



The Pitfalls of Women and Peacemaking in Sudan — Shifting Feminist Narratives in Revolution and War

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Executive Summary

Sudanese women have long been central to the nation's social and political transformation, yet their roles in peacemaking remain marginalized, contested, and shaped by both internal patriarchy and external intervention. This policy brief analyses the shifting feminist narratives in Sudan from the 2019 revolution to the outbreak of the 2023 war. Drawing on interviews conducted abroad, both in person and remotely in 2024, and using grey literature, it shows that while women's mobilization during the revolution represented one of the most visible forms of gendered political participation in the Arab world, subsequent transitions exposed deep fractures within Sudan's feminist project.

The findings reveal a cycle of empowerment and erasure. During the 2019 revolution, women's activism embodied radical civic participation (*Medaniya*)—reshaping Sudan's democratic imagination. However, this momentum was quickly undermined by militarization, donor conditionalities, and competing feminist ideologies. The result has been a fractured feminist landscape: liberal NGOs emphasizing inclusion through quotas, grassroots networks resisting co-optation, and revolutionary women activists struggling to retain legitimacy amid repression and war.

As Sudan descends deeper into violence following the 2023 conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), gender politics have re-emerged as both a tool of political manipulation and a form of survival. This policy brief argues that the pitfalls of women and peacemaking in Sudan lie not in the absence of women's participation, but in the structural, cultural, and epistemic hierarchies that define how women are allowed to participate.

Sustainable peace will require dismantling these hierarchies, re-politicizing feminist agency, and institutionalizing gender equity within both national and international peacemaking frameworks. Future peacemaking in Sudan must centre feminist agency beyond tokenistic representation—by addressing structural patriarchy, depoliticization, and the commodification of women's struggles within international aid frameworks.

1. Introduction

Sudanese women's political participation has historically been a paradox of visibility and exclusion. From anti-colonial mobilization to the 2019 revolution, women have consistently formed the backbone of civic resistance—embodying the revolutionary call for *Medaniya* (civilian rule). Women's inclusion in post-conflict and transitional politics remains performative, fragmented, and externally influenced. The pitfalls of peacemaking thus lie not only in women's underrepresentation, but in the structural ways gender politics are instrumentalized to stabilize authoritarian and donor-driven agendas (Abbas and Tonnessen, 2022).

The 2019 Sudanese revolution marked a turning point in women's political visibility. Women led protests, participated in the configuration of grassroots politics through their membership in Resistance Committees (RCs), and actively engaged in building networks that coordinated national mobilization. Through these interventions they also forcefully centred the question of women, resisting the tendency to advance "democracy and the civic-*Medaniya*" without clearly articulating what it would mean for advancing women's rights. The question of "what do Sudanese Women Want" in the revolution's imagery—from women chanting in the streets to the public display of Sudanese feminist art—captured the world's imagination. Yet this visibility masked deeper tensions within Sudan's feminist project: class divides, ideological fragmentation, and the enduring patriarchal structures that shape both formal and informal politics.

The 2019 transition that followed Bashir's fall—marked by optimism and international attention—failed to institutionalize women's political agency. Activists who had risked their lives in the streets were sidelined in power-sharing agreements (PA-X Analytics, PeaceRep), marginalized within male-dominated Resistance Committees, and patronized by donor frameworks that framed them as "beneficiaries" rather than political actors.

This brief utilises field interviews conducted in 2024 in Cairo and Nairobi with female members of the emerging political grassroots groups and civil society. The selective interview sample covered elite and mobilised grassroots political actors across Sudan with a focus on Khartoum and Darfur. The sample considered some of the most pertinent issues in peacemaking—in addition to gender—such as class, age and education level. For ethical and security concerns, the names and affiliations of respondents are anonymised.

