

Update on Women, Peace and Security in Sudan 26 January 2024

The Informal Expert Group (IEG) of the Security Council on Women and Peace and Security discussed the situation in Sudan in December 2019, December 2020 ([S/2020/1319](#)) and in May 2022 ([S/2022/460](#)). This update summarizes relevant developments since the last IEG meeting, with a focus on recent months.

Developments in the Security Council

Even though widespread sexual violence and the marginalization of women from peace talks and decision-making have been reported since the conflict erupted in April, **these issues have not been mentioned in recent Security Council decisions**. The Security Council has adopted four resolutions on Sudan since the last meeting of the IEG in May 2022. Two resolutions were adopted before the conflict broke out in April 2023, extending the mandates of UNITAMS and the sanctions panel of experts. Both resolutions adopted since April 2023 were gender-blind: both the technical rollover extending the mandate of UNITAMS for six months and resolution 2715 terminating UNITAMS mandate. Out of three press statements issued by the Security Council since April 2023, only the most recent one in December 2023 made a reference to women, peace, and security, expressing particular concern at ongoing reports of international humanitarian law and continuing human rights violations, “including cases of sexual violence in conflict.”

Two women civil society representatives from Sudan were invited to brief the Security Council during this period. During the annual open debate on Women, Peace and Security on 25 October 2023, Ms. Hala al-Karib, the regional director of the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), said that the military takeover in 2021 “illustrates how only paying lip service to the WPS agenda, without insisting on women’s rights and women’s meaningful participation in peace and political processes, is not enough to overcome the repressive patriarchal status quo (...).” Referring to the conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, she said that “the gendered nature of the conflict became clear mere hours after the fighting began. The first case of gang-rape was reported at noon on 15 April, inside a woman’s house in Khartoum. Alerted by her screams, neighbors started gathering and the perpetrators, identified as RSF soldiers, quickly fled. The same day, two other women were gang-raped inside their homes in the same area. From that day on, reports of sexual violence and kidnapping flooded human rights and women’s organizations.” Ms. Al-Karib called for an immediate cessation of hostilities and ceasefire and demanded women’s meaningful representation (including parity) in de-escalation and peacebuilding efforts. Her full speech can be read [here](#). The previous month, Ms. Mayada Adil, a Sudanese medical doctor and women’s rights advocate and Young Leader for the Sustainable Development Goals, emphasized the need for accountability for the victims of war and conflict-related sexual violence in Sudan noting that the perpetrators are “walking freely [...] without accountability, threatening and treating women’s bodies as their personal battlefields”. She also highlighted that women have been shut out from participating in the political sphere and the peace negotiations.¹ Sudanese women from civil society have also participated in informal meetings of the Security Council. For example, Ms. Niemat Ahmadi (Darfur Women Action Group) briefed the Security Council during an Arria Formula meeting on Preventing and Responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in October 2023.

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Women's participation in peace negotiations and political talks

There have been **multiple diplomatic initiatives and negotiations** between the Sudanese government and the RSF since April 2023, spearheaded by regional organizations and countries in the region and beyond. **None of the actors involved in them have provided any specific information about women's participation.** The Secretary-General has called on all mediators to secure firm commitments from the parties to cease all acts of sexual violence, and sexual violence was included in the commitments and short-lived agreements made in Jeddah in May. At the Security Council, the UN has noted that “while Sudanese women continue their activism against the war and in favor of an inclusive transition, we are seeing a diminishment of women's political participation. No political process will succeed if women are not adequately present at the table and their concerns are not addressed (ASG Martha Pobe, November 2023). Two months earlier, in his last briefing to the Security Council, SRSF Perthes said the following: “Sudanese women's groups are rightly calling for our collective condemnation, as well as for prevention and justice. Despite the lack of the protection of civilians on the ground, Sudanese women and community-based support groups, such as emergency rooms and resistance committees, continue to put their lives on the line to provide urgent humanitarian assistance. Civilian activists, including women, are making laudable efforts in leading several anti-war initiatives. They are choosing peace. Their initiatives urge the parties to cease their violence, address urgent humanitarian needs and relaunch a political dialogue. Despite a host of logistical difficulties and security risks, they are intensifying their efforts to coalesce around a common platform. (...). In particular, women-led initiatives have underlined the importance of women's participation in ceasefire negotiations and any future political process.”

