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A regional insight into Sudanese women's participation in the December Revolution

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Table of content

Introduction.....	3
Sudanese women’s political participation and representation: A history of exclusion	5
Young women’s participation in the revolution despite family restrictions.....	7
Young women’s gendered motivations for participating in the revolution	10
Young women’s participation in the transition period: Empowered but side-lined	12
Concluding remarks.....	18
References.....	19

Introduction

The popular uprising against the Islamist-Military regime of Omar al-Bashir started in December 2018, and women were at the forefront of the peaceful protests in many locations throughout the country. The uprising, which is now popularly known as the December revolution, started in Damazeen in Blue Nile state with schoolgirls and boys protesting the poor living conditions and scarcity of bread. Street protests spread throughout the country, including to the capital Khartoum. Economic grievances were put in the context of authoritarianism and the corruption of the Bashir regime, which had ruled the country with an iron fist for three decades (1989-2019). The main slogan of the protestors became “fall that is all” and “freedom, peace and justice”.

After eight months of protests, Bashir was ousted from office through an internal military coup in April 2019. A transitional military council consisting of Bashir's former allies took control of the state. Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese citizens formed a sit-in in front of the military headquarters in Khartoum demanding a transition to a civilian government. On June 3rd, the sit-in was crushed by a branch of the military, namely the rapid-support forces (RSF) which until six years ago were better known as the militia *janjaweed* that fought the war in Darfur on behalf of the Bashir regime. Despite the killing and arrest of protesters during what has been coined the “Sudan massacre”, the protests continued. In August 2019, negotiations between the transitional military council and the Forces for Freedom and Change⁹ facilitated a new transitional government guided by the Constitutional Declaration.¹⁰ However, in October 2021, the military hijacked Sudan's transition to democracy and the transitional government they were part of. This kickstarted new calls for a freedom, peace, and justice under the umbrella of a civilian state. Protests are still ongoing, over a year after the military coup.

Despite it being a revolution that started in marginalized areas, most of the research conducted thus far has been entirely focused on the capital. This includes the research conducted on women's role in the revolution and its aftermath (see Grabska and Aziz 2022; Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2021; Nugdalla 2020; Adam and WagiAlla 2021)¹¹. In this paper, we build on original interview data with young female revolutionaries from seven states (South Kordofan, South Darfur, Blue Nile, Senar,

⁹ Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) is a wide political coalition of civil and rebel forces created as part of the popular uprising (including rebel groups, political parties, labour unions, civil society and neighbourhood resistance committees). The alliance drafted a charter for freedom and change which was originally signed by 22 organizations and political parties. During the transitional period and after the 2021 military coup there have been major fractionalization within the FFC. A continuous critique throughout has been the patriarchal nature of the decision-making structure within FFC, whereby women and youth have been sidelined. See for example Tønnessen and Al-Nagar 2020.

¹⁰ You can access the Constitutional Declaration via the following link: Sudan Constitutional Declaration August 2019 | ConstitutionNet

¹¹ In addition, several blogs and news articles have been written on the topic, all with a Khartoum bias (see Tønnessen and al-Nagar 2019; Abbas S. 2020, Abbas 2019, Engeler and Manzur 2020, Lavrilleux 2019, Malik 2019; Abdel Aziz 2019a; Abdel Aziz 2019b, Abdel Aziz and Grabska 2019).

Red Sea, Kassala and Gadaref) to give a regional perspective on women's role in the revolution. A total of 72 unstructured interviews were conducted with young women, aged 18 to 35, in these states.¹² The paper examines the revolutionary activism of young women from different regional locations in Sudan. What motivated these young women to participate in the revolution and what type of roles did they take, and what challenges did they meet? Some of the locations where we have conducted fieldwork are among the most gender-conservative in the country, where women historically have largely been excluded from public spaces (Abbas and Tønnessen 2022). Furthermore, what is their experience with political activism during the transitional period? What implications does this new political activism by female Sudanese youth have on the women's movement?

Based on the original interview data, the paper argues that the participation of young women in the revolution reflects an emerging feminist mobilization in Sudan that challenges patriarchal structures, including the dogmas of a historically Khartoum- and elite-based women's movement.

