

**“We have been quiet for so long”
Sudanese women’s coalitions in
post-revolution Sudan**

September 2022

“We have been quiet
for so long”

Sudanese women’s coalitions
in post-revolution Sudan

Reem Abbas

September 2022

Acknowledgements

This paper was written by Reem Abbas, an independent consultant, with advisory and editing support from Rayan Nimir, Zahbia Yousuf and Julia Poch of Saferworld. Special thanks goes to Dr Samia Al-Nagar, who generously shared her wealth of knowledge and expertise, advising on the research from start to finish, and providing in-depth reviews of the research design and drafts. We are also very grateful to the women and men who kindly gave their time to participate in the research and share their experiences.

Thanks also go to Saferworld colleagues, particularly Lucy Atim, for their contribution to the design and analysis of this report. Publications support was provided by Martha Crowley and the report was designed by Jane Stevenson.

This research was funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Addressing Root Causes of Conflict Fund (ARC).



Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Cover photo – Sudanese people in Blue Nile State take part in ‘Citizen hearings’ as part of popular consultations on the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

© UN Photo/Tim McKulka

Acronyms

ESWC	Eastern Sudan Women’s Coalition
FFC	Forces of Freedom and Change
NAHT	Forum of Women in Forces of Freedom and Change
MANSAM	Women of Sudanese Civic and Political Groups
SuWEP	Sudanese Women Empowerment for Peace network

© Saferworld, September 2022. All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without full attribution. Saferworld welcomes and encourages the utilisation and dissemination of the material included in this publication.

Contents

Executive summary	i
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Methodology	2
2 The history of coalitions and the Sudanese women's movement	7
2.1 Overview of coalitions	10
3 Representation within coalitions: diversity and challenges	15
3.1 Diversity and intersectional representation within coalitions	15
3.2 Challenges to representation	16
4 A common strategic agenda	21
4.1 Political participation	22
4.2 Economic empowerment	23
4.3 Women, peace and security, and violence against women and girls	23
4.4 Towards a common agenda	24
5 Coordination among and between coalitions	27
5.1 Coordination challenges	29
6 Conclusion and recommendations	33
6.1 Ability to influence policy change	34
6.2 Recommendations	35



A community action group meets in Umsinaibra village, Gedarf.
© Ala Kheir/Saferworld

Executive summary

Sudan's democratic transition has faltered since the military executed a coup in November 2021 to re-take power from the civilian-military Transitional Council. The 2019 revolution is still a powerful symbol of Sudanese people's desire and the possibility for democratic, inclusive governance and peace. Women's mobilisation, organisation and activism were a significant contribution to the revolution, and while the transition process has been a crucial platform to push for change, including for gender equality provisions in the 2019 Constitutional Charter, the current political, economic and social reality also involves tremendous challenges for women.

Over six months, from March to September 2021, Saferworld conducted research in Khartoum, Red Sea State and North Darfur State to explore how women in Sudan have been organising for change. Focusing on the work and efforts of women's coalitions – three at the national level and four at the sub-national level in Darfur and Eastern Sudan regions – this report examines issues of representation, coordination and building common agendas, in order to reflect on the ability of women's coalitions to influence policies in support of inclusive gender equality in decision-making and peacebuilding processes.

Overall, the research found that coalitions have struggled to effect policy change, particularly on the women's rights agenda. The biggest barrier is the ongoing patriarchal structures and norms that limit women's participation and empowerment, and the political and legal reforms required to bring about gender equality. The coalitions themselves have struggled to develop coherent, comprehensive or bold common agendas, relying instead on a 'minimum' agenda that limits the issues they can push for. The coalitions have yet to develop effective ways to manage disagreements, develop common and clear policy priorities, messaging and advocacy strategies internally, and build more strategic alliances with other coalitions. The few examples of successful policy influence have been achieved through focusing on a specific issue that either supports the implementation of or is aligned with an existing government policy; for example, the Cooperative Union maintaining pressure on the government to ensure that its strategy to distribute aid to low-income families included women in the informal market.

Specific challenges for the coalitions that emerged from the research include:

Representation

- Unsurprisingly, the types of representation in the coalitions reflect their historical development, as well as the particular socio-economic, political and conflict dynamics in different regions. Literacy levels can create gaps between urban centres and rural areas, while recurring outbreaks of conflict may force coalition groups to focus on responding to immediate conflict needs rather than on outreach and movement building.
- Considering the democratic transition, the representation of political activists in all coalitions is important. Men continue to dominate political parties and resist the legal and political changes required to ensure women’s equal access, and so far there has been little focus on promoting gender sensitivity within political parties.
- Intergenerational differences have not been well-managed to date, with younger women normally marginalised from decision-making or given marginal roles, even though they may be more active and visible within coalitions. A recurring concern from younger women is that while older generations of women activists have broken down barriers, they may also embody patriarchal interests, limiting the ability to develop strategic, transformative agendas that challenge gender inequality and women’s oppression. The model of the minimum agenda has also not allowed coalitions to challenge the patriarchal status quo.

Common strategic agenda

- Each coalition has common objectives that broadly fall under four areas: women’s political participation, women’s economic empowerment, peacebuilding, and violence against women. While coordination on specific issues has occurred at particular moments, more strategic alignments have yet to be explored.
- A holistic articulation of women’s rights is lacking, with political participation and economic empowerment narrowly defined. For example, a focus on increasing women’s participation in government and legislative structures neglects local levels of governance or women’s economic rights, and economic empowerment work fails to advocate for gender equality to be embedded in institutions and laws.

- This includes disregarding the broader dimensions of women, peace and security (heavily focused on women’s participation) and violence against women and girls (focused on legal reforms or the immediate security concerns of women and responses to them), and failing to address the underlying gender and social norms that perpetuate economic or political exclusion and violence against women and girls. Barriers to women’s participation and security and economic empowerment occur in both the private and public spheres, including the informal livelihoods sector. A human security lens would help focus on the diversity of women’s conflict experiences that contribute to these barriers.

Coordination

- Managing intergenerational, ethnic or regional diversity is challenging for coalitions, and coordination committees have not been able to address conflicts between members at times. Ethnic tensions within regions can prohibit inter-coalition coordination, as can relations or suspected relations with the former regime. Some coalitions have sought to overcome this by rejecting the membership of activists who were affiliated with the former regime, but this has led to further frustration.
- Historical centre-periphery tensions can create coordination challenges – with regional groups resisting engagement with Khartoum groups, citing their domination of agendas and neglect of regional concerns. Some coalition groups talk of ‘double marginalisation’: from men at the regional level as well as men and women at the centre. While regional platforms allow women to break the cycle of ‘other people speaking on their behalf’, cross-regional collaboration could provide important knowledge exchange, especially as Khartoum-based activists have more access to capacity building.
- The possibilities for policy influence are greater if individual members have multiple hats and are part of several women’s groups and coalitions, making coordination between them more feasible. The presence of political parties in coalitions such as Sudanese Women in Political and Civic Groups (MANSAM) and Women of the Forces of Freedom and Change (NAHT) has also allowed civil activist members to campaign and influence politicians to support women candidates.

- Coordination challenges have several effects: they limit the impact of coalitions, prevent them from pursuing their goals and stifle representation within the coalitions. Coordination costs required for engagement and organising or attending events can be high and prohibitive, and as a result external coordination by coalitions is largely focused on accessing funding. Widespread insecurity and transportation costs have also contributed to women not wanting to stay out late for meetings, leading to limited participation in coordination (which limits representation as well).

With this in mind, the research suggests the following recommendations:¹

Common agenda and policy influence:

- Coalitions should prioritise developing organisational strategy documents, including gender-transformative common agendas and coalition charters which set out shared understandings and members' roles and responsibilities. This should be informed by a gender-sensitive context analysis of the democratic transition process, highlighting regional differences.
- In line with the above context analysis, international organisations and donors should provide technical support to women's coalitions and comparative learning from other contexts on the development of policy influence plans, taking into consideration regional differences.
- All coalitions should incorporate a holistic women, peace and security lens in strategy documents – including the linkages between peace and security in public and private arenas and transformative gender equality, and between women's economic, social, political and cultural rights.
- Coalitions, with the assistance of international and national gender experts, should prioritise women's advocacy on 'gender sensitising' political parties, including developing specific advocacy plans.
- Women's coalitions should support internal understanding of a common agenda, charter and policy influence plans, and facilitate discussions on member organisations' and individuals' roles and responsibilities in the implementation of these.

Representation:

- Coalitions should hold member-led discussions on the importance and challenges of representation, incorporating a gender analysis on who is underrepresented and why, and on modes of accountability. Coalitions should develop strategies for increasing representation as a basic component of institutionalising democracy within the coalition.
- Specifically, women's coalitions should commit to and develop processes for increasing representation of women political activists, women academics, housewives, women in the informal sector and women in underrepresented professions.
- Coalitions should prioritise and international organisations should facilitate opportunities for coalitions to discuss cross-regional collaboration – for example, between Eastern and Western Sudan – to promote democratic transition and gender equality, as well as resourcing regional exchange programmes designed by coalition representatives.

Coordination:

- Coalitions should create opportunities for their members to discuss the importance and challenges of coordination, including how coordination mechanisms can further the aims of a common agenda.
- Priority areas for discussion are intergenerational tensions; ethnic diversity; and coordination of political and civil society activists, particularly with regards to advocacy to 'gender sensitise' political parties.
- Coalitions should organise separate discussions among older and younger generations on the topics of feminism and the importance of challenging patriarchal cultures in order to promote gender equality and democratic state-building, as well as intergenerational dialogues to create a common understanding of and momentum for promoting a culture of gender equality, and to outline responsibilities for achieving this.
- Coalitions should consider how coordination mechanisms can better manage ethnic diversity and tensions, especially for Darfur and East Sudan coalitions, including having sensitive yet open discussions on ethnic differences in Sudan, the implications for women's equality agendas, and identifying monitoring indicators.

Notes

¹ These recommendations are expanded upon in the conclusion.



A woman from an IDP camp in North Darfur votes in the 2010 Sudanese national elections.

© UN Photo/Albert Gonzalez Farran

1

Introduction

Throughout the three decades of President Omar Al-Bashir's military rule, Sudanese women were disproportionately affected by discriminatory laws² and, with the exception of those affiliated to the regime, continued to face exclusion and marginalisation as a result of patriarchal and structural societal norms and practices. Sudanese women resisted this discrimination in different ways, and were the backbone of the 2019 revolution that ousted Al-Bashir's government. They formed the majority of the protesters and played critical roles in mobilising and coordinating protests through neighbourhood-based resistance committees.³

Encouraged by their role in the revolution, the addition of gender equality provisions in the Constitutional Charter 2019 (Article 49) and the opening of civic space in the democratic transition, women's organisations took the opportunity to increase their participation in different networks and coalitions across the country. The aim was to form a larger constituency to address their issues and interests, and to build platforms to engage both at the political level and in peace negotiations as large regions of the country emerged from conflict.

