

"Resilience in the Third Sudanese War (2023): Reproductive and Sexual Impact on Sudanese Women."

What is happening in Sudan?

Sudan has been a simmering conflict zone for several decades now. However, just this year, in April, violence and conflict erupted with the clash between the Sudanese Armed Forces (hereafter SAF) and the paramilitary group known as the Rapid Support Forces (hereafter RSF), both of which are fighting for power. The conflict poses a blatant threat not only to the rights of civilians, but also, and especially, to the rights of women and children.

But before we get into it, let's go back to 2013. That year, Omar al-Bashir, who had ruled since 1993, officially founded the RSF, a new paramilitary group that had its roots in the Janjaweed, which still operates violently in Darfur and was born during the Second Chadian Civil War (1979-1982) when its main purpose was to prevent Chadian encroachments on Sudanese soil.

In 2019, al-Bashir was dismissed by the SAF army after being convicted of crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide in Darfur since 2009. He

was convicted of having committed numerous acts of corruption, in addition to the aforementioned crimes. It was then that the military promised to call elections in 2023 and to create, in the meantime, a power to be shared with civilians, which took the form of the Transitional Sovereignty Council.

However, this was not the case as, in 2021, a second coup d'état took place, again driven by the Sudanese Army, led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, but this time to concentrate power in his hands. It was then that the Transitional Sovereignty Council was dissolved, and any hint of democracy left in the country was suppressed.

Since 2021 there has been citizen discontent which, added to the presence of the RSF and its tensions with the Sudanese Army—which tried to absorb them into the state military group— led to the attack on several Sudanese bases in April this year.

Since then, the conflict has not stopped, leaving hundreds dead and thousands wounded in less

than four months. Since it broke out, more than 2 million people have fled the country, heading for neighboring countries, as reported by the UN. Although few, relative to the total population, have been able to escape, half of the Sudanese population is in urgent need of humanitarian aid and protection.

How gender shapes the consequences of war.

The situation in Sudan remains critical for women and girls. In addition to reproductive needs, which are being put at stake, there are the sexual assaults usual in many conflicts.

Care and reproductive health. Sudanese mothers.

On April 15, the same month that the war broke out, Khartoum, the capital, was bombed, and with it, numerous hospitals in the city. By May, two-thirds of the hospitals near the country's main hot spots had become totally inoperative. The healthcare network was beginning to be saturated at an unprecedented rate in a context where healthcare was one of the prevailing needs. All this highlighted how healthcare became a critical infrastructure that was almost completely suspended due to the conflict. This being so, not only were surgical interventions prevented as a result of the pains of war, but also that phase with which any human life begins, birth.

More than 250,000 women in Sudan are pregnant and urgently need access to reproductive health services, which are becoming increasingly essential and critical due to attacks on health workers, health facilities and supplies. Moreover, we are no longer talking about simple labors that could happen in a context of peace, but about pregnancies plagued by anxiety, which leads to numerous complications including premature births and low birth weight, among others. In addition, all this is intensified by constant power outages. Newborns can even die from running out of oxygen when there is insufficient power to supply essential infrastructure.

Midwives have become indispensable figures, and thanks to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), nearly 30,000 of them have been trained to continue supporting pregnant women to give birth safely. In Khartoum, one of the midwives said: "We are running out of fuel. If the power cuts continue, we don't know how we will be able to assist pregnant women who give birth a week from now".

Sexual violence as a weapon of war.

Sexual violence is also a reality that is on the rise. In the context of war, sexual violence is used not only because the situation is more chaotic and less controlled, but also because there are underlying purposes linked to war strategies aimed at

frightening and demoralizing the population and the opposing side.

After all, even though this is a conflict and it is clear that the guarantee of human rights is not the same in times of peace, human rights cannot be suspended in their entirety. International humanitarian law, in force in times of war, criminalizes rape and other forms of sexual violence. These conducts must be penalized by the state whether or not it is in a situation of internal confrontation.

In 2000, the UN Security Council published Resolution 1325 in which it urged that sexual violence was one of the major scourges of war and that states should not, in any case, leave warring parties who carry out this type of aggression without impunity. However, these attacks continue to this day and affect girls and women in Sudan regardless of the UN's position. The UN Human Rights Office in Sudan has recorded 21 such incidents against some 60 women and girls, a third of whom were raped in the same attack.



