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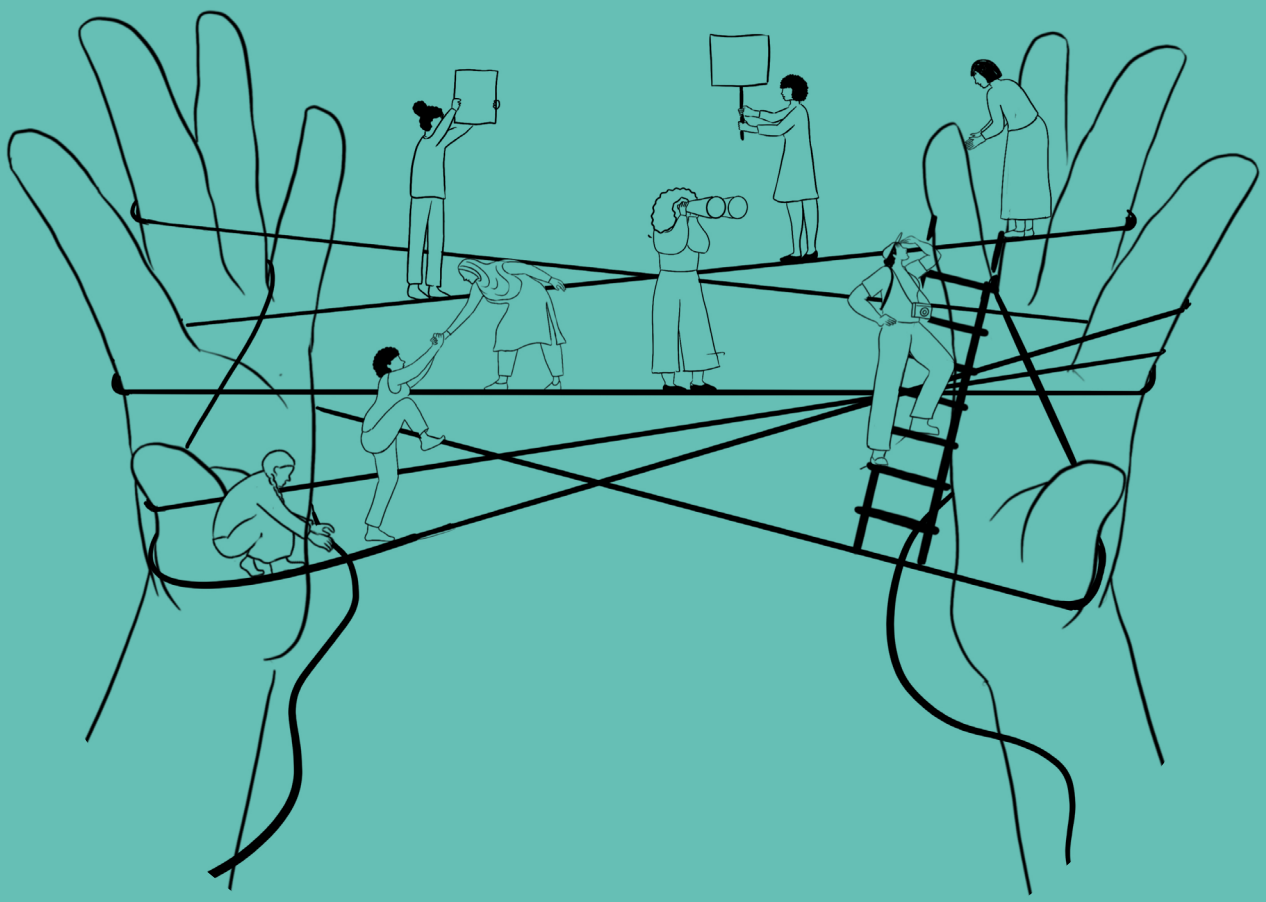
EUROPEAN INSTITUTE OF PEACE

Reclaiming the Women Peace and Security Agenda in Sudan

A Background Paper



Acknowledgments

This background paper is part of the *Breaking Barriers, Making Peace* project, led by the European Institute of Peace with support from the German Federal Foreign Office. It examines the intersection of gender and conflict in Ethiopia, with a focus on how and where women have been leading on and meaningfully participated in peacebuilding efforts. The findings highlight the persistent barriers that undermine women's participation and set out concrete actions to enhance their role in conflict prevention and peace processes. The findings highlight the persistent barriers that undermine women's participation and set out concrete actions to enhance their role in conflict prevention and peace processes. These insights contribute to the "Status Quo or Bold Adaptation? Reclaiming the Women, Peace and Security Agenda" report, which aims to advance the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda globally by equipping policymakers and practitioners with evidence-based recommendations on how to promote women's meaningful participation, including in evolving areas such as environmental peacebuilding.

This background paper is accompanied by two others entitled Confronting the Exclusion of Women in Ethiopia's Peace Processes and Navigating Barriers To Women's Participation in Policy Spaces Intersecting with Environmental Peacebuilding. The papers have informed the findings in the global report and a policy brief under the same title. The findings from the global report are also backed by references included in a practitioner-friendly compendium of resources.

The timing is significant, as the international community approaches the 25th anniversary of the formal WPS agenda. This milestone invites reflection and renewed commitment. The global report, compendium and background papers, underscore the critical importance of grounding international policy in the lived experiences, knowledge and innovations emerging from women peacebuilders on the ground. It will help shape more responsive and effective WPS approaches in the years to come.

Sudan report researchers: Mayada Elmaki and Junli Lim
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Reviewers: Sophia Close, Siad Darwish and Cate Buchanan
Project management: Miriam Reifferscheidt (Gender & Peacemaking Programme Manager) and Pauline Chauveau (Gender & Peacemaking Programme Officer)
Copy-editor: Kelley Friel
Graphic Designer: Dorothée Olivereau, Illustrations: Vidushi Yadav / Studio We are Stories.