Our findings suggest that young women participated in the revolution by playing diverse roles, including roles that challenged traditional perceptions of appropriate gender relations. A common trend across the interviews, which also echoes the narratives from Khartoum (S. Abbas 2020; Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2019), noting that they participated despite family restrictions. In many ways, they broke cultural barriers about what is considered "appropriate" for young women and thereby challenged prevailing social and political norms. However, these norms differ across the locations. In eastern Sudan, the conservative belt, merely being out in the streets protesting was regarded as deeply inappropriate, meanwhile in Darfur, where women's public presence as such does not conflict with cultural norms, other types of restrictions emerged.¹³

There is a range of different motivations that prompted those interviewed for this study to participate in the December revolution. In contrast to earlier work with a Khartoum bias (see Grabska and Aziz 2022; Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2021; Nugdalla 2020; Adam and WagiAlla 2021)¹⁴, the economic motives and the demand for a dignified life come out more clearly in these interviews. This is perhaps related to the continuous economic marginalization of the regions, so that the ongoing economic crisis was felt more outside of the capital. However, these motives were coupled with gender-specific motivations such as discriminatory laws and the lack of job opportunities for women. "Dignity", which echoes the Arab spring in Egypt (Singerman 2013), is a frame within which demands for change were

¹² The young women interviewed include university students, professionals, activists, and members of resistance committees and other civil society groups; all of whom participated in the revolution.

¹³ Although there are cultural norms in Darfur that allows women's participation in public spaces, these do not entail that their rights are better protected than elsewhere in the country. Not only has the region has been haunted by armed conflicts and displacement which has had severe consequences for women, but women's presence in public spheres in terms of trade and wage work is largely exploitative.

¹⁴ Ali (2019) also did a study of women's online activism during the December revolution.

presented. In the views of our interlocutors, the Bashir regime restricted the lives of women in undignified ways.

Despite the broad participation of women and especially of young women in the December revolution, they were largely marginalized and sidelined in the transitional period (Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2021, Tønnessen and Al-Nagar 2020; Abbas and Tønnessen 2022; R. Abbas 2020; SORD 2020). In terms of the general literature, the Sudanese case sadly follows the general trend. Although women have played key roles in protest movements worldwide and even when they are prominent actors in these protests and movements, they are largely excluded from political decision-making processes afterwards, which remain male-dominated (Molyneux 1998; Haider and Loureiro 2021; Johansson-Nogués 2013; Tripp 2015; Saad and Abed 2020). However, this exclusion from political decision making, often justified by the lack of experience in political activism, has fueled the formation of new women's groups and solidarity networks (both formal and informal), which is also a common response seen in similar cases (see a summary of the literature in Affi and Tønnessen 2021; Adjei 2019). They often use the label "feminist", and the use of this word (which has largely been rejected by the older generation of women's rights activists¹⁵ during the Bashir era) suggests a realization that the fall of the Bashir regime is not enough to change the situation of women. A women's revolution is needed, as patriarchy is deeply embedded in social, economic, and political structures. In the case of Morocco, Fatima Sadiqi (2016) presents the "center" as a post-revolution space for the women's movement. In Sudan, "feminism" is emerging as a space for the women's movement (Tønnessen and al-Nagar 2023). The revolution has created a new discourse on feminism by self-identified feminists and women activists and organizations (Ali et.al 2022). However, our findings suggest that the establishment of several new youth-led feminist groups has made visible a growing generational gap between the older and younger women's activists. As such, the exclusion of young women does not only occur in political parties and institutions, but also in social movements and women's groups that have been dominated by people who do not believe in the capabilities of young women and are unwilling to be considerate to intersectionality.

Sudanese women's political participation and representation: A history of exclusion

Politics in Sudan is seen as a male domain (Aziz and Alfaki 2021). The large participation of women in the December revolution is thereby significant as it entails women's entry into a domain that has been predominantly male for the majority of Sudan's post-independence period. Women have seen themselves excluded from political parties and governing institutions, and therefore their activism has been most evident within the sphere of civil society. There is a long trajectory of women's groups in

¹⁵ With some exceptions. Salmamah Women's Resource Centre established in 1997 and was closed down by the Bashir regime in 2014.

the country (Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2017). However, their public presence, especially in the streets, has been controlled by a public order regime (SIHA 2009). Therefore, taking to the streets was a highly political and anti-regime act that challenged the idea of a masculine public domain.

