

Resistance and
movement building:
Women's rights
in **Sudan**





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Introduction

APRIL 25, 2019. It was a humid day as dozens of women crossed the Blue Nile bridge and arrived at the army headquarters in Khartoum. They had entered the demonstration or “sit-in” area carrying provocative banners and placards. The weeks and months leading up to this day had been turbulent. Women had been on the streets revolting against the dictatorship, and they had been behind closed doors, engaging in administrative and logistical tasks that helped fuel the revolution. Just a few days earlier in a breathtaking development, this space and many others like it across Sudan had been pivotal in bringing down the 30-year dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir and his government.

On this particular day, the messages were clear, and the women’s voices were even clearer as they chanted to denounce discriminatory “personal status” laws. Women with lived experience of the law were joined by feminist activists, some representing their organizations. Women at that protest were reeling at the memory of several heart-wrenching and high-profile cases of Sudanese women whom the courts had failed. Discriminatory laws on custody, divorce, child marriage, male guardianship and others had made their lives a living hell. The protesters collectively supported revolution, desperate for and passionate about the change they wanted.

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Research

This report is based on original research commissioned by Inter Pares, and conducted by Reem Abbas, a journalist, academic and women’s rights activist, who interviewed over a dozen women’s rights activists in April to August of 2022 about their perspectives on the state of the Sudanese women’s movement, particularly the current challenges to movement building. Women analyzed their situations before and during the al-Bashir regime, throughout the 2019-2021 revolution and transitional period, and after the October 2021 military coup.

Evolution of the women's movement

Over the last century, the women's movement in Sudan has invented and reinvented itself. Through both collective action and individual activism, progress on issues of women's rights has been hard-fought, won, and then lost again.



Khartoum, Sudan
Photo credit: Rita Morbia/Inter Pares

Changes in power relations have been subject to colonial dynamics, as well as more contemporary political realities, i.e., revolutions and brief transitional periods that have interrupted long dictatorships.

The historical literature on the Sudanese women mobilizing for social and political change in Sudan is scarce. What little has been documented focuses on the period after Sudan's independence through the perspective of Sudan's elite. Due to this gap, women's historical voices have been silenced, particularly those reflecting intersectional approaches and integrating factors such as class, age and ethnicity. However, feminist scholars have uncovered that the further back one looks, the more one finds in terms of women's rights activism. Diverse women and their

organizations have focused on a range of issues over the years and spaces for organizing have included cultural, political, academic, labour, professional and student associations.

Throughout al-Bashir's rule, from 1989 until he was ousted in 2019, women consistently attempted to carve out public spaces for discussion and advocacy. These endeavours became a critical building block of the revolutionary infrastructure. Women were mobilizers, educators, leaders, creative thinkers, and organizers during the 2019 revolution. However, afterwards in trying to build a state that integrated feminist understandings of socio-economic and legal issues, it felt to many as if movement building for Sudanese women was still both nascent and fragile.

Movement-centred demands

Some of the earliest, formally documented efforts in Sudanese women's activism involved their opposition to colonial rule, as well as promotion of their own socio-cultural freedoms. But, not all women who fought alongside the nationalist struggle benefited as it left out women who were not urban, middle-class or tied to political elites. In addition, those struggles were limited to civic and political rights and did not

address questions of women's subordination in the private sphere. The antecedents of feminist organizing, however, did morph into broader calls for modern political, legal and economic reforms. Advocacy demanding changes in the private sphere was seen as very radical. One example of this is the advocacy to disrupt power dynamics in the household through legislation such as the family law.

