FROM EXCLUSION TO INFLUENCE: SUDANESE WOMEN'S STRUGGLE FOR MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN PEACE PROCESSES
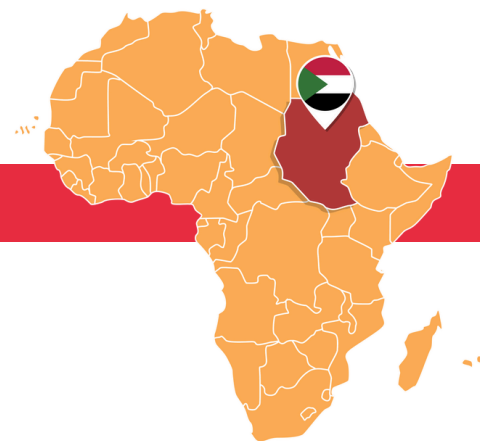
PURPOSE OF THE DOCUMENT

This document highlights the challenges faced by Sudanese women in accessing and influencing peace processes, alongside lessons learned and actionable recommendations for overcoming these barriers. Sudan's ongoing conflict has exacerbated systemic exclusion, while Sudanese women, despite being key actors in peacebuilding efforts, continue to be deliberately sidelined from formal negotiations and decision-making spaces.

WE, WOMEN FROM SUDAN...

Demand that women in all their diversity form an integral part of all peace processes, including ceasefire negotiations, security arrangements, constitutional and governance processes, transitional justice, truth and healing processes, and humanitarian assistance provision.

From Communique adopted at the Sudan Women's Dialogue, a landmark conference held in Kampala on July 3-4, 2024

1. INTRODUCTION

THE SUDAN CONFLICT: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The ongoing devastating conflict in Sudan began in April 2023, when clashes erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), commanded by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti). Initially, a power struggle between two military leaders, once allies during Sudan's transitional period, has escalated into a devastating nationwide crisis involving rebel groups, ethnic militias, and international actors.

The roots of the conflict trace back to October 2021, when the two generals led a military coup that dissolved the civilian government, derailing Sudan's transition to democracy. By late 2022, disagreements over a proposal to integrate the RSF into the regular army further heightened tensions, culminating in full-scale fighting on 15 April 2023.

The consequences have been catastrophic:

- Grave human rights violations, with both SAF and RSF accused of war crimes by the UN Fact-Finding Mission. These include airstrikes, shelling in civilian areas, arbitrary arrests, torture of children, and targeting of journalists and human rights defenders.

- Widespread destruction of critical infrastructure, including homes, hospitals, schools, and communication networks.
- Humanitarian blockades imposed by both factions, preventing aid from reaching vulnerable populations, with devastating consequences.

The humanitarian crisis has reached staggering levels:

- By October 2024, 3 million people had fled to neighbouring countries such as Egypt, Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Uganda, placing immense strain on host nations (UNHCR).
- Inside Sudan, over 8 million people remain internally displaced, with nearly 25.6 million—half the population—facing severe hunger. In some areas, famine conditions have already been confirmed (OCHA).

THE ROLE OF SUDANESE WOMEN AND KEY CHALLENGES IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Sudanese women have long played a pivotal role in the country's history. In 2019, women were at the forefront of the revolution that led to the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir. Despite their contributions to the political transition and ongoing humanitarian response, women remain excluded from current peace processes. Historically, women-led justice mechanisms such as traditional conflict mediation in Darfur and community-driven peacemaking efforts in Nubian societies have long been integral to Sudan's social fabric. These histories can inform contemporary peace processes, ensuring that indigenous and feminist knowledge systems are recognized alongside formal diplomatic interventions.

Efforts to mediate the conflict have been fragmented, with various international and regional actors—including the African Union (AU), United Nations, and countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt—pursuing parallel tracks. However, these efforts have often failed to deliver tangible outcomes, as mistrust between the SAF and RSF continues to impede progress.

The exclusion of women further undermines peace processes:

- The Geneva Process, supported by the ALPS Group (Aligned for Advancing Lifesaving and Peace in Sudan), aimed to incorporate a gender perspective but fell short due to restrictive visa requirements, inadequate funding, and the elitist nature of representation.
- Women from grassroots movements, displaced communities, and conflict-affected areas remain marginalised, with participation often limited to those aligned with political or military factions.

PROJECT OVERVIEW:
WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL PEACE CENTRE (WIPC)

The Women's International Peace Centre, working with UN Women, the African Union Office of the Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security and the Gender, Peace and Security Programme of the Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department, IGAD and other partners has co-led initiatives to amplify Sudanese women's voices in peace processes by facilitating their engagement with key regional and international actors. The project, supported by the Rapid Response Window of the United Nations Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF), has focused on addressing exclusion, building collective action, and strengthening women's influence on political dialogues.