The public and especially the political sphere remained dominated by men, or rather an elite of Muslim and Arab men of certain ethnic backgrounds. The political representation of Sudanese women has historically been chronically low both in elected and appointed National Assemblies, varying between 0% and 9% until after the peace agreement in 2005 when 18% women were appointed. From 2010 onwards, there was a significant increase in this number largely due to the introduction of 25% reserved seats for women in the parliament in the 2008 National Election Law (Abbas S. 2010). However, those women elected for office were part of Bashir's patronage networks (Arab, Muslim from certain ethnic groups) and were loyal to the Islamists' conservative gender ideology that elevated women's roles as mothers and wives before anything else (Tønnessen 2018;2011). The regime established its own women's organizations and ushered in a 'state feminism' that did not aim for gender equality. At the same time, independent women's groups and political parties were severely suppressed. This was a way for the Bashir regime to organize women to mobilize regime support. Officially sanctioned organizations foster women's political participation and help them gain access to state patronage networks; however, their main purpose is to control women, preventing them from forming autonomous political movements. Therefore, the space for women, operating outside of an Islamist framework, has therefore been severely restricted (Tønnessen 2017; Tønnessen 2011).

However, according to Abbas and Tønnessen (2022), authoritarian rule is an important factor, but so is armed conflict; historically, the political scene in Sudan has not allowed for a civil political structure that enables women to be active participants. The insecure and often violent context, especially at the regional level, has affected the formation of local women's movements in different ways. As a country in perpetual conflict since before independence in 1956, Sudan has had many attempts at peace. Most of these have to a large extent excluded women from formal peace negotiations. In the most recent negotiations, which led to the Juba Peace Agreement(s), 10% of the negotiators were women (ibid)¹⁶. The sidelining of women in formal peace negotiations is a manifestation of their broader marginalization in political spaces. This pattern, however, is not unique to Sudan. Women remain largely excluded from formal peace negotiations worldwide (Krause, Krause and Bränfors 2018; Tripp 2021).

¹⁶ In previous peace negotiations, the number is even lower. There were no women represented as part of the negotiation team, which eventually led to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. In the two Darfur peace negotiations in Abuja (2006) and Doha (2011), the representation of women and youth continued to be low (Ellerby 2013).

In the overall literature, traditional gender roles are also mentioned as important (Aduda and Liesch 2022). In the Sudanese context, these have been expressed through policies and laws legitimized within an Islamist framework during the Bashir era. The idea of complementarity, that men and women have different rights and obligations because of their biological differences, is central to this gender ideology. However, according to Sudanese Islamists, women should only be active participants in the public sphere – such as politics – *if* they behave and look pious, moral, and chaste. To ensure that women abide by such ideals, the state enacted public order laws that stipulated women's decent dress and movement, and also labour laws that restricted women's work life (Tønnessen 2019; SIHA 2009).¹⁷ At the regional level, ethnic politics and cultural norms play a role, but these vary according to the context. In the West, there is a long and rich tradition of women's public presence, especially as traders and in the education sector. In the East, gender norms embedded within traditional norms of ethnic groups such as the Beja are very restrictive on women's public presence (Fadlalla 2007; Abbas and Tønnessen 2022). As a rule, few women are politically active in fear of social backlash where their morality is being questioned (Abbas 2022). As far as politics are concerned, in the East “women are excluded from public decision making and politics” (Pantuliano 2002:5) However, Sudanese women have found themselves excluded from political decision making regardless, including in the transitional period (Kadoda and Hale 2020; Tønnessen and al-Nagar 2020).

However, processes of excluding women have also ignited their mobilization outside of the existing power structures; this was showcased during the December revolution. And as during the Arab Spring, this created great hope for an equitable role for women in the political transition processes that followed the fall of the authoritarian regimes in the region (Johansson-Nogués 2013). However, as Reem Abbas (2022:1) puts it, “women experienced backlash from the early stages of the transition period (...).”

Young women's participation in the revolution despite family restrictions

Young women from the seven regions interviewed for this study took different roles, some of which challenged traditional gender norms and some of which accommodated traditional expectations for women. These roles (beyond participation in the street protests) included cooking food for protestors, artwork, burning of tires in the street, leadership roles in the organization of the protests and the sit-in, media relations, and social media activism. It should be noted that many of these young women protested for the first time, but through it gained important experience in political work, including in leadership roles. An interlocutor from Blue Nile says:

¹⁷ But this vision has an important class dimension: for example, it is only possible to combine work and piousness if you are educated and working in blue-collar professions, not if you are working as a street vendor delivering direct service to men (Tønnessen 2019).

“Many young women participated in the sit-in, at the center of Damazeen city, during the day and night as much as they could. We carried out various activities such as cleaning the sit-in square; preparing food or distributing food that some protesters brought from their homes; working in the sit-in clinic; securing the sit-in and monitoring the security elements who came frequently; drawing murals and paintings reflecting the concepts of freedom, peace and justice; collecting donations (if you have, put, if you don't, take); working in the media and raising awareness of the importance of the sit-in and the importance of civil disobedience; and enlightening with the mechanisms of the peaceful revolution and the current political situation”¹⁸.