In recent months, women's groups led several peaceful protests, even as some were subjected to arrest and harassment. Women have also voiced their demands through **more than 90 public statements**, and participated in broader efforts by major anti-war initiatives, including a large meeting in late October in Addis Ababa which sought to form a structure for the coordination of civil democratic forces. However, less than 15 per cent of participants in this meeting were women, and one of the outcomes of this meeting was setting 30 per cent as a quota for women in their coordination structures, below the 40 per cent enshrined in the Constitutional Declaration and Juba Peace Agreement. In the meantime, UNITAMS, UN Women, and civil society partners have continued virtual and in-person consultations with women's groups and activists in Sudan, convening women leaders in the capitals of neighboring countries (such as in Cairo, Addis Ababa, Kampala, and Nairobi) for strategic discussions and to facilitate their advocacy efforts, and surveying women's needs and priorities. Some visible women-led initiatives include Peace for Sudan Platform, comprising at least 49 women-led peace initiatives and civil society organizations, Mothers of Sudan, and Women Against War.

Conflict-related sexual violence and other human rights violations

The conflict has been marked by a rise of serious human rights violations, including sexual violence, unlawful killing, arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance, and others. Allegations of **different forms of conflict-related sexual violence** have been reported since the start of the conflict, primarily in Darfur, Kordofan, and the greater Khartoum area. As of 18 December 2023, OHCHR has received credible reports of 58 incidents of conflict-related sexual violence, involving at least 118 victims (98 women, 18 girls, one man, and one boy). 52 of these incidents were rape, including 28 incidents of gang-rape.² Of particular concern are reports of abductions and captivity of women and girls in inhumane conditions where they are subjected to rape, gang-rape, sexual slavery, and other forms of sexual violence. There are also

² The highest number of these incidents were recorded in Khartoum state (44 per cent), followed by South Darfur state (17 per cent), North Darfur state (17 per cent), Central Darfur state (6 per cent), West Darfur state (3 per cent), and the remaining in other states, including North Kordofan state, West Kordofan state, and Red Sea state.

indications that ethnically targeted violence has included the use of sexual violence against non-Arab women, although Arab women are also vulnerable to sexual violence. The responsibility for 48 incidents (82 per cent) was attributed by victims to men in RSF uniform and armed men affiliated with the RSF, whereas the responsibility for 2 incidents were attributed to the SAF. The responsibility for the remaining incidents were attributed to men in uniform and unknown men.

58 credible reports of conflict-related sexual violence are likely a **vast under-representation** of the actual number of incidents due to under-reporting in a climate of fear, absence of credible police and justice institutions and social stigma associated with sexual violence. **This under-reporting will only be exacerbated by the departure of UNITAMS** and the loss of its capacity to document and report on atrocities. Women's organizations and activists have expressed their concern about the impact on civilian protection of a reduced UN presence, recalling their warnings against a premature withdrawal of UNAMID, and the potential ramifications of that decision by the Security Council in the developments that have followed. In addition, the prevailing health crisis and (sometimes deliberate) attacks and destruction of health facilities have made medical care nearly impossible. The intensity of the fighting blocks access of victims to medical care services and psychological support. OHCHR received information that most of the victims were unable to access the necessary medical care during the first 72 hours of the incidents, including post-exposure prophylaxis or emergency contraception.

The UN has issued condemnations of acts of sexual violence during the ongoing violence and called for senior officials of all parties to issue command orders prohibiting sexual violence, and to ensure that all abducted women and girls are released and provided the necessary support. In one of several statements, a group of UN Special Rapporteurs said that gender-based violence, including sexual violence, is being used as a "tool of war to subjugate, terrorize, break and punish women and girls, and as means of punishing specific communities targeted by the RSF and allied militias" and asked for the world to not "turn a blind eye to the atrocities and large-scale sexual violence unfolding in Sudan." In August, the **SRSF on Sexual Violence in Conflict met with the Deputy Commander of the RSF** (and leader of the RSF in West Darfur) and urged the RSF to issue a formal undertaking in the form of a unilateral communiqué condemning conflict-related sexual violence and committing to effective measures to prevent and address any such violations. The government of the United States later adopted sanctions against this Deputy Commander for his role in overseeing crimes against civilians in West Darfur, including sexual violence. **Currently, none of the narrative summaries of the listings in the sanctions committee of the UN Security Council include references to sexual and gender-based violence or violations against women and girls.**

The Sudanese authorities have been reporting to the Security Council on these allegations in several meetings, sharing incidents documented by the National Unit for Combating Violence Against Women in the Ministry of Social Development, which by July had already recorded more than 100 cases in Khartoum, Nyala, and El Geneina, and later reported 29 cases of sexual slavery and the sale of abducted girls in the district of Halfayet Alumulk in Khartoum. The National Unit for Combating Violence Against Women and UNFPA have a joint plan to strengthen national mechanisms to protect women and children, although some of these mechanisms are not functioning now for security reasons, such as in Khartoum and the capitals of Darfur states.

In December, the Human Rights Council established an Independent, International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan, mandated by the Human Rights Council, and these reports of atrocities will be a priority. In July 2023, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court announced that he was investigating new allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur.