Unfortunately, women experienced backlash from the early stages of the transition period and have been excluded from the governing coalition – the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). In Khartoum, women's coalitions mobilised to demand equal representation in decision-making posts: they organised several protests in front of the *Umma* political party headquarters in Khartoum, calling for women to be added as the 'sixth component' of the FFC⁴ declaration,⁵ and submitted lists nominating qualified women for minister and governor positions. However, a list of potential women parliamentarians prepared by the Women of Sudanese Civic and Political Groups (MANSAM) was not recognised in the multiple attempts to form the Transitional Legislative Council. Only two women⁶ were appointed to the Supreme Council; representation in the two transition cabinets remains less than 20 per cent, and only two out of 18 appointed governors are women.⁷ In western and eastern regions of the country, women remain underrepresented in state governments and continue to experience insecurity due to the recurrent conflicts in the regions.

While several discriminatory laws have been repealed – such as Article 152 on ‘indecent clothing’ and Article 154 on prostitution – there are still loopholes for the prosecution of women.⁸ For example, the amendment of Article 152 now focuses on indecent behaviour, which empowers police officers to judge women’s behaviour in public spaces.⁹ Similarly, Article 141 was amended to criminalise female genital mutilation, but without mechanisms for its application. Although consultations were conducted in many states for the approved national action plan for implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security (WPS), the plan lacks consideration of the specific peacebuilding needs of different states. In addition, the plan does not include accountability mechanisms for sustainable peace and gender-transformative equality.

And, despite activists’ mobilisation in support of the formation of a women and gender equality commission, there has been little political will to make it a reality and to promote women’s constitutional rights.¹⁰

The current political, economic and social reality, and the need for democratic transformation and peacebuilding, involves tremendous challenges for women. At the same time, women’s mobilisation, organisation and activism in the transition process has been a crucial

platform to agitate for change. Recognising their importance to democratic transformation and gender equality in Sudan’s transition period, this research explores how women have been organising for change. It looks at issues of representation as well as women’s coordination approaches, and reflects upon how these impact their ability to influence policies in support of inclusive gender equality in decision-making and peacebuilding processes.

The research examines four issues:

- the degree of representation of women groups within coalitions
- the internal approaches and challenges used to develop a common strategic agenda
- coordination internally and with other women groups and coalitions at the national, regional and international levels
- how the above factors affect the coalitions’ ability to influence policies and decision-making processes

The research will inform Saferworld’s own programming and policy work in Khartoum, East Sudan and the Darfur region. Crucially, it also aims to support women coalitions by providing a roadmap on how to overcome some of the challenges identified in coordination, and by securing a common agenda to facilitate work within and across coalitions and towards more representative and meaningful engagement of different women groups, in support of gender equality.

1.1 Methodology

The report focuses on seven women coalitions in Sudan: three at the national level and four at the sub-national level in Darfur and Eastern Sudan regions. The qualitative research involved a desk review of secondary literature and primary data collection. An in-depth literature review explored the history and experience of the women’s movement in Sudan. This included an examination of defunct coalitions to understand their limitations and impact, drawing on reports by national and regional organisations, statements and reports written by the coalitions, and information extracted from social media pages. This was supplemented by primary research conducted in Khartoum, Red Sea State and North Darfur State. The capital, Khartoum, was selected because it is both historically and presently the centre of women’s activism and the base of a number of coalitions. The other two states were selected as they are zones of conflict where women’s lives have been hugely impacted. They also represent capitals of the western and eastern regions of the country, and areas where Saferworld has programming and focal points.

Primary research was carried out in May and June 2021 in Port Sudan city in Red Sea State, Al-Fashir city in North Darfur State, and in Khartoum State. Follow-up phone interviews were conducted to update gaps as necessary. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion (FGDs) were conducted in Arabic with members of the seven selected coalitions, as well as with experts and political actors. Two FGDs were carried out in Khartoum (16 participants) and two in Darfur (nine participants), while a total of 68 men and women were interviewed in the three states and

“
The current political, economic and social reality, and the need for democratic transformation and peacebuilding, involves tremendous challenges for women.

”



A community action group member in Aroma, Kassala, leads a literacy session with some of the young women in her community.
© Ala Kheir/Saferworld

in South Darfur. The participants were selected through ‘snowball’ sampling: after initial contact with coalitions, members of coalitions were asked to identify other potential participants, taking into consideration the need to ensure diversity. Some coalition members living outside the selected states were contacted by phone to ensure their inclusion. Outside the coalitions, activists as well as officials from the FFC and the government, as well as experts from organisations, were selected based on recommendations by Saferworld and members of the coalitions. An additional group of men and women were interviewed because of their involvement in advancing women’s participation.

Selection criteria

In Khartoum State, three coalitions with different compositions were selected. MANSAM has a combination of political parties’ chapters, civil society organisations (CSOs), unions, associations and societies. The Forum of Women in Forces of Freedom and Change (NAHT) includes women from political parties only. The Women’s Cooperative Union membership

consists of market tea and food sellers, petty traders and domestic workers.

In South Darfur the Darfur Women’s Platform was included as it was the first coalition in Darfur; it was formed in 2019 and has branches in the five Darfur states. The Darfur Women Forum is now the main coalition in North Darfur, after its members had a disagreement with the Darfur Women’s Platform and became independent. The Forum also has focal points in all five states. Both coalitions were considered as they have different representation – the Forum has a majority of younger groups – and context dynamics in the two states are also distinct.

The two coalitions targeted in Eastern Sudan represent different compositions and interests. The Eastern Sudan Women’s Coalition (ESWC) includes groups of mostly young women from the three eastern states. Considering the restrictions women face in the east, working across the eastern states represents a breakthrough in women’s activism. The Women’s Platform is focused on women’s groups in the Red Sea State, including neighbourhood-based groups.

Research limitations

Practical and logistical challenges impacted the scope for conducting primary research. The interview period coincided with women activists travelling to Juba to attend peace talks as well as school examinations, making it difficult to hold group interviews in Khartoum State. As a result, some interviews were conducted by phone. Many interviewees in North Darfur and in Port Sudan, in Red Sea State, have day jobs and holding FGDs after 4pm was difficult due to insecurity and caregiving roles. Weak phone networks also made it difficult to conduct interviews with members of the Darfur Women Forum in Nyala, South Darfur, and the researcher worked with a field assistant in Darfur to conduct the interviews in person.

In addition, COVID-19 cases were high during the research period and several restrictions were in place. Health measures in Red Sea State were non-existent, which made it impossible to hold FGDs there, and one-on-one interviews were conducted instead. In North Darfur, participants’ commitment to wearing masks and maintaining social distancing allowed two FGDs to take place.

During the field visit to Port Sudan town, there were tribal clashes that lasted two days. Although they were contained quickly, it created tension in the city. In the aftermath of the

fieldwork, violent clashes occurred in Port Sudan and in the Eastern Sudan region in general, which could impact working with groups in Eastern Sudan in the future.

There are also limitations related to the report’s findings. Firstly, limited time and resources meant that interviews were not conducted with all of the groups that make up each coalition, which could limit data in terms of age and geographic diversity. Secondly, almost all of the groups are recently established and have had to develop under exceptional circumstances – COVID-19 waves and lockdowns, insecurity, conflict, political instability and near economic collapse. This has translated into less evident outcomes, constant deviations from plans and strategies, and long periods of inactivity. This does not make the findings irrelevant but means that data should be updated in the future, and more focused research needs to be carried out to understand the dynamics within the newly formed youth groups that operate within the coalitions, as they have very different ways of thinking. Finally, the findings cannot be extrapolated to represent regions with active women groups and coalitions that were not included in this research, as the conflict dynamics and cultural and socio-political circumstances – and their impact on women’s participation and coordination – may vary too much.

Notes

- 2 Abbas R (2020), 'The Year We Change Sudan's Personal Status Act', African Feminism, 14 April (<https://africanfeminism.com/the-year-we-change-sudans-personal-status-act/>)
- 3 Abdel Moneim S (2021), 'Women have always been at the forefront of Sudanese resistance', Open Democracy, 26 November (www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/women-have-always-been-at-the-forefront-of-sudanese-resistance/); Mohamed H (2019), 'Sudan's female protesters leading the pro-democracy movement', Al Jazeera, 23 April (www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/4/23/sudans-female-protesters-leading-the-pro-democracy-movement)
- 4 Statement published and presented to the FFC on 25 August 2019 and pictures of the protest: <https://www.facebook.com/LaLqhrAlnsa/posts/1251659098291669>
- 5 *Radio Dabanga* (2020), 'Sudan campaign demands women governors', 16 July (<https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-campaign-demands-women-governors>)
- 6 One resigned in May 2021.
- 7 Abbas R (2020), 'A Year after Bashir's Fall, the Struggle for Sudanese Women Continues', Wilson Center, 11 April (<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/year-after-bashirs-fall-struggle-sudanese-women-continues>)
- 8 Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA Network) (2015), 'Third-Class Citizens: Women and Citizenship in Sudan. A paper on women's struggle for equal citizenship in Sudan', September (<https://www.cmi.no/file/3217-Third-Class-Citizens-Womens-Struggle-for-Equal-Citizenship-in-Sudan-002.pdf>)
- 9 SIHA Network (2020), 'Taking a stance – blinded by the Kohl. A memorandum on the amendments to the 1991 criminal law' (<http://sudanile.com/index.php/الرأي-مستبر/34-0-6-8-3-1-6-8/128396-عساها-يحلها-جاء-م-2020-لسنة-المتوقعة-التعديلات-قانون-موقف-توحيد-مذكورة>)
- 10 The Women and Gender Equality Commission is one of the commissions listed in the 2019 Constitutional Declaration. Women groups such as No to Women's Oppression continued to press for the commission during their protests, while MANSAM drafted a vision for the commission and shared it with the government and the public.



الاعتماد على المركزية
المجتمع المدني حول
في المجتمع
شراكة المجتمع
نتائج عن المشاركة

UNAMID

A Darfur Women Forum meeting, supported by UNAMID, in North Darfur, September 2018.
© UNAMID

2

The history of coalitions and the Sudanese women's movement

Sudan is a multicultural country with various ethnic groups dispersed across its regions. These ethnic groups have diverse religions, systems of belief, traditions and practices, but a commonality is the patriarchal culture that shapes gender power relations in private and public spaces and which influences policies and laws at all levels and across all regions.

In some contexts, the dominance of men and subordination of women is related to religion or systems of belief. The lived reality of women shows that they also navigate this system; for example, in Eastern Sudan, women are able to join and be active in political parties in the presence of relatives who are men and who are also members of these parties, which gives them the space to be present in different settings – especially in the evenings.¹¹ Patriarchy in Sudan, similar to other countries, has different repercussions based on social class. In Sudan, social class and privilege are also tied to race and ethnicity, which means that women from less dominant ethnic groups are more likely to face discriminatory laws and violence in private and public spaces, and are less likely to access higher education, making them less visible in the social and political arena.¹² This has limited the activism of women's groups in relation to sociocultural and economic rights; the priority is on civil and political rights, as women find themselves facing patriarchal state institutions that want to regress women's civil rights.

