



War on Women in Sudan: Sharing Experiences of Displacement, Violence and Personal Struggles

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Abbreviations

CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
FFC	Forces of Freedom and Change
NCP	National Congress Party
NISS	National Intelligence and Security Services
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)
MANSAM	Sudanese Women in Political and Civic Groups
RCs	Resistance Committees
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SC	Sovereign Council
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
STG	Sudan's Transitional Government
TCD	Transitional Constitutional Declaration
TLA	Transitional Legislative Assembly
TMC	Transitional Military Council
SLM/A-MM	Sudan Liberation Movement/Army- Minni Minawi
SLM/A-AA	Sudan Liberation Movement/Army- Abdelwaheed Nur
SPLM/A-N	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army- North Faction



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¹ States of Sudan [map]. Mappr. <<https://www.mappr.co/counties/states-of-sudan/>> (15 September 2023)

Introduction

War has been one of the most consistent realities for Sudanese women, starting with the war in Southern Sudan (1955-1972) and (1983-2005) and the armed conflict in the Darfur region (2003-ongoing) and the conflict in the two areas, Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan (2011-ongoing) and last but not least, the conflict that began on several fronts in Sudan in April 2023 and is ongoing. In this regard, women in different parts of Sudan who have experienced war have been robbed of educational and better employment opportunities, have been impacted by endemics of sexual violence and exploitation and war created a situation of perpetual insecurity for women in the country which has negatively affected their access to economic empowerment and political participation².

Educational and employment opportunities: Sudan has one of the largest out-of-school children in the Middle East and North Africa region, it also has one of the highest number of girls who have dropped out of school due to a mixture of poverty, conflict and early marriage. Moreover, over 45.2 percent of girls and women aged 15-24 are illiterate³ and illiteracy and dropping out of the educational journey are highly influenced by communal violence and conflict-induced poverty and displacement.

Sexual violence: the Darfur conflict cemented sexual violence as one of the weapons used to displace and humiliate communities. In 2015, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported over 200 cases of rape in Tabit, a town in North Darfur⁴. Moreover, the current war has seen increasing rape cases in Khartoum and Darfur with at least 124 cases of rape verified by the government.⁵

Economic empowerment: 74% of those employed in Sudan are self-employed⁶. This created a precarious situation for many people and especially for those living in precarious situations as their livelihood depends on their ability to leave the house and their ability to move. In general, most women in Sudan work in the informal sector and the majority of women from the outskirts and unplanned settlements who mostly hail from conflict areas work in the informal sector as tea and food sellers or petty traders with the most recent estimate being 23,000 tea sellers in the state of Khartoum⁷ which is an understatement. Shamel Al-Nour, a prominent journalist and researcher, describes tea-selling as a safer choice for displaced men and women fleeing conflict zones⁸. The conflict has made this last resort an unsafe option for women leaving them with little choices to survive.

Political participation: research conducted in Sudan post-2019 showed that insecurity is directly related to weak political participation for women as it makes them avoid public spaces, going out

² El-Nager, Abbas and Eisa. "Women Advancing Citizen and National Security in Sudan," January 2023. Unpublished report submitted to the United States Institute of Peace.

³ Education Within Covid-19. UNICEF Fact Sheet (Sudan). July 2020. <<https://www.unicef.org/sudan/media/4376/file/Education%20Fact%20Sheet%20English.pdf>>

⁴ Human Rights Watch. "Sudan: Mass Rape by Army in Darfur." Human Right Watch February 11, 2015. <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/02/11/mass-rape-north-darfur/sudanese-army-attacks-against-civilians-tabit>>

⁵ Harter, Fred. "Women in Sudan facing a 'tragedy' of sexual violence as rape cases rise". 29 Aug 2023. <<https://rb.gy/wbju6>>

⁶ Caroline Krafft, Samia Mohamed Nour, and Ebaidalla M. Ebaidalla. 2022. "Jobs and Growth in North Africa in the COVID-19 Era: The case of Sudan (2018-21)." In Second Regional Report on Jobs and Growth in North Africa (2018-21): Developments through the COVID-19 Era. ILO and ERF. <1666174365_873_1135632_pb97.pdf (erf.org.eg)>

⁷ Al-Nour, Shameal. "Tea Sellers in Sudan... Icons of the Feminist Struggle!" Assafir Arabi. 8 August 2022. <<https://assafirarabi.com/en/46811/2022/08/08/tea-sellers-in-sudan-icons-of-the-feminist-struggle/>>

⁸ Al-Nour, Shameal. "Tea Sellers in Sudan... Icons of the Feminist Struggle!" Assafir Arabi. 8 August 2022. <<https://assafirarabi.com/en/46811/2022/08/08/tea-sellers-in-sudan-icons-of-the-feminist-struggle/>>

after sunset and it also makes families more prone to enforce curfews on them⁹. Moreover, research in Eastern Sudan showed that women's underrepresentation in politics is closely linked to "continuous insecurity compounded with conservative gender norms." (Abbas and Tønnessen 2022: 98)¹⁰

The current war which is now in its sixth month has instigated a set-back for Sudanese women who were mobilising for the last years to change their situation in private and public spaces through reform of legislations and policies as well as increasing their representation in the general political marketplace in Sudan which is dominated by the military, men with arms and age-old patriarchal political parties.

Formally, estimates from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project puts civilian death at 5,000 people and this is a modest figure due to inaccessibility¹¹. Moreover, over 3 million have been displaced with the majority of them being women and children and over one million fled to neighbouring countries. Moreover, UNICEF estimated that at least 435¹² children including girls have been killed in the war with scarce information on rising infant mortality as well as maternal mortality.

