

## DEMOCRACY &amp; HUMAN RIGHTS

# Women and War in Sudan: Gendering of the 2023 Sudanese Civil War

OCTOBER 1, 2024

Sudan's modern history has been marked by protracted civil wars and non-democratic governance systems. Behind the conflicts between armed groups and militaristic rules, women and children have borne the brunt. Yet another conflict over the control of the state [erupted](#) in April 2023, leading to the largest refugee and displacement crisis in African history. As a result of violence, nearly 10 million people have been [displaced](#), and a [food crisis](#) now affects 25.6 million Sudanese, over half the population. Among these, 8.5 million are acutely malnourished, while 755,000 are in [famine conditions](#). In conflict zones, millions of women and girls face increasing safety threats and limited access to essential services in conflict zones, including primary healthcare and housing. Kidnappings, forced disappearances, and conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), often involving armed groups, are [prevalent](#). However, despite the ongoing negotiations to end the war, peace talks to this day have largely failed.

## Background

On April 15, 2023, a power struggle between the Sudanese army and the notorious paramilitary group Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, shook the country after the RSF [launched a surprise attack](#) on multiple Sudanese Army bases across the country, including the capital Khartoum. In response, the Sudanese Air Force [launched](#) air strikes on RSF positions in Khartoum. Within weeks, the conflict spread to the Darfur region, which was still recovering from the civil conflict and genocide in the 2000s, and to the Kordofan region, where remnants of South Sudanese separatist groups have joined the ranks of the RSF, led by Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagalo, or the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF).

The two warring parties were once allies, having [united](#) in 2019 to overthrow dictator Omar al-Bashir, who had ruled the country for three decades. After al-Bashir's removal, General Abdel

Fattah al-Burhan of the SAF became the de facto head of state. With the backing of RSF General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemedti, al-Burhan [led a second coup](#) in 2021 that overthrew Sudan's interim government. However, amid international pressure to transition to a civilian government, a push to integrate the RSF into the national army sparked a violent uprising by Hemedti in mid-April 2023.

Starting in October 2023, momentum began to shift towards the RSF as paramilitary forces [defeated the army](#) in Darfur and advanced in Khartoum State, Kordofan, and Gezira State. The SAF has made progress in Omdurman since February 2024. Despite ongoing [negotiations](#) between the parties, no significant results have been achieved so far, while many countries have provided military or political support. As the conflict deepens, humanitarian conditions are deteriorating, and the hope for a long-awaited democratic transition is fading. Meanwhile, neighboring countries have [taken in more than one million refugees](#), raising the risk of broader destabilization throughout the Horn of Africa and the Sahel.

## **The Humanitarian Situation**

Fifteen months into the conflict, Sudan is facing one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises. Sudan is now the [host to 13% of all internally displaced people \(IDP\)](#) globally, making this the largest displacement crisis in the world. This extensive displacement has increased risks to maternal and child health; an [estimated](#) 50,000 births are expected in the next three months, and this year alone, 1.2 million pregnant and breastfeeding women face acute malnutrition.

Since May of 2024, heavy clashes have been reported in the states of Khartoum, Al Jazirah, North Darfur, West Kordofan, and North Kordofan states. Further, armed clashes between the SAF and the RSF have erupted in Sennar and Al Fasher states between SAF and RSF, leading to the [displacement of over 55,000 people](#) in Sinja town in Sennar alone and close to [130,000 people in the Al Fasher locality](#). In addition, a severe food crisis is unfolding. Of the 25.6 million people that are facing acute hunger levels, [611,000](#) are pregnant women; and of the 8.5 million people that are on the verge of famine, [203,000](#) are estimated to be pregnant women. Of the 755,000 people currently undergoing famine, [18,000](#) are pregnant women.

