Sudan's Forgotten War an Women's Untold Cost

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Sudan's Invisible Humanitarian Crisis: Forced Displacement, Famine, and the Gendered Cost of Civil War

Introduction

This brief examines forced migration in sub-Saharan Africa through the lens of Sudan's civil war. Since April 2023, Sudan has produced what the United Nations calls the world's most devastating displacement crisis. Yet it remains unnoticed internationally. This analysis unfolds in two parts: the war's political roots and humanitarian toll, including the famine in North Darfur; and the situation of women and girls, marked by systematic violence, exclusion from peace efforts and resilience.

A country already broken: Sudan's Path to Civil War

Sudan is a country shaped by decades of authoritarian rule, repeated displacement and ethnic and regional tensions that were never resolved, but rather only postponed. Omar al-Bashir ruled between 1989 and 2019, becoming the longest-serving dictator in the country's history and leaving behind a deeply fragmented state: the power was concentrated in Khartoum, the capital, while the peripheral areas were gradually neglected. On top of this, the military became the only institution that actually mattered as corruption permeated the rest of the state apparatus. A turning point was reached in 2009, during the war in Darfur, previously started in 2003, when Omar al-Bashir was indicted by the International Criminal Court for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Then, in 2019, a revolution brought together broad sectors of Sudanese society in powerful street protests, which later led to al-Bashir's removal and the establishment of a transitional government, combining both civilian and military actors. Eventually, the deep social fractures left by the previous regime, combined with the general instability of the region, triggered a new coup in 2021. Once again, the military seized full control of the state and dissolved all the transitional institutions, arresting civilian leaders. Two men jointly led the coup: General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, commander of the Sudanese Armed Forces, and General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, commander of the Rapid Support Forces (often referenced as RSF).

However, on 15 April 2023, this fragile alliance finally collapsed, creating a new struggle for control of the state between two military actors, each with its own networks, resources and external backers. The Rapid Support Forces are essentially an evolution of the Janjaweed militias, already responsible for the atrocities in Darfur, then restructured into a paramilitary force in 2013. In the following years the group grew really fast, especially thanks to independent economic interests such as managing gold mining operations in northern Darfur and financial and military backing from the United Arab Emirates. The power struggle rapidly spread across the country and once again dragged the civilian population into a conflict.

Since the beginning of these last hostilities, over 12 million people have been displaced, the majority internally, while other millions fled across the borders into Chad, Egypt and South Sudan. Famine has been formally declared in parts of North Darfur; in August 2024, the Famine Review Committee confirmed IPC Phase 5 conditions in the Zamzam camp, only the third such determination anywhere in over twenty years of monitoring. Never in modern history have so many people faced starvation at the same time. Despite this, Sudan remains largely absent from any international conversation, consistently overshadowed by conflicts with greater geopolitical visibility.

Women in Sudan experience this war's brutality in ways that differ from men's, but are no less severe. They are among the people most affected

by the violence, but they are also the ones keeping families together and helping communities continue to function in the middle of collapse. The conflict has made the already prevalent inequalities much worse, especially for women and girls who have been displaced or struggled to reach protection and basic services. At the same time, it seems important not to describe women only as victims, because many of them are also responding to the crisis in particularly courageous ways.

A major part of the problem is displacement, hunger, and the breakdown of everyday services. As the war has spread, many women have had to flee several times, often with their children, older relatives, and little more than what they could carry: food, cash, or basic household items. In those situations, they are often exposed to exploitation, abuse, and trafficking, especially in displacement sites or while moving across unsafe areas. Many also lose access to stable work and are pushed into informal survival strategies, such as street vending, domestic labour, or in the worst cases, transactional relationships, that bring their own risks. But with the words of Fabrizia Falcione, UNFPA Country Representative of Sudan, these women "*don't want to be fed. They want opportunities, income generation activities, opportunities to be able to feed their families and their children*".

Sexual and gender-based violence is another of the most painful aspects of this war, which overwhelmingly affect more women and girls, who have been subjected to repeated rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, and forced marriage, which are often as part of broader efforts to terrorize communities. These crimes against the civilian population seem tied to the wider logic of the conflict, where women's bodies become part of the violence itself. Underreporting, stigma, fear, and the total collapse of justice systems make the scale of the crimes even harder to capture fully. Even when they are relatively and temporarily safe, survivors face consequences like pregnancy, psychological and physical trauma, social stigma rejection by families, and very limited access to care have a life-long impact on their lives. In practice, this means that violence continues long after the immediate assault, shaping not only women's health, safety, but their place in the family and community.

Basic health needs have also become much harder to meet. Hospitals have been under deadly attacks, many facilities have closed or are barely functioning, and travel to care is often dangerous or impossible. This is especially serious for pregnant women, rape survivors, or anyone needing reproductive or maternal health services in the midst of malaria outbreak. In many places, women are forced to choose between safety and care, which is an unfair and exhausting burden. The same is true for food access, since women often eat last, cut down their portions, or put their own needs aside for children and other family members. So the crisis means more than the acute insecurities, as it also slowly and cumulatively erodes women's health, security, and everyday survival.

Still, women are not only surviving the war, they are also helping others to do so. Women-led groups have been providing food, hygiene items, psychosocial support, and help to survivors of violence. These efforts matter because they often fill gaps left by the state and by humanitarian systems that cannot reach people in need. Women have also been involved in mediation, local peace efforts, and the everyday work of holding communities together, although their role is often informal.

What feels especially disappointing but somehow expected is that this work has not brought women much closer to formal peace talks or political decisions. The UNSC note on Sudan says women are heavily affected by violence, hunger, displacement, and loss of education, while still being left out of diplomatic tracks. The brief which has been published by CMI last year also suggests that this gender-based exclusion is closely tied to restrictive gender norms, limited resources, and the continuous warfare.

Conclusion

Three years into Sudan's civil war, sexual violence against women and girls has become one of its central instruments. The number requiring related support services has quadrupled, reaching 12.7 million by 2026. Yet the women bearing these burdens and driving much of the humanitarian and peacebuilding work on the ground, have no seat at the formal negotiating table. peace built without the people who have borne the brunt of the violence, and led the response to it, is unlikely to last.