

Endangering peace by ignoring women

by Nada Mustafa M Ali

“We want our New Sudan women to be well informed about politics. They are the majority of the population ... but because of ignorance, they are trodden upon, kept in the kitchen and made to procreate.... But time has come for us to equally dance with our men in the political arena. No man is born a politician and no woman is born a cook!”

Pamphlet, New Sudan Women's Association, March 1999

“A major problem with this peace agreement is that it is an agreement negotiated without the participation of other political parties or civil-society organisations in which more women are represented.”

Sonia Aziz Malik, lecturer, Ahfad University for Women, Omdurman

Unresolved conflicts and exclusions seriously undermine the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in January 2005. The CPA testifies to the struggle of the people of southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains. It may have largely settled the contradictions between the political North and the South but injustice in other parts of the country, particularly Darfur, has instigated fierce violence. Government-sponsored militias have used rape as a tool to subjugate whole communities. Conflict could also escalate in the East, where women are most affected by decades of socio-economic, political and cultural marginalisation. The process leading to the CPA and formation of the ‘Government of National Unity’ in September 2005 has been dominated by the SPLM and the ruling National Congress Party and has excluded most other political forces as well as civil society organisations, including women's groups.

It is important to remember not only that women's bodies have been used as tools of ethnic cleansing – in the South, Nuba Mountains and Darfur – but also that women have been actively engaged in peace promotion. Women have been responsible for running whole communities in the

absence of men and basic services: in the war-affected areas, in the displaced camps in Khartoum, in refugee camps in Kenya and other neighbouring countries, and in exile in Europe, Australia and North America. They have also played key roles in inter-tribal reconciliation efforts across southern Sudan.

Women in the SPLM and Nairobi-based women's organisations

Women started to take an active part in the SPLM/A in 1984 when a ‘girls’ battalion’ was established. In 1985 the New Sudan Women's Federation (NSWF) was established. From initial focus on organising women to assist the wounded and feed the army, NSWF moved on to provide humanitarian assistance to women and children in refugee camps and commenced literacy classes for women. In 1986 the first women joined the SPLM's ‘political school’ and in 1989 the movement established the position of director of Women's Affairs. Women participated in the process of preparation for the SPLM/A's first convention in 1994, where 23 women were appointed to the movement's National Liberation Council.

Throughout the 1990s southern Sudanese women's organisations built a movement that worked in collaboration with UN agencies, donors and local communities in Nairobi as well as in non-government-held areas. Members were continuously trying to create a space for women within various political institutions. To better coordinate their activities they worked with community organisations to set up the New Sudan Indigenous Organisations (NESI) network. Groups engaged in advocacy and service delivery in the non-government-held areas in southern Sudan. NSWF established centres that provided legal advice to women affected by domestic violence. The Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace (SWVP) ran training courses on conflict resolution, peace monitoring and leadership skills in collaboration

with international and UN agencies. Women's participation in the peace negotiations started in 1997 when two women joined the SPLM negotiating team. Throughout the Machakos and Naivasha meetings, southern women such as Jemma Kumba, Anne Itto, Awut Deng, Agnes Lasuba, Christine Lino, Abuk Payiti, Susan Jambo, Lona Lowilla and Cecilia Oba formulated a clear plan to tackle obstacles preventing proper integration of women's specific needs into the peace process. The activism of the Nairobi-based organisations developed around a very strong and critical discourse, which demanded representation in the peace talks. However, in the end, although civil society organisations associated with the SPLM/A attended briefings and consultations, they – including women's organisations – were excluded from the formal peace negotiations.

In accordance with the resolutions of the Oslo women's conference, held in April 2005, at least 30% of seats in all political institutions should be allocated to women. Resolutions of the conference covered women's roles and their access to power, resources and services in different spheres. However, focus on women's representation without attention to the gender component of the CPA and of other political processes might result in male-gendered and untransformed patriarchal politics, albeit with token female participation. It is important to ensure that the whole CPA and the constitution are engendered, which means that issues of redistribution of power and wealth are also considered in relation to the position of women and men in society, including women's land ownership and women's active participation in decision making. We must not forget that the CPA has been negotiated with a regime whose rigid ideology actively discriminates against women. Given that the CPA allows for implementation of *shari'a* law in the North, state-led discrimination seems set to continue at least in the North. A sensitive gender approach can be a tool for bringing about genuine transformation through

challenging this ideology. It is also time to rethink the role of women as bearers of culture and markers of ethnic boundaries, expressed, for example, in the restrictions posed on intermarriage between various communities in Sudan.

Only five of the 74 positions in Sudan's new government are held by women. The new minister of health, Tabita Shokai – a nurse and long-time Nuba activist formerly based in the UK – welcomes the fact that there are 60 women in the 274- member National Assembly but

argues that this is not enough. “We still need more representation in all aspects of decision making and there is need to build the capacity of women leaders.”¹

Apart from the Joint Assessment Mission's report, which started by formulating a gender strategy, mainstream peace and peace related processes have failed to look at the specific way in which conflict, peace building and post-conflict reconstruction have affected women and men in a gender-specific way. They have not given due consideration to

the role of women as peace builders and active participants in post-conflict reconstruction. If left unaddressed, this risks endangering, and not engendering, Sudan's recovery and reconstruction.

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