Apart from violations attributed to the parties to the conflict, partners have reported an increase of intimate partner violence, including among displaced populations, and the lack food security also exacerbates

harmful coping strategies, like forced and child marriage. **4.2 million people are estimated to be at risk of sexual and gender-based violence and in need of services, compared to 3.1 million before the eruption of hostilities in April 2023.**

There have also been reports of attacks on **women human rights defenders and civil society actors**. For example, Bahjaa Abdelaa Abdelaa was killed in Nyala in October after receiving death threats due to her work on women's human rights. Many were forced to flee to neighboring countries or have lost their main offices, equipment, and financial resources. OHCHR has also received information that service providers supporting sexual violence victims, including doctors, have been threatened by the RSF for reporting cases. Since September 2022, the UN Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, in partnership with the Front Line Defenders and Defend Defenders has provided urgent protection support to 52 women human rights defenders (one third of them 18 to 29 years old) and 102 of their dependents in Sudan. 46 per cent of women human rights defenders from Sudan supported by the Women's Peace and Humanitarian fund have been forcibly displaced, either internally or in neighboring countries. The support provided to them includes grants for relocation and livelihoods, security equipment and digital technology, and medical and psychosocial assistance.

In addition, women and girls continue to be exposed to **shelling and bombardments** while in their homes or in the market (such as in the case of the bombing of a market area populated by women traders in the Mayo district of Khartoum), to harassment and violence when they attempt to flee to other areas and going through checkpoints, and to looting and abductions when their homes are occupied by armed actors. Sudan has the second highest estimate of availability of firearms in the region, and the **proliferation of small arms and light weapons and ammunition** fuels systematic and widespread sexual and gender-based violence. Rape survivors have already reported to the National Unit for Combating Violence Against Women that they were either threatened by weapons or beaten by them. There are also concerns that **international terrorist groups** could seize upon the opportunity presented by political and military instability, with serious implications for the country and the region, and Sudanese women and girls in particular.

Other humanitarian issues affecting Sudanese women and girls and the broader region

Sudan is now the **world's largest displacement crisis**. 1.4 million new refugees have crossed into neighboring countries already hosting large refugee populations. Women and children represent approximately 80 per cent of the displaced population, and the majority travel on foot and spend the night in open areas without protection and privacy. Prior to the start of the conflict in Sudan on 15 April 2023, Sudan hosted some 1.4 million refugees. The conflict has exacerbated the protection risks of refugee women and girls, and deprived about 12 million children of schooling since April, with the total number of children in Sudan who are out of school reaching 19 million. If the war continues, no child in Sudan can return to school in the coming months, exposing them to immediate and long-term dangers, including displacement, recruitment into armed groups and sexual violence.

The conflict has exacerbated the already dire humanitarian situation. Across Sudan, half of the population – nearly to 25 million – people are in a need of humanitarian assistance in 2024 (compared to 16 million before April 2023), and the conflict is severely impacting neighboring countries, with their own humanitarian needs, such as Chad, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan. In South Sudan, the arrival of close to half a million refugees and returnees from Sudan has compounded the needs in a country where two-thirds of the population are already food insecure. During a recent visit by members of the IEG to South Sudan, the impact of the arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees and returnees from Sudan, and the lack of access by women to education, health, or livelihoods, was one of the issues most raised by interlocutors. Data from Chad indicates that 90 per cent of the new refugees are women and children. In

Egypt, UNHCR recorded that most of the registered households crossing the border with Sudan were women-headed households.

The disruption of economic activity has particularly affected **women-led households**, who rely on manufacturing and informal service jobs, and the lack of mobility because of insecurity is a huge challenge for women seeking reproductive care or GBV services. The **increase in the burden of care** and other factors – including the need to line up for hours to obtain basic needs, like food and water – has also limited the ability of women to engage in other activities and has elevated the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. The conflict is also taking a toll on women’s mental health, driving up reports of suicidal ideation.

Sudan already had **one of the highest mortality rates in the world**. Among the 11 million people in need of urgent health assistance, 2.64 million are women and girls of reproductive age, including over 260,000 pregnant women. In the first weeks of the conflict, there were reports that doctors had to perform caesarean sections in the middle of power outages, with the help of the light in their mobile phones, while tens of thousands of emergency contraception, HIV-prevention, and abortion drugs were locked in a warehouse in Khartoum, inaccessible during the fighting.