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DURING the 2019 demonstrations and transitional period before the October 2021 military coup, many feminist organizations and platforms centred their aspirations on political and state-derived power – understanding it, acquiring it and transforming it. Substantive issues included

the formation of a Women's Commission, quotas related to gendered representation in the national legislative assembly, the placement of gender advisors, and the contribution of female candidate names for political posts, among others. At the same time, explicitly misogynist and patriarchal



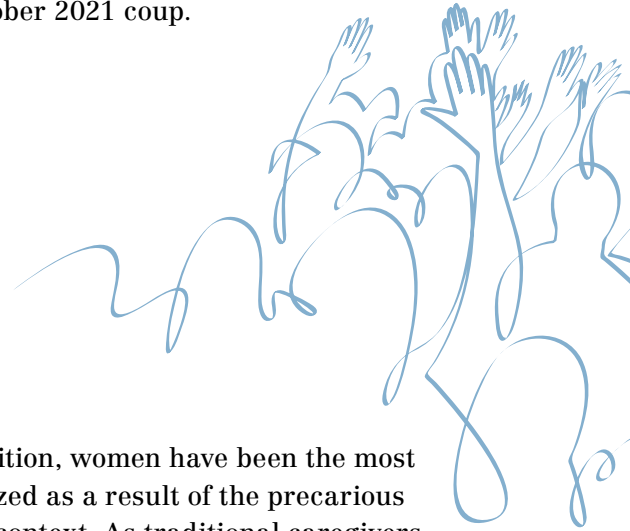
Khartoum, Sudan
Photo credit: Rita Morbia/Inter Pares

legal structures such as the public order laws began (for a time) to be dismantled. In some cases, despite the formation of a gender-responsive legal framework, massive social and cultural barriers to implementation persist – as in the case of the criminalization of female genital mutilation. Now post-coup even political gains have regressed. For example,

Challenges

There was a plethora of challenges that met the feminist movement during the transitional period. The root cause of women's subordination and oppression could be linked to the overwhelming weight and interconnections of patriarchal structures in Sudan, including social norms, judicial infrastructure, economic architecture, political power, and cultural traditions. Compounding this was the connection between them at the individual, household/family and societal levels. For example, guardianship laws whereby women need permission from male guardians for a whole host of activities (such as working outside the home or travelling) dictated power relations in an intimate context.

the public order laws and its related infrastructure has re-emerged. There has been a backlash to women's rights and women's rights organizing in the aftermath of the October 2021 coup.



Post-transition, women have been the most marginalized as a result of the precarious economic context. As traditional caregivers of their families, children and the elderly, women bear the brunt of state-facilitated economic mismanagement such as spiralling hyperinflation. For the most part, they do not benefit from the kleptocratic relationships that develop in authoritarian military regimes. Said one interviewee, “We can’t grasp how much women are struggling to make something out of themselves. Most women here have home businesses, they make items to sell, and they are not making any real profit. They are stuck in grinding conditions and don’t have time to take part in the conversations we are having on rights.”

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POST-COUP, women’s rights organizations are experiencing existential threats in the form of attacks on individual feminist activists, a pervading climate of harassment and fear related to their security and safety, and a context that is hostile to any kind of

gender-responsive reforms. This mirrors the experiences of feminist activists during the al-Bashir era.

Many activists interviewed noted that the (male-dominated) revolutionary infrastructure neglected women’s participation and undermined their

role after the revolution. Despite their incontrovertible role and influence in the 2019 revolution, few women were allowed to take key formal political and decision-making roles. Many felt instrumentalized by their own revolutionary comrades. In fact, post-revolutionary structures often modelled pre-revolutionary structures in terms of women's exclusion. For example, nominations to the executive branch of

government were male dominated. Said one woman "The politicians were not supporting our demands and the military component was taking advantage of siding with women so they could get their support as a constituency. Another important issue is the [Forces for Freedom and Change] which viewed women as a sector just like displaced communities and in this sense, they looked at them with a quota mentality."

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TRANSITIONAL period Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok took a year and half to appoint a gender advisor to his office and the Women's Commission never saw the light of day. Another interviewee indicated that if Hamdok had remained loyal to his discourse prioritizing women, he would have had their backing to fight for his vision in the transition, but his government allowed itself to publicly marginalize women. Within the local, grassroots resistance

committees, there were barriers to women's participation. The women's rights movement felt largely betrayed as their exclusion spanned the highest levels of the formal transitional structures to the most local grassroots revolutionary organizing.

