

# From Emergency Response to Feminist Action: The Evolving Role of Women Led Organizations in Sudan

AUTHORS | Samia al-Nagar (independent researcher | [samia.alnager@gmail.com](mailto:samia.alnager@gmail.com))  
and Liv Tønnessen (research professor, CMI | [liv.tonnessen@cmi.no](mailto:liv.tonnessen@cmi.no))

Women-led organizations play a crucial role in addressing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Sudan's ongoing humanitarian crisis. This brief examines how these organizations address SGBV amid systemic collapse and offers reflections that can inspire strategies and recommendations for more inclusive, gender-responsive humanitarian action.

## *Sexual and gender-based violence as a weapon of war*

Sexual violence has long been weaponised in Sudan's conflicts, serving as a deliberate strategy of war, repression, and political control. The current war has escalated the use of sexual violence to unprecedented levels, including rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, and abductions. As of mid-2025, no definitive figures exist for the number of women and girls raped during the current conflict, but the scale is widely acknowledged to be extensive. UN Women estimates that 12.1 million women and girls, alongside men and boys, are at risk of SGBV. The Sudanese Combating Violence Against Women (CVAW) Unit, in collaboration with UN agencies, has reported a sharp rise in conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), particularly in RSF-controlled areas; a finding corroborated by the UN's fact-finding mission (2024). Civil society organizations such as SIHA (2024) and international bodies like Human Rights Watch (2024) have also documented widespread sexual violence.

RSF has been more frequently implicated in reports about sexual and gender-based violence than SAF, but both parties have documented histories of using SGBV. SAF has additionally and strategically used SGBV narratives to highlight RSF's crimes while denying its own involvement (Nihar 2024).

Grassroots women's groups have played an indispensable role in collecting and reporting cases of SGBV, but activism has come at a cost. Politically and socially active women have faced accusations of collaboration with warring parties, leading to social ostracization and arrest, often without evidence. Women detained for their activism have reported

This brief synthesizes findings from a comprehensive mapping of 44 women-led organizations (WLOs) working on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The report draws on desk research and in-depth interviews with WLOs across RSF and SAF controlled areas in Sudan.



sexual harassment and assault. In addition to physical violence, women activists and humanitarian workers have been targeted by politically motivated online smear campaigns, involving fabricated images, false accusations, and rumours aimed at tarnishing their reputations and undermining their work (SUWRA 2025).

### ***Barriers and challenges***

WLOs operate in an increasingly hostile and resource-constrained environment. Despite militarization and war, Sudanese women stand as powerful examples of sustained activism (Abbas 2025). Alongside doctors, journalists, and human rights defenders, they take enormous personal risks to support survivors of SGBV.

WLOs play a crucial humanitarian role, but they face several barriers and challenges, some of which are structural and systemic to the global humanitarian architecture, such as limited funding, a lack of donor flexibility, exclusion from strategic decision-making, and limited coordination mechanisms. As one WLO lamented: “We contribute essential local knowledge, established trust, and firsthand experience from the front lines (..) However, we are frequently excluded from critical decision-making spaces.” Coordination meetings focus on avoiding duplication rather than fostering gender-transformative strategies. Programming remains donor-driven and insufficiently informed by local realities and the concerns of WLOs for transformative change. Currently, funding landscapes are shrinking. SGBV responses are particularly underfunded. By the time the limited funds trickle down to the WLOs at the local level, it becomes undignified. Some donors' budgets are as little as 20 USD per survivor-victim, and “considering the cost of basic items, this grant does not help her (survivor-victim) even with transportation to a safe place”.

Other constraints arise from the political and security context in Sudan and include the politicization of humanitarian aid, bureaucratic barriers and authoritarian and militarised control mechanisms. Humanitarian principles like neutrality are often interpreted as a political stance, exposing WLOs to intimidation and violence. One respondent shared: “Our declared positions against both sides of the war have led to the stoppage of our activities in several states.” In addition, there are complex dynamics with conservative local communities working on “sensitive” issues such as SGBV. Female humanitarian workers are hyper visible and put at risk not only because of the sensitivity of their work, but because they are challenging traditional gender roles by being actively engaged in emergency public activities during times of war.

Additional challenges relate to internal organizational capacities and operational risks, including limited access to training, high turnover and displacement of staff and personal risks and safety concerns, especially related to women working in patriarchal contexts. Many WLOs lack training in crisis response and survivor-centred approaches. As one interviewee admitted: “We are not trained to work in a crisis situation. We needed higher doses of training, especially in the field of protection.”

### ***Women-led organizations in Sudan:***

#### ***Navigating crisis and driving change***

Women-led organizations (WLOs) responding to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Sudan are operating in a context of extreme humanitarian collapse, political obstruction, and widespread displacement. The mapping shows a highly fluid organizational landscape, including newly formed initiatives led by displaced women, organizations that emerged during the 2018–19 revolution, and groups with longer histories of women's rights activism. What distinguishes current WLO engagement, however, is not organizational

form but a shift in practice: emergency humanitarian response has become a primary arena through which feminist politics are articulated, enacted, and sustained.

