

SUDANESE WOMEN WAGING PEACE

by Rogaia Abusharaf

Sudanese women are urging the international community and Sudan's male leaders to do more to promote the inclusion of women in peace building and reconciliation.

Although UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) specifically mandates women's participation in peace processes, Sudanese women have been consistently sidelined by North-South and Darfur peace processes. Although many women's organisations were registered observers with the Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and presented technical papers to negotiators in the Machakos talks, they were not formally involved. When the Government of Sudan prevented women from boarding a plane to take them to the Naivasha talks in Kenya, women from the South joined northern women to formally protest their exclusion from the peace process. At Naivasha, women's organisations were forced to present their papers with recommendations to the parties by pushing them under the closed doors of the negotiation room. Sudanese women have played hardly any role in the African Union-sponsored Darfur peace talks in the Nigerian capital, Abuja.

Women comprise the majority of Sudanese IDPs and refugees. Even when housed in refugee and IDP camps, women are not safe from gender-based violence. Reports abound of women being abducted and/or raped while collecting firewood near camps while little or nothing is done to bring perpetrators to justice. During resettlement, women face specific challenges including increased burdens as female heads of household, little access to healthcare and education, and few economic opportunities.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement between Khartoum and the SPLM does not speak to the full complexity of the ongoing conflict in Sudan as it fails to address the intermittent conflicts throughout the country with additional parties, related human rights abuses and the

deep ethnic and religious rifts which make reconciliation and transition to peace difficult.

Nowhere is this more so than in Darfur where the Janjaweed militia have used sexual violence as a strategy to dehumanise women and girls and humiliate and control entire communities. Abductions, sexual slavery, rape, torture and forced displacement have been so pervasive as to call into question the ability of communities ever to re-establish themselves. Louise Arbour, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has noted the absence of structures in Darfur to promote justice and healing and bring perpetrators to justice.

Addressing the root causes of conflict in Sudan must include promotion of women's economic empowerment. Women make up the majority of Sudan's population and in some conflict-affected areas three quarters of the surviving inhabitants are women. Women head households, yet they do not have legal access to land or resources due to discrimination in Sudanese statutory and customary law. Sudan - like most Arab states - is not among the 180 nations which have signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Challenging tradition

Sudanese women are challenging their traditional status. In Sudan and in the diaspora we have established organisations and networks to raise awareness about the human costs of the conflict and to call for an inclusive approach to the implementation of the peace agreement. As breadwinners and decision makers, women are starting income generation projects, some in fields as untraditional as carpentry. Women from the North and South have

organised to respond to the needs of orphans, street children and others in dire economic straits.

Support for women's efforts must be seen as a vital component of peace and reconstruction. Sudan urgently requires a broad, nation-wide, awareness-raising campaign about women's rights that speaks to men and women as well as young people. Women's land tenure, title and ownership rights must be clarified and an enforceable legal framework set in place that reconciles competing claims on land and enables women and women-headed households to hold and defend ownership. It is essential to educate the population about the diversity of customary and traditional laws with an eye towards codification and revisiting of customs that discriminate against or disadvantage women, such as female genital mutilation.

Plans for the voluntary return, resettlement and rehabilitation of refugees and IDPs cannot succeed without more being done to involve women. Income-generation activities must be created for women in refugee and IDP camps and at transit and entry points for returnees. The international community needs to facilitate links and communication among women leaders and the grassroots, women returnees in urban and rural areas and women returnees across the country and across conflict lines. Women need to be given access to credit and information about local and national markets so that they can set up small businesses.

Other key demands being made by Sudanese women's organisations include:

- increasing to 50% the target for women's participation at all levels in all governing and deliberative bodies in Sudan, including land commissions, oil commissions, party lists and elected and appointed bodies in national, local and regional governments, both transitional and permanent

- removing legal impediments to the registration and operation of civil society organisations and repealing restrictive laws that inhibit the freedom of movement so that women's NGOs throughout Sudan can work together
- building capacity of women's organisations, particularly skills in proposal writing, project planning, management and evaluation, accounting and money management
- monitoring to ensure women are at least half of the beneficiaries of all assistance efforts in all sectors
- establishing mechanisms to clarify and strengthen the roles and relationships among NGOs, civil society and government entities dedicated to assisting women
- convening periodic national women's consultations at which female representatives of the grassroots, government and non-governmental organisations throughout Sudan, representing all ethnic and faith-based groups, can discuss shared priorities and concerns
- raising the marriage age to 18
- ratification and observance of CEDAW and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- establishing a ministry and presidential advisor for Women's Affairs to ensure gender mainstreaming
- including foreign and Sudanese women in all missions, negotiating sessions and needs assessment teams sent by foreign governments and international organisations to assist Sudanese peace building
- including women in UN and African Union peace-keeping units
- ensuring that disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) efforts include ex-women soldiers
- training and involving women in the security sector (women police officers, military officers, security officers)
- designing a protocol on accountability and transitional justice mechanisms, especially with regard to gender-based violence
- establishing an internationally-sponsored commission of inquiry and commission for truth and reconciliation
- ensuring women's access to reproductive healthcare
- supporting gender training for political parties using national and international experts and national women's organisations.

Sudanese women are articulating the need for change:

Agnes Nyoka, Coordinator, Sudanese Women's Empowerment for Peace (SuWEP):

"Dialogue is very important to resolve and prevent conflict in Sudan. As women, decisions are being made for us. The GoS and SPLM are using arms, and we carry UNSC 1325 as our arms to promote inclusion."

Keziah Layinwa Nicodemus, Head, SPLM Women and Gender Commission:

"We are speaking in one voice today. We are women from all over Sudan and we are a voice for peace. We speak in one language regardless of our divisions ... we have been given 25% seats in southern Sudan's constitution. But we have to push to make this a reality. Sudan is a country of men and we have to work hard

with the support of the international community to train our women to be leaders."

Muna Khugali, postgraduate student: *"At the local level, we need crimes against humanity to be documented and captured. With this information, we can start to create more accountability and prevent history from repeating itself."*

Amel Gorani, Director, Sudan Future Care:

"The absence of violence will not create a peaceful Sudan. There should be a truth and reconciliation process because so many people in Sudan have been traumatised."

Eiman Seifeld, founder of the Darfur Women's Relief and Rehabilitation Agency:

"It is women who are caring for the family, who remain at home, who know the situation on the ground. Women will be the ones who are left, who must implement the policies of the peace talks - if they are not included, they will surely fail. Women are ready for peace and a better future for their children."

Afaf Ahmed Abdel-Rahman, Woman Center for Peace and Development:

"This war was created by poverty. Poverty perpetuates the cycle of violence and one strategy to eradicate poverty and violence is to build the capacity of women through training."

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This article draws on the report of a November 2004 event which brought 16 Sudanese women peacebuilders for meetings, presentations and events in Washington DC and New York. It was organised by Inclusive Security: Women Waging Peace (www.womenwagingpeace.net) whose founder Ambassador Swanee Hunt facilitated the entry of the women into US and UN decision-making circles. The author wishes to thank her compatriots for their tireless work in formulating the recommendations included in this article.

