's meaningful participation is essential for sustainable peace and democracy in Sudan.*

Women have been politically active and have played key roles at times of critical turning points in Sudan's history, but this has not been translated into official recognition in political processes or substantive representation in government. The latest example of this is women's active role in response to the crisis that has evolved in Sudan since 15 April 2023, when the country was plunged into violence amidst the power struggle between the two main factions of the ruling military regime, the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Women have established a range of coalitions and movements working towards ending the war through advocacy campaigns, such as Women Against the War, which comprises 200 prominent female advocates and human rights activists who have been active on social media and in documenting human rights violations against women. Women have also done important work at local level in the de-escalation of the conflict and ceasefire-monitoring through initiatives such as the Ceasefire Initiative in Darfur and the Youth Citizen Observers Network, which is currently monitoring and reporting on the ceasefire with nationwide representation. Moreover, women continue to support internally displaced people with basic services and needs through initiatives such as the South Red Sea Organization Initiative.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Women in Sudan have played a crucial part in historic uprisings, including the revolution in 2018-2019, and have again come to the fore since the recent escalation of armed conflict in mobilising humanitarian support, de-escalation, and advocating peace.
- The latest revolution had positive effects for women in Sudan, including the commitment of 40 per cent representation in Sudan's national legislative assembly, the repeal of gender discriminatory laws and provisions, and a general shift in attitudes towards the role of women.
- Despite positive developments for women, their effective leadership and inclusion has been impeded by the lack of active political will and support.
- Moving forward, an inclusive political process must be created that includes women, and other key representatives of civil society, and that has legitimacy and represents.

However, although the conflict affects women severely, not least in the form of exacerbated sexual violence, none of the afore-mentioned activities by women have led to including or consulting them, nor civilians more broadly, in the recent ceasefire negotiations led by the US and Saudi Arabia. There is a valid concern that women's role is again being limited to mobilising on the ground as civil society actors but does not receive official recognition in the political process.

Similarly, Sudanese women were crucial to the recent historic 2018-2019 revolution that overthrew former president Omar al-Bashir. Women sustained the protests for months by leading and engaging in various forms of civic resistance through art, poetry and social media activism. Female demonstrators from across classes, generations, faiths, educational levels and ethnicities continued to occupy the streets, exposed to arrest, harassment and gunfire by security agents. Female lawyers and

media professionals offered their professional expertise in support of creating a campaign for reforming the family law, which previously prevented women from obtaining travel documents for their children without the consent of the children's fathers.

It is, however, worth noting the limited progress that has been made in recent years towards the more equal inclusion of women in the politics and society. Following the revolution, in 2020, Sudan's transitional government repealed the family law and banned female genital mutilation. Moreover, women's participation in the revolution led to shifts in attitudes towards girls and women within society with young women involved as vocal protesters on the streets confronting the security forces – even late at night – being seen as more acceptable and even admirable.

As a result of women's visible role in the demonstrations, commitments were made for the transitional period of securing a minimum of 40 per cent representation for women in Sudan's national legislative assembly, and the repeal of gender discriminatory laws and provisions. In the end, women gained two out of eleven seats in the Sovereign Council and women were appointed to lead four out of 16 ministries. Thus, although small steps were taken towards women's inclusion, the set target for 40 per cent representation was not even nearly reached, while support and active political will for women's effective leadership continued to be absent. Similarly, during the negotiations of the Juba Peace Agreement in 2020, women had ten percent representation, however this was largely symbolic with little to no effect on the outcomes of the agreement.

While in recent years in Sudan women have become more prepared to mobilise politically and to join political parties, many have continued to organise in parallel to the political structures rather than fully integrating into established gateways to decision-making. Hence, political integration or synergies between political structures in Sudan must be established to ensure that women's

voices are included in political as well as broader peace processes. This also relates to the need for bridging informal and formal approaches and creating linkages between different levels of the peace process, both locally and nationally. Whereas women's participation is expansive at the grassroots level, their participation in official processes continues to be limited. Bringing women's voices forward to allow for a redesign of political processes is essential in addressing the realities on the ground and the consequences of the conflict.

In conclusion, women continue to play a critical role in Sudan's politics, as the recent developments and the 2019 revolution, as well as the previous revolutions in Sudan in 1964 and 1985, illustrate. While positive progress has been made as outlined in this paper, women's ability to effectively engage as agents for change is impeded by political realities in Sudan, and further demonstrated by the outbreak of war on 15 April 2023. Nevertheless, women have once again come to the forefront in mobilising to assist civilians, calling for an end to the conflict, and monitoring human rights violations and the ceasefire. Moving forward, it is

of paramount importance that the recently announced AU-led initiative, or any other international efforts towards resuming a political process, creates an inclusive process that ensures the representation of women and key civil society actors that has legitimacy and real constituencies, not least to avoid losing the positive progress that was made prior to the recent outbreak of war but also to ensure a sustainable peace and a thriving democracy in Sudan in the future.

*This Insight paper is based on research conducted by Ahfad University for Women (AUW) in 2022, supported by CMI, on the motives and objectives of the women who participated in the 2018-2019 revolution, their different ways of contributing and the challenges they faced. It is also based on the findings from a roundtable discussion held at AUW on 26 February 2023. It also serves as a case study to the dynamics outlined in CMI's Insight on Recognizing Women's Political Agency – Beyond Advocacy to Inclusion <https://cmi.fi/2023/04/18/cmi-insight-recognising-womens-political-agency-beyond-advocacy-to-inclusion/>.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Any international efforts to resume a political process, must design an inclusive process that ensures the meaningful participation of women, and the representation of key civil society actors that has legitimacy and real constituencies.
- In creating an inclusive and representative political process, it is essential to identify and include women's views on major national issues in the outcomes of any agreement and to ensure that women's concerns are incorporated in a ceasefire agreement, and that a role is established for women in a ceasefire monitoring mechanism.
- The international community should continue supporting women's coalition and alliance-building to allow for their mobilisation for peace and political participation, and to strengthen their common voice, while taking into consideration the diversity of needs and perspectives among women.