Allegations of sexual violence and human trafficking are also widespread across Sudan. Cases of sexual assault, forced marriages, sexual slavery, and trafficking of women and girls continue to be [recorded in high numbers](#), especially in Khartoum, Darfur, and Kordofan. Millions of civilians are particularly at risk as they flee conflict zones to find sanctuary either in Sudan or in neighboring countries. However, the true extent of this crisis remains unclear due to serious underreporting resulting from stigma, fear of retaliation, limited access to response services, and lack of trust in national institutions.

### **The Health Situation**

The health situation in Sudan is dire, with the ongoing conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces severely compromising access to medical care, particularly in the capital, Khartoum. The conflict has left Khartoum's health system on the verge of collapse, with only a [few hospitals](#) still functioning and essential medicines in short supply. Patients often arrive in critical condition at the few functioning hospitals after facing dangerous journeys due to the absence of ambulance services or other transport options. The situation is exacerbated by the high prices of medicines and the limited availability of essential medical supplies, making it increasingly difficult for the remaining residents of Khartoum to access lifesaving treatment. Over 80% of the health centers in conflict-affected areas have been [destroyed](#) or looted, and those still operating face severe challenges as staff have been displaced and essential medicines and supplies have run out.

The war has devastated Sudan's health infrastructure, with only one-third of the hospitals in conflict zones still operational. Many health facilities have been destroyed or repurposed for military use, leading to severe shortages of medical supplies and personnel. [Health workers](#) are fleeing the country or are unable to reach hospitals due to safety concerns, further crippling the already struggling healthcare system. The conflict has disrupted essential health services, including obstetric care, emergency services, and treatment for chronic conditions, putting millions at risk. Amid the health crisis, women, especially pregnant ones, face severe challenges in accessing medical care.

The ongoing conflict in Khartoum has severely impacted [maternal health services](#), leaving over 1.1 million pregnant women in need of care. The destruction of hospitals, shortages of medical

supplies, and attacks on healthcare facilities have drastically reduced access to essential services such as antenatal, delivery, and postnatal care. Many women are forced to travel long distances to seek medical help, risking their own health and that of their babies. Some women have no choice but to give birth at home without professional support, leading to possible life-threatening complications. The conflict has also led to an increase in premature births, exacerbated by stress, insecurity, and malnutrition. Additionally, the conflict, coupled with displacement, deaths, and sexual and gender-based violence, has taken a significant toll on the mental health of the women, heightening their risk of both physical and psychological harm.

### **Threats to Women**

Even in peacetime, gender norms and dynamics profoundly curtail women's social, economic, and political participation, as well as their access to resources and services. The war has worsened these conditions. Compounding the catastrophe is the violence targeted at women and girls: over 6.7 million Sudanese people, mostly women, are [estimated](#) to be at risk of gender-based violence (GBV), fueled by the unequal laws that perpetuate it, patriarchal gender norms, economic hardship, insecurity and conflict, and inadequate law enforcement, and concepts of family honor.

The conflict in Sudan has exacerbated the threats faced by women and girls, amplifying existing gender inequalities and exposing females to increased risks of gender-based violence. The collapse of the state institutions and the health infrastructure has become an obstacle to women searching for essential health services, leading to the neglect of reproductive health and [increased maternal mortality](#). The conflict has also triggered an increase in sexual violence, kidnappings, and forced marriages, often perpetrated by armed groups and criminals who take advantage of the instability. The exact number of women and girls affected by abductions, kidnappings, and enforced disappearances in Sudan is unknown, even though some survivors have [reported](#) that they were seized, held in captivity with other women, and subjected to repeated rape by their captors. While dozens of cases of rape resulting from the conflict have been verified, the Sudanese government's Combating Violence against Women (CVAW) unit estimates that official reports [may represent only 2% of the total incidents](#).

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Women and girls in conflict-affected areas, members of minority communities, IDPs, and refugees have been particularly targeted.