Key Activities:

- Kampala Dialogue (July 2024): Over 100 Sudanese women from diverse backgrounds—including peacebuilding networks, refugees, academia, and the media—came together to develop a common agenda for peace. The dialogue focused on building consensus and strengthening women's ability to articulate their demands effectively.
- Participation in the Inter-Sudanese Political Dialogue (July 2024, Addis Ababa): Five women engaged with stakeholders such as the AU Chairperson, IGAD envoys, and the AU High-Level Panel on Sudan. Despite structural challenges, this participation highlighted women's commitment to influencing formal processes.

- Regional Advocacy at GIMAC on the margins of the mid-year coordination meeting between the African Union and Regional Economic Communities in Accra (July 2024): Sudanese women engaged with policymakers and civil society across Africa to build solidarity and ensure Sudan's crisis remained on the agenda at regional platforms.

The discussions underscored three urgent priorities:

- The need to ensure meaningful women's participation in all peace processes.
- Recognition of women's critical but undocumented role in delivering humanitarian aid.
- Addressing the silence on Sudan's conflict in global media and international policy spaces, where attention has often been diverted to conflicts such as Gaza and Ukraine.

2. KEY CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

2.1 BALANCING INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION, REPRESENTATION, SAFETY, AND CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Challenge:

Efforts to include diverse Sudanese women in peace dialogues, such as the Kampala Dialogue and the African Union-led meeting in Addis Ababa, exposed significant challenges.

In Kampala, the inclusion of women affiliated with military and paramilitary factions created immediate tensions and safety concerns, as they were perceived as powerful figures who might relay sensitive information to opposing groups. Participants, particularly those with families still in Sudan, expressed fears for their safety. To restore trust and allow open dialogue, these women were asked to leave.

In Addis Ababa, women participants faced intimidation and systemic exclusion. Many participants, fearing repercussions for their families in Sudan, ultimately withdrew from the meeting. These incidents also revealed gaps in capacity for navigating high-level diplomatic spaces and responding to attempts to silence or marginalise their voices.

Lessons Learnt:

Balancing inclusivity with safety and representation is crucial in peace dialogues. While diverse participation ensures varied perspectives, it must not compromise the security or trust of participants. Safeguarding measures and clear participant selection processes are key to mitigating these risks. Additionally, strengthening women's capacity to engage in hostile political environments is essential. Providing tools, training, and support prepares participants to navigate exclusionary tactics and advocate effectively in high-risk settings. Beyond physical safety, holistic security measures should be put in place to provide mental health support, digital security training, and also prioritise trauma-informed approaches.

2.2 NAVIGATING ETHNIC, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL DIVISIONS

Challenge:

Sudan's deep-rooted ethnic, religious, and class divisions have intensified during the conflict, contributing to mistrust and fragmentation. Sudan's majority population identifies as Arab and Muslim, but there are minority groups, including black Sudanese and Christian Arabs, who often face systemic marginalisation.

While the Kampala Conference successfully brought together women from diverse backgrounds to develop a common agenda for peace, significant tensions arose when women aligned with political or military factions participated. Many participants viewed their presence as undermining trust and accountability. As a result, the women called for the exclusion of the National Congress Party (NCP) and the RSF from future political discussions, highlighting the need to ensure that peace processes are not dominated by groups seen as responsible for perpetuating the conflict and suffering.

"Not all women are ready to share the same space... Broad consensus allowed women aligned with the two warring generals to appear, creating tensions as they were seen as complicit in the suffering endured by others."

Strategic Partnerships and Advocacy Coordinator WIPC, Pauline Kahuubire

Lessons Learnt:

While the goal is for women to speak with one voice, existing ethnic, social, and political divisions must be acknowledged and managed sensitively. Constructive engagement requires prioritising trust-building and representation of women from affected communities. Women's inclusion must not be symbolic or limited to elite representatives aligned with political or military factions. Grassroots women, displaced women, and those in refugee camps must be centered in decision-making, ensuring that peace processes reflect the realities of those most affected by conflict.

2.3 WOMEN'S EXCLUSION FROM DIPLOMATIC SPACES

Challenge:

At the Preparatory Meeting for the Inter-Sudanese Political Dialogue in Addis Ababa (July 2024), Sudanese women faced systemic exclusion. Although they had prepared to present the outcomes of the Kampala Declaration, they were informed upon arrival that they would only participate as observers. In diplomatic spaces, observer status effectively silences participants, preventing them from speaking or contributing directly to the agenda.