The Institute extends sincere gratitude to the research participants who, despite the risks involved, generously agreed to be interviewed. Their contributions were essential to the study and are deeply valued.

For any comments, kindly contact: info@eip.org
The text is left-aligned throughout the report to promote accessibility and ease of reading.

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1. Introduction

This background report is part of the European Institute of Peace's Breaking Barriers, Making Peace project. Sudan is home to two of Africa's longest civil wars and has experienced continuous internal strife under a series of dictatorships since it gained independence in 1956.[1] It was under the firm grip of President Omar Al-Bashir from 1989 until 2019 when the grassroots December Revolution overthrew him.[2] During this Transitional Period, the Sudanese military and a civilian coalition administered the country; they jointly developed a draft constitution to guide Sudan to a civilian-led democratic government.[3] The subsequent Juba Peace Process produced the 2020 Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan (Juba Agreement) between the transitional government and multiple armed factions.

The Transitional Period and Juba Peace Process both advanced the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and provided momentum for Sudan to adopt its first WPS National Action Plan (NAP) in 2020.[4] These changes were superficially gender responsive: the draft constitution referred to equality between men and women and guaranteed women 40 per cent representation, and the peace process included women in official talks.[5] Yet these commitments to women's human rights were primarily included to appease international partners. Closer examination reveals that women's representation was tokenistic: it expanded the proverbial "pie" but did not meaningfully boost their participation.[6]

As women mobilised again after the Juba Peace Process in 2020 to demand their inclusion in peace processes and political decision-making, an October 2021 military coup halted the transition and disrupted the implementation of the NAP – stalling the advancement of the WPS agenda.[7] Unrest ensued as calls for a civilian government and accountability for violence escalated.[8] Armed violence between the Rapid Support Forces and Sudanese Armed Forces broke out in Khartoum in April 2023, quickly escalating to the armed conflict that continues at the time of writing.

This research seeks to: (1) uncover the barriers affecting women's meaningful participation in conflict prevention and peace processes in Sudan and (2) identify strategies or promising practices that have been used to overcome these barriers and enhance women's meaningful participation. The report builds on significant prior analysis (predominantly conducted by local women's rights organisations) and assesses the current position of women in the country's political and peacebuilding spaces.

The analysis identifies numerous barriers to advancing the WPS agenda; one of the most important is the ongoing armed conflict. Enduring conservative gender norms and patriarchal attitudes foster systemic oppression and exclusion. Limited civic and peace education, the continued dominance of elites, and divisions and a lack of intersectional inclusion within the women's movement create further obstacles. Shortfalls in international support as well as insufficient coordination among international stakeholders also perpetuate women's exclusion. Various creative locally led initiatives have, however, helped to overcome these barriers. Their continued success depends on multiple factors, which are discussed in Section 3.

1.1 Summary of Key Findings

The research identified five key blockages and strategies for women's meaningful participation in Sudan and proposes targeted strategies to address them:

- **BARRIER 1: Restrictive gender norms**
  Use prevailing socio-cultural norms and locally resonant practices to build community trust and encourage male allies.
- **BARRIER 2: Limited civic, gender equality and peace education**
  Bolster civic and peace education through intersectional initiatives to foster awareness of gender inequality and participation.
- **BARRIER 3: Divisions within civil society**
  Narrow the divide within the women's movement and civil society by addressing economic inequalities and creating a common platform to help diverse communities advance a unified WPS agenda.
- **BARRIER 4: Limited international funding and influence**
  Ensure flexible and responsive core funding to support women's meaningful participation while leveraging international influence to advance the WPS agenda.
- **BARRIER 5: Dire humanitarian crisis due to continued armed conflict**
  Leverage the crisis to support local initiatives enabling women's meaningful participation.

1.2 Report Structure

This report examines the intersection of gender and conflict in Sudan (Section 2). The focus on how (and where) women have been able to meaningfully participate (Section 3) emerged through consultations with local stakeholders. The findings detail the barriers that interfere with women's participation and set out clear actions to enhance women's meaningful participation in conflict prevention and peace processes (Section 3). Section 4 briefly concludes, and the Annex describes the research methodology.

2. Background

2.1 Women and Conflict

Human rights abuses committed with impunity during Al-Bashir's reign had far-reaching effects on Sudan's civil society and the status of women. The regime's "Civilization Project"[9] systemised abuse through a combination of Arabisation and Islamisation that aimed to consolidate a patriarchal way of life and deepen political divisions.[10] Arabisation advanced Arabic identity, language, culture, and ethnically Arab people in politically powerful positions at the expense of other ethnic groups; Islamisation is the historical spread and influence of ultraconservative interpretations of Islamic texts and practices. As Nyombe explains, these were intertwined in Sudan: **"If a non-Arab became a Muslim [in Sudan], and acquired a Muslim name and culture, he became an Arab."**[11]

As part of the Civilization Project, the regime enacted the Public Order and Personal Status Laws to further its Islamisation efforts, control gender relations and regulate personal behaviour.[12] The enforcement of these laws affected life in both public and private spaces, including individuals' choice of dress and behaviour, as well as their economic, social and political activities.[13] While all citizens were expected to conform to these guidelines of "morality", women were frequently held to stricter standards than men and were disproportionately penalised. Women's families policed them at home to avoid incurring severe fines, incarceration and violence.[14]

Women were forbidden to leave their homes without being accompanied by a male relative, and women's rights organisations and women activists experienced heightened scrutiny, harassment and intimidation. For example, the Salmmah Women's Resource Centre, an independent feminist organisation that advocated women's rights, was forced to close in 2014 with no justification or due process.[15] Women from marginalised and lower socio-economic backgrounds were disproportionately impacted.[16] For instance, they could not afford private transportation to avoid detection by law enforcement officials or pay fines for violating laws. They were more often imprisoned, which compounded cycles of harm and poverty.[17]