In this paper, we will move beyond the official and UN statistics and dive into the stories of women who were affected by this war first-hand and are now fighting personal and public wars to rebuild their lives, protect their dignity, protect their children and loved ones and maintain their bodily autonomy.

Literature review

Women and children bear the brunt of all conflicts (Brown: 2012) (SIDA: 2009). They are a majority of internally displaced persons (IDPs) as well as refugees. For the purpose of this paper, we will review the literature on the impact of conflict and displacement on women's health, economic situation and on social dynamics. Although this will be our focus, this doesn't undermine the roles of women in instigating and as drivers of conflict. We will tackle this issue at the end of the literature review to ensure that this review is balanced.

In general, war is a very patriarchal act because it is about power and is one of the extreme manifestations of militarised masculinities (Pawlak: 2021)¹³. In this regard, the vulnerability of women in conflict is due to "patriarchal, cultural, social and political causes....and women do not have the same resources, authority and political rights to meet their personal needs or control their environments as men," (Lauka: 2018). The focus on the situation of women in conflict has inspired

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Tønnessen, Liv and Reem Abbas. 2022. "Tokens of Peace? Women's Representation in the Juba Peace Process." In *African Conflict & Peacebuilding Review*, Volume 12, Number 2, Fall 2022, pp. 89-105. edited by Andrea de Guttry, Melvis Ndiloseh and Alessandro Mario Amoroso.

¹¹ "25 Civilians Killed in 48 Hours in Sudan: Activists, Medic." 3 September 2023. VOA <<https://www.voanews.com/a/civilians-killed-in-48-hours-in-sudan-activists-medic/7252794.html>>

¹² "Tens of thousands of Sudanese children on the brink of death before the year ends." UNICEF. <<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/tens-thousands-sudanese-children-brink-death-year-ends>>

¹³ MenEngage Alliance. (2021). Piotr Pawlak. MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium summaries: Peacebuilding and countering militarism.

a lot of literature and has led to the adoption of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in 2000 and this agenda called the United Nations Security Council Resolution (1325) is seen as critical to “raising global attention and dialogue about civilian women disproportionately suffering during war and conflict.” (Lauka: 2018).

The manifestations of the war are many and in general, it impacts women’s health, safety and economic situation. When it comes to women’s health, the mortality risk for women and children increases with conflict and especially for women of reproductive age living in conflict situation who are prone to malnutrition, injuries, poor sexual and reproductive health among other issues¹⁴. Women’s safety is compromised due to the conflict as rape and other forms of sexual violence are often used as a weapon. Research contextualises rape and other forms of sexual violence in conflict as “weapons of war, designed not only to inflict bodily harm on primarily – but not exclusively – female victims, but also to terrify and humiliate them, their families and their communities,” (Jones et al: 2014). Rape is not the only kind of sexual violence suffered during conflict; sexual slavery, forced pregnancy and forced prostitution are also prevalent types and during this current war, research by human rights organisations showed that the RSF has practised abduction and sexual slavery¹⁵. Jones et al (2014) write that survivors of sexual violence during armed conflict suffer from fistula, infertility, HIV and other sexually-transmitted diseases as well as long-term trauma.

Economic Disempowerment

Moreover, many women lose their income as a result of the conflict and due to insecurity, it becomes very difficult for them to make ends meet. One of the ramifications of sexual violence, for example, is loss of economic futures for survivors because in conservative societies, it impacts the marriage potential of women when marriage is a route out of poverty and it also reduces productivity because women are afraid of further violence in the workplace (Jones et al 2014: 3). Equally important, gender-based violence is very much linked to economic disempowerment as soldiers could be motivated to subjugate women to rape as they loot their savings or produce¹⁶.

Women experience poverty differently during conflict, for example, women in the informal sector who represent the majority of women in Sudan lost their investment in the form of tools and clientele and have to start from the beginning while women in the formal sector lose their jobs and struggle to find employment in other sectors because social norms among other factors makes it difficult for women to pivot to another career as evidenced in the case studies. As we mentioned above, women are already disadvantaged due to low education levels and conservative social norms and research shows that this creates a situation which limits their job skills and mobility and leads to discrimination in employment. Equally important, displacement leads to more domestic burdens such as increasing childcare responsibilities and a lack of social network as well

¹⁴ “The effects of armed conflict on the health of women and children”
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7612212/>

¹⁵ Amin, Mohammed. Middle East Eye. <Sudan: Rights groups say RSF responsible for surge in sex crimes> 16 Aug 2023.
<<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-rsf-responsible-surge-sex-crimes>>

¹⁶ Brown C. “Rape as a weapon of war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.” *Torture*. 2012;22(1):24-37.

as longer commutes to access markets and food items and those new factors limit their economic potential and their opportunity to find jobs and increase their income.¹⁷

Changing power dynamics

Research in conflict and post-conflict communities shows that the longer a conflict continues, the more change happens to the gender power dynamics and although women could benefit from conflict as they are more resourceful in finding opportunities to rebuild their lives, this also puts them at risk of more violence especially intimate or domestic violence. Intimate violence is linked to how a man wants to “assert power over a woman” and reflect his superiority in the relationship (Horn et al 2014:).

Research suggests that “violence occurs when men are unable to live up to the socially presented ideas of what it means to be a ‘successful’ man” and also note that many reasons also instigate more intimate violence, for example, displacement fractures social relationships and “judicial systems and institutionalised conflict-resolution mechanisms no longer function effectively, and a culture of impunity may develop.” (Horn et al 2014).