2. The Evolution of Feminist Narratives in Sudan

2.1 Evolving Political Mobilisations: From State Feminism to Grassroots Resistance

Under Islamist rule (1989–2019), Sudanese women navigated a restrictive legal system shaped by Sharia-based family laws and patriarchal governance. Women's associations tied to the National Islamic Front (NIF) framed activism within the confines of religious morality—creating what Hale described as "state feminism" (Hale, 1996). These normative systems socialized women into roles of obedience and service, limiting their public presence and political participation. For instance, the Sudanese women's union, a state co-opted women's organisation, encouraged membership and participation in regime-sanctioned events while limiting popular agenda-driven political mobilisation.

Authoritarian state control under Bashir's regime had many negative effects, the most enduring being the weakening of civil society. State policies limited civic presence through co-option or excessive regulation. This had a double effect on the women's agenda as they became subsumed under the "opposition's banner" (Abbas, 2023; Hale, 1996). This polarisation of civil society in the years leading to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005–2010) (PA-X Analytics, PeaceRep) meant that no 'real' representative women's agenda or female political leadership beyond the state and opposition emerged for effective political engagement through the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Instead, tokenistic representation became the preferred tool, with very little ability or interest in transforming structural inequalities or expanding feminist agendas (Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2020).

The period after the signing of the peace agreement was one of political liberalisation (Sidahmed, 2010). The substantial political opening created opportunities for new forms of civic action to emerge, mostly in the form of externally funded NGO-style civic presence. The women's groups that formed as a result of this political opening became intertwined with funding oriented towards universal, rights-based agendas, largely tied to state power and expressed through electoral forms of representation – a process that excluded the majority of Sudanese communities. This form of civic mobilisation had little to no effect on structural injustices that limited women empowerment.

By the time protests erupted in December 2018, Sudanese women carried dual inheritances: one of institutionalized Islamism and another of NGO-driven liberalism. The revolutionary moment provided a rupture from both—a space to articulate a *civic feminism born from lived resistance*.

2.2 Feminising the Revolution

During the 2019 revolution, women's participation reached unprecedented levels, with women making up the majority of protestors (Raseef22, 2019; Engeler, Braghieri & Manzur, 2020). Women also mobilised in the daily management of the uprising. They organized food, first aid, security coordination, and digital advocacy across cities and villages. The term *Kandaka*, derived from the Nubian queens of Kush, became a rallying identity. It symbolized not just equality, but defiance—the reclaiming of historical matriarchy against modern patriarchy.

However, politically situated identities like *Kandaka* acted as a double-edged sword. In the early days on the 2018 revolution, women were a driving force of political mobilisation against the regime. *Kandaka* was a unifying term given to women by society, particularly men, in recognition of their contribution to the movement against Bashir. The term elevated women's visibility but also homogenized their struggles, erasing differences of class, ethnicity, and ideology. Sudanese society as well as the international community celebrated Sudanese women as icons of resistance while overlooking the localized feminist agendas that did not conform to liberal expectations. The emphasis was on political and civil rights at the expense of economic rights and structural injustices. For example, no recognition was extended to the developing anti-violence narrative, which encompassed both gender-based violence in domestic settings and forms of economic exclusion that rendered women vulnerable to male control.

Sudanese women's most prominent revolutionary slogan – “*the private is the public*” – captured the feminist thrust of this period, challenging the patriarchal logic that confined women's suffering (rape, harassment, domestic violence) to private shame rather than a matter of public injustice. Sudanese women used the revolutionary moment to make the political nature of violence palatable.

2.3 The Transitional Period: Liberal Feminism and Donor Capture

The transitional period (2019–2021) witnessed a reconfiguration of feminist politics. With the formation of a civilian-military transitional government in 2019, international donors, NGOs, and civil society organizations poured into Sudan, bringing with them funding, training programmes, and calls for reform by applying representational quotas. Campaigns like “50 Percent Representation” emerged to demand gender parity in political appointments.

While these campaigns made visible progress, they also marked a turning point in the depoliticization of Sudanese feminism. As one quoted activist declared, “Representation is a scam.” The project of political inclusion through representation, she explained, was divorced from the struggle for justice and equality that had animated the revolution. Instead, it was folded into donor agendas emphasizing technocratic governance and liberal reforms that ignored structural patriarchy.