Sudan: now and then

Since its independence in 1956, Sudan has been ruled by the military for 53 out of 67 years. The longest regime was that of Omar Al-Bashir, who came to power in a coup in 1986 and acceded to the secession of South Sudan in 2011. After 30 years of rule, a surge of popular protests and demonstrations sprang up across the country, toppling Al-Bashir from power in April 2019. The subsequent transition was initially encouraging, and the Transitional Military Council and the civilian opposition alliance – better known as the Forces of Freedom and Change – signed a constitutional declaration sealing a power-sharing agreement in Khartoum in August 2019.¹³ Abdalla Hamdok became prime minister, and a new cabinet took office on 8 September, with the aim of steering the country to free elections over the next three years.

In October 2020, the civilian government and the Sudan Revolutionary Front – a broad alliance of armed and other movements – signed the historic Juba Peace Agreement. Through a mixture of regional and national protocols, the agreement aims to address some of the fundamental issues of Sudan’s crises in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile and in other marginalised regions. It has been criticised for failing to address root causes of conflicts and for not being comprehensive enough.¹⁴ Nationally, military generals also continued to wield enormous influence, and in October 2021 they sought to depose the civilian-led cabinet in a coup. While considerable international pressure led to the reinstatement of Prime Minister Hamdok, he eventually resigned in January 2022.¹⁵

Although the women’s movement began before independence, changes in patriarchal gender power relations have been limited. The long periods of military rule – the most recent lasting three decades – have been guided by conservative Islamist ideology that consolidated patriarchy through restrictive laws and men-biased educational curriculums and media. However, women have continued their resistance, encouraged by international human rights and gender equality discourses. Women strategically resisted the patriarchal regime through participating in organisations and coalitions as much as the authoritarian context

allowed. In the current transition period, the women’s movement has grown to include more coalitions promoting gender equality.

The women’s movement in Sudan can be divided into three stages. The first includes groups affiliated with the independence movement, while the second can be defined as state feminism that emerged with the one-party military rule under the then-Presidents Jaafar Nemari (1969–1985) and Al-Bashir (1993–2019). The third includes women CSOs and associations that appeared during the second democratic period (1964–1969) and which increased in the 1990s with the international trend of ‘NGO-isation’ of the women’s movement.¹⁶

Al-Bashir’s rule had a crucial impact on the development of the women’s movement. Upon his arrival to power in 1989, he restricted civic space and cracked down on political parties, media houses and CSOs, including the Sudanese Women’s Union and other women groups.¹⁷ Organisations that were allowed to register and operate did so under strict supervision and security restrictions, and some organisations were able to form coalitions to influence government decision-making. As political parties were also restricted, women from political parties formed the Women’s Democratic Alliance in 1991, with representation from eight political parties in the diaspora. The Sudanese Women Empowerment for Peace (SuWEP) network was formed in 1997 and included CSOs, the Women National Democratic Alliance, and women’s groups from South Kordofan and South Sudan. As an initiative of the international community, the coalition was given government approval, and included representation of women in government.¹⁸ Coordination in SuWEP was challenging due to mistrust between the government and other members of the coalition.

In 2005, political parties and organisations were allowed to operate in public spaces after the government of Sudan signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement with the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). During the subsequent preparations for the elections, women formed the Quota Coalition in 2008, which included women-led political groups and women from political parties who coordinated to lobby for a minimum 30 per cent representation of women in legislative bodies at all levels (national, regional, state and local levels).¹⁹ Although the gender quota was approved as it aligned with the interests of the dictatorship and

its allies, only a 25 per cent quota was applied to the election.²⁰

In 2010, Article 149 Alliance was formed by women CSOs with a specific objective to reform Sudan's criminal law Article 149, which confuses rape with adultery.²¹ It was coordinated by the Salmah Women's Resource Centre. The Alliance was strongly supported by international and regional organisations active in Sudan.

The three coalitions – SuWEP, the Quota Coalition and Article 149 Alliance – had some achievements. For example, SuWEP, in collaboration with some voluntary associations and academic institutions, participated in the development of the poverty strategy in 2004 and was able to develop a common agenda in 2004–2005.²² The capacity and experience gained by women in SuWEP was also beneficial to the peace talks on Darfur. The other two coalitions were short-lived. The Quota Coalition was only ever meant to influence the 2010 national elections, in which it agreed on a minimum demand and revised its quota from 30 to 25 per cent as a compromise to its political parties.²³ Although Article 149 Alliance stopped operating before reaching its goal – due to the shutdown of the lead CSO, the Salmah Centre – its work over four years was the backbone of the law reform to Article 149 that occurred in 2015. The three coalitions are now defunct, but their legacy continues to influence women's activism as many of the members of the current coalitions were previously involved in them.

The polarisation and politicisation of women's spaces and presence in public spaces under Al-Bashir's regime prohibited the organic growth of the women's movement and pushed women's issues to the periphery of political party agendas. Within political parties, this led women to form women branches and coalitions, such as Sudanese Women's Solidarity, which was formed by women from political parties following the establishment of the Sudan Call Forces, an opposition political body formed in 2014.²⁴

During the military regime, momentum for the women's movement differed between regions. In Khartoum, women had slightly safer spaces in which to organise due to the presence of national and international organisations, which provided them with venues and resources; the police's control was also much tighter outside Khartoum.²⁵ The development of the women's movement was also largely focused on the central part of Sudan, in Omdurman and Wad Medani cities, and this meant that women from these regions had more accumulated experience that enabled them to work in women coalitions and organisations.²⁶ It is also important to note that gender norms and traditions in Eastern Sudan remain highly restrictive for women, and women lag behind in education and suffer from high rates of child marriage,²⁷ while women in Western Sudan were only able to collectively organise at the national or regional level after the outbreak of war in 2003.²⁸

In the Darfur states, the state of emergency – in which any gathering of more than five individuals was considered suspicious by the authorities – meant that women groups were unable to operate.²⁹ In Eastern Sudan, any workshop or gathering of women's groups required prior registration, which was often denied.³⁰ This is reflected by the fact that only two out of the seven coalitions selected for this study were formed before the fall of Al-Bashir's regime in 2019. Since the fall of the regime, dozens of new informal and formal women-led organisations, associations and networks have been established. Although different women and youth groups, as well as political parties, worked together before and during the revolution in a common objective to overthrow the government of Al-Bashir, interests and positions were altered during the transitional period³¹ and many coalitions broke down, while several new coalitions representing regional interests emerged. Some of the emerging coalitions were formed by women in different regions.

“The polarisation and politicisation of women's spaces and presence in public spaces under Al-Bashir's regime prohibited the organic growth of the women's movement and pushed women's issues to the periphery of political party agendas.”

”

2.1 Overview of coalitions

Khartoum State

Women of Sudanese Civic and Political Groups (MANSAM)

MANSAM was formed at the start of the revolution in December 2018. It is a coordination body of women activists from civil and political organisations and groups, with the aim to promote gender equality, justice, democracy and peace for Sudanese women. It consists of over 60 member organisations, groups, political parties, women groups and associations, as well as individuals, from different regions of Sudan. MANSAM has branches in South Darfur, South Kordofan, Al-Jazirah and Blue Nile. MANSAM also has branches in other countries, including MANSAM Canada and MANSAM USA. MANSAM is divided into thematic groups focusing on peace, socioeconomic issues, political participation and democratic transformation. There are also groups of women academics and gender experts and a coordination group made up of representatives of member organisations. MANSAM groups work mostly through WhatsApp. Its general assembly, which includes all MANSAM members, had its first meeting in September 2019, in which its members approved the coalition’s objectives and structure and voted for the coordination committee. The coordination committee oversees everyday activities and coordinates between the different members and groups in the body, and, when needed, provides support to MANSAM branches outside of Khartoum.

Forum of Women in Forces of Freedom and Change (NAHT)

From 2019 until December 2020, women in the FFC worked through their political parties and through coalitions such as MANSAM, where advancing women’s political participation is a priority. In December 2020, women from 13 political parties and armed groups decided to form NAHT, to address issues specific to women in political parties and specifically to enhance women’s political participation. NAHT’s intention is to ensure that women who

are excluded from the different leadership structures of the FFC can play a critical role in the transitional period. It focuses on implementation of the constitutional declaration, to ensure 40 per cent participation of women in the Transitional Legislative Council; implementation of UNSCR 1325; combatting violence against women and girls; and legal reform. NAHT also seeks to build members’ ‘power as politicians’ as ‘women from political parties are less trained and qualified than women from civil society groups, as parties do not invest in capacity building – unlike organisations’.

The Women’s Cooperative Union

This is an unregistered coalition made up of 15 cooperatives that split from the first General Women’s Multipurpose Cooperative Union in March 2013. It includes women involved in the selling of tea and food, domestic work and small trading, and was recently joined by mechanics and plumbers. Initially the Union provided services and advocacy to women in the informal sector on matters such as protection and legal aid, as they were targeted by the police and local officials during Al-Bashir’s rule. Members also organised around legal reform to ensure women’s protection from sweeps and raids by the police, and spoke on their behalf with government officials. The Union was actively present in the revolution and managed the kitchen at the 2019 sit-in in front of the military headquarters; its members were subjected to rape, violence and even killings when the sit-in was dismantled by soldiers. By 2019/2020, the Union had 20 associations with over 27,000 members. The original Union was dissolved by the transitional government’s Committee for Dismantling the Ousted Regime, but it was able to refute its association with the former regime and resume its activities. The overwhelming majority of members are from conflict areas, especially Darfur and Kordofan, and members range in age from 20 to 60 years.

Eastern region

Eastern Sudan Women's Coalition (ESWC)

The ESWC was formed in March 2020, reportedly during a workshop led by the Al Ayam Centre for Cultural Studies and Development, in order to bring together different groups working on women's rights in the east. The coalition began its activities in the same year. The aim of the coalition is to coordinate women's activism in the region. Based on its charter, the group focuses on four core areas:

- 1) supporting the peace process in Eastern Sudan
- 2) supporting and monitoring the democratic transition process
- 3) promoting women's political participation in Eastern Sudan and in public spheres
- 4) realising gender justice

Coordination is undertaken by appointed focal points in each state. Due to the economic situation and COVID-19 restrictions, the ESWC relies on a WhatsApp group that brings together representatives from each group. The coalition is diverse and includes members from Northern tribes that are settled in the east and members from the larger Beja tribal group.

The Women's Platform

The Women's Platform is a women's coalition based mostly out of Red Sea State, with some member groups in other parts of Eastern Sudan. It is made up of organisations, groups and activists and was formed in 2020 during

the violent tribal clashes that shook Eastern Sudan. The platform began as an initiative to advance women's issues and empower activists and groups to take part in the East Sudan track of the peace negotiations in Juba in late 2019. It has 39 women's organisation members and associations, such as the Om Al-Gora Association and the Al-Shuhada Association, which work on different thematic areas.