Women as agents of war in Sudan and beyond

As much as women are often victimized by conflict, they are sometimes active participants. To a large extent, women are currently not fighting in the RSF or SAF, but female Hakamas (traditional female poets) were seen in the battlefield with the RSF and they were armed. The Hakamas are traditional poets who craft poetry and sing lyrics that are “considered by some to encourage community violence among tribes based in South Darfur and the North-West Kordofan regions” and they “usually revolve around warrior chants, dwell on themes such as honour, bravery and cowardice and are often considered to encourage conflict.”¹⁸

Conceptual Framework: understanding the main concepts

Gender means that the roles and responsibilities assigned to men and women are socially constructed and learned through socialization processes. Gender roles differ between women and men and vary among women and among men by age, class, and region. Gender roles are ascribed by society and thus change with dynamics in socio-economic settings and life experiences of individuals¹⁹.

Armed conflict is a fluid term because “the changing nature of armed conflicts, which increasingly involve non-state actors,” however, a used definition is “an armed conflict is a contested

¹⁷ “Women’s Economic Empowerment in Conflict and Post-conflict Countries” SIDA Policy, May 2009.

<<https://cdn.sida.se/publications/files/sida51910en-womens-economic-empowerment-key-issues-and-policy-options.pdf>>

¹⁸ Songs of War Become Songs of Peace in Sudan. 26 July 2021. Kaiciid Dialogue Centre.

<<https://www.kaiciid.org/stories/features/songs-war-become-songs-peace-sudan>>

¹⁹ Al Nagar, Samia, 2020. Gender Equality in Practice and Research: A Manual for Academics, Policymakers, and Communities. Sudan: Assisting Regional University in Sudan Project. (Implemented in partnership with CMI, Bergen, Norway and funded by Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway)

incompatibility which concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle related deaths.”²⁰

Sexual Violence is defined as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic a person’s sexuality, using coercion, threats of harm or physical force, by any person regardless of relationship to the victim, in any setting.”²¹ Moreover, in conflict areas, sexual violence is normalised and it occurs in different settings and “women and girls are often targeted with sexual violence whilst performing daily chores, such as collecting food, water and wood.” Along with sexual violence, women could experience torture and sexual mutilation.²²

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) is defined as “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.”²³

Refugees are “persons who flee their country due to "well-founded fear" of persecution due to reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, and who are outside of their country of nationality or permanent residence and due to this fear are unable or unwilling to return to it.”²⁴

Data collection methods

Semi-structured questionnaires were used for data collection from women and girls from different backgrounds with reliance on different networks. In total, sixteen women from Khartoum, North Kordofan and the Darfur region, the most affected parts of Sudan were interviewed. Secondary sources and the relevant literature were used to understand the impact of conflict on women and to contextualize the research findings and understand the impact of war on women at large.

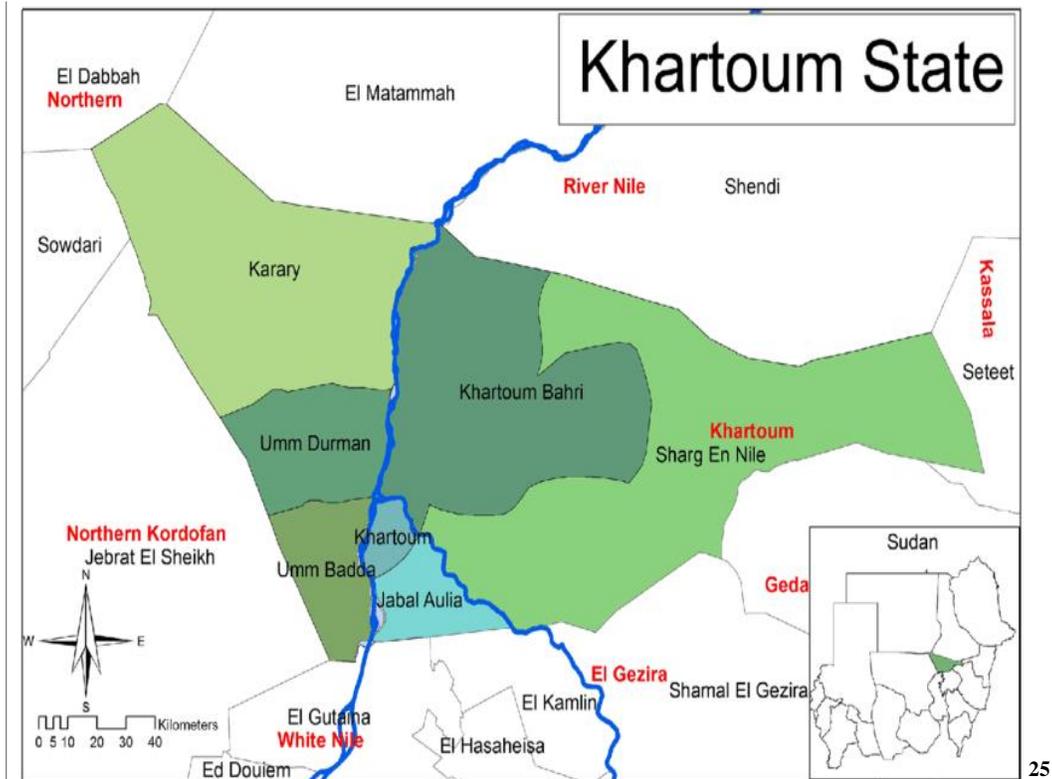
²⁰ Megan Bastick, Karin Grimm and Rahel Kunz, *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Global Overview and Implications for the Security Sector*, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2007, p. 19.

²¹ Megan Bastick, Karin Grimm and Rahel Kunz, *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Global Overview and Implications for the Security Sector*, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2007, p. 19.

²² Megan Bastick, Karin Grimm and Rahel Kunz, *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Global Overview and Implications for the Security Sector*, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2007, p. 19.

