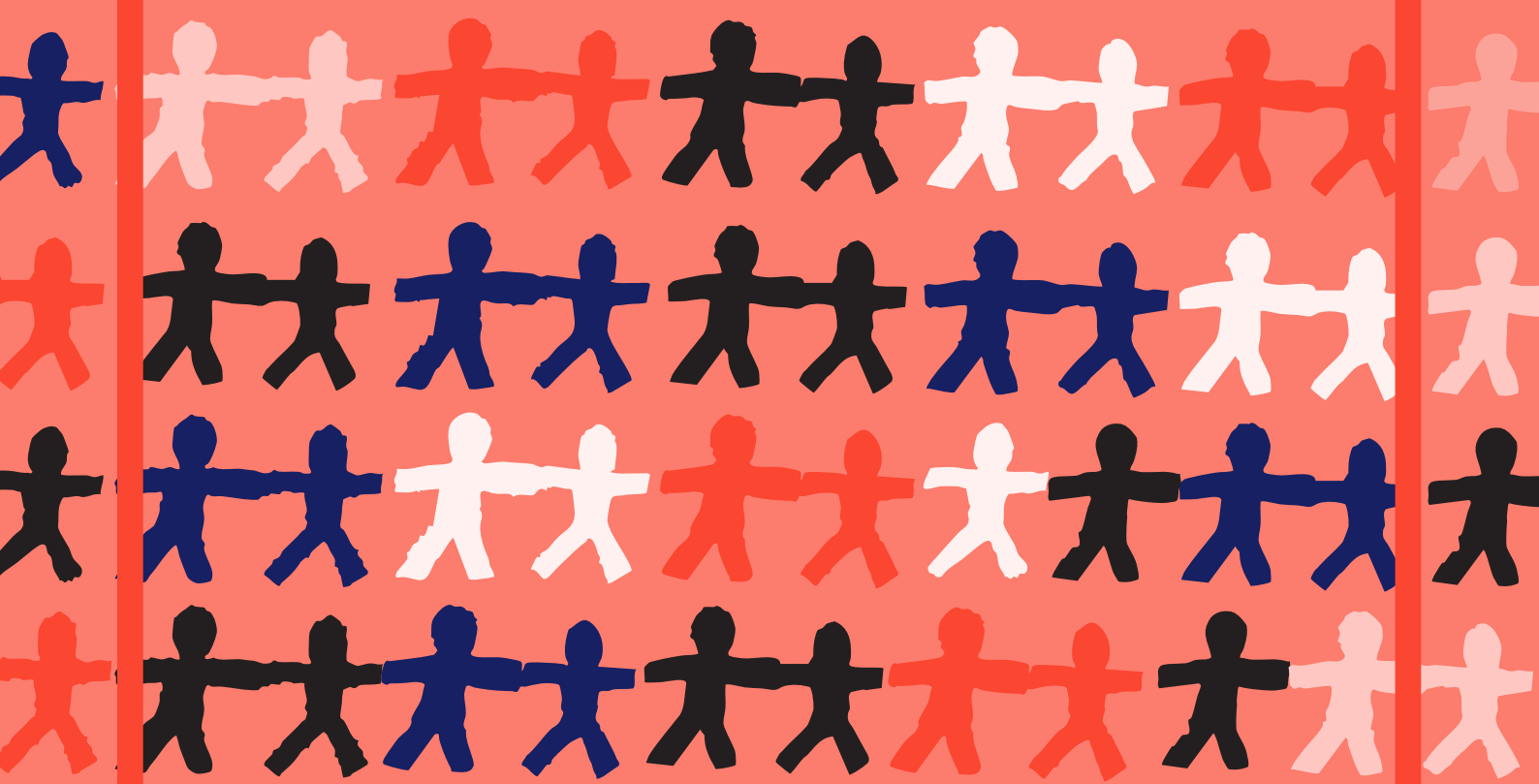


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Women's activism in the context of militarization and war: Lessons from Sudan

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Sudanese women have mobilized for decades, often in contexts of war and authoritarianism. From early social associations to the Sudanese Women's Union, activism has evolved under state co-optation and repression. The 2019 revolution marked a turning point, but the current war threatens these gains.

Summary

- Sudanese women have a long history of activism, often under militarized regimes.
- The 2019 revolution created new spaces for feminist organizing provided immense resources to the movement, but gains were limited.
- The April 2023 war has led to “activist drain,” shrinking civic space, and heightened Sexual and gender based violence (SGBV)
- Feminist groups are adapting through humanitarian work and decentralized networks.