Another interlocutor from South Kordofan said:

“In the grounds of the sit-in at Kadugli, which started from the eleventh of April and continued until the fall of the first military regime, after which sit-in space was arranged, and the role of women was remarkable. They participated in all the organizing committees for the sit-in, and in the discussion sessions and social activities, like broadcasting seminars as well theater and musical band. And in the sit-in at the Freedom Square in Dilling, young women participated, but they were fewer than the young men”¹⁹.

It is not always the role itself that might challenge gendered norms, but the time of day that young women participated in these activities. For example, women's public presence after dark and without the company of a male guardian is seen as deeply inappropriate (Abbas 2021). In all states, some young women spent the night at the sit-in and thus challenged these social norms.

That women took multiple roles ranging from radically challenging deeply rooted patriarchal expectations to more traditional caring tasks aligns well with the prevailing knowledge from Khartoum-based studies (See Tønnessen and Al-Nagar 2019). However, what is interesting to note is that women in the East of Sudan, which is considered the conservative belt, have taken roles which starkly contradict gendered expectations about women's presence in public and in political life. In Kassala, a state in eastern Sudan where women have historically been domesticated, some of the youth interviewed noted the active participation of women at the beginning of the uprising, and they indicated that the number of women was greater than that of men in processions and in the sit-in. An interlocutor said:

“During the early days of the movement, young women organized the Kendakat Parade and called for it via Facebook. They were also active on social media groups in mobilizing for resistance and enriching dialogue on national issues”²⁰.

¹⁸ Interview in Blue Nile State, 16th July 2021.

¹⁹ Interview in South Kordofan state, 16th July 2021.

²⁰ Interview in Kassala State, 16th July 2021.

Young women in Kassala participated in delivering public speeches in schools and the markets and neighborhoods to urge participation in the sit-in²¹. Young female revolutionaries in Kassala and the Red Sea State mentioned their efforts in raising funds to buy supplies for the protests and sit-in. One interlocutor from Kassala asserted:

“As young women, we contributed funds for buying posters and spray paint for writing on public walls messages calling for the overthrow of the regime”²².

Another interlocutor explained:

“I collected money from some businessmen to provide needs of the sit-in such as food and we paid for photographic documentation”²³.

As the fundraising entailed engagement with many men outside their families, the young women from conservative communities in the states crossed the red lines set for their public presence and engagement in a highly patriarchal culture.

The participation of young women in protests and the sit-in challenged traditional roles in many ways. For many of those young women interviewed for this study, the start of change was in their success in resisting and challenging their families' restrictions to their participation. Most young women emphasized that their decision to participate was challenged by their families. Very few had the permission from their families. However, it is notable that such family restrictions were felt more in areas of the country, like the east, where there is a history of denying women a presence in public spaces. However, also in other areas, family restrictions were present. An interlocutor from Darfur said:

“The families of young women in Nyala did not refuse the participation of their young family members, but they objected to the participation in any night activities in the sit-in to avoid being stereotyped by society and for the security brutality in South Darfur. The objection was often made by the head of the family.”²⁴

But restrictions were not only related to patriarchal control, but also to the security situation. An activist from Gadaref explained that most families refused the participation of their daughters in the revolution with various justifications, not only out of patriarchal control, but also out of fear of the security forces.²⁵

²¹ Interview in Kassala State, 14th July 2021.

²² Interview in Kassala State, 20th July 2021.

²³ Interview in Red Sea State, 18th July 2021.

²⁴ Interview in South Darfur State, 12th July 2021.

²⁵ Interview in Gadaref State, 13th July 2021.

In the face of restrictions, young women either negotiated their way into participating or used other strategies. An interlocutor from Senar said:

“Due to the severity of the repression, most families refused to allow young women to participate at the beginning of the revolution, but all the young women found justifications to go out, and some secretly participated in protests without knowledge of their families. Participation in the revolution in general, and in the sit-in in particular, was discussed with the families, and some families were forced to accept due to the insistence of their young women.”²⁶

In Kassala some interlocutors tried to convince the parents of their desire to participate in the revolution through discussions arguing for the need for change. It is noted that they were allowed if they accepted the condition of having a family member accompany them, while some gave in and did not participate, but some insisted and went without family permission. One interlocutor explained:

“Our families restricted our participation in protests, but we succeeded in participating by wearing the ‘niqab’ and engaging in protests far away from our neighborhoods.”²⁷

Thus, despite the restrictions, the role of young women began to be pivotal and central in the Sudanese revolution also at the regional level, bypassing and defying the family restrictions and patriarchal logic. Some young women respected their families' conditions for participation, and accepted being accompanied by their brothers, friends, and neighbors. The young women reported that this arrangement helped them to stay longer hours at the sit-in.