²³ Forced migration or displacement. 28 June 2023. <<https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/forced-migration-or-displacement>>

²⁴ Forced migration or displacement. 28 June 2023. <<https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/forced-migration-or-displacement>>



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Experiences of women and girls

As stated above, Khartoum state and the Darfur region are the most-hit regions in the country by the April 2023 war. Khartoum state is divided into seven localities: Khartoum, Sharg En Nile (known as Eastern Nile), Umm Durman, Umm Badda, Jabal Aulia, Karary and Khartoum Bahri (known as Bahri) while Darfur is divided into five states: South, North, East, West and Central Darfur.

Sudan currently has the highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world. Before the April war, there were already about 3.5 million IDPs mostly in the Darfur region, however, after the war, an additional 3.8 million were displaced largely in the Darfur region and Khartoum state and a smaller number in North Kordofan state. Most of the IDPs are now in the safe states such as River Nile, Northern, Sennar, White Nile, Al-Jazeera, Gedarif and East Darfur.

Because displacement is often expensive, most of the IDPs are now living in their states of origin or places where they have a social network otherwise the ones that are originally from conflict areas such as Darfur and are unable to return there are now staying in shelters, schools and centres in Al-Jazeera state and others. Al-Jazeera state is the closest state to Khartoum and for this reason,

²⁵ [Shamsaldeen I. Saeed](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/A-map-of-the-localities-included-in-the-study-area-of-Khartoum-State_fig1_318894381)

<https://www.researchgate.net/figure/A-map-of-the-localities-included-in-the-study-area-of-Khartoum-State_fig1_318894381>

it has received many IDPs in the recent months and this is also because it is able to absorb more people than other states because of its better infrastructure (apartment and houses that are rentable).

Based on interviews, the families that fled to Egypt had some savings and were able to consider this journey, but the other cases either fled to their hometowns to lessen the expenses or are now using their savings to finance their temporary stay.

The below case studies covered different aspects related to the war and displacement experience including sexual activities and intimacy, fears, familial relations and ability to find employment. The interviews covered students, young professionals and mothers.

Case Studies:

Student displaced in River Nile state²⁶

M.A²⁷ is a 21-year-old student who lives in Sharg En Nile (Eastern Nile), one of the neighbourhoods in Khartoum state and a month into the conflict, she became displaced and is now living in Abu Hamad in River Nile state.

“We left our home when the RSF began raiding houses in our neighbourhood, but the main reason for leaving is when we began hearing stories of rape and kidnapping of women. I left with my family to River Nile state and this is where I am originally from.”

M.A is a university student and due to the current situation, she is unable to continue her education or transfer to another university. To make a living, she used to have an online store where she sells women’s items and although she is now displaced, she is trying her best to keep her business in operation, but it is no longer a stable source of income to her.

“When we first arrived, we lived with my paternal uncle, but now we have built a small house using very basic building material,” said M.A.

As a woman, her life is not easy in Abu Hamad since the society is very conservative. She is struggling to find her basic needs as a woman, for example, sanitary pads are not easy to find and the available ones are of very poor quality. Moreover, the houses are built in a way that is not friendly to women as the toilets are outside making it less private. M.A explained that women and girls have to wait until the end of day (or until the evening) to use the bathroom and they have to dress a certain way (ie: wear the *toub*, the official costume for women in most of Sudan) the whole time because there is no privacy in the homes.

M.A feels great loss. She lost her ability to finish her education, which would have given her a better life, and she is struggling to restart her business. She also lost most of her belongings when the RSF entered their house and looted it. She is also struggling to imagine a life here for herself and she doesn’t know how she will finish her education or find a partner.

²⁶ Interview via phone on 22nd of September 2023.

²⁷ Initials will be used to protect the privacy of the interviewees.

“I still think about the journey from our house to her. We took a bus from a bus station in Khartoum and we couldn’t move because there was heavy fighting. We ran and basically hid for a few hours behind a mosque, the bullets were literally above our head as we were on the ground trying to stay safe. We were supposed to move at 7 am, but we ended up leaving at 4 pm and after we moved, a bomb fell a few meters from the road and we had to change direction. The RSF also intimidated them on the way from Khartoum North to Al-Jeily. It took us two days to get to our destination. It was a terrible journey.”

Refugee in Egypt²⁸

A.B is a young professional who used to work at a bank and lived in Khartoum locality and is now living in Cairo with her four children and husband. A.B was touched by the interview because she feels that she never had time to recover from the trauma, and to this day, she continues to cry.

“I stayed put for two weeks thinking that this will end. I was there with my family and in-laws who came to us after power was cut in their neighbourhood. My compound had access to a generator. We left after the building next to us was bombed and we felt that staying here would eventually kill us. I was so scared and just took the absolute basics. We went to my in-laws house and we stayed there until I left for Egypt with my children.”

A.B. left for many reasons, but the rape video²⁹ that was circulated sometime in June 2023 made her feel scared. She felt that she would never forgive herself if this happens to her young daughters.

In Egypt, A.B. found herself with her husband and children and she had to make a living. In the apartment she rented, she turned one of the rooms into a workspace and she is now a private tutor. Her husband is trying to find work and they are able to make a living. Although she has roots in Northern state, she said that she was worried that she wouldn’t find a good quality of life for her children and this made her choose Egypt as a destination. She travelled alone with her children before her husband joined them a month later as he was waiting for his visa.

Before the war, things were finally stabilizing for her. She bought new furniture and a car, she felt like she was building a good life for her family and she worked very hard for years to do that. They have nothing left now in Khartoum. Her apartment and car were looted.

“I feel that I am in a transitional period, I just have to survive for now, once the war stops, I want to return. I don’t feel that I am living anymore. I miss my job and taking my children to school. I missed having an organized life. I am unable to plan anything now. I don’t even leave the house.”