Background

Sudan’s 2019 revolution opened opportunities for women to occupy public spaces, build coalitions, and access funding for feminist initiatives. Women-only hubs and digital platforms flourished, and the movement became more decentralized, with groups emerging in Kassala, Darfur, and other regions beyond Khartoum (Abbas 2022). The hubs provided women with spaces to gather, use the internet and build their knowledge such as the feminist library in Kassala and the feminist associations in Sennar and the Blue Nile. Yet these gains were fragile. Patriarchal backlash quickly followed, with state-sponsored SGBV undermining progress. Women’s representation in government remained minimal, and their influence in decision-making was limited. The backlash terrified women, but also strengthened the feminist groups around Sudan who were able to document these experiences and build a feminist infrastructure.

The April 2023 war has compounded the backlash. Women activists are targeted with SGBV and other forms of authoritarian control and surveillance in an increasingly polarized context where the warring parties target civilians on the basis of assumed loyalties or affiliations by taking a stance against the war (Makawi, 2024). This violence is not incidental, it is part of a broader backlash against women’s presence in public spaces during the revolution and its aftermath.

Mass displacement and economic collapse have led to what activists call an “activist drain,” as many leaders fled to neighbouring countries and the Gulf countries. Many activists were displaced, and some previously economically independent had to return to oppressive family structures which made it very difficult for them to continue their activism. Those remaining face increased workloads, severe mobility restrictions, and curfews that limit both civic engagement and women’s personal freedom. However, conditions vary: some cities remain relatively safe, while others are under siege or engulfed in active fighting.

Feminist work is now closely tied to humanitarian response, with activists providing food, shelter, and psychosocial support in displacement centers. At the same time, vulnerabilities have multiplied: food-for-sex practices, child marriage, and exploitation of displaced women are on the rise (UN Women, 2024, Interviews in White Nile, Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan, August to October 2025). For the most marginalized, violence has become a daily reality as they navigate public spaces to secure livelihoods in a context where famine has been declared and hunger is weaponized as a political tool.

Quiet resistance as a political act: A case study from Kassala

Sudanese feminist groups have demonstrated remarkable adaptability in the face of militarization and war. This example from Kassala - the story of a mother, politician and feminist leader who is active in feminist and humanitarian groups and has worked with the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) – illustrates how they have sustained their work through **decentralization**, the emergence of a **humanitarian-feminist nexus**, and a focus on **informal networks** as arenas for activism:

‘In the early days of the conflict, I used to go with my colleagues and wait for comers from Khartoum and other cities at war. The families would come on trucks they have no money for so we would raise funds to pay the trucks. Then, we would go door to door to collect beds, chairs, bed-sheets or anything that we could use to furnish the displacement centers.’

In a situation of unprecedented displacement, this rapid response was possible because of already existing decentralized networks that had been built during earlier crises, for example during the revolution, the

covid-19 pandemic and periods of communal violence in Kassala between 2019 and 2021.

‘We were able to move quickly because we had an infrastructure of youth-led and feminist groups’.

Some of the displacement centers where the feminist groups worked, especially in Kassala West, predominantly housed women. This created safe spaces in which feminist groups could interact with displaced women, providing emotional and material support, hence integrating humanitarian work with feminist work.

‘It was not just about supporting the traumatized women, but also their children. We brought chocolate and balloons and toys, we wanted them to feel a sense of normalcy. During the coffee settings, we would talk about peaceful coexistence, their rights, how women can take part in stopping the war and what they can do together, displaced women who share the same experience would also get to know each other’.

Initially, the group operated through a political feminist body, but this quickly became risky. Many in the community blamed political parties for fueling the war, and authorities began intimidating and detaining activists. To keep reaching displaced women, the group shifted its approach and let humanitarian work take precedence over politics. Carrying bags of food and supplies allowed them to enter centers without permits, avoiding surveillance and confrontation.

‘I remember one time only, they refused to let us in. We brought women from the center and also women from the neighborhood where the displacement center is located and we sat outside, under a tree, and had coffee and talked. We wanted to show them that we will always find a way and that we are not saying anything wrong.’

For remote areas outside of Kassala that they could not reach by themselves, they coordinated with local groups or formed small feminist circles to replicate their work.

The feminist group she represented now plans to form smaller feminist groups in different parts of the state to continue providing services to women and raise their awareness, turning them into actors and not just receivers.

