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reconstruction**

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DIIPER RESEARCH SERIES

WORKING PAPER NO. 14



ISSN: 1902-8679

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Development, Innovation and International Political Economy Research (DIIPER)

Aalborg University

Denmark

DIIPER Research Series

Working Paper No. 14

ISSN 1902-8679

Published by

DIIPER & Department of History, International and Social Studies

Aalborg University

Distribution

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<http://www.diiper.ihis.aau.dk/research/3397011>

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Sudanese women in civil society and their roles in post-conflict reconstruction¹

Amira Osman²

Introduction

This paper tries to explore Sudanese women's involvement in civil society. It looks at their roles as actors in public life with emphases on their roles in conflict resolution and peace reconstruction. The paper argues that Sudanese women are active members in civil society, yet they face many obstacles which could hinder their full involvement in development and peace reconstruction. These obstacles include lack of gender awareness or political will that perpetuates patriarchy and old/negative traditions. However, despite these constraints women were able to find a place for themselves in a male dominated sphere and to create and develop their own civil society organizations.

Moreover, and through their civil society organizations, women were able to develop national and regional networks and to lobby and negotiate for political, economic and financial constructions of their country.

Definition of civil society

There is a considerable debate about the meaning of civil society, its relation to the state and its relevance to social and political life. For example, Diamond (Cited in Labuschagne 2008, Online) defines civil society as:

The civil society is a voluntary and self-generating sphere autonomous from the state, but bound by a legal order (this is an important point). In spite of this, civil society is still a vulnerable commodity and defenceless in the face of political opportunism. Legal order and constitutional state are therefore of critical importance in creating and sustaining a civil society.

Civil society can also be seen as “the power of the powerless” (Havel 2001, cited in Reverter-Banon 2006: 8). In this sense, civil society could allow women

¹ This paper was presented at the Horn of Africa Workshop: What is the Way out: Challenges in Overcoming Governance Crises, Endemic Conflicts and Negative External Involvements in the Horn of Africa? The workshop took place May 26, 2008 at Aalborg University and was hosted by Development, Innovation and International Political Economy Research (DIIPER) in Collaboration with Centre for Comparative Integration Studies (CCIS), Aalborg University.

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who are victims of armed conflict to exercise power through their own civil society organizations.

In civil society people work collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, ideas and goals. Civil society organizations (e.g., ex-soldier associations, women's organizations and community-based organizations) have no fixed boundaries as they represent the need of people. Their wider range of activities includes political, cultural, economic and social activities which enrich the public work and the democratic process.

Civil Society in Sudan

Historically, civil society in Sudan has been active in social and political life. For example, trade union, professional associations, journalists, lawyers, academics, women's organizations and the like have been active in setting the agenda for human rights and democracy (Alternatives 2000).

In fact, non-violent and organized civil society protests had overthrown military dictatorships in 1964 and 1985 and sought democratic changes with other political parties. However, in 1898 the military regime dissolved trade unions, professional and women's organizations and intensified its assault on civil society and democracy activists and ethnic minorities (Africa Watch 1990). As a result, the number of civil society, particularly women's civil organizations, declined and fewer people were involved in voluntary work. Union membership has also declined and political and social activists have been made illegal. Nevertheless, this does not last long owing to a number of factors. First, people have felt that the government is not doing enough to address their social and political problems especially the issue of poverty, unemployment, education, democracy, conflict resolution and peace. Second, the government is more concerned about establishing civil society organizations, which support the government and turn a blind eye to its corruption, rather than encouraging the growth of grass-roots organizations, which represent the interest of the masses, especially the poor and marginalized. Third, the brutality of the civil war and its human costs in the South have brought the issues of peace, human rights and democracy to the forefront. Civil society organizations are becoming increasingly more concerned with the related problems of conflict resolution and peace building at the local, regional and national levels. They have realized that violent conflicts are the major obstacle to development.

Sudanese women in civil society

In Sudan, the number of women's civil society organizations has grown rapidly. Some of them are voluntary or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which

focus on the wellbeing of society. They provide services and are engaged in welfare activities such as child care and income generating activities, but they do not challenge the status quo in many civil arena. Some of them have links with international organizations and most of them are urban-based, though they conduct many activities in rural areas (Osman 2002: 39).

This welfare approach adopted by most women's civic organizations is part of the Women in Development approach (WID) which assumes that women are basic recipients of development benefits because their role is a reproductive one: motherhood, childbearing and rearing and caring for the elderly. By contrast, men's work is productive (Synder and Tadesse 1995: 9).

Moser (1993: 61) has argued that welfare programs tend to increase women's dependency rather than help them to be more independent because these programs do not question traditional gender division of labor. The criticism of the welfare approach and its limitations has resulted in the development of alternative approaches such as Gender and Development (GAD).