Women who had once organized horizontally through civic networks now found themselves competing for NGO grants, recognition, and institutional legitimacy. International actors, eager to promote Sudan as a model of post-revolutionary democratization, privileged urban, English-speaking women leaders aligned with global discourses on gender and human rights. This sidelined grassroots women, particularly from rural and conflict-affected regions, who didn’t necessarily have a state-centric view of reform, articulating instead a more intersectional and socio-economic vision of liberation.

Thus, the Sudanese feminist project was fractured between *elite liberal feminism* and *popular civic feminism*. The former, usually confined to electoral representation and professional quota systems, sought to integrate women into existing state structures. Popular women’s mobilisation, which emerged strongly during the 2019 uprising, addressed issues of sexual and reproductive rights, including ending male guardianship (*wilaya*) over women’s bodies and political choices, ending child marriage, instituting equal pay, and pushing for more effective legislation to end violence against women and girls; it sought to dismantle these structures altogether.

2.4 The Collapse of the Feminist Project

The outbreak of the 2023 war between the SAF and RSF plunged Sudan into a new cycle of violence that reshaped gender politics once again. Feminist organizations, already weakened by internal divisions and funding fatigue, now faced existential threats. The war redefined women's roles through the logics of displacement, survival, and humanitarianism.

As the humanitarian imperative grew, it overshadowed the once prominent political demands of the revolution, and with it, the feminist agenda. Women constituted the majority of Sudan's 10 million displaced, with most of them taking on the role of breadwinner while retaining their original care worker roles. Sudanese women found themselves stranded in neighbouring countries with limited protective status under increasing conditions of physical and economic violence. As most donor funding redirected to emergency relief, feminist organizations adapted by shifting from advocacy to service provision, coordinating food, shelter, and medical aid through networks of women volunteers and diaspora groups. While this shift demonstrated resilience, it also entrenched the framing of women as caregivers rather than political actors. Middle-class feminists, once vocal in political reform, now spearheaded humanitarian NGOs, while working-class and displaced women became front-line responders. The feminist discourse fragmented further, shaped by class and geography: urban elites negotiated donor partnerships, while rural women negotiated survival.

The war's gendered violence also intensified patriarchal control. Rape, forced marriage, and sexual slavery became systematic tools of warfare—echoing patterns from Darfur in the early 2000s (Kaiser & Hagan, 2024). Yet, despite these atrocities, women's voices remain peripheral in ongoing peace negotiations, which continue to be dominated by male military and political elites.

The war in Sudan has militarized public life as a whole, even in spaces not typically considered active war zones. As people reconfigure their lives around access to security, displacement, reduced public interaction, and the loss of income and social networks, socioeconomic life is being redefined in ways that have profoundly affected the welfare of women.

Women in Sudan, once economically independent and educated, now struggle to access markets or earn a living in an economy that is largely enabling of militarised entrepreneurship (Craze & Makawi, 2024). The 2023 war redefined gender politics through the popularisation of violence. Rape, displacement, and sexual coercion became tools of war and control, shaping political discourse around women’s bodies. Under these conditions, it is difficult to imagine how women’s voices and political choices can be reflected in the peacemaking process at the local or national level.

Table 1. Shifts in Sudanese Feminist Narratives and Civic Practice (1989–2025)

Period	Dominant Feminist Narrative	Political & Institutional Context	Forms of Women's Agency	Key Characteristics / Limitations	Illustrative Outcomes
Islamist Era (1989–2010)	<i>State Feminism / Controlled Participation</i>	Authoritarian Islamic regime under Bashir; Sharia-based personal laws; suppression of independent civil society	Women mobilized through state-sponsored unions (e.g., NIF women's groups); negotiated within patriarchal Islamic structures	"Empowerment through obedience"; activism confined to moral and domestic roles; exclusion from national peace processes	Institutionalized patriarchy; gendered laws (1991 Family Law); erasure of grassroots feminist voice
NGO Era (2005–2018)	<i>Liberal NGO Feminism</i>	Post–Comprehensive Peace Agreement liberalization; donor influx; rise of professionalized CSOs	Urban, elite women engaged in donor-funded NGOs and rights-based advocacy	"NGO-ization" of feminism: emphasis on training, quotas, and technical inclusion over political transformation	Increased visibility of women's organizations, but limited structural change; deepened class and regional divides