In her life in Egypt, she doesn’t leave the house much and tries to not interact with the locals.

“The Egyptians I have met are nice, but I try to keep to myself to avoid problems.”

²⁸ Interview via phone on the 22nd of September 2023.

²⁹ Abbas, Reem (2023). “When the Only Way out is Death.” African Feminism. August 2023. <<https://africanfeminism.com/when-the-only-way-out-is-death/>>

Like many Sudanese refugees who arrived in Egypt over the last few months, A.B. tries her best to be invisible and to not make her presence felt in a country that received over 300,000 refugees over a period of a few weeks. A.B. wants to return, but her children struggle with this idea and now equate Sudan with death, saying they don't want to return to die.

Refugee in Chad³⁰³¹

T.A is a lawyer who lived in Al-Geneina city in West Darfur state with her family. They are from the Masalit tribe who consider Al-Geneina and much of West Darfur their homeland.

Shortly after the conflict broke out in Khartoum, another conflict and ethnic cleansing campaign raged in Al-Geneina and other parts of the state. In an [investigation](#) that was recently published, it was noted that the city suffered over 50 days of war that were perpetuated by the RSF and allied Arab militias against the Masalit who are the majority in the state.

The Masalit were attacked in their neighbourhood, their homes were burned, the men were killed and many women were raped. T.A and her family were attacked in their home which was burned by the RSF.

“We were tortured and they killed my uncle and cousins before we left in mid-June, shortly before the governor of the state was killed.”

As a result, T.A and her family and tens of thousands fled and started their journey to Chad.

“We arrived in Abeche, a neighbouring town with nothing.”

T.A. began receiving some financial support from her family members which enabled her to move to the capital city, N'Djamena. She now travels back and forth to volunteer in the camps in Eastern Chad. She relies on her family abroad to get by as she still doesn't have a job.

She feels very uncertain about the future because she believes that what happened to them is ethnic cleansing and she doesn't know when they would be able to return.

“Al-Geneina is now totally controlled by the RSF, there is no fighting there, but the looting of what remains of the town continues.”

³⁰ Interview with T.A via whatsapp on 10 September 2023.

³¹ Due to connectivity issues, the interview was conducted over a few weeks depending on her access to the internet.

Internally displaced inside Omdurman³²

M.A is a single 39 year old who lives with her family and works in the logistics sector. She lives in Umm Durman and due to the conflict she moved from a neighborhood in Umm Durman locality to Al-Thawra neighborhood which lies in Karary³³.

M.A. left her house and became displaced in Karary locality in mid-July after their house came under the bullets of the RSF (she uses the term Janjaweed) and they were held at gun-point for over an hour as they were interrogated and threatened and told that they will be killed if they don't leave their house.

“I am from Omdurman so I have nowhere else to go. Of course, the stories I heard about rape and kidnapping affected our decision, but that incident made us leave.”

Although they were lucky to find a house to live in through acquaintances, it is difficult for her as a woman to live in an area surrounded by conflict.

She said that she can't leave the house for long to get items and can't be on her own and she is unable to find a job now because the jobs available are mainly for men. There are jobs in the market but women can't be accepted in this environment now due to the current situation. Currently, the only jobs available are for health workers, those living on daily subsistence such as selling tea and food.

M.A feels hurt and angry at what happened to her and her family. She feels that they were degraded and inside her is a raging volcano directed at everyone involved in this war.

“I don't feel well at all. I feel hate.”

Moreover, she doesn't have the resources to leave Sudan or move to a safer state because she would have to pay extortionate rent prices and her family doesn't have this kind of income now and this makes her think about her fate. She is extremely worried about sexual violence and kidnappings.

Although Karary is controlled by SAF, they continue to be bombarded on an almost daily basis by RSF who want to move into the locality.

Displaced in Al-Jazeera³⁴

T.B is a young woman who works in the media industry and who chose to live an independent life in Khartoum for her mental health away from Al-Jazeera state where she is originally from. She worked in Khartoum and lived on her own before she was forced to move to a place she feels no

³² Interview with MA via phone on 22 September 2023.

³³ At the time of writing this paper, Karari remains the only locality that is solely controlled by the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) mainly due to the fact that it houses the largest SAF air base in Sudan. This led to a situation where residents from Umm Durman and Umm Bada have sought refuge there in recent weeks. They are not staying with acquaintances or at schools in Karari where residents provide them with meals based on donations from Karari residents and the diaspora.

³⁴ Interview with T.B via phone, 22 September 2023

belonging to. She is not on good terms with her family but left Khartoum to seek refuge as she believed that this situation was temporary.

“I didn’t want to be with my family because of violence they subjected me to. I just don’t feel safe around them.”

T.B chose Al-Jazeera because she had family there and she couldn’t afford anything else. She also grew scared of the RSF because she expected to see rape and sexual exploitation in Khartoum because its part of their war culture in Darfur.

“Because of inflation, my salary in Khartoum only covered my basics in terms of rent and living expenses, but it also saved my dignity. I moved from a physical war to a psychological war, a war on my mental health.”

In her new home, she is unable to find work because there are no opportunities in her town and she has to commute to Wad Medani, the capital of Al-Jazeera state, to make a living. She has been doing some unpaid work to keep herself busy because not doing anything and not having a job was affecting her mental health, however, she needs to make an income for her own empowerment.

“If I get a job and make money, I will move from my family’s house right away.”

Right now, she spends her time listening to music or watching films when there is internet and she is living on the memories of her living the life she wanted in a past life. She said she rarely speaks anymore and she is not on good terms with her father whom she describes as “verbally abusive and having extremist ideas”. She can’t enter any battles now with her family members because she feels that she is not in a good mental health state.

