

Sudanese Women Trapped Between Conflict and Political Marginalization in Peace Negotiations

by [Areej Elhag \(/experts/areej-elhag\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Areej Elhag \(/experts/areej-elhag\)](#)

Areej Elhag is a journalist and researcher in international relations and national security.



Brief Analysis

Now more than ever, it is crucial to effectively include women's issues in peace talks and transitional negotiations, ensuring that their representation is proportionate to their realities and contributions to society.

In the ongoing war in Sudan, there is an insufficiently narrated tragedy—the plight of women who are paying a hefty price for this war and are simultaneously being kept from the table in the discussion of how this war can end. International Women's Month coincides with a difficult period in Sudan, where women are facing various forms of violence and violations, including rape, sexual assault, kidnapping and the loss of providers. This is all occurring in a context marked by extreme poverty and lack of medical facilities, especially those related to sexual and reproductive health.

The war that erupted on April 15, 2023 between the Sudanese army and Rapid Support Forces has led to a humanitarian crisis that [UN reports \(https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/106323\)](https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/106323) have ranked among the largest globally—stating that nearly 8 million people have been displaced due to the war, 88 percent of whom are women and children. There are more than 4 million women and girls at risk of sexual assaults, and alarming reports have appeared of women being sold in markets in Sudan.

The painful irony is that Sudanese women were at the forefront of the Sudanese revolution that overthrew Omar al-Bashir's government on April 11, 2019. Despite their contributions and sacrifices, they found themselves marginalized and excluded from decision-making positions in the subsequent transitional government. The promises of allocating 40 percent of the Sudanese parliament's seats for women [remained unfulfilled \(https://sudan.un.org/en/49556-finding-sudan%252525E2%25252580%25252599s-future-women-political-leaders-1070-and-rising\)](https://sudan.un.org/en/49556-finding-sudan%252525E2%25252580%25252599s-future-women-political-leaders-1070-and-rising). When the actual figures emerged, they reflected a failure to meet Sudanese women's

aspirations and acknowledge their vital role in society and the political process.

One of the greatest impediments to peace and the protection of women and vulnerable groups is Sudan's long history of impunity for perpetrators of violence. The lack of accountability for those committing atrocities is not only a roadblock to transitional justice but also serves to perpetuate this cycle of violence. Many of the horrific human rights violations that occurred in Darfur years ago are being repeated again in Khartoum, Al Gezira, and elsewhere. The complete lack of justice reflects a failure of the Sudanese state and the international community, signaling to the victims that they do not deserve justice, and that perpetrators can continue their actions without fear of consequences.

Although it is premature to discuss specific political roles in a post-war government, the acknowledgment of women's suffering from within Sudan's political elite is an urgent need since negotiations and initiatives are currently underway to bring a peaceful transition and peace to Sudan. Yet, it seems that politicians have not benefited from past experiences. And women's issues seem to have not been given the priority they deserve in the negotiation agenda, indicating a continuation of their marginalization and exclusion. New promises of reduced parliamentary quotas, now at 30 percent, reflected a diminished willingness to promote female political representation despite the significant impact of the war on Sudanese women. This reality demonstrates a lack of political will to ensure fair and effective representation of women in Sudan's political and social future.

This failure to prioritize the role of women in politics has roots in the personal beliefs of some of the key actors involved. I have personally encountered discussions among some Sudanese political leaders doubting the accuracy of figures related to sexual assault incidents, ignoring the evidence and testimonies presented and contributing to the increased silence and fear among women of social stigma and that their suffering will not be recognized. These attitudes must also be addressed if a true peace process is to occur in Sudan.

The testimonies of women who have been sexually assaulted in Sudan, as documented by the Sudanese Doctor's committee, has reached 417 cases. These numbers likely underrepresent the true figures, which are often higher. This discrepancy is due to the difficulty of accessing reporting bodies amid communication blackouts and a dangerous security situation. The UN expert on the human rights situation in Sudan, Radhouane Nouicer, stated in a statement that he "heard extremely disturbing accounts of sexual violence against women and girls, allegedly committed mostly by Rapid Support Forces and allied militias." Reports indicate that **70 percent** (<https://3ayin.com/sudanese-women-6/>) of the violations occur mostly as collective assaults in front of the victims' families. They are intended as a systematic form of humiliation and a powerful weapon to weaken the 'other' via traumas that last for generations. There is also a worrying increase in suicide rates in Sudan due to the lack of psychological and medical treatment, with no organizations working on support and treatment after these violations.

Sudanese women's blocs, which have consistently spoken about women's rights in Sudan and their suffering, have often been attacked by both women and men in society who confuse legitimate women's rights with Sudanese customs and traditions. In a male-dominated and patriarchal Sudanese society, where men desire to control women, political platforms are not free from a narrative that openly minimizes women's concerns and decries the "nuisance" caused by women demanding a larger role in political life. Hagar El Sheikh, a specialist and analyst of the political and human rights situation in Sudan, notes that "we see many activists and rights defenders advocating for women's rights often being bullied on the news and social media, along with their female colleagues, in a way that makes their work more difficult compared to their male counterparts."

Sudan's current reality imposes a new role for women; it is unreasonable for their legitimate demands to disappear within the negotiations between military and civilian components, where women's rights and preventing violations in the war are being ignored. We believe peace can be achieved, yet why wasn't a clause included to prevent sexual

assaults on women, with a clear agreement on criminalization since these are systematic crimes punishable under international law? The current initiatives and mediations for peace, sponsored by the United States and European countries prioritizing peace and supporting civilian rule in Sudan, are lacking basic rights in this respect.

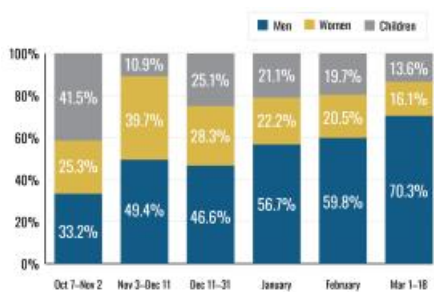
Here the international community’s true will and desire will emerge: either to resolve the Sudan war and ensure sustainable peace, or to make a temporary peace that fails to address the systemic issues facing Sudan. Peace cannot occur in the desired manner without justice for all.

Thus, both Sudanese political elites and regional mediators contribute to the neglect faced by women in Sudan. The challenges facing women in Sudan require specific international attention and action. The international community's silence and inadequate media coverage of Sudanese women's suffering contribute to the crisis's perpetuation. The international community and the media must play a more active role in highlighting these issues and supporting the efforts of women and human rights organizations in Sudan to ensure their rights and protect them from violations.

The international community also bears a responsibility to the women of Sudan. They have an obligation to place the issue of violence against women among the priorities of current and future negotiations and to ensure that they are fully protected and that the parties to the conflict do not consider women as one of the legitimate arenas of war that they can wage and then escape punishment as is usual. In addition to promoting equality and implementing United Nations Security Council resolutions, such as Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which calls for increased participation of women in all conflict prevention and resolution efforts.

Now more than ever, it is crucial to effectively include women's issues in peace talks and transitional negotiations, ensuring that their representation is proportionate to their realities and contributions to society. Women in Sudan are not just victims; they are also leaders and significant drivers of change and peace. They must be regarded by other actors as partners in building Sudan's peaceful future. Achieving peace and stability in Sudan is impossible without addressing the roots of women's problems and fully ensuring their rights. The time has come to change the narrative and focus efforts on building a future that secures for women the status they deserve in leading and laying the foundations of peace for a new Sudan. ❖

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