Period	Dominant Feminist Narrative	Political & Institutional Context	Forms of Women's Agency	Key Characteristics / Limitations	Illustrative Outcomes
Revolutionary Civics (2018–2021)	<i>Civic Feminism / New Civic formations (Medaniya)</i>	2019 Revolution and transition; fall of Bashir; emergence of Resistance Committees (RCs)	Women as protest leaders, mobilizers, and organizers in revolutionary structures; articulation of “the private is the public”	Radical inclusion in street politics but exclusion from formal negotiations; <i>Kandaka</i> symbolism elevated visibility but masked diversity	Women led majority of protests; first female foreign minister and chief justice; failure to achieve parity in transitional governance
Wartime Survival Feminism (2023–Present)	<i>Humanitarian Feminism / Survival Politics</i>	War between SAF and RSF; collapse of state institutions; displacement and crisis	Women-led ERRs, local aid networks, and transnational feminist organizing for survival, documentation, and justice	Resilience increased but politics gave way to humanitarianism	Women lead on wartime relief efforts and caregiving, active in public kitchens, providing food, shelter and protection

3. The Pitfalls of Peacemaking: Between Patriarchy and Depoliticization

Feminist struggle in Sudan exposes three pitfalls of peacemaking, namely the failure of peace interventions to address the social and economic structures of communities and groups affected by conflict. Below, I explore why women have benefited the least from peace related security systems.

3.1 Patriarchal Control and Institutional Fragmentation

Sudanese women continue to face systemic exclusion from peace negotiations and transitional institutions. The state's gender politics remain rooted in patriarchal patronage networks that prioritize symbolic inclusion over substantive participation (Abbas & Tønnessen, 2022). Feminist movements are fragmented between Islamist-influenced groups, liberal civil society networks, and radical grassroots activists. Even within revolutionary spaces, women face micro-level patriarchies. Within Resistance Committees, male activists often monopolized decision-making, while women were relegated to logistical and care roles. This reflects what feminist scholars call *the patriarchal bargain*—a trade-off where women gain limited participation in exchange for reinforcing male leadership norms (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Women activists reported persistent marginalization, harassment, and silencing within committee structures, leading to what one called “gendered invisibility inside the revolution.”

3.2 The Liberal Trap: Donor-Driven Feminism

Another major pitfall is the donor-mediated liberal feminist framework that dominates Sudan's peace and governance agenda. Donors and international NGOs often approach women's empowerment as a technical issue—solvable through training, representation quotas, and capacity building—rather than a structural political struggle. Post-revolution donor engagement reinforced liberal feminism as the dominant paradigm. The focus on quotas, technocracy, and international partnerships privileged English-speaking, urban, middle-class women who aligned with Western human rights discourse. As Amal Fadlalla observes, “transnational humanitarian groups rely on a master narrative of gender violence and ethnic suffering” to define Sudanese women's struggles (Fadlalla, 2019).

This donor gaze both amplifies and constrains women's agency—framing them as victims rather than political actors, resulting in the “depoliticization of the women's agenda,” where gender advocacy becomes a funding mechanism rather than a vehicle for structural reform. Campaigns like *50 Percent Representation* are championed by Western partners as success stories but failed to transform women's lived realities. As one activist told me, “We were merely using the same meritocracy logic that underpinned the transition's technocracy. Both failed.” The result was a disconnect between feminist ideals and everyday experience: symbolic inclusion without structural change.