These laws had an outsized impact on women from historically conflict-affected and economically marginalised areas such as Darfur, Kordofan, the Blue Nile and Eastern Sudan. Violence and loss of economic opportunities created more women-headed households, forced rural-to-urban migration, and required women to forge new livelihoods such as trading small goods, running food stalls, and selling tea or homemade alcohol. However, the Public Order and Personal Status Laws prohibited women from trading in certain markets or selling particular goods.[18] They exacerbated structural inequality by making upward mobility nearly impossible for women from marginalised and conflict-affected areas. As an interviewee explained:

> **"The Sudanese community is deeply traditional, often limiting women to domestic roles. Despite some progress, cultural and religious barriers are still present and heightened by a lack of awareness [about their impacts] among both men and women."**[19]

Systemic oppression and deeply ingrained structural inequities continue to pose serious obstacles to the protection of women and their effective participation in reconciliation and peacebuilding. Institutionalised policies and practices, particularly the Public Order and Personal Status Laws, limited women's agency, stifled their voices in public and private, and excluded them from decision-making forums crucial to advancing the WPS agenda by socially, economically and politically marginalising them. The legacy of these policies still hampers attempts to establish gender equality and a lasting peace.

The non-violent December Revolution (December 2018 to April 2019) transformed the nature of women's participation in conflict resolution and peace processes and helped advance WPS.[20] Young women served in prominent leadership roles.[21] As a project participant described, **"The revolution empowered women and made the community recognise that women have a role to play. Of course, in some cases there was backlash, but in general, people were [now] okay with seeing women in public spaces. That itself is significant because in some communities having women in public spaces is still an issue."[22]**

The generation that fought for women's rights under Al-Bashir and earlier did so within highly restrictive environments and risked severe consequences. Systemic oppression within families and conservative norms often prevented younger women from leaving the home due to fears they would be harmed or bring shame to the family if they were caught protesting.[23] Women defied social expectations to engage in public political activism during the December Revolution, often against the wishes of their families.[24] A key informant explained, **"[T]here [were] two revolutions happening [in] parallel…the revolution started from [women's] ability to leave to protest every day without being locked in the house".[25]**

The image of Alaa Salah in a white robe leading revolutionary chants attracted international attention to the protest movement and spotlighted Sudanese women spearheading democratic change. She symbolised young, urban and educated professional women – a privileged group that has traditionally been more socially and politically active in Sudan.[26] Yet overall, the women who engaged in the December Revolution were ethnically, religiously and geographically diverse and represented communities beyond the educated elite.[27]

Narratives of the December Revolution framed women's activism as exceptional despite their consistent involvement in political and social activism prior to the revolution, albeit in much smaller numbers than men.[28]

Localised collective solidarity provided an opportunity to bridge historical divisions between women's movements in the centre and those in the regions, and to create a shared agenda for change among women across the country.[29] The diversity did not result from a centralised plan but rather from "spontaneous bread protests" in which citizens engaged in sporadic street demonstrations to oppose rising food prices and the declining economy.[30] Local protests mitigated women's safety concerns since they did not need to travel long distances and provided safety in numbers to overcome social barriers such as restricted freedom of movement.[31]

Women protestors broke stereotypes and gender norms, but Sudanese women who try to take on public or political roles usually confront several challenges. Conservative norms create and sustain these hurdles because women are still expected to prioritise caregiving and domestic household tasks: this makes it difficult to engage in economic activities as well as public leadership roles.[32] The extent of women's involvement differed by region.[33] One participant highlighted, "Unlike in Darfur, where women had more public visibility, in the areas of Eastern Sudan where I worked, only one woman was actively engaged, travelling from village to village to convince women of the importance of organising [collective action]."[34]

Economic motives to participate in the December Revolution were more pronounced among young women outside Khartoum due to persistent economic marginalisation and limited access to reproductive and gender-responsive health care in the regions.[35] As one participant stated, **"It's catastrophic [in Eastern Sudan]…if the baby is big, there is no one to help them [deliver]. And most likely women die. That's why they starve, so that the baby becomes so small so that they can give birth naturally".[36]**

2.2 Women and Peace Processes

The 2019 draft constitution recognised women's significant roles in the December Revolution by guaranteeing a minimum of 40 per cent women's representation on the Transitional Legislative Council.[37] Despite this explicit commitment to the WPS agenda, women were initially excluded from the Juba Peace Process due to persistent patriarchal and conservative gender norms that generally exclude women from politics.[38] Commitments outlined in the draft constitution were never realised, leaving women with a sense of betrayal and reaffirming the lack of political will to advance the WPS agenda.[39]

For example, women were not permitted to speak during formal negotiations; nor were they offered seats.[40] One female attendee explained, "When it was time to sit at the table we could not find chairs at the front. They were all occupied by men…It wasn't until a UN official asked why we're sitting at the back that we started to claim the chairs at the front of the room. The men were not too happy. Every man would walk up to us and state that this is his seat. When we refused to move, they brought their chairs forward until we eventually found ourselves at the back again".[41] A key project informant explained:

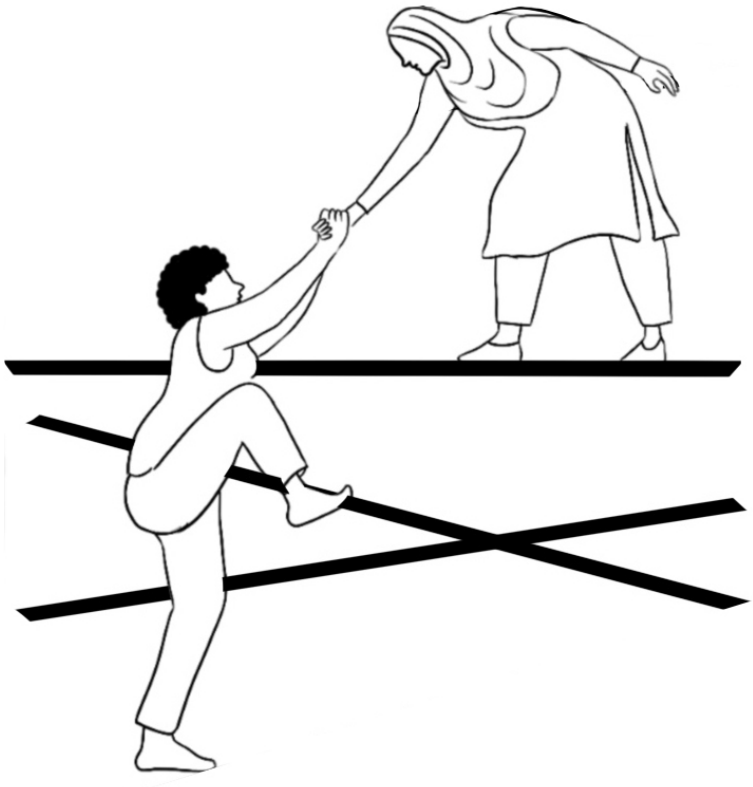
> **"Women were at the front lines of the revolution – not only at the national level but also on the ground, taking on various roles. However, the moment the revolution transitioned into a formal political process, women were immediately marginalised. This was because the parties and political institutions leading the negotiations had never genuinely supported women's leadership… They were not going to prioritise or advance this agenda within the negotiations."[42]**

Despite widespread calls to advance WPS goals in Sudan, donors still favour men's participation in peacemaking.[43] A project participant explained that, **"Women have been excluded from peace talks in Eastern Sudan, Northern Sudan, Darfur, and South Sudan."[44]** Women composed only 10 per cent of the official Juba Peace Process negotiations – usually women members of political party factions – even after women's groups had again mobilised to demand their inclusion.[45] Organising the negotiations into regional tracks disadvantaged women from areas that historically excluded women from political and public domains due to patriarchal and conservative gender norms, such as Eastern Sudan. Furthermore, regional tracks discouraged cross-regional coalition building and learning as participants only worked with others from the same regional delegation.

Sudan developed and adopted its first NAP in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 for 2020–2022.[46] It is the only NAP in the Arab region to include gender-responsive recovery planning, and is only one of two that contains gender provisions for peace agreements and monitoring mechanisms.[47] The Ministry of Labour and Social Development jointly implemented it with the Geneva Institute for Human Rights with funding from Norway. Sudanese women's groups welcomed the NAP, which received broad support both within civil society and the transitional government as it was seen as an opportunity to address gaps in the peace and transitional process.[48]

However, the NAP had no dedicated implementation budget, which made it difficult for women to engage in political and peace decision-making.[49] As a key informant explained, "Political engagement is expensive, and in Sudan, becoming a political activist or a women's rights advocate requires substantial effort and resources. However, there is little to no financial support, which creates additional economic burdens."[50] The NAP also emphasises women's *individual* rather than collective participation and does not contain comprehensive measures to support survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).[51]

All formal efforts to advance the WPS agenda and implement the NAP halted with the military coup in 2021 and armed conflict in April 2023. Over 12 million women and girls are currently at risk of SGBV and conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) that has been used to "humiliate, dominate, disperse, forcibly relocate and terrify an entire population".[52] Trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation, slavery and forced marriage has also been on the rise.[53] The armed conflict has heightened the need to protect women and children, and underscores the importance of inclusivity in peace and transitional processes.



3. Findings: Barriers that Derail Women's Meaningful Participation (and How to Overcome Them)

This section discusses five intersectional challenges that obstruct women's meaningful participation in political and peace processes[54] and links them to actions that (if done carefully and consistently) can help address the barriers and the exclusion of Sudanese women. These include:

- BARRIER 1: Restrictive gender norms
- BARRIER 2: Limited civic, gender equality and peace education
- BARRIER 3: Divisions within civil society
- BARRIER 4: Limited international funding and influence
- BARRIER 5: Continuing armed conflict

3.1 BARRIER 1: Restrictive gender norms

Sexist and patriarchal norms limit women's freedom of movement, association, behaviour and participation in public life. Sudanese women and their needs and interests are not prioritised. Particularly during armed conflict, **"Women's issues are always treated as peripheral issues… 'Now, let us achieve peace first and achieve democracy and stability, and then later, we can discuss women's issues'".**[55]

Al-Bashir's Civilization Project entrenched these conservative gender norms by weaponising education. In 1990, the government instituted a curriculum based on conservative Islamic teachings that reinforced restrictive gender roles.[56] As one participant explained, **"Gender discrimination is a state policy, and you can see it in our curriculum, which teaches using stereotypes: 'Mohamed is a pilot and Zainab is a nurse.' Limiting girls' confidence and shaping how they see their opportunities from an early age."**[57]

Severe restrictions on public life and activism have forced women to find novel ways to influence peace processes and help prevent conflict. One initiative involved leveraging mothers' influence within the family to discourage their sons from joining war efforts. This initiative, called the "Mothers Group", started in Damazin (Blue Nile State) and Kordofan Region in April 2023.[58] This informal network was composed of locally based women who frequently communicated via social messaging platforms.[59]

The network's efforts were initially successful: **"because of the significant influence mothers have over their sons, and because obedience to one's mother is a religious, cultural, and social duty".**[60] However, armed forces attacks on anti-war activists, as well as the economic impact of the conflict, have hampered the success of this initiative. Nearly one-fifth (18 per cent) of heads of urban households now report being unemployed or receive no income, compared to 1.6 per cent before the war.[61] **"Mothers are saying, 'We can't afford to eat, it's better for my son to [be] recruited [into the war] so he can bring us food.'"**[62] Participants reported that, **"These women were targeted, beaten and imprisoned."**[63]