GAD approach has been used by a few of the women's civic organizations, which have succeeded in going further and challenging the sexual division of labor and seeking women's empowerment. These organizations challenge the unequal distribution of power between women and men. They seek to improve women's access to development resources by challenging male's culture, economic and social privileges. An example of these organizations is the Gender Centre for Research and Training. The centre has emerged as a leading women civil society organization in gender debate. Its objectives involved training on different gender issues such as gender and conflict resolution. Moreover, its founding members are well known as women activists with a profound experience in different gender issues. However, the centre has been raided many times by the authorities (Human Rights Watch 2004, Online).

Women's civil society organizations and peace efforts

Armed conflicts in Sudan have become more destructive. In Darfur, for example, the Sudanese government continued its war by proxy: allying, supporting and arming *Janjaweed* militia, more than 300,000 people were killed and 2.5 million became displaced. Ironically, this bloody internal conflict emerged while negotiations were going on to end the war in the South.

Moreover, civilian population from ethnic groups such as Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa have been subject to "ethnic cleansing" committed by the government of Sudan and its backed *Janjaweed* militias (Human Rights watch 2004, Online). Strong evidence, including victims' testimonies, shows that the

government backed *Janjaweed* militia used rape as a systematic weapon of ethnic cleansing (Boustany 2007, Online).

The above mentioned aspects of the armed conflicts such death, torture, violence and rape have brought conflict resolution and peace building to women's civil society organizations' agenda. For example, immediately after the UN conference in Beijing many women's organizations including Sudanese Women Union, Sudanese Women's for Peace and Babiker Badri Scientific Association for Women Studies have come together calling on warring parties to end the war and work towards a lasting peace (Royal Netherlands Embassy 1998).

In upper Nile, Southern Sudan in 1994, village women were very active in the People –to-People peace initiative that successfully managed to stop inter-ethnic violence in the region. Women used their knowledge, experience and influence within their families and communities to work for peace (Insight on Conflict 2008, Online).

Sudanese women in exile have also formed their own civil organizations. For example, the Sudanese Women for Peace in Nairobi has placed peace building and the strengthening of the role of women in peace building on the top of their agenda.

Moreover, regional networks have been developed to unite women of the Horn of Africa and to promote their role in conflict resolutions and peace building. These for example include The Network of for Gender Equality and Women's Rights in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), an indigenous organization based in Khartoum. The main objective of SIHA are promoting gender equality and constructing peace (SIHA 2008, Online).

However, and despite their efforts to bring peace, Sudanese women have not been represented in peace processes at the official levels. Official peace talks/negotiations are male dominated, irrespective of women's efforts to resolve conflicts and promote peace. This is mainly because political arena, including war and peace issues, is regarded as male domains. Therefore, peace agreements as foundation for post- conflict reconstruction tend to be gender blind.

Moser (2001: 48) argues that, women are the main victims of armed conflicts. However, they are excluded from peace negotiations at local, national and international levels. Therefore, their legitimate interests and needs are overlooked.

Moreover, as indicated by Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (1995: 3):

Women and young people are rarely consulted during the political process of peace negotiation, yet they are often the ones who keep their communities alive – emotionally and physically – during the times of war.

Although war may “empower” women by increasing their responsibilities in taking on what is traditionally referred to as male roles, experience has shown that traditional discriminatory social attitudes may re-emerge immediately after the war is over as was the case in Eritrea (Eugenia Date-Bah from ILO in a WILPF conference) where women were asked to leave the public arena, despite their enormous contribution during war, and go back to their traditional domain. The challenge is how to ensure that women hold on to the new gender roles they acquired during armed conflicts.

The role of women’s civil society organizations in post-conflict reconstruction era

It has been argued that conflict, conflict resolution and building peace are engendered. Moser (2001: 30-31) points out that a gender perspective should be developed to deal with post-conflict reconstruction issues. This is mainly because women and men, as social actors, often have different roles, relations, interests, needs and identities in post-conflict efforts.

A woman from Lebanon narrates:

The real experience of war is not the shelling and so on, those are just moments, though they are the ones you see on TV. War is what happens afterwards, the years of suffering hopelessly with a disabled husband and no money, or struggling to rebuild when all your property has been destroyed.

(Bennett *et al* 1995)

This narrative illustrates the importance of reconstruction in post-conflict era which includes economic reconstruction. A different experience from Somalia shows that, and while the war was still on, nomadic women have developed a new trading role. They sell livestock and milk and buy other essential items. The main cause of taking this new role was the security situation. Women had an advantage over men because they had a double clan identity that helped them to be more mobile than men. This skill could be developed further and used in post-reconstruction era (Sorensen 1998).