Most of the organisations that make up the Platform were established in the 1990s and early 2000s to support microfinancing activities, and developed premises in urban neighbourhoods. The work of the Women's Platform has progressed slowly, due to the violence that rocked the three states of Eastern Sudan several times in 2021. Outbreaks of conflict impact the associations' ability to function as they cannot move between neighbourhoods, and the building of one association was burned down during one outbreak of violence. However, women have come together to stand up to tribalism and fight against the instability that is threatening the east. The Platform advocates for gender equality and promotes women's social and political participation as part of the agenda of the transitional period in Sudan. It focuses on thematic issues including political participation (the main focus for political parties), social issues (the main concern of civil society groups that work on education and healthcare), and peace (as Eastern Sudan struggles to overcome recurring conflicts).

Darfur region

The Consultative Platform for Darfur Women (known as the Darfur Women’s Platform)

The Platform was officially launched in November 2019 after women activists and groups organised gatherings in their respective states in Darfur. These groups then sent delegates to attend the Platform’s conference, which was held from 25–27 November 2019 in Nyala and which was supported by the African Union and the United Nations-African Union Hybrid Mission in Darfur (UNAMID). The coalition is ‘an umbrella organisation of women’s protection and mediation networks, professional women’s associations, the women’s wing of the Forces for Freedom and Change, women-led civil society organisations and representatives of displaced women’. Its members describe it as an attempt to unite women from civil society as well as political parties and armed groups in Darfur, and it aims to include women from camps for internally displaced people (IDPs), as well as women from rural areas, from voluntary return villages and nomads. The Platform was initiated by CSOs and networks in Darfur, such as the Women’s Network for Change, Bana Organisation for Peace and Development, Generations of Peace, the Protection Network in IDP camps and the Community Development Association, which are all considered to be well-established in Darfur. Its main aims, as stated in its position paper, are to ‘unite our position to advance the issues and agenda of

the Darfur women in the peace process; to work with others to dismantle the *Ingaz* regime and establish a democratic system in which all are equal on the basis of citizenship’. The Platform works on all issues related to women in Darfur, from violence to peace and political participation.

Darfur Women Forum

The North Darfur Women Forum was established in March 2020 by members who were initially part of the Darfur Women’s Platform, but who felt excluded by the Platform or who had some reservations about some members of the Platform. While the Forum includes women from different age groups, the majority of its members are aged 30–50. The Forum works to build the capacity of its members, organisations and individuals, to instil peace in their communities and to advance the social, cultural and political empowerment of women – in order to ensure that Darfuri women take part in the transitional period regardless of their ethnicity. It has focal points or coordinators in the five states. This internal set-up based on focal points is seen as temporary because the chapters in the five states have yet to come together in a united meeting, due to lack of funding. This temporary leadership was not elected but was appointed to facilitate the work. At the time of the interviews, the Forum had both individual members and organisations.

Notes

- 11 Interview with a member of the Eastern Sudan Women's Coalition, Port Sudan, 22 May 2021.
- 12 Between June and September 2019, a committee made up of women groups (including the author as well as two of the participants in this study) struggled to find a woman from Blue Nile and Eastern Sudan to nominate as a Minister on Animal Resources, which highlights the level of marginalisation women face there.
- 13 International Crisis Group (2019), 'Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution', Report 281, 21 October.
- 14 Marsden R (2020), 'Is the Juba Peace Agreement a Turning Point for Sudan?', Chatham House, 14 September (www.chathamhouse.org/2020/09/juba-peace-agreement-turning-point-sudan)
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 The term was used by Sonia Alvarez in the 1990s to describe (in Latin America) the increase in more formally structured feminist organisations with paid, professional staff and funding from government, multilateral and bilateral agencies and foreign donors, as well as the active neo-liberal promotion and official sanctioning of particular organisational forms and practices among feminist organisations and other sectors of civil society. The term has been adapted and applied across contexts where international development aid has flourished. Alvarez S (2009), 'Beyond NGO-ization?: Reflections from Latin America', *Development* 52, pp 175–184.
- 17 Human Rights Watch (1996), 'Behind the Red Line: Political Repression in Sudan', May (<https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1996/Sudan.htm>)
- 18 Badri B (2014), 'Sudanese women network for supporting peace and development: Formation, Achievement, and Challenges'. The paper was produced as part of the 'Women Leadership: Samples of Coalitions for Peace and Political Participation' project at the Development and Research Institute (DSRI), University of Khartoum.
- 19 Tønnessen L, Kjøstvedt H (2010), 'The Politics of Women's Representation in Sudan: Debating Women's Rights in Islam from the Elites to the Grassroots', Chr. Michelsen Institute.
- 20 Most political parties boycotted the election as the government restricted the parties' freedoms and access to resources and media.
- 21 Tønnessen L, Kjøstvedt H, op. cit; Hashim F (2018), 'Political Economy of Violence Against Women in Sudan. DAWN Discussion Paper #12' (https://dawnnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Political-Economy-of-Violence-Against-Women-in-Sudan_DAWN-discussion-paper12.pdf)
- 22 Badri B, op. cit.
- 23 Abbas S (2010), 'The Sudanese Women's Movements and the Mobilisation for the 2008 Legislative Quota and its Aftermath', *IDS Bulletin* 4 (5), pp 100–108.
- 24 Interview with FFC leader, online, 25 May 2021.
- 25 Interview with member of the Darfur Women Forum, North Darfur, 27 May 2021.
- 26 Hashim F, op. cit.
- 27 El Nagar S, Tønnessen L (2017), 'Girls, Child Marriage, and Education in Red Sea State, Sudan: Perspectives on Girls' Freedom to Choose', Chr. Michelsen Institute, September.
- 28 Interview with member of the Darfur Women Forum, 29 May 2021.
- 29 FGD with the Darfur Women's Platform, 28 May 2021.
- 30 Interview with Hanan Hamid, Darfur Women's Platform, Port Sudan, 23 May 2021.
- 31 Interview with member of MANSAM, Khartoum, 26 May 2021.



Members of a community committee
in Mukram, Kassala, East Sudan.
© Ala Kheit / Saferworld

3

Representation within coalitions: diversity and challenges

This report considers representation as not only the presence of women or their organisations in coalitions but also the extent to which their diverse interests and concerns are visible in coalition agendas and in discussions to promote gender equality. This includes interests that intersect ethnicity, class, age and regional differences, as well as whether women come from or live in rural or urban areas. Inclusive representation therefore raises questions about the engagement of women with disabilities, housewives, women earning low incomes, students, farmers, professionals and academics – women who are not generally engaged in organisations. Considering the democratic transition processes, the representation of political activists in all coalitions is essential and mandatory. Members should also share a commitment to coalitions' decisions and feed back to their organisations, to ensure that member organisations are informed and engaged in coalitions' activities.

3.1 Diversity and intersectional representation within coalitions

Each of the seven coalitions is made up of a variety of women activist organisations that are registered as unions, associations, organisations and groups, in addition to women sectors in political parties and individual independent activists. The types of representation in the coalitions reflect their historical development, such as the reasons they were created or the areas of work focused on. For example, NAHT was created as a result of pressure by coalitions – such as the Women Politicians' Coalition – to enhance the role of women in political life in Sudan.³² It was also an opportunity to include women politicians who are not part of a coalition but who belong to women secretariats and women groups within their political parties. The coalition is composed of 18 political and armed women's groups – predominantly left and centre-left parties that are mostly members of the National Consensus Forces.

Similarly, the Port Sudan Platform in the ESWC focuses on microfinance and consists of women activists’ organisations in urban neighbourhoods. The ESWC focuses on legal reform and sexual and gender-based violence issues and is spearheaded by initiatives led by young women. The Khartoum-based Women’s Cooperative Union focuses on supporting women from similar socioeconomic backgrounds who are doing similar work in the informal sector; bringing together older or established women; and supporting younger women to start cooperatives in their neighbourhoods.³³

Geographically, the coalitions draw widely from members based across relevant regions and states. MANSAM brings together organisations from eastern, western and central regions, including some organisations or individuals who are members of other coalitions. MANSAM’s representation is therefore relatively wide – including urban women, women with disabilities, IDPs, and rural women living in Khartoum. The Women’s Platform and the ESWC have representation from the three eastern states – Kassala, Gedarif and Port Sudan. This is significant: societies are generally more conservative in the east and very few women are normally active in political and public life for fear of backlash and social commentary on their ‘morals’.³⁴ There are also high levels of illiteracy among women in the east, which creates a large gap between women in urban centres and in rural areas. The ESWC has not been able to broaden its representation from urban centres, let alone rural areas. A member of the coalition noted that “I can’t say that the coalition represents all women in the east right now, but if we are able to attract more women’s bodies to the coalition and we develop our charter to include their perspectives, then it could represent larger sectors of women”.³⁵ However, the ESWC lacks the resources to reach other women groups in the same states and in other eastern states, as most of the members are students or young women. Due to the rapid changes that took place in the transition, including recurring outbreaks of tribal conflicts and political disagreements in the east, many groups in the coalition have dedicated the little time they have to activities in their own entities as opposed to the coalition.³⁶

“The Eastern Sudan Women’s Coalition is not able to represent women completely, frankly, because we ourselves are representing a certain group, I mean, we are considered ‘girls of the city’, we can’t represent others, and frankly, we

have not done anything about it... if we served the main objectives, we would have served women and girls from the outskirts of Gedaref and Kassala. In particular, here in Gedaref, the girls are very oppressed – ‘the rural girls’. This means that the groups at the level of the alliance and the assembly serve only the girls of the university and the girls of the city of Gedaref, I do not think that we are able to represent them”.

Maisoon Salah, Gedaref Students and Women Association

In contrast, coalitions from Darfur have broad representation of women from intersecting marginalised identities, reflecting the population in that part of Sudan. This includes women who are displaced, from rural areas, nomads, and women from voluntary return villages. The inclusion of women nomads is important as many people do not understand the complex issues their tribal groups face with their distinct lifestyle as nomadic women.³⁷

3.2 Challenges to representation

There are a number of challenges to representation – in particular relating to political dynamics within the country as well as intergenerational differences, and the role of political parties’ representation within the coalitions.

Power, politics and geography

Khartoum coalitions may have broader geographic representation than regional ones; for example, members of the Darfur and Eastern coalitions come only from states in those regions, while Khartoum coalitions – specifically MANSAM – include member organisations and individuals from different regions. However, this has created tensions where state-level and regional activism is viewed as representing branches of Khartoum-based organisations, reinforcing the history of Khartoum being the centre of women’s activism. This has impacted coordination efforts – the Darfur Platform coalition has at times rejected partnership or engagement with Khartoum groups, claiming that Khartoum activists dominate opportunities and neglect issues and concerns of women in

the regions. This was evident in the 2006–2008 Juba peace talks where the Platform’s delegation fell into disagreement and refused to engage with the delegation led by Khartoum-based women groups (MANSAM, the Sudanese Women’s Union and the No to Women’s Oppression initiative). This position, based on narratives of historical power dynamics between the centre and the margin, has widened rifts and constrained collective mobilisation, especially in peace talks.