As a woman, there is discrimination against her. “Two of my male friends also moved to Al-Jazeera around the same time and now have jobs in Wad Medani and I noticed that men get cheaper rent, it is easier for them to move around and people trust them faster. I changed the way I dress to fit in, I wear very loose pants, but I still get met with looks and people believe that girls who come from Khartoum are loose and they want to do anything they want to them. I feel that the community feels that it is their right to harass girls who came to the city from Khartoum because of the war. They always tell me that I look like I was displaced by the war. This limits my movement and makes me feel so oppressed.”

T.B. is also doing much of the house chores right now with no support from her brothers who also began interrogating her if she wants to go out which limits her movement as well.

“This is not my life. I had a life, a life where I had bought everything for my home. Every single tea cup and utensil was carefully selected. It took me a long time to build my life and I only left with a back-pack.”

Right now, T.B. feels very vulnerable as she has no income and has to rely on her father.

“Sometimes when we are not on good terms, I can’t even ask him for money to buy sanitary pads. I have to use any piece of cloth which affects my dignity.”

As a single woman who had an intimate life away in Khartoum, she finds no privacy for any sexual activities.

“I have no sex life right now because of privacy and I also can’t satisfy my needs on my own (masturbation) because there is no place to do that. I feel so sexually frustrated. There is no privacy, you share your space with a lot of people and even children”

To answer the questions, T.B. said that she had to sit under a tree inside the house and speak in a low volume, she feels that this is part of the family violence against her. She said she is now facing two wars, the Burhan-Hemedti war and the war against her personal life.

Displaced in Wad Medani, Al-Jazeera state

H.A lived in Khartoum state with her husband and mother and 12 days after the war began, she left her house and moved to Al-Jazeera state.

“I left because my husband was already outside Khartoum and my mother was sick and I was worried that we would need healthcare services and I wouldn’t know where to go. I came to Al-Jazeera because my husband is from here.”

A month and a half before the war, H.A had started working at a production company, but she was unable to complete the work and currently has no job.

“Our income is limited now and we have to live with my in-laws and it is very difficult. I just want the days to pass. I feel that I left my soul when I left my home.”

Displacement has affected her intimate life; she feels that people are dying and the war is raging and this makes her feel that her needs are not important right now. She is very anxious about her life now and not being able to understand when she will have to go back.

Remained in Khartoum despite the odds³⁵

A.A is a young activist who remained in Khartoum despite the war and she lives in what is described as an “RSF-controlled area”.

“The area is very bad because the citizens are subjected to harassment, armed robbery, killings and sexual violence. It only gets quieter and safer when there is a battle raging far from where we stay because I think that the RSF mobilises all the fighters in the state and they temporarily leave civilian areas as a result.”

³⁵ Interview with an activist living in Khartoum East, 14 September 2023

For the past few months, she got used to hearing gunfire because RSF soldiers open fire randomly in Khartoum and it is probably a means of communication between them and this makes it difficult for citizens to move around due to fear of stray bullets.

“We move between 7 am to 3 pm to get stuff for the house and so on because I think this is when they sleep and we don’t see them on the streets as much during this time so we have to go back before the late afternoon. I never walk alone, I always move in a group.”

She said that the RSF gets more brutal when they lose soldiers.

As a woman who recently gave birth to a child, A.A said that pregnant women struggle with hospitals because there are barely functioning hospitals in Khartoum state and there are just badly-equipped clinics that are close to her. The clinics rely on community donations and organisations. Right now, they don’t have access to pre-natal and post-natal medicine or even sanitary pads.

When it comes to getting daily items and food, her neighbourhood has a soup kitchen that offers one meal a day at no cost and many people can only afford to eat from it and even after that, she said that most families would take their share in a container and add water to the stews to make it enough for feeding the entire family.

A.A continued to describe her life under siege and she added that the RSF sometimes cuts food supply for a few days or gets into a fight with the residents and orders them to shut down the market for a few days.

“The vegetable used to come on *toktoks* (local transportation) and when the RSF accused them of being military intelligence, they burned many of them on the streets and now most of the *toktok* drivers don’t come to Khartoum East anymore. At some point, some supplies arrived on donkeys or on bicycles, but now the RSF banned this. Right now, food access is very difficult and it is very expensive. There are food items in the supermarket, but because they are now Ethiopian and Egyptian products, they cost much more than what was available before the war. We get very little fresh food, sometimes we get vegetables from nearby farms, but we mostly get the same vegetables over and over again and they are so expensive.”

Moreover, power is unstable. Sometimes they would have power, but then it could go out for weeks in a row and the volunteers are not allowed to fix the electricity if there are raging battles.

“On some streets in my neighbourhoods, they have occupied a lot of houses, people are banned from walking there and women and girls don’t move or they move with men because they could get kidnapped by RSF and there are many stories of rape. We don’t know how many got raped because of the stigma. Sometimes they enter houses and kidnap girls and families can’t speak up.

We always move in groups and our movement is very limited.”

Refugee in Egypt (2)

W.A is a 41 years old mother and teacher who lived in Ombada, a locality in the Omdurman area. A little over a month after the war began, she left her house and travelled to Egypt.

“We left because our area is occupied by RSF and we used to suffer from daily bombardment due to that, the war planes were always above our heads,”

Before she left, she had only left her house once; mainly because she was very anxious about the sexual violence reports and she has teenage daughters.

“I remember leaving the house with my daughter to get some things and I came back with a headache because of the sight I saw and the RSF all over the place.”

In Egypt, W.A. said that she was unable to find employment and she suffers from racism because of her color which makes living there difficult. She has no income and is now dependent on some savings.

“When it comes to racism, some children bullied my girls because of their skin tone and we are constantly asked when we will leave Egypt and we are told that we have made their living more expensive.”