Young women's gendered motivations for participating in the revolution

There are a range of different motivations that prompted those interviewed for this study to participate in the December revolution. In contrast to earlier work (with a Khartoum bias), the economic motives come out more clearly. This is perhaps related to the continuous economic marginalization of the regions, and thus the economic crisis was felt more outside of the capital and the middle classes. Most of the young women in the state of Red Sea interviewed for this study mentioned that the low standard of living, the collapse of infrastructure, the lack of basic needs being met, and the suffering of the people due to the standard of living were major reasons for the revolution in the society with all its categories²⁸. A young activist from Senar said:

“As young women, we were concerned for the fall of the military regime, as our communities need political change and a decent life that ends their miseries, including change from the continuous cuts

²⁶ Interview in Senar State, 15th July 2021.

²⁷ Interview in Kassala State, 10th July 2021

²⁸ Interview in Red Sea State, 12th July 2021.

to water and electricity and the lack of bread. Changing the economic situation remained a priority for us and our communities.”²⁹

“The main motive for participating in the revolution is overthrowing the oppressive dictatorial regime and living a life of dignity”.³⁰

The economic motivations were often expressed in language of ‘dignity’ with a clear link to the political regime and its corrupt and violent practices.

However, these economic motives and furthermore the clear motivation to topple a corrupt and authoritarian regime were coupled with gender-specific motivations. It came out clearly in the interview material that women participated in the revolution to end discriminatory practices against them by the former regime. This was articulated by a young female activist from Senar in the following way:

“As young women, we are specifically interested in ending discrimination and gender-based violence that the ex-regime was practicing”.³¹

An activist from South Darfur stated in a similar vein:

“We participated in the revolution to contribute to the fall of the Islamists’ regime as the regime violated our rights, restricted our movement and freedoms in public spaces and our opportunities for work, and it enacted and implemented laws that undermined women’s dignity and freedom”³².

From Senar, an interlocutor added:

“We are out in the streets protesting not only the political situation but the economic adversity of electricity and water cuts, scarcity of bread, we are looking for a dignified life”³³.

The link between the economy and the right to a decent life was also clearly linked to gender discrimination and specifically the lack of opportunities for paid labor. One young activist from South Darfur said:

“The regime monopolized knowledge robbed women of their rights and limited work opportunities for them in the public and private sector and enacted laws that undermine women’s dignity”³⁴.

²⁹ Interview in Senar State, 11th July 2021

³⁰ Interview in Gadaref State, 12th July 2021.

³¹ Interview in Senar State, 13th July 2021.

³² Interview in South Darfur State, 20th July 2021; Interview in Senar State, 10 July 2021

³³ Interview in Senar State, 20th July 2021.

³⁴ Interview in South Darfur State, 26th July 2021.

Women's legal and social status prior to the Sudanese revolution, that is legal discrimination and a gender conservative state policy, have shaped female protesters' motivations to participate in the revolution.

The participation in the revolution exposed the young women to diverse experiences that differed with the degree of conservativeness of their communities and those communities' resistance to young women having public freedoms. Many of the young women come from communities whose cultural norms entail gender segregation of public activities and put limits on any male-female engagement. Since the start of the revolution, the young women faced family restrictions and succeeded in negotiating their public participation. The planning and preparation for the processions and the sit-in included close interaction between genders from the same and different neighborhoods as well as movement in spaces without families' and communities' guardianship. In all the new settings, they were able to negotiate these relations and gain public recognition.

Young women's participation in the transition period: Empowered but side-lined

The participation in revolution influenced the development of an awareness among the young women that, despite their leading role in the revolution, they are facing a political backlash which is defined in this paper as a violent retrograde response or reaction aiming to push women away from public protests and back to the private sphere. Exclusion from political decision making was the norm both nationally and in the regions in which we conducted fieldwork (Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2021). This exclusion has been regarded as a 'betrayal' and a huge disappointment by women (Abbas 2020). Until the military coup in October 2021, those claiming to represent the revolution continued to sideline women's participation from formal politics, including in the Juba Peace negotiations, in the appointment of state governors and in the decision-making structures of the forces of freedom and change (Abbas and Tønnessen 2022; Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2021). The political actors claiming to represent the revolution justified this by referring to Sudan's conservative culture, women's lack of political experience and their emotional biological nature (Tønnessen and Al-Nagar 2020). According to our interview data, similar dynamics of political exclusion were observed at the regional level. An interlocutor from the Blue Nile said it in the following way:

*"The government of the revolution is not revolutionary. The women's representation is weak compared to their participation in the revolution, even their presence within the parties is very weak."*³⁵

³⁵ Interview in Blue Nile State 15th July 2021.