Moreover, the closure of schools and health facilities has deprived women and girls of safe spaces, increasing their vulnerability to violence and exploitation, as well as extreme poverty. The bodies of women and girls become highly commodified during times of unrest, food insecurity, and deprivation, resulting in an increased number of forced marriages. Hyperinflation and other economic hardships force families to resort to child marriage as a survival strategy, whereby daughters of destitute families in extreme situations are wed to increase food security or access to other means of survival. In Khartoum, [there are cases of young girls being forced into marriages](#) with RSF soldiers, which may result from parents agreeing to dowry proposals as their only means of survival after the RSF has restricted their family's access to essentials.

Since the conflict began last year, traditional roles have been disrupted as men are drawn into the fighting or rendered jobless. This has placed a heavy burden on women and girls, who now face the responsibility of keeping their families together. Many women, unprepared to make the critical decisions needed in these difficult times, now are forced to find ways to support their entire families. Women in urban areas are especially at risk, for many are tea or food vendors or small traders on the streets of Khartoum, serving as the primary breadwinners for their households. Nevertheless, this is highly dangerous work in a conflict zone, as evidenced by the numbers who have [disappeared](#).

Furthermore, women have also been victims of an [increase in domestic violence](#). The rising tensions within households can be attributed to men's unemployment alongside financial constraints and displacement. According to a [study](#) by CARE International, when many Sudanese women seek a divorce, they often face physical abuse from their husbands, and their families pressure them to remain in the marriage and endure the hardship. Decades of efforts to end violence against women and children are at risk of being undone in the ongoing conflict, demonstrating the fragility of progress toward gender equality.

## **Responses and Initiatives by Women**

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In the face of violence, hunger, and trauma, Sudanese women have nevertheless been rising and taking action. To lead the humanitarian response, especially when the efforts of international organizations have been restricted, women have brought together networks and initiatives and expanded existing civil society and non-profit organizations by creating targeted responses to the realities of different population groups. Women across the country, for instance, have expanded women’s Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), which have been crucial in providing specific services and interventions for women and girls. These include internally displaced women, others who are pregnant or breastfeeding, and the victims of sexual violence. Women have also played a critical role in humanitarian response efforts within Sudan and neighboring countries, exhibiting leadership, resilience, and adaptability to reach those most in need. They have also been strong advocates on a global scale for increased funding and support for delivering aid to women, children, and other vulnerable groups.

Many women have been [making great efforts](#) in providing shelter, water, food, healthcare, and psychological and social support. Around 49 women-led (WLOs) and women’s rights (WROs) organizations, peace initiatives, humanitarian groups, and civil society organizations have come together and—supported by the UN Women’s Sudan office—[formed](#) “The Peace for Sudan Platform,” a network that includes representatives from various regions of the country and fosters coordination, communication, and collaboration among members.

These civil society actors also monitor human rights violations and raise awareness to further international support for ending the war. Members are actively working to facilitate inclusion and social harmony through dialogue among IDPs forced to unite from different regions of Sudan. Due to the challenges of holding face-to-face meetings, many organizations have [formed](#) WhatsApp groups, despite the limitations of weak and unstable mobile networks. These groups have become critical for maintaining support operations and collecting evidence of the war’s devastating gendered impact. Most of these organizations receive [financial support](#) from the Sudanese diaspora as well, but the volunteers [complain](#) that these funds are insufficient and hard to access because of the collapse of the banking system.

A further initiative, [The Mothers of Sudan](#), rallies citizens to oppose the war, demand accountability from individuals and military leaders, and strengthen resilience during the

ongoing war. Emerging as a strong advocate for peace, the organization has quickly expanded its scope to conduct an in-depth analysis of the situation. Recognizing the vital role of civil society, the group actively works to engage and empower communities in the pursuit of resolution. Beyond making strategic assessments, the initiative has crafted a variety of approaches for different forms of participation, while also committing substantial resources into crucial psychosocial support for survivors. However, the responders have [reported](#) facing numerous obstacles that hinder their efforts, such as the constant risk of arrest by the RSF and the army, both of which accuse volunteers of aiding their adversaries and view these groups as entities to control rather than support.