Similarly, the Darfur Women’s Platform and the Darfur Women Forum have representatives from the five states of Darfur. The two differ however in the importance they place on engaging with women from Khartoum. The Darfur Women’s Platform members consider themselves subject to ‘double marginalisation’: from men at the regional level as well as men and women at the centre. This leads to a perceived lack of representation of women from Darfur coalitions at the Khartoum level and has made the former feel that their issues are not represented. It should be noted that this representation challenge is not overcome by the active presence of women who are from Darfur but who live in Khartoum, as they are seen as being detached from the realities of women’s life in Darfur and do not represent their interests. Establishing their own platforms has allowed these women to break the cycle of “other people speaking on their behalf”.³⁸ On the other hand, while highlighting the marginalisation of Darfuri women, another Darfur Women Forum activist reflected on the importance of flexibility and collaboration with other groups, to allow for knowledge exchange and sharing of experiences, especially as Khartoum-based activists have more access to capacity building.

Political parties

The representation of women from political parties is interesting to note, and highlights some of the challenges for women’s political participation. For example, NAHT’s membership is exclusively made up of women from political parties, and MANSAM includes representation of 14 women’s political movements or parties’ sectors as well as activists from individual political parties; but there are few women from political parties represented in the Darfur and Eastern Sudan coalitions because the dynamics are different. The influence of political parties has weakened over the years due to conflict and power struggles and the two regions have seen a

rise in tribal bodies entering the political scene with force, such as the Beja Coordination Body in Eastern Sudan. Political parties in these states are marginalised by the centre, and in order to gain any leverage in the (patriarchal) national political processes they have brought men to the forefront, to the exclusion of the women of the state. A member of the FFC in Red Sea State suggested that women’s representation in decision-making at the national level should be taken up with the FFC in Khartoum, as regional politicians are given few opportunities by the national FFC and they do not want to give these opportunities up for women.³⁹

On the other hand, where political parties and civil society activists are both present there can be tensions and conflicts of interest. In MANSAM, there is concern among political activists that their interests and needs are neglected in MANSAM’s work, and that decisions and activities are controlled by the civil society activists. This raises questions about how the coordinating committees manage the diversity of the concerns and needs of its members. It also speaks volumes about the power dynamics within MANSAM – the coalition faces threats of departure on a weekly basis by groups and entities that see themselves as powerful on their own, as opposed to the smaller groups that benefit from opportunities in MANSAM.⁴⁰ A public statement on the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement was dropped by the group following disagreements between member groups and armed groups that are part of the agreement.

At times, limited representation is perceived to be necessary for the coalitions’ mandates. NAHT has received criticism for only including women from political and armed groups, but its members insist on the importance of this – “there are many bodies that include women from political parties and civil society, we want to focus on building our power as politicians”.⁴¹ MANSAM however feels that NAHT is a duplication of its efforts, because most women’s political groups are already part of its coalition. The FFC argues that women are already represented in its leadership structures. However, NAHT members suggested that the FFC welcomed their coalition and promised them representation in the FFC’s central committee – its executive body.⁴² The executive body of the FFC has received criticism for being exclusive to men from political parties while ignoring women, young people and civil groups.⁴³ There were disagreements between women’s groups

and women politicians on how to better include women: one viewpoint, championed by No to Women’s Oppression, was that women should be represented in a component, adding a sixth component to the FFC’s five existing components (the five main coalitions represented in the FFC executive committee), while another view was that women should be represented in all five components of the FFC. NAHT⁴⁴ saw its addition to the central committee as a way to guarantee the participation of women in the transitional period.

Historically, political affiliations within women’s coalitions created divisions with women civil society groups – this rift was apparent when civil

“
overall the lack of gender sensitivity within political parties is a challenge, as democratic transition needs engagement of both political and civil society activists.

society activists started to advocate for gender equality while gender sensitivity within political parties remained limited. For example, NAHT focuses on political participation at the level of the FFC and at the national level, but does not work on gender strategies within its members’ parties.⁴⁵ One party, the Sudanese Congress Party, has recently established a gender secretary and is working on a gender strategy⁴⁶ – but overall the lack of gender sensitivity within political parties is a challenge, as democratic transition needs engagement of both political and civil society activists.

Age matters

All coalitions confirmed the presence of young women, including students and professionals. In Eastern Sudan, younger women are more active and visible, while older women struggle to overcome the social, cultural and patriarchal norms that exclude them from political life, and to actively travel to attend workshops and take part in political seminars.⁴⁷

Some interviewees thought that tensions around this diversity were not necessarily well-managed. A young member of MANSAM claimed “there is diversity, but it is about who really makes the decisions and if they represent different interests”.⁴⁸ She added that MANSAM has organised a series of intergenerational

discussions to address conflicts, but younger women are still normally marginalised from processes or are given marginal roles, and are not mentored, while older women make the decisions.

There is also a debate, largely spearheaded by younger women, over the need to build feminist movements that tackle power dynamics, as opposed to simply building women coalitions.⁴⁹ In Eastern Sudan for example, younger women feel that older generations of women activists have broken down barriers, but also embody the patriarchy and its interests. This has led to disagreements within coalitions as older generations view feminism not as an identity, but as an analytical framework. This however can limit their ability to adopt a transformative agenda that challenges gender inequality and women’s oppression.

Failure to represent housewives

Although the coalitions have diverse member organisations, they lack representation from important groups such as housewives, the civil service (such as cleaners and administrators), and the private sector, specifically women working in factories. These groups are neglected for three reasons: firstly, most are not organised or are not activists, and secondly the coalitions have not recognised the need for broader representation as part of a transformative equality agenda. Finally, because the coalitions – excluding the Cooperative Union – largely focus on civil and political rights as opposed to economic rights, they do not have much to offer to economically and socially marginalised women.

It is evident that coalitions’ understanding of representation is rather limited, and specifically its link to coalitions’ accountability for promoting gender equality and integrating gender into democratic transition processes. The political transition process was dominated by men, and women coalitions focused on resisting men’s dominance and exclusion – rather than on gender equality.

Notes

- 32 Interview with NAHT members, Khartoum, 25 May 2021.
- 33 FGD with the Cooperative Union, Khartoum, 26 May 2021.
- 34 Interview with member of the Eastern Sudan Women's Coalition, Port Sudan, 22 May 2021.
- 35 Interview with member of the Eastern Sudan Women's Coalition, Khartoum, 26 May 2021.
- 36 Follow-up interview with member of the Eastern Sudan Women's Coalition, 27 January 2022.
- 37 FGD with the Darfur Women's Platform, North Darfur State, 29 May 2021.
- 38 FGD with the Darfur Women's Platform, North Darfur State, 29 May 2021.
- 39 Interview with FFC member, Port Sudan, 21 May 2021.
- 40 The coordination committee has organised at least five committees with members from the general assembly to resolve problems with individual members and groups.
- 41 FGD with NAHT members, Khartoum, 25 May 2021.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Interview with FFC member, Khartoum, 26 May 2021.
- 44 Another issue with NAHT is the matter of armed groups. The largest coalition of armed groups, the Sudan Revolutionary Front, left the FFC to negotiate peace with the government. When NAHT began, it included a member from Minni Minnawi's armed faction, which was part of the Sudan Revolutionary Front from 2011 to 2020, but she left due to issues her faction had with the FFC. A member of NAHT said that this member was willing to continue working, but that she had asked NAHT to change its name to a name not affiliated with the FFC, which NAHT refused to do.
- 45 FGD with NAHT members, Khartoum, 25 May 2021.
- 46 Interview with Sudanese Congress Party member, online, 6 June 2021.
- 47 Interview with activist, Port Sudan, 23 May 2021.
- 48 Interview with MANSAM member, online, 5 June 2021.
- 49 Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA) defines feminist movement building as 'a deeper understanding of how power structures operate, especially patriarchal power': Batliwala S (2019), 'All About Power: Understanding Social Power and Power Structures', CREA. Meanwhile JASS presents a broader definition, which looks at feminist movement building as 'bringing gender equality goals and feminist perspectives into work with all kinds of movement partners and organizing women in many different spaces'. JASS, 'Feminist Movement Building' (<https://justassociates.org/what-we-do/feminist-movement-building/>)



Participants of a community action group meet in Umsinaibra village, Gadarif.

© Ala Kheir/Saferworld

4

A common strategic agenda

The coalitions' member organisations represent a range of issues. Some groups are issue-based, tackling specific gender concerns such as violence against women, economic empowerment and legal rights, while others broadly focus on women's rights, political participation and peacebuilding.

As noted, few have been able to incorporate a gender-transformative lens that directly challenges the patriarchal system and hegemonic masculinities. While coalitions do not have an explicit common strategic agenda, each coalition has common objectives that broadly fall under four areas: women's political participation, women's economic empowerment, peacebuilding, and violence against women. The priorities and concerns articulated under these areas are specific to the membership composition of the coalitions, and shape their strategies. This allows for diversity and a multi-pronged approach to change. As yet, while coordination on some specific issues at particular moments has occurred (as detailed earlier), more strategic alignments have yet to be explored. By understanding the different priorities and approaches the coalitions are taking, it may be possible to identify such opportunities.

“The common agenda for all of us, that’s all we want – a better position for women, and to fulfil the rights of women in various feminist, ethnic and class intersections. That is why we want to achieve social justice or equality and attain women’s rights; in general, we all agree on this need. Maybe as there is no common agenda at present, it would be possible for people to agree on the minimum number of needs. For example, we are in the ‘She Initiative’ – in which we want to achieve complete equality, with men, meaning complete justice. We want to see women everywhere in public work, and for women to be considered in public policies and law, while other groups, for example, are working on education or awareness raising on the economic status of women’s economic disparities. That’s why in the end, there are different schools and approaches to work on women’s issues, and that’s why the agenda will be somewhat different”.