The "NGO-ization" of women's work in Sudan was one of the manifestations of the regime's crackdown. Activists tried to maneuver the authoritarian context



Khartoum, Sudan
Photo credit: Rita Morbia/Inter Pares



by creating new platforms to operate and continue working. However, feminist organizations can become enmeshed, not in pursuing their own autonomous and collective agendas, but in donor-driven pursuits with little connection to local or domestic interests. Co-optation is a persistent risk. Women's organizations may be (legitimately) overtaken with providing services, at the expense of rights-based organizing or advocacy work. Large organizations have also been seen to monopolize spaces and take advantage of their access to international events, conferences and funding.

One of the biggest hurdles faced by the women's movement in Sudan is the weak(er) identification with and commitment to a collective rights-based, feminist agenda and the ensuing divisions. This takes many forms. For many women, party affiliations trump their feminist-movement affiliations even while they are continually marginalized within their party hierarchies. Women in non-partisan groups often accuse partisan women of not using their party platforms to advocate for women's issues while relying on the activism of the former to gain ground within their parties and access power. In this way, power relations in patriarchal political parties prohibit the organic establishment and growth of the women's movement. One activist who was

interviewed said with a sense of bitterness that "women have to stop tying the women's agenda and women groups in general with their patriarchal political parties because they end up losing."

Regional and ethnic dynamics also contribute to divisions. Many women's rights scholars acknowledge that literature and even oral history have consistently excluded women's voices from outside Khartoum. Scholars observe that women from northern and central Sudan have dominated women's activist spaces for a long time and these "women from the centre" have largely shaped the women's movement. There are regional and ethnic political, social and economic dynamics that have also kept women from taking part in national-level organizing and discourse. Political developments such as the Juba peace process have sown both inter- and intra-regional divisions. Still, there have been repeated and courageous attempts at overcoming these differences – whether with women from South Sudan pre-2011 referendum, at the (as one interviewee described "majestic") sit-ins during the 2019 revolution, or during the transitional period through women's rights coalition platforms. These attempts continue in the hopes of building larger and more resilient understanding.

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Future

Though we recognize the incredible barriers women's rights activists have faced to their movement-building efforts in Sudan, their accomplishments are cause for optimism in the long-term.

Over the short- to medium- term, the following recommendations by Inter Pares considers how allies (donor agencies, Northern organizations, solidarity groups, etc.) can express international solidarity with the women's rights movement in Sudan:

- 1 Reframe success in movement-building spaces.** Taking a feminist approach, indicators of success should be process-oriented rather than rigidly outcome-oriented. This approach recognizes the staggering challenges activists face in collective organizing as well as their courageous efforts.
- 2 Acknowledge that fractures will take generations to heal.** Given the enormity of building understanding amongst women who have been subject to state-sponsored violence and trauma and unable to access spaces for common learning and discourse for decades, it is critical to recognize that sustainable movement building will take time. Though courage can be seen everywhere, hope lies most squarely in the aspirations of next generation.
- 3 Understand that alliances can be disempowering and at times, expressions of diversity more relevant.** Despite the importance of women coming together to agree on and advocate for a common agenda, it is equally critical that women's rights activists feel free to express their authentic voices and assert their own agency within a larger movement.
- 4 Support dialogue and convening spaces, which are critical even if they are ephemeral.** Despite the challenges faced by the women's movement, any future success is dependent on cultivating understanding and nourishing a sense of collective identity. Communicating, networking and learning together are key and their impacts endure long after particular platforms or processes have vanished.
- 5 Support organizational capacity building – a multitude of platforms contributes to movement building.** These platforms offer tailored organizing potential that is critical for women to express their perspectives and come together. Building and finding their own specific institutional home is a critical for many women in order for them to more securely express their feminist activism.
- 6 Use a trauma-informed approach.** The generations of political and social violence inflicted on women in Sudan, and its particular manifestations with respect to women human rights defenders, require a trauma-informed approach in crafting programs.



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