The Sudan Family Planning Association (SFPA) has also been a leading organization providing a wide range of sexual and reproductive health services across Sudan. Despite facing severe challenges, such as the loss of staff, destruction of clinics, and bureaucratic obstacles, SFPA remains committed to providing essential care. Over the past year alone, they have [delivered](#) more than 33 million health services, including HIV/AIDS and STI treatment, along with support for survivors of GBV.

Another initiative has been the [Sudan Women's Peace Dialogue](#), a historic conference held in Kampala on July 3-4, 2024, that brought together over 60 Sudanese women from diverse backgrounds. Attendees included representatives from peace-building networks, political groups, faith-based organizations, and civil society organizations. Convened by the African Union Commission's Chairperson, H.E. Moussa Faki Mahamat, through the Office of the Special Envoy on Women, Peace, and Security, and under the leadership of the AU High-Level Panel on Sudan (HLP-Sudan), the event aimed to amplify the voices of Sudanese women in the ongoing efforts to secure lasting peace and security in Sudan. The dialogue concluded with a strong commitment to advocating for women's representation in the peace talks.

Overall, initiatives like these serve as a powerful testament to the resilience and determination of Sudanese women in their pursuit of peace and security.

## **Women in Peace Processes**

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In April of this year, European, African, and Arab foreign affairs ministers [met](#) in Paris to relaunch peace talks aimed at ending the war in Sudan. Earlier [meetings and multiple conversations](#) in Jeddah, Djibouti, Addis Ababa, Manama and Cairo laid the groundwork; however, not much progress was made as neither the army nor the RSF were represented.

As the negotiations and peace talks continue with the aim of bringing a peaceful transition and peace to Sudan, women's issues seem not to have been given the priority they deserve in the negotiation agenda, indicating a continuation of women's marginalization and exclusion. This reality highlights a lack of political will to secure fair and meaningful representation for women in Sudan's political and social future.

Despite this, Sudanese women are seeing positive developments. As of August 15, a dozen women from various civil society organizations have [participated](#) for the first time in the US-mediated peace talks in Switzerland addressing the civil war in Sudan. The women-led delegation emphasized the impact of GBV throughout the past fifteen months of the conflict. Sudanese women also advocated for inclusion in the monitoring mechanism, which was anticipated to be a key outcome of these talks. If implemented, this mechanism would involve civilian-led confidential reporting to ensure safety, using both physical and online channels.

While the US-mediated peace talks [failed to end](#) the country's conflict, they succeeded in improving humanitarian access to millions who have been without food, medicine, and other vital aid for many months. Furthermore, negotiators [secured](#) commitment from both the RSF and SAF to allow aid to be delivered via the Adre and Dabar routes.

While the latest talks included women delegates, the underrepresentation of women in general is a missed opportunity and a profound injustice that risks jeopardizing the potential for sustainable peace in Sudan. Women's leadership in humanitarian efforts, their firsthand experiences of the conflict, and their unique perspectives on peacebuilding are essential for any meaningful resolution.

## **Conclusion**

The humanitarian crisis in Sudan has placed immense burdens on women and children, millions of which are facing life-threatening conditions including acute food insecurity,

displacement, and gender-based violence. The collapse of healthcare infrastructure, combined with widespread conflict-related sexual violence, has worsened their already dire situation. However, women have taken on significant roles as primary caregivers, while also leading community-based efforts.

The ongoing war in Sudan underscores the critical need for inclusive and comprehensive peace processes that prioritize the voices and experiences of those most affected – particularly women. Despite their pivotal roles in humanitarian response and community resilience, women remain underrepresented in Sudanese peace negotiations. This underrepresentation not only perpetuates cycles of violence but also fails to properly address critical issues such as gender-based violence and access to essential services. As Sudanese women continue to demonstrate remarkable leadership and resilience, it is imperative that their contributions and efforts be recognized and incorporated into the formal peace process. The international community and all involved parties must ensure that women’s voices are not sidelined and that women are active participants in shaping Sudan’s future. Their involvement is not only a matter of justice but also a necessity for achieving peace and stability in Sudan.

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