Ensuring a stable, inclusive economic environment has proven critical to advancing the WPS agenda. Women are more able to participate in campaigns, advocacy, and initiatives if their basic needs are met. This becomes more critical the longer the war lasts and the economic situation continues to deteriorate. Peace Research Centre initiatives in East Darfur prove that addressing economic inequalities using socio-cultural practices to query prevailing gender norms builds community support for gender equality and income generation for women.[64]
Successful initiatives include economic empowerment activities to improve livelihoods and increase women's confidence and ability to engage in community-level governance. Women entrepreneurs were provided with essential

materials and business training. These trained women then instructed others, expanding the programme's reach and impact. This led to a shift in gender power dynamics in local reconciliation committees: women who were once relegated to the sidelines now actively participate, highlighting the need to address the risks of female genital mutilation and the need for trained midwives to prevent maternal deaths.[65]

Building trust and influencing male attitudes towards women's issues shifted perceptions and behaviour. The Peace Research Centre – in partnership with the Right Organisation, the Civil Laboratory, and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies – first approached male community leaders in El-Firdous, East Darfur to attend workshops on women's access to healthcare and education. As a project participant explained, **"At first, only men attended…After a year, the men began to trust us. They even started inviting women themselves…At first, they were reluctant, but once they trusted us, they started supporting women's rights".**[66]

Complementary initiatives by the Civil Laboratory promoted peaceful coexistence through culture. They used traditional folk art and theatre, creative and locally relevant processes, to engage communities and address conflict. The Women's Movement for Resolution 1325 raised awareness of women's rights and promoted women as peacebuilders. To overcome male dominance in leadership, they introduced women-only coffee meetings, which provided safe spaces for discussions on women's rights, early marriage and female genital mutilation. These meetings proved instrumental in raising awareness and encouraging women to influence community decision-making.[67]

War has disrupted their progress, but these complementary initiatives are a powerful example of strategic programming: a combination of economic empowerment, cultural engagement, and targeted awareness can break systemic barriers to women's participation. They further highlight that understanding cultural norms and working within familial structures is integral to shifting barriers to women's influence.[68]

Actions to address and overcome this barrier

1. **Build trust within communities to foster male solidarity.** Where sexist and patriarchal norms prevail, first building trust with male leaders enables shifts in perceptions, attitudes and behaviours, which can boost support for addressing women's issues and including women in public life. Pursuing these goals via existing socio-cultural practices is perceived as non-threatening.

2. **Address economic inequalities by integrating economic empowerment into peacebuilding initiatives**. Economically empowering women through business training and providing essential tools and equipment improves their livelihoods and builds their confidence to engage in community decision-making. Women who have their basic needs met can focus on broader socio-political issues, wielding their influence in familial spaces and participating politically in their communities and beyond.

3.2 BARRIER 2: Limited civic, gender equality and peace education

Repressive gender norms are embedded and replicated in Sudan's formal and informal education systems. Study participants called for more civic and peace education initiatives, particularly with a gender-responsive lens to combat deeply ingrained conservative gender norms.[69] One participant explained: **"There are many traditions in Sudan that limit and reduce women's participation and devalue their contributions. These traditions vary from one state to another, with some adopting a [more] conservative interpretation of religion to justify these limitations."**[70] They highlighted the importance of raising awareness of gender equality and women's rights, including working with faith leaders to reinterpret religious texts.

Participants also highlighted the need to engage men and integrate gender equality into the formal curriculum. For example, Ahfad University for Women is the only institution to require students to take courses on gender studies. Men are thus systemically excluded from learning about gender equality and how it applies to men and militarised institutions.[71]

Community-level education initiatives have cultivated democratic knowledge and critical thinking by promoting local understanding of democracy and peace; they have also built respect for diversity and women's rights. The informal grassroots Reading for Change programme has strengthened peacebuilding, gender equality and civic activism. Established in 2013, it has formed more than 1,250 reading groups (which average seven members) across most regions, especially in conflict areas.[72]

It provides short, accessible books, of no more than 15,000 words, written in plain language by Sudanese authors on Sudanese issues. A total of 350,000 books across 100 subjects were distributed, leading to over 4,000 discussion sessions. Each reading group meets regularly to discuss the books, bridging knowledge gaps and fostering intercommunal dialogue on local experiences and solutions.[73] Women comprise 25 per cent of the groups. The initiative directly involves up to 10,000 participants and indirectly impacts 25,000 others, including the families, neighbours and friends of those involved.

The programme's impact extends far beyond its initial objectives. Many participants were integral in coordinating protests and sit-ins during the December Revolution.[74] The networking, coordination and knowledge building facilitated by this and similar initiatives generated the local skills, networks and coalitions that proved critical to sustain Sudan's revolutionary movement.[75]

Actions to address and overcome this barrier

1. **Bolster civic and peace education to foster awareness and participation.** Education is key to dismantling deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes, engaging men, empowering women and encouraging active civic participation. Future generations – young men and women – must be engaged to trigger systemic change. Offering accessible and inclusive civil education programmes that promote understanding of rights, democratic change and peace processes provide tools to enable women and marginalised groups to participate in decision-making. Such efforts are needed to allow marginalised women to voice their concerns and priorities.

2. **Ground civic and peace education in local knowledge to increase accessibility and relevance.** This will help local groups and communities engage effectively and inclusively. Local writing, art and music can trigger discussions and encourage political participation.

3. **Work with men as allies** to stimulate transformative systemic change by shifting attitudes, behaviours and perceptions of gender norms. Civic and peace education initiatives must include men and women from different generations to bridge knowledge and practice gaps.

3.3 BARRIER 3: Divisions within the women's movement

There are intergenerational tensions between a focus on participation vs. systemic transformation for conflict prevention. The December Revolution briefly allowed younger women to explore their political aspirations in civil society. However, they often clashed with older activists' approaches to political change and advancing women's political participation and WPS principles. The 2021 coup and ongoing armed conflict have further exacerbated the intergenerational division and disrupted the ways in which different generations work together.