Strategic lessons from Sudan

Lesson 1: Decentralizing the movement

Decentralization has strengthened the women’s movement’s adaptability and resilience during the war. Historically, Khartoum dominated feminist discourse and organizing, but the revolution sparked the rise of women-led groups across the country, including in conservative states where women’s public roles were limited. This shift diversified perspectives and centered grassroots experiences, including those of displaced women. For example, the Feminist Room in Kassala launched the popular podcast *Tell It*, which amplifies stories of activists and everyday women. Decentralization has also built local capacity for political participation and challenged representation politics that previously prioritized Khartoum-based voices. In many ways, the history of the women’s movement is being rewritten from the margins, bringing forward stories that were long excluded. Currently, and especially considering that Khartoum has been an active conflict zone, this decentralization has been important and formed a foundation for women’s active engagement in humanitarian responses. Despite mass displacement and departure of activists from the upper middle-class community in Khartoum, the women’s movement remains active.

Lesson 2: Integration of humanitarian and feminist work

The **humanitarian-feminist nexus** has emerged as a critical strategy. The immediate needs at the community level are substantial and a lot of the women and feminist groups have shifted their programmatic work to focus on humanitarian needs to cater to the vulnerabilities faced by women in conflict areas as this helps the feminist groups to continue engaging and building a more inclusive movement. It also becomes part of the collective care strategies used by women to ensure that women impacted by war have their basic rights to shelter and food. This does not mean that humanitarian work is isolated from politics. By linking feminist work to emergency relief, activists ensure that rights advocacy continues even in crisis settings. This integration helps protect vulnerable women while addressing immediate needs while simultaneously strengthening the foundations of a broader, more inclusive feminist movement.

Lesson 3: Creating safe spaces

When public spaces become unsafe, **informal networks** as well as **private and digital spaces** turn into lifelines for activism. As the case study from Kassala shows, home-based meetings allow women to strategize discreetly, maintain solidarity, and provide psychosocial support, especially for displaced women. This strategy is not new; it has been widely used during previous periods of repression in Sudan. Retreating to private spaces is not about withdrawal, it is about survival, collective care, and ensuring the movement continues quietly but effectively. Safe spaces include participation in digital forums through zoom and whatsapp which enable them to speak to the world and to build community and solidarity within and beyond Sudan. Digital spaces are a necessity for states that suffer from administrative session in the Darfur and Kordofan regions as they are isolated from the rest of the country, however, they also offer safer communications in states such as Kassala where the civic space is rapidly shrinking.

Conclusion

Sudanese feminist groups have shown extraordinary skills in negotiating ways to overcome repression. By decentralizing their networks, integrating humanitarian work with rights advocacy, and creating safe spaces for women, they have sustained activism under extreme conditions. These strategies not only protect vulnerable women but also lay the groundwork for an inclusive and adaptable movement, offering critical lessons for global feminist and humanitarian actors.

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Key insights for stakeholders

For humanitarian actors

International actors and donors should prioritize flexible funding for feminist groups that operate in insecure environments. Support for technology infrastructure such as starlink and solar power to ensure that women groups stay connected and to ensure that movement-building is not centered in "safe" states, economic empowerment, and safe hubs – both physical and digital– is essential. Humanitarian programs must collaborate with local feminist networks to ensure that emergency responses do not sideline women's rights advocacy.

For activist organizations

Activist groups should prioritize creating protection mechanisms for women in refuge, recognizing that exploitation during hardship is a form of political violence aimed at excluding women from politics. They must also amplify the voices of women in conflict areas by providing safe spaces and tools that enable them to organize and communicate globally. Finally, rather than forcing unity under one body, feminist organizations should navigate polarization by building collaboration around shared interests and fostering collective agendas that strengthen resilience without replicating patriarchal structures.

For researchers and academics

Sudanese women provide powerful real-life examples of sustaining activism under the most difficult circumstances. Their strategies and experiences must be documented in depth, not only to strengthen global feminist and rights movements amid a global backlash but also to ensure their suffering and resilience inform future peace processes. Such documentation started during the revolution through the production of literature and cultural resources such as the books like *Her Resistance* and *The Gift of Sudan: Love and the Revolution* and the documentary *Heroic Bodies*. These works are not only historical records, but they are also tools for advocacy, knowledge production, and global solidarity. Initiatives such as the [Sudanese Feminist Reading List](#) highlight feminist writers and resources.



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