GUEIPEUR DENIS SASSOU / AFP

Tens of these situations have been reported throughout the duration of this conflict, although it appears that this is only the tip of the iceberg. At the end of May, the Unit to Combat Violence against Women documented around 50 cases of sexual violence in major cities.

According to the head of Sudan's Unit to Combat Violence against Women, Sulaima Ishaq, the official figures represent only 1 to 2 percent of the atrocities that actually occur in the Khartoum region. The number of cases is higher because many of the victims find it difficult to report because of shame or stigma, which can sometimes be accompanied by punishment. In addition, there are physical barriers such as lack of electricity or connectivity or the absence of a police or judicial safety network to protect citizens in a context of such daily violence.

The guilty remain unpunished because the RSF accuses the SAF and vice versa. On top of all this, opportunistic criminal gangs act with impunity, especially in Khartoum and Darfur regions. The truth seems to be hidden in a sea of contradictions, but without fear of erring in our answer we could conclude that the guilty parties occupy ranks on all sides.

This ugly truth affects many women in a very cross-cutting manner in numerous areas of their lives. Not

only physically, but also mentally. The lack of medical care, as we have already pointed out, endangers their health or even their lives in some circumstances. Sexual violence triggers a medical emergency, and it is imperative that survivors are provided with immediate access to quality medical care three days after the attack. This is not only because of the need to terminate a possible unwanted pregnancy in sufficient time, but also to stop the contraction of sexually transmitted diseases or infections such as HIV.

In addition, when rape results in an unwanted pregnancy, some victims are forced to resort to risky practices to put an end to the pregnancy, placing in grave danger their health and lives. Unsafe abortions pose a public health crisis. And if mothers choose not to have abortions, both they and the children conceived in these circumstances are extremely vulnerable as they face the constant threat of being excluded and marginalized by their own community. These children may even be subjected to violence or infanticide because of the painful circumstances of their conception.

Civil society responses. Women organize.

In the face of this humanitarian catastrophe, the response of civil society is not trivial. Civil society has tried, through various initiatives, to oppose the violence and hardship of the conflict, with a special

focus on the reality that many women and girls are living.

The UN published last July 5 a compilation of initiatives carried out by Sudanese women, the identity of which was preserved behind pseudonyms for security reasons. Astur, Aliya, Barkhado and Axado were the names of the women behind the attempts to pacify or mitigate the Third Sudanese Civil War in very varied and diverse ways, but all of them of an extremely essential nature. Around 50 initiatives, led by women, have come together to form the "Peace for Sudan Platform", a network supported by UN Women. This has made it possible to weave an associative fabric to encourage communication and cooperation.

Despite the divisions and obstacles faced by women in Sudan, several initiatives and governmental and non-governmental organizations stand out as fighting for women's rights in the country. These include the Women of Sudanese Civic and Political Groups (hereafter MANSAM), the Sudanese Women's Union (hereafter SWU) and the No Oppression Against Women Initiative.

MANSAM, an alliance of eight women's political groups and 18 civil society organizations, played an important role in the December 2018 Revolution. Although they faced internal divisions, MANSAM remains a significant force in the feminist

movement, working to secure the path to democracy and peace in Sudan.

SWU, founded in 1952, is one of the leading women's rights organizations in Africa. It fought for education, against child marriage and labor discrimination, among other issues. Despite its official dissolution during the al-Bashir government, it continues its work from exile in London.

The No Oppression Against Women Initiative, with roots in 2009, seeks to change discriminatory laws in Sudan and support rape victims. Despite their peripheral position in the realms of power, these organizations play a central role in supporting the community in difficult situations.

Conclusions.

Helping women and girls in Sudan involves not only encouraging these kinds of local initiatives, but also increasing humanitarian aid in the reception sites of those trying to flee the hardship of war, as the risk of sexual violence increases in displacement. "Peace for Sudan" can be a great response, promoting dialogue and providing commodities that are even more key in situations like these.

As a group that has suffered in a particularly dehumanizing way from the pains of conflict, women need to be integrated into the response to the war. At this stage, humanitarian aid remains a

priority, but women's empowerment plays a key role in building a violence-free Sudan.

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