Younger women are increasingly focused on addressing systemic issues: they seek to dismantle power dynamics and reform structures through an explicitly feminist lens. Older women have instead historically emphasised integrating women into existing systems; they prioritise representation within established institutions rather than fundamentally changing these structures.[76] A participant noted that "[older] elitist women in Khartoum are only calling for political positions".[77] Another explained, **"it's not [just] about that. It's about how our issues are mainstreamed into all ministries and all government bodies".**[78] Participants also expressed a desire to broaden the narratives, "There's so many issues that we want to talk about. We want to talk about domestic violence…sexual harassment…the discrimination against women in job opportunities".[79]

Some younger women portray themselves as more progressive, feminist and committed to challenging the systemic power dynamics than their older counterparts. Others argue that this dichotomy oversimplifies reality. Many older activists share feminist values and are deeply committed to transformative societal change, though their strategies and priorities may differ.[80] Younger women see their older counterparts as resistant to new approaches and agendas.

These generational differences have become more pronounced since April 2023, as discussions on transforming systems have gained traction, increasing the challenge of building a united front on women's political goals. If a new conflict had not broken out, mutual understanding and intergenerational cooperation could have emerged, fostering a more cohesive movement. However, the war has left disagreements unresolved; trust and unity will need to be rebuilt.[81]

This issue is further aggravated by the lack of capacity sharing between generations and beyond so-called elite women.[82] (Typically older) individuals with prior exposure to political and conflict resolution processes tend to dominate peace and political processes, which limits the inclusion of new and younger women and ideas. It also alienates women from historically marginalised communities, who are either unaware of these forums or feel their contributions will not be valued.[83] As one participant described, **"The issue is the lack of diversity and inclusivity as the same women are consistently present in all meetings and workshops, leaving no opportunities for other women to participate."**[84]

The women's movement has traditionally discriminated against LGBTQIA+[85] persons, economically disadvantaged women and women with disabilities. Participants highlighted that LGBTQIA+/non-binary rights inclusion and issues remain taboo, even among younger generations and in the women's movement, for fear of further marginalisation.[86] LGBTQIA+ persons and issues did not appear to be a high-priority: participants did not address the topic until researchers raised it. As a member of the LGBTQIA+ community detailed, **"Many women's rights defenders and human rights defenders in Sudan are very conservative when it comes to the [LGBTQIA+] community, and homophobic attitudes are widespread even within those groups."**[87] Addressing protection and prevention gaps and systemic imbalances is essential to enable greater diversity and inclusivity in women's groups and peace and political processes.[88]

Participants noted the persistent exclusion of voices from rural and less developed regions and economically disadvantaged backgrounds from forums, workshops and decision-making platforms – particularly those from historical conflict areas.[89] Women with disabilities face further heightened violations and systemic exclusion by authorities, parties to the armed conflict and the women's movement. They are frequently excluded from women's groups, political decision-making spaces, and advocacy platforms and remain underrepresented in Sudan's peace agreements.[90] This exclusion is particularly troubling because the country's prolonged conflict has increased the number of persons with disabilities.

The coup and armed conflict have halted several efforts to bridge these gaps through intergenerational dialogues and mentorship programmes. For example, a coalition of women's groups, Women of Sudanese Civic and Political Groups (MANSAM), facilitated intergenerational dialogues as an avenue to mentorship, allowing older women to stay involved.[91] One participant attributed the success of these dialogues to allaying the older generations' fear of being irrelevant: **"[I]n Sudan…people monopolise spots and they don't want to leave because they feel that they have nowhere to go. So for you to move forward…you have to also change [their] mindset".**[92]

Interpretations of feminism and prioritisation of WPS goals differ. For some in Sudan and elsewhere, identifying as a feminist signals an alignment with Western, liberal, socially unaccepted values; the older generation in particular is hesitant to adopt the term. This interpretation exacerbates ideological divides and limits the potential for collaboration among women's groups.[93] In response, some women's rights and peacebuilding organisations and networks have avoided identifying as feminist; they have framed their work as involving "gender equality", "inclusiveness" and "women's leadership" to appeal to a broader audience while continuing to work towards WPS goals.[94] These divisions have hampered the progress of feminist principles and WPS objectives.

The war has exacerbated tensions; some women suggested that "humanitarian needs" should be prioritised over "women's issues".[95] While these divisions pose challenges, they have also spurred critical conversations about the direction and priorities of women's rights organisations and civil society more broadly, and highlight the need for a cohesive strategy on the WPS agenda, objectives and principles. At least one participant observed that the war has forced a shift in narratives: more women are now calling for transformative change and emphasising the importance of cross-regional engagement with other women's groups.[96]

A unified agenda through a collective platform or coalition that reflects women's diverse needs and aspirations, especially those from rural and traditionally marginalised communities, is needed to create a more inclusive peace movement.[97] Such a platform can ensure genuine inclusiveness in discussions and decision-making, and foster collaboration and cohesiveness. As one participant expressed, "[we need] to have our own platform instead of working as secretaries for men who were receiving political funding and continuing this pattern of not caring about including us".[98]

A unified agenda should also integrate the support of international stakeholders who can influence and leverage opportunities to include women in formal peace processes. Collective advocacy presents an opportunity for Sudanese groups to engage with international stakeholders to identify opportunities for support and enhance mutual understanding and partnerships.

Actions to address and overcome this barrier

1. **Support intergenerational dialogues that facilitate mentorship initiatives to ensure the participation of women of all ages.** Finding common ground and sharing skills, knowledge, resources and strategies between generations is critical to empowering the next generation of Sudanese women leaders.

2. **Back civil society initiatives that are inclusive and intersectional.** Leadership positions should not be monopolised by the same individuals. Building on civic and peace education, a meaningful commitment should be triggered to include the voices, views, experiences and needs of marginalised groups of women including women with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ and non-binary people, and those from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

3. **Build a collective platform to connect diverse women's groups.** International stakeholders should help foster inclusive and intergenerational dialogues to create a unified women's agenda.