Right now, she relies on organisations such as UNICEF and the Egyptian Red Cross for personal needs such as sanitary pads.

W.A misses her home and wants to return. “I miss my garden and seeing the stars in the sky, having coffee with my neighbours and going to visit my mother. I miss the students I used to teach in first-grade and I remember it was during an exam that the war erupted and I received this news. I remember that moment so well and I miss teaching so much. I also write my memoirs and I have been writing since 2001. I had to leave it all behind. I have left my soul in Sudan.”

W.A is alone with her daughters in Egypt while most of her family members went to other states. Her daughters keep telling her to take them back to their family. She has not heard her mother’s voice for three months because she is now an IDP and has very weak connectivity.

“My daughters want to go back, but everything scares them. If they hear a plane or screeching tires, they get scared.”

Refugee in Uganda³⁶

S.A is a student who lives between Omdurman and North Kordofan and on the 28th of June, she left her home and travelled to South Sudan to reach her final destination, Uganda.

“We stayed in our neighbourhood in Omdurman which was full of RSF soldiers for two months. We left because it was just getting worse and also because we were worried about running out of food items.”

Because she is originally from North Kordofan which is also a conflict area, S.A. couldn't return there.

Right now, she has no income and doesn't speak English which makes it difficult to consider studying university in Uganda. She relies on her sister for support.

“I think moving to the states is not easy, because rent is expensive and it will be difficult to work or go to university. I am still trying to find my feet here, but the challenges are different. I don't feel different or face any racism.”

Displaced inside North Darfur³⁷

A.N is a politician and activist who lives in Al-Fashir in North Darfur state.

“Al-Fashir is unsafe right now, there is looting and fighting that starts and stops. The city is now divided into two parts, the North and Eastern part is under the control of the RSF while the South and Western part is in the hands of SAF.”

In this regard, the residents in the RSF-controlled areas began moving to the SAF-controlled area and A.N is one of them.

“Most of the residents in Eastern Al-Fashir moved to other areas in the Southern part of Al-Fashir because it is safer there. My family is one of them and we had to move out of Eastern Al-Fashir to stay with my family members as a result. We are in a constant state of flight, we don't know what to do. We leave and we come back to check on our houses, we are worried of looting. My mother keeps harassing me to go back home and I feel helpless”

³⁶ Interview with S.A by phone, 24 September 2023.

³⁷ Interview with A.N by whatsapp, 25 September 2023.

A.N spoke about her struggles and the struggles in her community as people have no savings and no stored food items.

“It is hard to connect, there is no network most of the time, sometimes the network is only in Southern Al-Fashir.”

After weeks in displacement, A.N is back to her home, but she feels very unsafe. She said that the city is being run over by men in arms and the sexual violence rates continue to grow.

“I am trying to convince my mother to move to another locality outside Al-Fashir, but she refuses. I feel that the worst is coming because humanitarian aid should be coming soon in convoys and there are threats by the RSF that they will interfere with this convoy. This will be a humanitarian tragedy and it will also push the armed groups here to enter the fight.”

Displaced inside Khartoum³⁸

E.N is a young woman who was displaced within Khartoum East as she moved about 7 kilometres from her neighbourhood.

“I live in Burri and I didn’t feel safe there at all and also, most of our neighbours left the area. I moved to another neighbourhood which still has residents.”

In her new environment where she lives with family, she had to change her lifestyle and her dresscode to fit in.

“I don’t think that in this conflict, it matters if you are a woman or man, men can also be raped or kidnapped, but yes if I go out with my brother for example and if we enter into a fight with an RSF soldier, it is likely that they will take me and rape me, but it could also happen to both of us because we don’t know how they could react.”

Although it is dangerous, E.N feels connected to Khartoum and feels that once she leaves, she will no longer be able to return. She has no job, but her brother is selling sandwiches to bring them an income and support the family even though it is very unsafe, but the presence of men in the public spaces is more accepted.

“I don’t think women can move freely, but you could make something and give it to a male relative to sell it for you.”

³⁸ Interview with E.N by phone, 24 September 2023.

Due to the conflict and displacement, she gets her period for longer periods and sometimes it even comes twice a month.

“I have not seen my partner in months and we only speak over the phone. I miss him a lot and want the war to stop so I can see him.”

In her new life, she feels stuck, unmotivated, she is unable to think about her future and only feels fear and anxiety.

Moved to Kassala, but don't feel any belonging³⁹

E.N is a 33-year old mother who used to live in Khartoum North and worked for the government before moving to Kassala state in Eastern Sudan because of the war. She is originally from Kassala and this is why she moved there.

“I left my home a few days into the war because I was heavily pregnant and I needed to act quickly. I live in Khartoum North and from the first day, we had no power or water and we were close to a military site, it became very dangerous.”

She gave birth in Al-Doroshab on the 19th of April and spent a few days with her baby under the bed before she had to move to Wad Medani and remained there until she healed from birth before moving to Kassala.

“I've been in my family's house with my daughter for six months. I rarely leave the room and I am struggling. I think I have postpartum depression and it is affecting me. I am from the Beni Amer tribe which is very conservative. It is difficult for me to leave the house and my husband spends the whole day outside and I can't do anything about it.”

Part of her depression is her feeling of not having a life of her own.

“In Kassala in my family's house, I am just a woman who had just given birth. I am not a working woman, I don't have a career or social life. I feel that I have no value. I want my job back, I want my friends and I want to feel that I have my own personality.”

Even though she is with her family, she experienced racism in Kassala. In recent years, tribal conflicts have pitted the Beni Amer, her ethnic group, against other groups and the state witnessed tribal fighting in 2020 and 2021.