Rather than separating humanitarian action from feminist or political work, WLOs increasingly operate through a humanitarian–feminist nexus, where immediate lifesaving interventions are simultaneously used to challenge stigma, assert bodily autonomy, and contest gendered power relations. In this framing, humanitarian response is not treated as a temporary or depoliticized activity, but as a necessary and meaningful site for feminist action under conditions of war.

This shift is most clearly illustrated by the emergence of Feminist Emergency Response Rooms (FERRs). FERRs developed in response to the limitations of existing Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), which were often unable to address SGBV due to mixed-gender settings, and some of the FERRs have later registered as WLOs to access international humanitarian funding mechanisms. This transition is not merely administrative but politically sensitive, particularly due to their perceived links to the Resistance Committees who played a vital role during the December revolution. Registration is here understood as registration under the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), which is a residue of the Bashir regime and is still operative in SAF controlled areas and remains a criteria for receiving international funding.

Within this humanitarian–feminist framework, WLO activities cannot be meaningfully divided into “service delivery” versus “gender transformative work”. Instead, feminist politics are embedded in how humanitarian assistance is delivered. Dignity kit distribution, psychosocial support, survivor referrals, and community outreach are used not only to meet urgent needs but also to challenge shame, reshape gender norms, and affirm women’s rights to their bodies. At the same time, documentation and advocacy are carried out alongside emergency response, rather than as separate or subsequent phases of work. This work entails substantial risk, as documentation is often politicized. Advocacy extends to international forums, with calls for Sudan’s inclusion in global protection frameworks such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s (IASC) metrics on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA). There are hopes that this documentation will give more attention and funding, legal reform but also and that some cases may find their way to the International Criminal Court.

These efforts take place amid profound material scarcity. With approximately 70 per cent of hospitals inoperable, frequent attacks on medical facilities, and severe shortages of supplies, WLOs often cannot provide even minimal clinical care. One interviewee from Darfur reported that rape survivors could currently only be offered salt and hot water to cleanse their wounds. The report emphasizes that in such conditions, survivor-centred approaches must be understood as contextually negotiated practices, rather than technical standards that can be consistently met.

Community engagement further demonstrates how humanitarian response functions as feminist practice. WLOs integrate stigma reduction and gender norm transformation into emergency activities, including by involving men in dignity kit distribution and outreach. These practices deliberately disrupt taboos surrounding women’s bodies and menstruation, using humanitarian delivery as an entry point for broader social change. As one WLO noted, young men publicly distributing sanitary pads door-to-door challenged deeply entrenched norms and reduced shame associated with women’s needs.

Feminist framings are particularly prominent among younger women, including displaced university students, whose engagement builds on revolutionary feminist discourses while

being reshaped by war (Tønnessen and al-Nagar 2026). While definitions of feminism vary, youth led WLOs consistently link SGBV to bodily autonomy and rights. Feminist language is used to reframe sexual violence as a violation of rights rather than a source of shame, directly addressing survivors as rights-bearing subjects. As one WLO stated: “Her body belongs to her and not to others. Others are not allowed to determine what happens to her.”

WLOs in Sudan are not simply responding to humanitarian gaps left by international actors. Through feminist emergency response, they are redefining humanitarian practice itself; using crisis response as a space for dignity, political meaning-making, and gendered resistance under conditions of war.

### *Concluding reflections*

Building on WLOs’ perspectives, this brief offers the following reflections of relevance to humanitarian actors operating in Sudan:

**1. Safeguard feminist agency:** The shift toward humanitarian relief risks reducing women-led organizations (WLOs) to service providers rather than political actors. This would depoliticize and weaken their ability to challenge patriarchal militarism and advocate for transformative change. At the same time, humanitarian engagement embeds WLOs deeply within communities, potentially strengthening grassroots legitimacy; a dimension historically lacking in Sudan’s women’s movement. There is an emerging humanitarian-feminist nexus, especially by the youth driven WLOs. However, the movement remains fragmented, with coordination largely limited to information sharing/work division.

**2. Invest in prevention:** Funding must go beyond emergency response to support long-term structural change. Without resources for prevention and systemic reform, cycles of violence and exclusion will persist. To get the most out of the limited funding, it is essential to prioritize the feminist organizations able to manoeuvre the humanitarian-feminist nexus.

**3. Enable flexibility:** Rigid donor requirements undermine local agency and responsiveness. WLOs need flexible funding and trust to adapt to volatile realities while preserving activist identity. If flexibility is reserved for generalist humanitarian actors, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) risks being sidelined. If given to WLOs, support can be more closely aligned with women’s actual needs. This will re-enforce grassroots legitimacy and with time facilitate support from local communities.

**4. Reimagine coordination:** Current mechanisms enable WLOs to operate across RSF and SAF-controlled areas and reach remote communities, but coordination remains transactional and focused on avoiding duplication. It should evolve into platforms for mutual learning and gender transformative strategies, ensuring humanitarian responses do not sideline feminist agendas. Coordination can also serve as peer-to-peer support, capacity building/knowledge transfers and sustaining dialogue and collective agendas in an increasingly polarized landscape. Such movement-building activities lay the groundwork for future feminist peace mobilisation when political openings emerge.

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