3.4 BARRIER 4: Limited international funding or influence

The international community's influence should be leveraged to coordinate and fund WPS objectives and principles. It has a critical role to play in legitimising and empowering groups and advocating systemic change in the WPS agenda and conflict resolution more broadly. Some participants claimed that popular groups and their demands for radical change were sidelined due to international pressure for "compromise" between traditional factions.[99]

Much of Sudanese civil society is dependent on international funding. Participants expressed appreciation for this support but stressed the need for more to be done. International support also requires deliberate coordination, capacity sharing and communication: fragmentation, overlaps and duplication of efforts must be fixed. As one participant expanded, **"There are many initiatives and people not talking to each other."**[100]

The international community has not consistently recognised the strengths of locally led initiatives. Prolonged conflict has blocked access to certain areas and minority groups for many international and local registered organisations. However, the decentralised nature of Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) and Women Emergency Rooms (WERs) have allowed these groups to function in hard-to-reach locations (discussed further in Box 1 below). They fill the vacuum of both authority and protection, which international resources can amplify.[101] Participants cautioned that international stakeholders should not alter the groups' informal, non-hierarchical nature, which makes them effective.

The international community must insist on women's meaningful involvement in formal peace processes. Women were underrepresented at both the Juba Peace Process aand the recent Geneva peace talks, where only 3 of the 26 participants were women.[102] While there have been attempts to engage political parties and civil society, international actors urgently need more focused and inclusive approaches to women's groups and organisations. Most peace agreements are not crafted solely by local communities or national leaders. The international community has the responsibility and leverage to ensure women's voices shape Sudan's future.[103]

Flexible and responsive core funding is needed to support women's meaningful participation. The outbreak of armed conflict in Sudan has rapidly increased humanitarian needs, including the protection of women human rights defenders and advocates.[104] Gender-responsive humanitarian support is needed to meet fast-changing humanitarian and protection needs.[105] As one participant stressed, **"So UNICEF provides a safe space for the children, but the children now have malnutrition [because of the war]. How can you provide a place to play, and the people are hungry?"**[106]

Funding that targets the logistical and financial needs of women leaders and human rights defenders is also needed to allow them to travel to discussions and meetings. Participants noted that a lack of flexible resources also hampers relationship building and coordination across groups, particularly when internet accessibility is limited as a result of war.[107]

Actions to address and overcome this barrier

1. **The international community must acknowledge their influence and responsibility to ensure women's meaningful participation in peace processes – and act on it.** Women's representation must reflect the diversity of Sudanese society to ensure genuine inclusiveness.

2. **Provide flexible core funding as well as targeted funding to accommodate fast-changing participation and protection needs.** Earmarked funding for women leaders to address logistical needs such as travel to attend meetings and peace negotiations is just as important for ensuring inclusion and participation.

3.5 BARRIER 4: Dire humanitarian crisis due to continued armed conflict

The ongoing conflict in Sudan has destroyed and disrupted countless lives, resulting in "the world's worst humanitarian crisis" with estimates of at least 150,000 deaths.[108] The implementation of the WPS NAP has halted, as have many WPS initiatives. Times of upheaval, however, can also create opportunities to redefine unequal systems, foster new alliances and advocate for transformative change.

Building on their experiences in the December Revolution, women have taken on leadership roles in their communities during the present armed conflict. They have been able to respond to urgent humanitarian needs when others could not, engage with diverse women beyond their communities, and implement the changes they have long demanded – albeit on a smaller scale and in a markedly different setting. Continued support for these new groups and processes, such as the ERRs and WERs (see Box 1), will help channel this momentum to advance WPS goals tailored to local needs and priorities during armed conflict.

Box 1: Emergency Response Rooms and Women's Emergency Rooms

Sudanese resistance committees mobilised to respond to the humanitarian needs generated by the war in April 2023 by creating Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs),[109] which provide life-saving services including medicine, shelter and evacuation.[110] These community-led groups are grounded in non-violent, revolutionary and democratic ideals. Despite their growing prominence and indispensability, these groups remain disconnected from formal peacebuilding processes.[111] Harnessing the legitimacy and effectiveness of ERRs offers an opportunity to centre these voices and processes in Sudan's political future.

Subgroups with specialised initiatives have emerged within ERRs. Over 75 Women's Emergency Rooms (WERs) have been created to respond to women's protection needs and provide economic and psychological support. Each group comprises 5–7 women who offer training in small-scale income-generating activities such as soap making and handicraft; their efforts help increase household income and foster resilience and self-reliance among women.[112] In Khartoum, feminist groups created WERs to address the rising but unmet legal, health, and psychosocial needs of women, including pregnant women and those impacted by sexual violence. As one participant explained, there was **"a lot [of talk] about how women are disproportionately affected and yet the funds weren't channelled to women".**[113] When the main ERR closed in Port Sudan, activists established a WER to support internally displaced women, providing basic supplies such as sanitary pads.[114]

ERRs and WERs are highly organised and coordinated. Subgroups provide targeted services such as programme coordination, communications and protection. Decision-making is decentralised and achieved through collective group discussions, often using social media platforms.[115] Their local knowledge allows these groups to identify and determine urgent needs. WERs have also initiated Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) that include international and other Sudanese organisations. LCCs are established "to collaborate, all of us together…We want to give the experience to other states…We want them to know how the process [runs], what they do".[116]

The lack of diversity in the women's movement has been widely criticised. Yet ERRs and WERs demonstrate inclusiveness by integrating diverse networks into their organisational structures. Neighbours connect by word of mouth, through social media platforms and other means of communication. These social interactions alleviate feelings of isolation and create a sense of solidarity. ERRs and WERs rotate which members attend meetings, ensuring a broader range of voices are included and that no single member dominates.[117] However, women with caregiving and household responsibilities may struggle to attend meetings without social and economic support.