In Sudan, displaced women as victims of war, were able to develop new legal survival strategies such as street trading, domestic work and laundry as well as illegal survival strategies such as selling and making of local alcohol (Marisa). These new survival strategies have helped women to earn income and to gain

economic power. Furthermore, these new survival strategies could be developed in post-conflict era to allow women to gain more economic and financial positions and power (Osman 2006).

Moreover, displaced women have taken the initiative to create space for themselves and to establish informal networks of solidarity or *Tajamoat* (groups) between themselves. That form of solidarity started with a few domestic/reproductive tasks such as child care. However, that kind of gathering has been developed into more organized work to challenge traditional gender roles and to confront traditional norms. For example, the *Tajamoat* demanded that women should be represented in camps' committees.

In terms of political construction Sorensen (1998) argues that women's participation in post-war political reconstruction depends on two main issues. First, the nature of emerging political system and its understanding of women's rights, interests and needs. Second, whether or not women will be allowed to be active participants in the political process. In the Sudan case, women civil society organizations have worked hard to ensure fair women's representation, despite many obstacles, in the new emerging post-conflict political structure. For example, they demanded a quota system to promote women's political participation in post-war transitions. In decision-making positions following war, experience elsewhere shows that women are leading efforts to promote good governance by fighting corruption, demanding accountability, and maintaining transparency in activities at national and local levels.

Moreover, as new constitutions and laws developed during the post-conflict era tend to be gender blind and do not recognize women's role in post-conflict reconstruction era, many women's civil society organizations have come together and demanded that new constitutions and laws need to address many gender issues such as, gender discrimination in public and private life. Furthermore, inclusion of women in the constitution making process holds potential for achieving sustainable peace and development.

Another important issue in post-conflict era is elimination of all forms of oppression and discrimination. Human rights and democracy are crucial for any conflict resolution and peace building processes. Therefore, women's organizations as well as peace building activists need to encourage and lobby for the governments to ratify international legal instruments promoting the rights of women including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Women's civil society organizations have also launched several campaigns to break the silence surrounding violence against women and the state denial of

sexual violence against women that accompanied armed conflict notably in Darfur.

Resources including financial resources are also essential in the transition or post-conflict reconstruction. For example, funding is needed for women's organizations to maximize their efforts and to re-build their countries. In Sudan women's civil society organizations, particularly the small ones are struggling to get funding from international donors. They are also denied state funding (Osman 2006).

For healing the pain of women victims of war the *tajamoat* (groups) mentioned earlier, have developed psycho-social mechanism. This is done in an informal, supportive and friendly way without help from NGOs or state institutions. This kind of help is offered to all displaced women irrespective of their place of origin or tribe. Women trust each other and talk about their traumatic experiences, their experiences of rape, and sexual and domestic violence. They tell each other what they could not tell their husbands (Osman 2006).

Finally, a gender sensitive version of truth and reconciliation committees is also required as it could provide a forum for victims to air their grievances and to seek reconciliations. Truth and reconciliation approach developed in South Africa is a land mark in the African conflict and could provide a platform for Sudan. However, a more gender sensitive truth and reconciliations approach that deals with gender issues, address women's needs and allows women to speak out need to be developed.

Constraints

Women's different needs in post war reconstruction periods, as mentioned above, need to be dealt with seriously though there are some difficulties with women's contribution in conflict resolutions and peace building. Since women have been excluded from democratic participation for so long, the need arises for consciousness raising campaigns about the importance of women's participation in peace process. Moreover, the implementation of the quota system mentioned above may face many obstacles such as lack of gender awareness particularly, among traditional political leaders, lack of political will or other unforeseen obstacles that might emerge during election campaigns.

Traditions that stereotype/portray women as non-decision-makers could also be seen a constraint. For example, in Somalia it has been argued that Somali social structure generally prevent women from participating directly in decision-making processes. For example, when it was recommended that all regional

representations to the Transitional National Council (TNC) should include at least a woman, no clan was happy to be represented by a woman (Jama 1996).

Moreover, Islamic extremists and traditional leaders have managed to introduce and maintain conservative and politicized interpretation of *Sharia* in order to tie women to domestic sphere and to restrict their participation in political life and to free men to politics. Political system is also a male dominated and characterized by power dynamic that excludes women from decision making process and stereotypes them as only mothers and careers.

Conclusion

The paper argues that Sudanese women's civil society organizations have played a significant role, at the grass roots level, to resolve conflicts and to bring in peace. However, they have been marginalized in formal peace talk/negotiations.

In post conflict reconstruction era, and to ensure women's full participation in the political reconstruction process, a gender sensitive approach needs to be developed. For example, to address gender imbalances at the political level, new constitutions and laws should address women's needs and their participation in the new emerging political system.

However, a number of constraints need to be dealt with. These for example, include traditions that deny women their full participation in the post-construction era because it view them as non decision makers.

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