WIPC strategically accommodated women in the same hotel as delegates, hoping to create an additional opportunity for them to influence the process informally. Corridor talks, informal dinners, and hallway conversations were seen as opportunities to influence the process bilaterally. However, attempts to engage through informal "corridor diplomacy" were rejected as insufficient by women who demanded meaningful participation. These women, experienced in mediation processes, refused to accept token roles after all they had contributed to peace efforts.

Lessons Learnt:

The lack of recognition for women's voices demonstrates the need for formal and meaningful inclusion in peace processes. Observer status must not replace active participation, and mechanisms must ensure that women have a clear, structured role at the table. While influencing decision-makers informally can be useful, it is no substitute for women having a formal seat at the table. Safeguarding their neutrality in polarised spaces is equally critical to avoid risks of being perceived as aligned with one faction.

The structure of diplomatic spaces itself must be challenged. International peace negotiations are often rooted in patriarchal, Eurocentric models that prioritize state actors and military figures while sidelining feminist, indigenous, and grassroots approaches to peace.

Challenge:

Given the backlash Sudanese women have faced in formal peace processes, efforts are increasingly focused on engaging them in alternative spaces where they feel safer and more empowered to contribute. WPS Week in October, held alongside the open debate on women, peace, and security at the UN Security Council, offered Sudanese women an opportunity to engage directly with high-level global actors without the intimidation and exclusion encountered in forums on Sudan. Moreover, these barriers underscore the need to connect Sudanese women's advocacy with regional networks to amplify their voices.

Sudan's conflict reflects broader regional dynamics, such as disputes over natural resources, seen in other contexts like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and South Sudan. These similarities suggest that regional linkages could provide an alternative pathway for Sudanese women to amplify their voices and influence peace processes in Sudan and beyond. In this context, South Sudanese women's experience offers valuable lessons. During their own peace negotiations, they successfully challenged exclusion, exemplified by the iconic instance of a South Sudanese woman locking the doors to a negotiation room, forcing political actors to include women in discussions. Such persistence highlights how bold, collective actions can disrupt power dynamics and secure women's participation in decision-making.

Lessons Learnt:

Alternative spaces such as WPS Week illustrate the importance of creating environments where Sudanese women can safely and meaningfully engage. Moreover, regional linkages offer strategic opportunities to address systemic exclusion. By connecting with women from South Sudan and the DRC, Sudanese women can gain practical strategies for inclusion and advocacy through shared learning.

"Women's participation in peace processes is essential—not just for the sake of women being there as women, but considering the leading role Sudanese women played in the political transition of their country, including the 2019 revolution that overthrew Bashir. Despite this, their contributions remain unrecognised, and their involvement is often reduced to a tokenistic approach."

**Strategic Partnerships and Advocacy
Coordinator WIPC, Pauline Kahuubire**

3. STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

To address the barriers Sudanese women face in peace processes, the following recommendations focus on fostering their meaningful participation moving forward:

1

Involve women in the design of peace processes

- Create safe spaces: Prioritise secure environments for open dialogue, free from intimidation or exclusion.
- Consult early: While facilitation and organisation may seem like technical tasks for implementing organisations, meaningful consultation with the women being supported is essential to ensure the process meets their needs and avoids unintended challenges.

2

Strengthen regional linkages

- Facilitate learning exchanges: Connect Sudanese women with counterparts from South Sudan, the DRC and the wider region to share strategies and build solidarity.
- Promote shared advocacy: Use regional platforms like WPS Week and AU processes to highlight common challenges and amplify women's voices collectively.

3

Amplify voices through collaboration and campaigns

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- Coordinate campaigns: Partner with organisations to develop unified social media campaigns that spotlight Sudanese women's demands and the humanitarian crisis.
- Increase visibility: Advocate for equitable media attention and humanitarian aid allocation, ensuring Sudan remains a global priority. Map and involve other actors in large-scale advocacy efforts to increase impact.

4

Strengthen capacity for high-level engagement

- Provide diplomatic training: Equip Sudanese women with skills for negotiation, advocacy, and navigating exclusionary tactics.
- Safeguard participants: Implement security protocols to protect women and their families from threats or retaliation.

By implementing these strategies, Sudanese women can achieve greater inclusion, safety, and influence in peacebuilding, ensuring their voices shape the country's future.

4. CONCLUSION

Sudanese women's continued exclusion, intimidation, and marginalisation undermine the effectiveness of peace processes. However, through coordinated strategies, regional linkages, and strengthened partnerships, it is possible to amplify their voices, ensure their safety, and position them as key actors in shaping Sudan's future.

Sudanese women's fight for meaningful participation is not just about securing seats at the table, it is about dismantling the patriarchal structures that sustain conflict and exclusion.