ERRs and WERs are best described **"not as institutions in the traditional sense but as networking hubs where various local actors intersect around service provision to the community".**[118] ERRs and WERs have successfully fended off donor pressures related to reporting requirements and continue to decide where resources should be directed. As one participant noted, **"Sometimes some organisations come to us with their own agenda. 'We want to support the kitchen'. We say, 'Okay, we have seven localities. We will see which one is most in need of food right now. And you don't have the right to tell us what to do. You just bring the food and we know how to distribute it'."**[119] In October 2024, a roundtable discussion with partners and international funders showcased their achievements and identified areas in need of additional support.[120]

> **"Don't try to organise them, don't try to make them [become] a legal entity; they [already] have a system to absorb the funds…We need to figure out and work within our system to help them, but not [by] converting them to local NGOs because that [de]values their agility.[124]"**

The WERs plan to further address peacebuilding and social issues, underscoring their adaptability and responsiveness to emerging challenges. For example, they seek to tackle hate speech through innovative community-led initiatives such as discussions at community kitchens with women, men and families. The gap in safeguarding and protection for WER and ERR workers is frequently overlooked. For example, there is little support for women workers who are targeted by sexual violence.[121] In collaboration with UNICEF, WERs have also launched a campaign to raise awareness of sexual harassment.[122]

Caution is required to guard against formalising loose groups and networks, particularly by international funders. WERs are creating a new structure to amplify their collective impact, albeit in informal ways outside formal governance structures. ERRs and WERs have engineered a significant shift from fragmented advocacy to a coordinated network. They represent a promising opportunity to advance the WPS agenda. With robust support and funding, WERs can continue to expand their reach, serving as critical hubs for advocacy, support and community mobilisation, and ensuring that women (particularly those from marginalised backgrounds) actively participate in rebuilding Sudanese society. Their combination of economic empowerment, psychological support and peacebuilding impact represents an effective model for driving transformative change from the ground up.[123]

Actions to address and overcome this barrier

1. **Employ a decolonised approach to supporting women leaders** by limiting bureaucracy, building good faith, and trusting that women leaders know how best to navigate the situation on the ground and serve their communities.

2. **Adopt flexible and responsive funding to channel support to locally led initiatives that provide humanitarian aid to communities and women in need.** The loose and adaptive structure of ERRs and WERs is key to their success.

3. **Ensure international funding reaches women who have taken up leadership roles during times of conflict.** International support of women leaders also legitimises their roles, shifting community perceptions that can be leveraged during peacetime.

4. Conclusion

While divisions among women's groups persist, the December Revolution demonstrated the potential for collective action.[125] It illustrated how shared goals, such as gender justice and equitable representation, can bridge differences and foster collaboration. This unity, though fragile, has laid the groundwork for sustained efforts towards gender equality, proving that collective action can be a powerful tool for social change.

Sudanese women have navigated, and continue to confront, multiple barriers to their meaningful participation in peace and political processes as well as conflict prevention. Restrictive gender norms, a lack of civic and peace education, divisions within civil society, insufficient international funding to advance the WPS agenda, and the outbreak of armed conflict are the most prominent barriers to emerge from this study. Yet, Sudanese women continue to advocate and demand gender justice; in the most recent civil war, they have taken the lead in humanitarian efforts to protect both women and their communities.

Formal political processes fail to include women, despite the significant roles they have historically played in Sudan. While this study does not rank the barriers to women's meaningful inclusion, the most influential external factor to ensuring sustained advancement of the WPS agenda may rest on international community efforts to channel resources towards WPS-oriented action. Since the international community can also influence formal political processes and structures, international stakeholders should insist on the diverse and meaningful inclusion of women.

Practices that demonstrate successful outcomes for women's participation in peace processes and conflict prevention showcase intersectional strategies. As discussed in Section 3.1, Intersectional initiatives that integrate socio-cultural norms, the economic environment and changing gendered roles have displayed marked success. Although the armed conflict has abruptly halted many efforts, it also presents opportunities for women's leadership as demonstrated by the ERRs and WERs.

Annex: Research Methodology

This analysis in this report draws on desk research, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The desk research involved a review and analysis of articles, institutional reports, academic papers, and grey literature in both English and Arabic. It adopted an inclusive approach to examine 'informal' sources such as personal and institutional blogs as well as social media posts, recognising the barriers to publication and the use of these media in organising local activism, particularly in the context of Sudan.

A total of 22 KIIs (14 women / 8 men) were conducted in October–November 2024. Interviewees were identified and recruited via purposive and snowball sampling through the authors' networks, desk research and recommendations from other participants. The informants represent diverse backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, religion, gender, age, area of origin and work in Sudan, thematic expertise and experience, as well as whether they identify as disabled, and are internally or externally displaced, among other pertinent social markers. Interviews were voluntary with ongoing informed consent in place. They were approached within a do-no-harm framework, and participants were free to decline to respond to any question posed and/or end the interview at any stage.

KIIs were conducted in person and online via end-to-end encrypted platforms or other secure alternatives that were most comfortable and accessible to participants. Interviewees could choose to participate in Arabic or English with seasoned interpreters. Compensation was offered for travel and internet charges, for instance to travel to a safe location to speak and/or to top up their mobile internet for an online interview.

An FGD was held with the Sudanese diaspora in Kampala, Uganda in November 2024. There were 10 participants (8 women / 2 men) across different age groups, educational backgrounds, professions, thematic experience, involvement in formal peace and political processes, as well as ethnicity and religion. The group also included individuals who have long been established in Uganda as well as those who have been recently displaced by the present armed conflict in Sudan.

Due to reports of targeted killings, harassment and intentional harm to activists, all identities in this report and related publications have been anonymised for the safety and security of participants.[126]

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EUROPEAN
INSTITUTE
OF PEACE

European Institute of Peace
Rue des Deux Eglises 25
1000 Brussels, Belgium

www.eip.org
info@eip.org