Khaldha Sabir, Eastern Sudan’s Women’s Coalition

4.1 Political participation

With the exception of the Cooperative Union, all of the coalitions discussed in this research prioritised women’s political participation and decision-making roles in their agenda. MANSAM, the Women’s Platform (East Sudan) and the two groups in Darfur have working groups or committees that are in charge of pushing for women’s share in decision-making positions, in light of the 40 per cent quota listed in the constitutional declaration for the legislative council.⁵⁰ NAHT cites political participation as one of the main reasons for its formation – to address the gap within political parties and advance women’s political participation.⁵¹ To achieve this, NAHT is not only looking at the legislative council and the ministries, but also representation within the central committee of the FFC, and – through meetings with the FFC – is trying to ensure that three women from NAHT enter this committee. NAHT argues that if women are not represented in the central committee, they will not be represented at any of the working committees of the FFC. Some members recognise that a common agenda between women’s groups would strengthen these efforts. The exclusion of women in decision-making roles in armed

groups and political parties has also made it hard for women groups to hold them accountable.⁵²

Political participation is highlighted by coalitions for a number of reasons. Firstly, the structure of the Sudanese post-colonial state has been largely undemocratic – particularly for women. Secondly, women activists feel that their large-scale participation during the revolution should translate into equal representation. Thirdly, women activists fear the return of a dictatorship or a religious-based rule (led by the sectarian parties which are the largest parties in Sudan), and want to make and secure advances during the transitional period. Political participation is critical to advancing legislative reforms in support of gender equality. Women’s participation will continue to depend on political goodwill and the quota system, as long as the major pillars of Sudan’s political landscape are dominated by men with common military and monetary interests, and the patriarchal, hegemonic masculinity culture continues.⁵³ FFC members interviewed in North Darfur, Khartoum and Red Sea State noted the lack of policy on women’s participation within the ‘patriarchal’ political parties, as well as in the FFC committees. A politician from the FFC in Red Sea State claimed that because political parties in the FFC are competing for very few seats in the legislative council, they ‘will not fight for women’s participation, and women will have to fight their own battles’. It is important to note as well that having women in leadership positions does not translate into empowerment for all women. For example, NAHT, MANSAM and the Darfur Women’s Platform organised meetings with women ministers, but no serious output was produced. In the 2021 reshuffle, two women ministers were members of NAHT and MANSAM, but they did not provide any benefit to their women constituents. Aisha Musa of the Sovereign Council and Asma Abdullah, the former Foreign Minister, were advocated for by MANSAM and other women groups, but their experience in power and its impact on women’s empowerment, socially and politically, has yet to be evaluated.

Despite having two key leaders with political backgrounds, the Cooperative Union members have not linked political participation to the achievement of other rights. A researcher on women’s rights argued that when coalitions look at political participation as an end in itself, this weakens the body.⁵⁴ Firstly, political participation is commonly narrowly viewed as increasing women’s participation in government

and legislative structures, neglecting local levels of governance. Secondly, this stance fails to understand political participation as a fundamental prerequisite for gender equality, women's human rights and genuine democracy. For example, economic empowerment cannot be achieved without women's influence on political decisions at all levels, nor will the Union be able to protect its members from police harassment if Union leaders are not represented at local decision-making levels, and specifically at the local level.

4.2 Economic empowerment

With regards to economic empowerment, the coalitions have different perspectives depending on the region, how they have been affected by conflict, and the specific livelihood concerns of women members. In Eastern Sudan, coalitions have been delegitimised at the community level for neglecting the economic struggles of women. Some organisations in the Women's Platform in Red Sea State are therefore working on microfinance and revolving fund programmes. For coalitions in Western Sudan, economic empowerment is a basic strategy to address the drastic impacts of conflict and ensure human security for sustainable peace. MANSAM has a socioeconomic thematic group focusing on women's economic empowerment, which is a priority for one of MANSAM's members, the Cooperative Union. Economic issues and empowerment for women do not appear on the agenda of some coalitions however – NAHT does not work on economic empowerment, though it does have a committee working on social services such as education and healthcare.

Economic empowerment is the core agenda for the Women's Cooperative Union, as its members work in the informal sector and 70 per cent are sole earners in their household.⁵⁵ They also come from conflict areas and so do not have a support network in Khartoum. To achieve economic empowerment and advance the rights of women at the periphery of the political transition, the coalition works on different levels. This includes livelihood skills training, such as training to become car mechanics and

electricians,⁵⁶ in order to challenge gender stereotypes of what women can do; helping women access small grants to expand their work and grow their business; supporting women who have been displaced to access the market; and the reform of discriminatory public order criminal law that targets women sellers on the streets.

A researcher on women's rights suggested that the Cooperative Union was successful in developing a common agenda because it was able to analyse its members' problems using an intersectional lens of ethnicity, class and gender.⁵⁷ However, as with political participation, work on women's empowerment fails to incorporate actions to address the patriarchal systems that underpin economic exclusion and discriminatory legislation. Economic empowerment cannot be achieved if gender inequality is embedded in institutions and laws, but it often remains a standalone priority detached from women's rights, peacebuilding, and enhancement of women leadership and political participation. For example, women who work in areas traditionally dominated by men, such as carpentry and mechanical repairs, are likely to experience backlashes in their work.

4.3 Women, peace and security, and violence against women and girls

In the context of the transition and ongoing conflict in the country, all of the coalitions work on WPS. Coalitions from Darfur and Eastern Sudan represent women still living with conflict, as well as these regions' concerns regarding the Juba peace process. MANSAM has peace as a core objective and has coordinated a Juba Track II advocacy group – monitoring talks and advocating for inclusive peace – while NAHT works on peace as its members include political parties in the FFC and armed groups. In Khartoum, the Cooperative Union has not identified peace as an objective, but it does work on protection of members from displaced communities.⁵⁸

The coalitions agree on the need for women’s participation in peace processes and protection from insecurity, but not on specifics related to WPS issues and the peace agreement. For example, some are concerned about not being included in the development of the national action plan for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 or in peace talks. MANSAM developed its own national action plan on UNSCR 1325, but the process was not inclusive of all women groups.

Violence against women and girls is seen as a pressing issue by all groups, but is conceptualised in different ways. In Khartoum, women’s groups focus on legislative reform, while at the societal level it is mostly dealt with in an individual capacity. The Women’s Cooperative Union in Khartoum prioritises protection of market women from violent raids by police and government officials. In Eastern Sudan, women are shut out of public spaces and are unable to access resources, so there is a focus on legal reform and sexual and gender-based violence issues. For example, the Eastern Sudan Women’s Coalition in Kassala works in universities and with young people on issues of violence against women and girls and political participation, and the Gedarif Students Association works on issues of violence and participation with students in the state. For groups in Darfur, violence against women and girls is also linked to WPS, as security arrangements are at the core of transition discussions there.

It is evident that coalitions are missing the wider perspective of WPS and violence against women and girls, and the links between them. WPS concerns focus on participation in peace talks

and local peacebuilding, while work on violence against women and girls focuses on legal reform or the immediate security concerns of women and responses to them, such as service provision and support. While undoubtedly important, these approaches fail to address the underlying gender and social norms that perpetuate exclusion and violence against women. A more holistic human security lens, which focuses on individual and

community security and which considers physical, economic, environmental and political security, is required. Barriers to women’s participation and to security and economic empowerment occur in the private and public sphere, including the informal livelihoods

sector. A human security lens helps focus on the diversity of women’s conflict experience – experience that contributes to these barriers, such as exclusion from formal and informal decision-making, including in their homes; different forms of violence against women and girls; the impact of poor-quality resources (water, food and housing); and insecure and limited livelihood options.

4.4 Towards a common agenda

It is apparent that the coalitions have not considered a process for developing a common agenda. The coalitions and the groups within them have different visions of and approaches to the common priorities identified, and there are some contentious issues that will require discussion in order to come to a common understanding. For example, some members of the ESWC believe that the personal status law – which governs familial relations, including marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance – clearly needs to be addressed, but that it is dismissed when raised in coalition discussions. It is argued that working on the law will make it difficult for coalitions to gain support from communities. Younger women in MANSAM and the east are also frustrated that agendas are not more radical and do not touch on issues that are important to them. A woman student in MANSAM explained: “When we talk about women’s issues, we need to talk about intersectionality and this brings us to disabled women and LGBTQI women, and those issues are neglected, and we can’t even talk about them.” Discussing LGBTQI+ issues is taboo among the older generation.⁵⁹

As already noted, feminism is also a contentious issue within coalitions, creating tensions between younger and older women. Within MANSAM, younger women who identify as feminists believe that the model of the minimum agenda does not challenge the patriarchal status quo. They are critical of how women in decision-making positions are the “wings of the patriarch”,⁶⁰ and believe that women in power do not challenge unequal power dynamics within the system. In Eastern Sudan, young feminists have spearheaded discussions on

“**A more holistic human security lens, which focuses on individual and community security and which considers physical, economic, environmental and political security, is required.**”

implementing a feminist framework in the coalitions, but as one member stated, “the conversation grew stale”. She added that “We just clashed because we couldn’t see eye to eye and they believe feminism is incompatible with social norms and is against religion; especially in relation to several laws that they view as inspired by Sharia law and we view as subjugating women. We want to disrupt the status quo that expects us to take a philanthropic approach to women’s issues instead of challenging the traditional structures such as the native or tribal administrations that invest political capital to isolate women from political processes.” MANSAM’s recently revised charter does however symbolise a shift, stating that the coalition represents women working on women’s rights as well as feminists, and upholds intersectionality in its work.

Notes

- 50 Since the revolution, MANSAM has been calling for 50 per cent political participation and has organised several campaigns and dialogue with the FFC and the government on the issue.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Interview with NAHT member, online, 8 June 2021.
- 53 De Waal A (2019), ‘Sudan: A Political Marketplace Framework Analysis’, World Peace Foundation, August.
- 54 Interview with researcher, phone, 31 January 2022.
- 55 According to the women interviewed in the FGD, the women are either divorced, their husbands have left and don’t contribute, or their husbands are unemployed and depend on them to make ends meet.
- 56 The Union leader was behind the idea of partnering with the SIHA Network to diversify the skillset of women.
- 57 Interview with researcher, phone, 31 January 2022.
- 58 FGD with the Cooperative Union, Khartoum, 26 May 2021.
- 59 Interview with MANSAM member, Khartoum, 26 May 2021.
- 60 Ibid.



Members of the Mukram and Tarawa
community action group in Kassala.
© Ala Kheir/Saferworld

5

Coordination among and between coalitions

Coordination can be understood as the unification, integration and synchronisation of the efforts of coalition members to provide unity of action in the pursuit of common goals. Effective coordination mechanisms include a common strategic agenda, a detailed work plan, the availability of unified tools and methods for implementation, and a plan for monitoring the effectiveness of coordination and progress towards change. There are two layers of coordination: internal coordination between member organisations in a coalition, and external coordination with other national organisations and the international community. This section examines how coalitions coordinate internally among their members, groups and individuals and across regions, and the factors that influence or constrain coordination.

Common coordination mechanisms used by the coalitions include executive committees, coordinating committees and focal points. Coalitions rely on occasional meetings and WhatsApp groups (more so since COVID-19) to coordinate activities. For example, the Women's Cooperative Union uses weekly meetings between heads of cooperatives to discuss and respond to the urgent needs of members and to share information on challenges members face.

NAHT's executive body is accountable to a general council, but it is unclear if it is also accountable to the political groups that make up the coalition. Most of its members are part of several women's groups and coalitions and this makes coordination between them more feasible. For example, a member in the executive office is also a member of MANSAM, although NAHT is not officially part of MANSAM.⁶¹ Coordination between NAHT (as a solely political body) and civil society groups is not always favourable, because women in political parties are critiqued for not advancing the interests and agendas of other women once they take up office, even though women civil society groups are a supportive constituency for them.⁶² This has led to coordination efforts being focused on a small number of issues, such as a campaign to support the former (and first) woman governor of River Nile State who was targeted in a sexist campaign in January 2021 by tribal leaders in the state. NAHT wrote a memorandum to former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and organised a solidarity visit with other groups to River Nile State. MANSAM said that they were unable to participate in the visit, but they raised funds in support.⁶³

“

Members participating in more than one forum creates opportunities for coordination as well as financial, logistical and capacity support.