Interviewees offered similar justifications for this political exclusion of women, most often citing women's lack of experience in political activism or their lack of confidence. In addition, politically active women were stereotyped. In contexts where women's public presence historically has been regarded as immoral because it entails engagement with men, some of the women we interviewed stated that after the December revolution they were regarded as 'people of the street', which in this context is an attack on their moral character. An interlocutor from Blue Nile said:

"Young women are excluded from political posts and parties and generally young people were stereotyped by the political parties as 'people of the street'"³⁶.

Another interlocutor from Blue Nile also spoke about stereotyping, namely that feminist activists are regarded as tomboys. She explained that this is because feminism is regarded as a political project where women want to become men:

"The few young feminist leaders engaged in politics proved to be strong women, thus they are stereotyped as tomboys"³⁷.

To the extent that young women were included in politics, our interlocutor in Kassala claimed that it was merely tokenism and a strategic move to attract the female vote. One interlocutor from Kassala stated:

"Young beautiful women are selected for mobilization and the activist considers this to be the objectification of women. That is why some influential political leaders in the state do not allow their family members to participate in political parties to protect them from such disrespect."³⁸

Young women of Kassala added that they are not only marginalized in the political space, but that they also experienced gendered violence and harassment on the rare occasions when they were given opportunities in political posts. An interlocutor from Kassala spoke to such experiences:

"An activist in a leadership position in a professional union used to face practices of disrespect and mistrust of her capacities from her male colleagues"³⁹.

In Blue Nile a woman appointed as minister was rejected and resisted. An interlocutor from Blue Nile explained:

"The males in the Ministry raised banners 'Our minister is a woman' and collected signatures and submitted to the governor of the region to remove the female minister."⁴⁰

³⁶ Interview in Blue Nile State, 15th July 2021.

³⁷ Interview in Blue Nile State, 12th July 2021.

³⁸ Interview in Kassala State, 16th July. 2021.

³⁹ Interview in Kassala State, 15th July 2021.

⁴⁰ Interview in Blue Nile State, 11th July 2021.

Similarly, a political activist from the Red Sea State spoke of the hardship and backlash experienced by female political leaders:

*"Women who take decision-making positions in any ministry experience 'backlash' from the male secretary generals who control decisions and run the ministry while the presence of women ministers gets treated as tokenism"*⁴¹.

The political backlash came in tandem with a social backlash. Families resisted young girls' continued political engagement. One young interlocutor explained how the family put conditions on her public engagement that were simply impossible to fulfill:

*"My family after the revolution restricted my participation, putting unjustifiable, discouraging, and unacceptable conditions on me such as wearing decent clothes, covering hair, saying the activity must have a financial return, not dealing with men, not being out of state and not sitting in the street"*⁴².

In South Kordofan, those interviewed for this study noted a decline in the participation of young women after the revolution. This was related to the resumption of guardianship practices and male domination in the public and political sphere. The young women's financial dependency upon families gave them few opportunities to negotiate. Some of those interviewed explained that they have been brought up to think that politics is a male domain, and as such they did not consider continued political engagement after August 2019. An activist asserted:

*"The young women discontinued their public engagement after the end of revolution due to family restrictions and societal harassment and expectations about what women and especially young women can and cannot do (politics considered a male domain). The exclusion of women from decision making in the transitional period was seen as discouraging."*⁴³

The same patriarchal logic is driving the political and social backlash. One interlocutor said:

*"One of the main reasons for the marginalization of young women in particular and women in general is the patriarchal thinking of men dominating the institutions and platforms of the revolution in South Darfur and the exclusionary mentality exhibited by the men in the parties and the institutions of the revolution that exploited religion and social customs."*⁴⁴

From Senar, an activist noted:

*"Obstacles to our political participation are the lack of trust in our capacities and the absence of laws that protect our rights for participation in decision-making spaces"*⁴⁵

⁴¹ Interview in Red Sea State, 13th July 2021.

⁴² Interview in Blue Nile State, 15th July 2021.

⁴³ Interview in South Kordofan State, 15th July 2021.

⁴⁴ Interview in South Darfur 25th July 2021.