3.3 Militarization and Gendered Violence

The militarization of public life after the 2023 war redefined gender politics through the popularisation of violence. Rape, displacement, and sexual coercion became tools of war and control, shaping political discourse around women's bodies. This brief introduces a concept of “a necropolitics in reverse,” wherein death, honour, and sexual purity are used to regulate female political expression in the name of regaining control and safeguarding community in times of war (Makawi, 2024). Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, whereby the state dictates terms of life and death, is fully embodied by the Sudanese war (Mbembe, 2019). Scores of young Sudanese men have died as a direct or indirect result of the conflict, and their memories are elevated to a status of untouchable patriotic martyrdom – despite them being accused of committing acts of violence against women. The logic of necropolitics is reversed whereby the dead have a hold over the political rights of living women. A memorable incident illustrates this dynamic: a female activist faced backlash after accusing a deceased male RC member of sexual harassment; patriarchal forces invoked respect for the dead to silence gender-based claims, subordinating women's justice to male martyrdom. Such incidents reveal how gendered violence operates not only through physical harm but also through structural control, where women's experiences are delegitimized in the name of national unity or revolutionary sanctity. The result is a culture of impunity that undermines feminist contributions to justice and reconciliation.

In conclusion, the 2019 Sudanese revolution provides important insights into the dynamics of women's political participation and the structural constraints shaping feminist gains during moments of political transition.

Key Lesson	Summary
Symbolism without Institutionalization	The emergence of the <i>Kandaka</i> figure as a powerful revolutionary symbol elevated women's visibility in the public sphere; however, this symbolic recognition did not translate into sustained institutional representation or meaningful decision-making power within transitional political structures.
Fragmentation of Feminist Mobilization	Divergent ideological orientations, class positions, and political priorities among women's organizations limited the consolidation of a unified feminist front capable of exerting consistent pressure during the transitional period.
Elite and Donor Co-optation	The shift from grassroots, confrontational activism toward NGO-driven liberal feminist agendas contributed to the depoliticization of women's demands and constrained the transformative potential of feminist mobilization.
Marginalization in Transitional Governance	Transitional negotiations and governance arrangements prioritized procedural democratic reforms and elite power-sharing mechanisms, frequently sidelining broader agendas of social transformation and gender justice.
Structural Economic Disempowerment	Long-standing structural barriers to women's access to education, employment, and economic resources limited their political leverage and weakened their capacity to influence the trajectory of the post-2019 transition.

4. Reimagining Peacemaking: Feminist Alternatives

Despite recurring cycles of exclusion, Sudanese women have continually reimagined peacemaking beyond the narrow confines of formal diplomacy and elite negotiation. Their vision of peace is neither abstract nor technocratic—it is rooted in lived experience, moral community, and the everyday struggle for survival. Drawing on long-standing traditions of communal care and collective responsibility, Sudanese women have forged alternative frameworks for peace that prioritize reconciliation, justice, and social repair over power-sharing and elite bargains.

Across Sudan's conflict zones—from Darfur to Blue Nile and Kordofan—women's networks have historically practiced what feminist peace scholars such as Elisabeth Porter (2003) call "relational peace": peace as a process built through empathy, accountability, and shared vulnerability. The *Hakkamat* poet-mediators of western Sudan, for example, have long used song and oral storytelling to defuse tensions between warring tribes, embedding cultural and moral authority into their peacebuilding work (Musa, 2018). Similarly, contemporary women's groups like *MANSAM*, *SIHA*, and the *No to Women's Oppression Initiative* have expanded these local traditions into broader civic strategies that integrate gender justice, political participation, and community healing. In their vision, peace is not a diplomatic outcome but a moral practice—the reconstitution of social bonds broken by violence.

However, these feminist alternatives face significant constraints. The dominance of liberal peace frameworks and donor-driven agendas has reshaped the meaning of peace itself. The international community tends to equate peacebuilding with institutional reform, marginalizing the relational and communal dimensions of women's activism. When women's initiatives are absorbed into NGO programming, their transformative potential is diluted—translated into measurable indicators, reports, and workshops rather than structural change. This "NGO-ization" of feminism has reduced women's peacebuilding to project-based outputs, obscuring its political radicalism and its challenge to militarized governance.