”

MANSAM has a coordinating committee that includes representatives of political parties and different member organisations. It works mainly through several WhatsApp groups, due to COVID-19 and high transport prices. The

WhatsApp groups allow for coordination and participation in decision-making and information sharing. Through the WhatsApp groups women can also discuss the current political and economic situation, which is an important empowerment process considering the diverse background of

participants. MANSAM successfully coordinated among its members to develop and conduct advocacy on political participation and to produce a list of qualified women candidates for the first transition government – some ministers were selected from this list. MANSAM supported several candidates, and campaigned at the FFC level to have one of its members, Aisha Musa, join the Sovereign Council⁶⁴ – she was part of the Council for over a year before she resigned. MANSAM also encouraged the candidacy of former Foreign Minister Asma Abdullah.⁶⁵ As with NAHT, having members with multiple hats has allowed for greater coordination and impact in influencing political change. MANSAM’s success in advocating for women candidates to take up posts can be attributed to the presence of one of its members, Amina Shein, in the central committee of the FFC. The presence of political parties in MANSAM also allows its civil activist members to campaign and influence politicians to support women candidates. Although the percentage of women ministers and officials is far below expectations, it is considered an achievement as the FFC is guided by gender-insensitive leaders who do not hesitate to exclude women.⁶⁶

Importantly, MANSAM – in collaboration with partners – coordinated the selection and capacity building of women involved in Track II diplomacy, in advance of the Juba peace talks. They sought meetings with negotiating groups to advocate for the integration of gender in the peace talks and the peace agreement. Unlike previous agreements, the 2020 agreement took UNSCR 1325 into consideration. MANSAM’s achievements were influenced by two factors – UN Women’s support and the insistence of MANSAM members to promote women’s political participation and peace processes. The exercise was an opportunity for training, even for women in armed movements who have no

access to training within their movements. In total, 19 women took part in Track II diplomacy through MANSAM and partners while more women participated in Track II diplomacy in Juba through other groups.⁶⁷ However, lack of funds meant that the women were only present for a limited amount of time in Juba – they missed the negotiation process, which meant that only ten per cent of negotiators in Juba were women.⁶⁸

Members participating in more than one forum creates opportunities for coordination as well as financial, logistical and capacity support. The Women’s Cooperative Union, which is also a member of MANSAM, received support from MANSAM during the first COVID-19 wave.⁶⁹ A member of MANSAM’s coordination committee said that MANSAM supported the Union during humanitarian crises – for example by helping tea makers replace their stolen tools after a massacre of activists and civilians in Khartoum on 3 June 2019 – as well as supporting them to stay at home and stay safe during the first COVID-19 wave.⁷⁰ The Cooperative Union is also invited to capacity-building and dialogue workshops held by MANSAM. The two bodies coordinate and share access to aid opportunities; for example, they shared support packages for Ramadan and COVID-19 masks that were provided by a donor.⁷¹ Such coordination is important to bring the two coalitions closer together to work on a shared agenda.

External coordination by coalitions is largely focused on accessing funding. The Women’s Cooperative Union and the Darfur coalitions mainly coordinate on funding opportunities so that they have sufficient funds to respond to their basic needs. The Eastern coalitions reported no external coordination – and this area requires further examination. MANSAM has coordinated with international organisations such as UN Women and the UN Development Programme to fund meetings, campaigns, capacity-building activities and dialogues in Sudan and abroad. Coordination with the international community includes identifying capacity-building and other needs. International support was critical for the development of women candidate lists for elections to the transitional legislative assembly. However, there are no clear indicators of tangible results of policy influence or the impact of capacity building.

5.1 Coordination challenges

The coordination costs required for engagement and organising or attending events can be high and prohibitive.⁷² As a MANSAM member explains, “the work requires time for follow-up, and this can only happen when several members of the coordination committee are on vacation or can take time off from other commitments to dedicate to the committee”. This can be unsustainable economically, or can clash with family and work responsibilities.⁷³ Even agreeing on a meeting venue can be difficult because members live in different areas. In addition to economic hurdles, widespread insecurity has contributed to women not wanting to stay out late for meetings. For MANSAM this means that only a few members of the coordinating committee are active in coordination (which limits representation as well).

“The problem we always face in coordination is the distances between us, especially when the economic situation is difficult, the difficulty of communicating with each other, and the difficulty of transportation, this varies from one area to another. There are people on the outskirts of Omdurman and there are people on the outskirts of Khartoum and so on”.

Saeeda, a member of the Help Yourself Association, the Women’s Cooperative Union, Khartoum.

Coordination challenges have several effects: they limit the impact of coalitions or prevent them from pursuing their goals, and stifle representation within the coalitions. The challenges involved in coordinating activities have meant that NAHT has not prioritised ‘gender sensitising’ political parties, which is a basic process for building a democratic state. NAHT needs collaboration and the support of civil society activists in this process.

Managing intergenerational, ethnic or regional diversity is challenging in coalition work. While no member groups have left because of ethnic or regional discrimination, MANSAM’s coordination committee has had to address conflicts between members at times, especially regarding who should access capacity-building opportunities. Two members said that women from outside Khartoum, especially those from conflict areas, believe that they should benefit from travel or training opportunities due to

regional marginalisation. In MANSAM and in the Darfur coalitions, coordination structures have not managed to reduce the domination of older and well-known women activists in coalition decisions and activism, leading to the exclusion and limited engagement of younger women. An older member of the Darfur Women Forum, who is also a member of the FFC in the state, said that, like her colleagues, she and her generation of activists have been fighting for years and want to pass on their knowledge and experiences to younger women, but they feel subjected to criticism by young women.

Coordination can also be tricky where individual organisations see greater benefit in operating on their own. Some older and more established organisations have preferred at times to act independently in campaigns and in the release of public statements, rather than aligning with the coalition. As one MANSAM member stated, “Although there is consensus and common understanding of the importance of collective work, some organisations try to capture attention”.⁷⁴ MANSAM’s lack of a charter that respects the autonomy of members as well as outlining the coalition’s public representation and accountability culture contributes to this. The competition for visibility and recognition sometimes causes coalition members to breach their accountability to the collective representation. Groups affiliated with political parties also feel they need to make separate statements that acknowledge their constituencies. This should be expected, as opportunities for visibility are very limited. There are a number of reasons for this: many organisations deliberately maintain a low profile, while others simply do not have communication mechanisms to promote themselves, and training and dialogue are only available for limited groups. For such organisations, media engagement is mostly in response to government backlash and is not a strategic mobilisation process for promoting women’s rights and gender equality. As political parties’ leadership positions are dominated by men, women’s opportunities for visibility are also rare.

An additional challenge is the ethnic tensions between the Darfur Platform and Darfur Forum members, which hamper coordination between the two Darfur coalitions even though they have the same line of work.⁷⁵ Relations or suspected relations with the former regime also limit coordination in Darfur in particular, and this has caused a rift between the Platform and the Forum. There are accusations that one of the

Forum’s founders was part of the women’s wing of the ousted ruling party. Such tensions permeate to younger generations of the coalitions, suggesting that such disagreements – whether related to political ideology or to ethnicity – are often inherited.

In Eastern Sudan, the Women’s Platform is viewed as part of the ousted regime even though it is very active at the community level; this creates resentment and suspicion. MANSAM has sought to overcome this by rejecting the membership of activists who were affiliated with the former regime, even though this has caused frustration, especially outside Khartoum.⁷⁶ For the Darfur groups there are no clear criteria for membership. Tensions within MANSAM indicate that it has not yet considered clarifying nor coordinating discussions on its political position with the military. In November 2019, some members left in protest of the coalition’s engagement with the military head of state at a roundtable on peace – but they did not express their discontent to the coordinating committee during preparations for the event.

Another challenge for MANSAM is that WhatsApp groups for academics and gender experts are not engaged with the other thematic groups. Activists’ skills and expertise are therefore not adequately coordinated and utilised to promote the coalition members’ knowledge and capacities. This is also the case in other coalitions such as the Darfur Women Forum, which has many gender experts. Better integration would also be beneficial for the

Eastern Sudan groups, which have more practical experience than the groups in the centre.

Other challenges include coordination between central and regional MANSAM branches, despite the fact that a member of each of the regional coordinating committees is assigned to be the focal point for coordination with the national level.

Although the coalitions have established coordination mechanisms for addressing the diverse concerns of its member organisations and political parties, there have been several challenges regarding coordination. Many coalitions lack an explicit coordination strategy, focal points do not have clear responsibilities,⁷⁷ and more significantly – as discussed later – there is a lack of a common agenda and plans for policy influence. In addition, the coalitions have not considered building their institutional capacities; during research for this paper, NAHT did not have active state branches. While MANSAM has branches in four states, only two carried out general meetings and nominated members to be in central coordination committees. Coordination between groups in the centre and the east is very minimal and groups such as NAHT and MANSAM do not work to strengthen their capacity. In Red Sea State, there was criticism of MANSAM for not being inclusive in its mapping process for developing candidate lists for the legislative council, especially regarding younger women.⁷⁸

Notes

- 61 Interview with NAHT member, online, 9 June 2021.
- 62 Interview with MANSAM member, 6 June 2021.
- 63 Interview with Finance Secretary at MANSAM, phone, 29 January 2022.
- 64 Interview with MANSAM member, Khartoum, 26 May 2021.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 A MANSAM member interviewed on 26 May 2021 confirmed that members in the central committee of the FFC had sexist tendencies, and one of them said in a meeting in March 2021 that the society will not accept women as governors.
- 67 Sudanese Women Rights Action (2020), 'Sudan Peace Agreements from Gender Perspective: The achievements and the Shortcomings', 8 October (<https://suwra.org/blog/2020/10/08/brief-sudan-peace-agreements-from-gender-perspective-the-achievements-and-the-shortcomings/>)
- 68 United Nations Security Council (2021), 'Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security of the Security Council: Summary of the meeting on the situation in the Sudan, held on 14 December 2020' (https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/S_2020_1319_E.pdf)
- 69 FGD with the Cooperative Union, Khartoum, 26 May 2021.
- 70 Interview with MANSAM member, 25 January 2022.
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Interview with MANSAM member, online, 5 June 2021.
- 73 Interview with MANSAM member, Khartoum, 26 May 2021.
- 74 Ibid.
- 75 Interview with Darfur Women Forum member, North Darfur, 30 May 2021.
- 76 In women circles in the conflict areas, there is an understanding that the context and the limits on choice faced by activists there are different from central Sudan.
- 77 At the time of writing this paper, MANSAM was working on a conceptual paper on coordination.
- 78 Interview with member of the Eastern Sudan Women's Coalition, Port Sudan, 22 May 2021.