⁴⁵ Interview in Senar State, 12th July 2021.

Although some women became active in political parties, unions and neighborhood resistance committees, most of those we interviewed mobilized within the context of civil society. This is not an uncommon route for women's political engagement in contexts where they are largely excluded from formal politics. An interlocutor from Kassala explained:

"In Kassala young women who had leadership roles during the resistance period continued their activism during the transition period within political parties or professional unions, some joined the resistance committees or neighbourhood campaigns such as Haanabniwbo (we will build it); some of them also participated in the formation of women's groups, such as 'Nogat Dow' (light point) and the Kassala Women's Platform. Some young women also participated in the establishment of unions, political, and human rights bodies in the Kassala town"⁴⁶.

In the aftermath of the December revolution, young women in Red Sea state civil society organizations and groups such as the Association of Beja Women, the Surkanat Feminist Organization, Women's Forum, '8 March group', Elbanfsage Initiative and the 'Decembriat' were formed. These organizations worked in political movements as well as in voluntary and community work to serve the state in general and women in particular, providing lectures at the Beja Club on national identity, peaceful coexistence, and the provision of financial and moral support to the revolutionary movement. Some young women led the Gadaref Students' Association and the Feminist Gathering, and others joined the Women Union branch. All were active organizing media campaigns, and rallies protesting abuses and harassment of women in employment within the state. In the state of South Kordofan, some young activists after the revolution joined the political parties and formed the 'Kandakat of Diling', and the 'Girls of Stone' and other groups. What is interesting to note is that many of these groups are appearing in regions where there is a short trajectory of women's public engagement. Not only that, but many of these groups have also labeled themselves as feminist, which in a Sudanese context is significant. Feminism has been rejected not only by the Bashir regime, but also by the historical women's movement in the country (Tønnessen and Al-Nagar 2023).

The label "feminist" has entailed a shift in the priorities and purpose of the women's groups. Before the revolution, women's groups in Kassala were interested in what Maxine Molyneux (1998:232) termed women's 'practical interests', that is "those based on the satisfaction of needs arising from women's placement within the sexual division of labour". In the Kassala context, this was geared towards increasing women's livelihoods through entrepreneurial activities such as crocheting, baking, and making perfume. However, the broad political participation of young women in the revolution period led to the establishment of women's bodies such as the Women's Forum, Dow Point Group, Nawara Initiative, and Rise Alliance that focus on what has been termed women's 'strategic interests',

⁴⁶ Interview in Kassala State, 24th July 2021.

that is “those involving claims to transform social relations in order to enhance women's position and to secure a more lasting re-positioning of women within the gender order and within society at large.”

A young feminist from Senar explained:

“The ‘feminist’ movement since the outbreak of the December revolution is becoming stronger in Senar due to emergence of some new young feminists’ groups aware of women’s interests and actively working on social, political, economic, and cultural change for gender equality and respect for diversity despite the tendency of men to discourage young women.”⁴⁷

For example, in South Kordofan some young women organized a vigil in solidarity with the women who were raped during the sit-in massacre in Khartoum in June 2019, and that vigil ended with the arrest of two young women. In Kassala, the Kassala Women’s Platform, the student movement at Kassala University and organizations such as Al Sharq Center noticed that the number of young women active during the transition period seemed to be far fewer than of those who led the revolution, so they tried to address the issue through several activities such as forums, discussion panels, radio and television sessions, training, workshops, and meetings with political leaders’ party institutions and others. In the Kassala Women’s Platform, the young women discussed the presence of young women in the resistance committees and in the Forces for Freedom and Change, and they did so through meetings with the leaders of the committees focused on the challenges facing women in the activities of the resistance and the inclusion of military in the meetings of the central council for Freedom and Change. Across the interviews it came out that the young women were educating themselves on feminist theory and philosophy, aiming to transform (rather than conform to) women’s traditional gender roles.

Some of these newly established groups have organized local campaigns, meanwhile others have participated in national campaigns like ‘Get into the Committee’ (*Guushi Allagna*) which started in Khartoum but was supported by women’s groups in Gadaref and Kassala. It calls for young women to be members not only in neighborhood resistance committees, but also in trade unions and political parties. The aim is to make trade unions and political parties friendly to ‘feminists’ and responsive to the needs of women. The presence of women in these political groups is seen as important for women to practice democracy and gain experience in political leadership. Further, the presence of women is believed to ensure that women’s needs are not neglected, and this is important for the economy and development and for freedom, peace, and justice⁴⁸.