“I was once in a taxi and he said that the Beni Amer are Eritrean refugees . I didn't see this racism beforehand and I didn't see that in Khartoum, but here I feel that I am witnessing it firsthand. This is making me feel that I don't want to stay here. I am now trying to get documents for my daughter and I will move to Cairo to stay with my husband's family, this could make me feel better. I

³⁹ Interview with E.N by phone, 26 September 2023.

understand that I could face racism in Egypt as well, but at least, the quality of our life there could be better. My daughter is keeping me alive and optimistic.”

E.N didn’t have any intimacy with her husband since the war began and she feels that she will not have a sex life after that.

“I don’t feel any desire and when I am alone, I just look at my daughter and cry and I feel that I’ve lost any feelings. I don’t see myself being intimate again.”

Displaced to Sennar with my son⁴⁰

E.D is a single mother of a 10-year old son who lived in Southern Khartoum and has now moved to her hometown, a small village in Sennar state.

“I left a few days into the fighting because we are close to the location where the clashes began and I was worried of random killings and looting. We arrived in this village where my father was born and we have not been here in eight years. I came to live in my grandfather’s house with my uncle and his family. I have considered to return back home, but the rape and looting stories made me scared. I don’t feel comfortable here at all.”

In her previous life, she worked at a private company and earned good money, she has now spent all her savings and is struggling to make ends meet.

“The opportunities for women here are extremely limited. You can just sell things, you buy clothes or women’s items and sell them on instalments and the value of money here is different. Everyone is living on loans and pays in instalments.”

When she arrived, she only brought limited clothes and now they are struggling because they washed everything so much that it is starting to wear out. She is so strained on money right now that she can barely afford sanitary pads.

“I wash with my bare hands, I can’t afford to get a washing machine or a water tanker. Water here is limited. We live in a compound of three houses and all of us use one water source and water is only available for one hour a day. Getting water from this source is time-consuming and I have to manage this for our washing and hygiene because there are a lot of diseases here related to hygiene.”

To coexist, E.D feels that her values are being compromised. She is very progressive and is now living in a society where women have to cover their faces. She also feels personal attacks because her community looks down on the IDPs because they are seen as disconnected from their families in their hometowns.

⁴⁰ Interview with E.D via phone, 27 September 2023.

“You have to be careful what to wear here and part of me raises awareness and speaks to the women here about their rights, but many times, I have to compromise. I am a divorced single mother with shaved hair and I had an independent life, I had to reimagine myself here.”

When it comes to her son, he has lost weight and she is concerned about his mental health.

“The environment here is different, the boys don’t play with girls and what is worse is that the boys insult each other using their mother (so they insult your mother repeatedly). I continue to speak to him and explain things, I don’t want my ten years of raising him to go to waste, I want him to have the values that I instilled in him.”

Concluding Remarks

War has led to mass displacement for the communities in Darfur and Khartoum and this displacement has impacted the physical and mental health, economic situation as well as private lives of women and girls. The women interviewed are divided into three groups; one group is now displaced inside Khartoum state, one group is displaced within Sudan and the third group was able to move to neighbouring countries. For the women that continue to live in Sudan - specifically the highlighted volatile conflict areas- their situation is dire because they have lost their stable incomes and live in imminent fear of sexual and gender-based violence. They are also stuck inside their former or new homes and their movement is extremely limited, further impacting their ability to re-establish income and improve their situation. These new spaces are also dictated by strict socio-cultural norms and expectations such as conservative dress codes, house chores, overcrowding, lack of privacy and lack of basic resources. These factors made many contemplate returning to an unsafe Khartoum where their personal spaces, familiar landscape, routines and rituals offer sought-after comfort that the shock of displacement and migration has desecrated.

For the women who were displaced within Sudan, the challenges are many. For starters, women are struggling due to the invasion of their privacy because of the new housing circumstances and the way houses are constructed in rural areas. This limits women’s intimate experiences and even their ability to use shared restrooms, which could impact their gut and reproductive systems as they have to plan their visits to the restrooms. Moreover, the women moved to areas where conservative social norms and economic prospects are limited which led to setbacks in their economic empowerment as they are now relying on male family members for their survival and this survival doesn’t include intimate needs such as sanitary pads. Their inability to contribute financially will translate into lessened chances to make decisions in their lives regarding marriage, employment and continuing their education.

Moreover, for the families that moved outside Sudan, their ability to continue living there will depend on their ability to make a living or raise funds from family members in the diaspora. In Uganda, the situation is better in terms of the ease of receiving a visa and getting refugee status or residency, which makes it an attractive destination. For Egypt, the situation there is more dire due

to restrictions on visa and on residency (females now require a visa to enter Egypt and getting a residency depends on registering your children in school and other inhibitive measures which put pressure on the family). As Egypt has its own economic difficulties currently, making living expenses more expensive, more families will have to relocate to towns inside Sudan.

Policy recommendations

- 1) There is a need to conduct more in-depth research on SGBV during this April war on Sudanese women and this research could be used to organise an international advocacy campaign on rape and sexual slavery as crimes of war.
- 2) Inclusion of women in the political and peace process is a priority and this requires strengthening coordination between women's groups, building their capacity on negotiations as well as providing them with financial and logistical support to attend meetings and talks. Lastly, due to the impact of the war on women's security and safety, it is imperative to reset the ecosystem to how things were pre-war, where women had clear engagement tracks in the peace and political processes.
- 3) Women-led CSOs need institutional strengthening support and core funding to sustain their work, strategize and maintain their staff members. They are critical because they already have the network, work force and can provide humanitarian support to displaced women and other vulnerable communities.
- 4) Coordination with emergency funds such as UAF, Freedom House and others to offer emergency funding for women. Due to capacity, there needs to be dedicated personnel who can support this.

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