Women waiting to vote in the 2010 national elections.
© U.S. Institute of Peace

6

Conclusion and recommendations

The research examined issues of representation, coordination and agenda development within women coalitions during the democratic transition in Sudan. The seven coalitions in Darfur, Port Sudan and Khartoum have wide representation of CSOs, IDPs, women with disabilities, professionals, academics, gender experts, feminists and activists in political parties, as well as women of different ages and from different ethnic groups, and from urban and rural areas. They also represent a range of different concerns including gender-based violence, women's legal rights, political and economic rights, and peacebuilding gender issues. The analysis shows that there is an imbalance in representation of political activists and of important categories of women such as housewives and women in skilled labour (such as plumbing, mechanics, carpentry, domestic work, farming and animal husbandry), as well as artists.

The coalitions have developed different coordinating mechanisms including focal points, coordinating committees and executive committees. These are used to coordinate capacity building for members, nominate women for participation in government, and highlight gender issues during peace negotiations. However, the difficulties in coordination within and between coalitions and lack of a common strategy highlight various challenges in balancing political, regional and ethnic differences. The most challenging of these is the intergenerational gap, which has been exposed recently in debates on adopting a more feminist approach. The effect these challenges have on policy influence is explored below.

6.1 Ability to influence policy change

The research findings demonstrate that the coordinated activities of the coalitions examined here have failed to impact policy change. A researcher focusing on women’s rights argued that the core issue preventing the coalitions from reaching a common agenda and achieving policy change is the way the coalitions are structured to only operate on a minimum agenda. They also often operate around specific interests such as political participation and are unable to attract larger audiences.⁷⁹

Why women struggle to influence policies: reflection of a FFC member

“Divisions within Forces of Freedom and Change in the Red Sea State began as a result of nomination requests for the legislative council. Feminist bodies have two out of 20-something seats at the level of Freedom and Change if they are not represented through their political parties. Women’s groups are not regulated; that is, a group of women cannot be represented alone. They must come under an alliance or have a clear identification of who they are.

Forces of Freedom and Change for the Red Sea State has four seats in the legislative council, which is a small number compared to the political and ethnic diversity and complexities in the Red Sea State. This includes one seat for the resistance committees, and two for the Sudan Call Alliance; the rest of the blocs decide who will take the last seat. It was agreed that the National Consensus Forces would take the women’s seat.

For women’s groups within Forces of Freedom and Change, their only political activity within the assembly is to ally for seats in the legislative council, and previously, women’s groups were a tool for political parties. There are permanent questions, who does the woman represent? Does she represent women? Do feminist alliances have political agendas?”

Ali Hassan Jubran, Forces of Freedom and Change, Red Sea State

One example provided in the research of successful policy influence was that of the Cooperative Union. The Union has played a crucial role in mobilising women in the informal market – who were often seen as ‘outcasts’ – to fight for their social and political rights, take pride in their profession, and become part of the wider political discourse in the transition process.⁸⁰ During the first COVID-19 lockdown, the government had a specific strategy on how to distribute aid to reduce the impact on low-income families; the Union advocated to the Ministry of Social Development and Labour to include the Union in this strategy.⁸¹ The Union’s leader was called to map the most vulnerable ‘tea ladies’, and gave them ID cards so that they could receive government support, as well as coordinating with other women organisations to maintain pressure on the government.⁸²

Another example is MANSAM’s development of its own UNSCR 1325 national action plan. Although the government did not adopt it, MANSAM’s accompanying sustained advocacy contributed to consultations and the adoption of the UNSCR 1325 national action plan as a priority. There are many other issues that the women coalitions also played a role in – such as the adoption of a law that criminalises female genital mutilation/cutting – which further change can be built upon.⁸³

Some of the challenges related to policy influence have emerged from the way in which coalitions manage disagreements, develop common and clear policy priorities, messaging and advocacy strategies internally, and build more strategic alliances with other coalitions. However, it is important to recognise the political, social and conflict landscape in which the women’s coalitions are trying to effect change. For some women’s groups, conflict is still very present in their communities, which not only demands immediate responses but also disrupts the possibilities for safe and effective organising and mobilisation. Despite some changes, women continue to be excluded from political processes and decision-making, with men dominating political parties and resisting the required legal reforms and political changes to ensure women’s equal access. As has been highlighted, few of the coalitions have as yet been able to incorporate a gender-transformative lens that directly challenges the patriarchal system and hegemonic masculinities, although the emergence of strong, young feminist women within several coalitions is promising.

6.2 Recommendations

These recommendations fall under the main themes of the research: representation, coordination, and a common agenda and policy influence. Within each there are general recommendations for all coalitions and others that are aimed at specific coalitions. Capacity-building needs are considered under each theme.

Saferworld expects to prioritise work in different regions for our Sudan programme and provide support for the effectiveness of women coalitions in influencing gender equality policies and gender-sensitive democratic transition processes.

Common agenda and policy influence

Coalitions should prioritise developing organisational strategy documents, including gender-transformative common agendas and coalition charters which set out members' roles and responsibilities

- Undertake a gender-sensitive context analysis of the democratic transition process, which highlights regional differences. This could evaluate the experience of women officials in the transitional period (women politicians, civil servants, academics, women trade unionists and the Sudanese Women Movement), and assess what support women's coalitions have provided, what has not worked and what factors continue to block women's political participation.
- In line with the above context analysis, international organisations and donors can provide technical assistance and comparative learning from other contexts to support each of the coalitions to design a common agenda that promotes gender equality and challenges masculinity and the patriarchal culture.
- Support the internal understanding of a common agenda, facilitating discussions on member organisations' and individuals' roles and responsibilities in its implementation.
- Initiate processes to develop a coalition charter, agreed on by members, which sets out how they are expected to support the coalition's common

agenda and its visibility, their entitlement to engage in autonomous initiatives, and the responsibility of representatives to feed back on coalition achievements to their organisations.

Improve understanding of and skills for the development of a policy influence plan

- Highlight the importance and purpose of a policy influence plan, citing examples from other countries.
- International organisations and donors can provide technical assistance and comparative learning from other contexts to support coalitions in the development of a policy influence plan, taking into consideration the gender context analysis and regional differences.
- Ensure that coalition member organisations and individuals are familiar with the plan and understand their role in its success.
- Organise discussion sessions on women's advocacy on 'gender sensitising' political parties, including developing specific advocacy plans, with the assistance of gender experts.

Improve understanding of women, peace and security

- Incorporate a holistic WPS lens into strategy documents – including the linkages between peace and security in public and private arenas and transformative gender equality, and between women's economic, social, political and cultural rights.
- For example, elaborate on the four common issues prioritised by coalitions to better promote gender equality. This may entail: considering political participation at different governance levels and especially at the local level; addressing issues of violence against women and girls in both private and public spaces as part of peace efforts; shifting the focus of economic empowerment to women's participation in the decision-making of economic institutions; as well as advocacy for gender-equal economic investment policies.
- Conduct a gender-sensitive needs assessment of coalition members and develop a plan to address the identified needs. This might include a refresher for all coalition members on gender equality; training for women in political parties and for coalition members on gender equality and gender mainstreaming; and advocacy on how to 'gender sensitise' political parties.

- Women and men champions and/or ambassadors can help promote and sustain peace and security.

Representation

Improve the understanding of representation and accountability

- Hold member-led discussions on the importance and challenges of representation, strategies for increasing representation and accountability mechanisms, as basic elements for institutionalising democracy within the coalition.
- In particular, increase the representation of women political activists in east and west Sudan.
- Consider mapping political parties’ women’s sectors in Darfur and the east, and develop outreach with these groups to understand their vision for working with civil society activists, and their parties’ commitment to gender equality.

Prioritise increased representation of women from local communities, the informal sector and other underrepresented professions in the coalitions

- Carry out a mapping of individual women activists, women labour groups (women Kandakat neighbourhood resistance groups, domestic workers, civil service employees, academics, mechanics, carpenters and skilled labourers in the informal sector) and housewives in neighbourhoods that are relevant or accessible to coalitions.
- Arrange dialogue sessions with all groups identified in the mapping process to solicit common concerns and encourage them to join or network with the coalition.
- Recognising the security risks, the Women’s Cooperative Union could consider coordination at the local level; for example, forming a local coordination unit and seeking representation in local security committees to ensure the protection of its members. The Union should also organise advocacy campaigns for its professional groups, specifically women mechanics and carpenters, to market their services and ensure recognition and acceptance by the community.

Improve cross-regional representation

- Coalitions should prioritise and international organisations facilitate opportunities for coalitions to discuss cross-regional collaboration; for example, between Eastern and Western Sudan, to promote democratic transition and gender equality, as well as resourcing regional exchange programmes designed by coalition representatives.
- This could include mapping of potential coalition members and organising visits to different regions to promote coalition membership.

Coordination

- Create facilitated opportunities for members to discuss the importance of coordination for realising the coalitions’ agenda, and their coordination challenges.
- Facilitated discussions should include exploring how coordination mechanisms are linked to the aims of a common agenda for the coalitions, taking into consideration the challenges that members have experienced.

Consider the following for addressing intergenerational gaps/tensions

- Organise discussions among older generations on feminism and the importance of challenging cultures of masculinity to promote gender equality and democratic state-building. This should include conversations on intergenerational gaps and the priorities and concerns of younger women.
- Arrange dialogues among younger generations on patriarchy, masculinity and obstacles to culture change, and on young people’s role in promoting gender equality.
- Organise intergenerational dialogues to create a common understanding of and momentum for promoting a culture of gender equality, and outline responsibilities for achieving this.

Support coordination across politically diverse groups, and engagement of political and civil society activists

- Arrange dialogue sessions on political differences, democracy and the accountability of women activists for the democratic transition, citing women’s experiences from Africa and the Middle East.

- Organise forums on the challenges of coordinating political and civil society activists and build consensus on effective coordinating approaches, particularly with regards to advocacy to ‘gender sensitise’ political parties.

Strengthen coordination mechanisms to address ethnic diversity and tensions, specifically for Darfur and East Sudan coalitions

- Facilitate sensitive yet open discussions on ethnic differences in Sudan and the implications of ethnic tensions for women’s equality, in order to promote unity, trust-building and solidarity across diversity.
- Identify monitoring indicators for how coalitions are addressing ethnic tensions and relevant peaceful approaches.

Notes

79 Interview with researcher, phone, 31 January 2022.

80 Ibid.

81 Interview with government official, 1 February 2022.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent, not-for-profit international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives in countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. We work in solidarity with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity.

SAFERWORLD

UK OFFICE

Brick Yard, 28 Charles Square
London N1 6HT, UK

Phone: +44 (0) 20 7324 4646

Email: general@saferworld.org.uk

Web: www.saferworld.org.uk

 www.facebook.com/Saferworld

 [@Saferworld](https://twitter.com/Saferworld)

 [Saferworld](https://www.linkedin.com/company/saferworld)

Registered charity no. 1043843

A company limited by guarantee no. 3015948

ISBN 978-1-912901-37-1