Generational gap: A need for an intersectional approach

⁴⁷ Interview in Senar State 22nd July 2021.

⁴⁸ Interviews with young activists from the campaign in Kassala and Khartoum in 2021 and 2022 in addition to the advocacy video of the “Get into the Committee” campaign.

It is interesting to note that young women do not only feel excluded from formal politics and political parties, but also from the women's movement as it manifested during the Bashir regime.

"The generation gap is indicated in the monopoly of older women in decision-making positions, whether in political parties or in women's groups. This has created an over-representation of older women and under-representation of younger women in politics"⁴⁹. "Oftentimes, young women feel that they are not heard by older women and that their concerns are ignored, and these are justified by their lack of experience"⁵⁰.

A young female interlocutor from Senar explained:

"The generation gap arose due to the tension caused by exclusion of young women from leadership without giving them opportunities to work and build experiences. The guardianship of old women is behind exclusion of the young women from meetings, from participation in public events under the pretext of their young age, lack of experience, and lack of needed wisdom. Also, older women, in advancing their agenda, neglect the interests and priorities of young women"⁵¹. On the same terrain, a Red Sea interlocutor added: "Older women dominate political activities without sharing experiences"⁵².

The emergence of new feminist young women's groups at the regional level, therefore, is not only a way of responding to patriarchal exclusions within the realm of political parties', but also within the civil society sphere, each of which has its own patriarchal dynamic, according to our interlocutors. This age-based discrimination is related both to a collective understanding that older women of whatever background are more experienced and wiser and to the patriarchal norms that promote guardianship of males and old women over young women. It is a clear finding from the interview material gathered as part of this study that there is a generational gap. This gap is related to the vision and goal of the women's movement, but also to strategy. With regards to the overall goal or purpose, the disagreement relates to women's practical versus strategic interests. These young women aim to dismantle structures of gender discrimination.

Women from the younger generation identify themselves as "feminists", a term/label which is often rejected by the older generation of women's rights activists. A young woman from Kassala noted, *"Old women are influenced by culture and are for traditional roles of women"⁵³. This sidelining of younger women thus becomes a vicious circle, as political experience becomes a requirement to participate in politics. It also overlooks the fact that the Bashir regime, as it narrowed freedoms and tightened its grip on civic spaces and civil society negatively affected young women's opportunities for political*

⁴⁹ Interview in Blue Nile State, 12th July 2021.

⁵⁰ Interview in Blue Nile State, 13th July 2021.

⁵¹ Interview in Senar State, 22nd 2021.

⁵² Interview in Red Sea State, 15th July 2021.

⁵³ Interview in Kassala State, 16th July 2021.

engagement. At the same time what is considered political experience is quite narrow and young women's activism during the December revolution tends to be overlooked as relevant experience. According to these older women, politics is and should continue to be the domain of men and older women, because they have privileges within this patriarchal logic. The gap is also evident in difference of concerns. A feminist interlocutor explained:

*“Young women are for radical change and full equality in many issues especially those related to the private sphere. They are for reform of personal status laws and family or marital relations, while women of the older generations tend to be conservative and contented with few rights, this is specifically the case with old political activists who come to politics through family”.*⁵⁴

A political activist in the Red Sea Feminist Union indicated that this generational gap has resulted in older women supporting the nomination of men rather than younger women.

Despite the noticeable participation of young women in the December revolution and in its aftermath, this participation did not result in the inclusion of these actors in political decision making and governance structures.

Concluding remarks

This paper gives empirical insights from young women in Sudan's regions on their role in the December revolution. Partaking in the revolution, whether as artists or street protestors or political leaders, they have gained political experience which has largely gone unrecognized during the transitional period. The sheer length of the popular uprising, from December 2018 until August 2019 when the agreement was negotiated, involved many months of political activism, some of which challenged gender stereotypes and family negotiations. Although young women found themselves largely marginalized during the transitional period, the ousting of Bashir opened up a feminist space for the emergence of new women's groups nationally and locally committed to women's strategic interests, aiming to transform patriarchal structures that subordinate women. In challenging patriarchal structures, these women's groups found themselves not only challenged by conservative political parties and hegemonic masculine political institutions, but also marginalized by the historic women's movement, which has been hesitant to embrace feminism and failed to recognize the political leadership skills of the younger generation. This has made visible a growing generational gap within the women's movement in Sudan. But in the perspective of young feminists, there is no going back. If women are to take their rightful place in Sudanese society and state, then there will need to be a woman's revolution.

⁵⁴ Interview in Port Sudan 17th July 2021.

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