In the wake of the evacuation of international staff, the role of women-led organizations in the humanitarian response has been prominent. Between April and November 2023, 163 local humanitarian partners operating under the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) provided 5.2 million people across Sudan with life-saving assistance. The total number of people assisted includes an estimated 1.35 million women and 2.5 million children. Currently, only 13 percent of the funding requested for gender-based violence prevention and response in the Humanitarian Response Plan has been received. Local humanitarian partners include neighborhood committees -mainly led by men- mobilizing resources from within and outside their communities, including from local business owners, pastoralists, and relatives living abroad, youth-led organizations facilitating transport to people fleeing violence, or distributing food, water, medicines, and fuel, and women-led organizations assisting the most vulnerable and addressing gender-based violence and reproductive health, among others, including through innovative community initiatives, such as emergency rooms. However, there have been reports of violence, including sexual violence, against women humanitarian workers in Khartoum, El Jazera, and River Nile states, and recent decisions by local authorities to dissolve or ban some of the grassroots and resistance committees set up by various actors to support their communities. The United Nations Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund is supporting 31 civil society organizations in Sudan implementing projects at the local and sub-national levels, half of them receiving support from the UN for the first time, and a new call for proposals is expected to be launched in February 2024.

Recommendations:³

In recent months, Security Council statements and resolutions on Sudan have been silent on the exclusion of women from diplomatic initiatives and peace negotiations and the reports of systematic sexual violence committed by the parties to the conflict. The Security Council should:

Call on the parties to ensure women’s meaningful participation in any negotiation to bring about a comprehensive ceasefire and end the conflict, and urge Member States and regional organizations brokering these talks to both request this from the parties and include women and gender expertise in their own mediation and facilitation teams, ensure the inclusion of displaced women, and report to the Security Council on these efforts.

³ These recommendations are prepared by UN Women as the secretariat of the Informal Expert Group, in consultation with other UN entities.

Reiterate that the full, equal, and meaningful participation of Sudanese women and civil society is critical to any de-escalation efforts and building peace in Sudan, as well as any decisions about the future of country.

Recall the commitments made to Sudanese women in the Juba Peace Agreement and the Constitutional Declaration, including with regards to the transition to civilian rule in Sudan.

Demand an immediate cessation of hostilities and a comprehensive ceasefire that includes sexual violence and is adequately monitored, including by women.

Call on the authorities for the full implementation of the 2020 Framework of Cooperation of the Republic of the Sudan and the United Nations on the prevention and response to sexual violence in conflict.

Call on the parties to cease all acts of sexual violence and gender-based crimes and to adopt time-bound commitments to prevent and address these violations and stress that sexual violence crimes will be duly investigated and perpetrators will be held accountable.

Condemn any threats or attacks against women human rights defenders and peace activists, and urge for the removal of any restrictions on civic space or their right to continue their essential work, and for international partners to direct more resources and support to local women-led organizations and services supporting survivors of gender-based violence or women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Request regional organizations to include women's meaningful involvement, including displaced women, and the protection of women as central pillars of their interventions.

Ensure that conflict-related sexual violence is systematically monitored and incorporated as a stand-alone criterion for targeted sanctions to deter the commission of such violence by implicated parties in the mandate of the sanctions committee on Sudan and its panel of experts and request the availability of gender and sexual and gender-based violence expertise in the panel of experts and the use of gender analysis in their reports.

Call on the parties to the conflict to ensure unimpeded access to the Independent, International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan to monitor and document human rights and international humanitarian law violations, including conflict-related sexual violence, and support the investigations by the International Criminal Court.

In addition, the IEG co-chairs and other Council Members could:

- Request the Secretary-General to produce an analysis of the impact of the termination of UNITAMS on the UN's work, including on civilian protection, gender equality, and the protection of women's rights in Sudan, and ideas for how to address these gaps with the support of national and international partners.
- Ask about how the work of the new Personal Envoy will ensure that women, peace and security issues are addressed, including by dedicated senior gender expertise and gender officers to support his mandate, as well as dedicated senior women and children protection advisors in line with Security Council resolutions on conflict-related sexual violence and children and armed conflict, the development of strategies or benchmarks for the participation of women in de-escalation, mediation, or peacebuilding efforts, or the adequate transfer and resourcing of these functions and capacities in the UN Country Team, such as monitoring and reporting on patterns and trends of conflict-related sexual violence and engage with parties to the conflict for the prevention of such crimes.

- Support the production and circulation of regular gender assessments or alerts by the UN, to both inform donors and partners and aid the regular reporting on the situation in Sudan to the Security Council, including disaggregated data on weapons and conflict-related sexual violence, among other issues.
- Increase long-term and flexible funding to women's organizations in Sudan and in neighboring countries, and remove administrative or bureaucratic barriers that may impact their access to funding or their ability to adapt to the new scenario or situations of displacement.
- Continue to invite women from civil society in Sudan to brief the Security Council in formal and informal meetings, and work with OHCHR and others to ensure there is a risk mitigation plan in place ahead of their engagement with the Security Council.
- Insist that all experts invited to speak to the Security Council on Sudan, including from the UN and other international and regional organizations, incorporate gender analysis in their remarks.