Still, Sudanese women's resilience lies precisely in their capacity to adapt. During and after the 2023 war, women transformed neighbourhood committees and humanitarian kitchens (*tukkiyas*) into spaces of protection and political dialogue, blurring the line between relief work and civic governance. In displacement camps, women's groups organize food distribution and education for children while mediating conflicts and advocating against sexual violence—turning survival into a form of political agency. These practices reflect what Amina Mama describes as "feminist survival politics"—an approach that reclaims care and solidarity as foundations for rebuilding the social contract in times of collapse.

To reimagine peacemaking in Sudan, policy actors must therefore move beyond the logic of inclusion and toward the logic of transformation. Inclusion asks how many women are at the table; transformation asks whose knowledge and experiences define the table itself. Sudanese women's peacemaking demonstrates that sustainable peace cannot be negotiated solely in conference halls or donor frameworks, it must emerge from the moral economies of care, justice, and accountability that women sustain in their communities. A truly feminist peace agenda for Sudan must integrate these local epistemologies of resilience, centre women's moral and political authority, and treat civic feminism not as a supplement to peace, but as its very foundation.

5. Conclusion

The pitfalls of women and peacemaking in Sudan are not isolated failures of representation—they are symptoms of a broader political order that continuously co-opts, fragments, and depoliticizes women's agency. The shifting feminist narratives from the 2019 revolution to the 2023 war illuminate a cycle of empowerment, exclusion, and adaptation.

Sudanese women have demonstrated extraordinary resilience, transforming resistance into survival, and survival into leadership. Yet their continued marginalization in formal peace processes reveals the endurance of patriarchal and neo-colonial structures that define both local governance and international aid.

The future of feminist politics in Sudan depends on repoliticizing gender justice to reconnect activism with structural transformation rather than donor validation. This means viewing women not as symbols or instruments of peace, but as architects of a civic order grounded in care, equity, and collective responsibility.

True peace in Sudan cannot emerge from power-sharing among armed men, it must be built from the lived ethics of women who have long sustained the nation in the absence of the state.

Recognizing this truth—and translating it into policy—is the ultimate test for both Sudanese reformers and their international partners.

6. Policy Recommendations

For the Government of Sudan (post-war transition):

- ▶ Institutionalize gender parity not as quota tokenism but through legal guarantees in peace agreements and governance frameworks.
- ▶ Establish independent gender commissions to address sexual violence before and during the 2023 war to ensure accountability and establish a post-war justice framework. Commissions must learn from previous failures to achieve transitional justice by situating the process with the public rather than handing it to the technocrats whose decisions and actions are affected by the pressures of state power.
- ▶ Reform personal status laws and family codes to eliminate wilaya (male guardianship) and guarantee women's autonomy in public and private life.

For Sudanese Civil Society:

- ▶ Foster intersectional feminist coalitions that bridge divides between liberal NGOs, grassroots networks, and regional women's organizations.
- ▶ Reclaim the feminist agenda from donor dependency through community financing and knowledge exchange.
- ▶ Promote civic education and local peace councils led by women to mediate conflicts at the community level.

For International Partners:

- ▶ Shift from project-based funding to long-term institutional support for Sudanese women's movements through enabling and building on the localisation process that emerged during the war.
- ▶ Prioritize political inclusion over depoliticized humanitarian programming.

- ▶ Embed gender expertise in peace negotiations to challenge patriarchal norms in mediation processes.
- ▶ Enable grassroots actors that emerged out of local and grounded political process, such as female members of the Resistance Committees and Women Emergency Response Rooms, to lead on and articulate women's involvement in peacemaking frameworks, building on their everyday experiences.
- ▶ Support Sudanese women researchers and activists in documenting war crimes and developing a gender-responsive peace framework.

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