

Sudan

Accord 18 (2006) 'Peace by piece: addressing Sudan's conflicts'

Abstract

The author, a former SPLM/A negotiator, describes women's roles in both conflict and peacemaking and argues that they were more than simply privileged 'guests at the table'. Women were combatants and supporters of fighting forces, and also promoted peace by urging family members to lay down arms, by supporting grass-roots peace accords, and by maintaining communication across divides. Women's groups, networks and NGOs

also lobbied foreign governments and the UN. Yet the subsequent Consolidated Peace Agreement (CPA) failed to meet their expectations. Despite the presence of women, talks focused on political and regional interests, excluding a wider range of constituencies. However, the article suggests that the CPA opened up opportunities for women to engage in post-agreement politics by creating a new democratic space.

Background

Sudan has seen multiple overlapping conflicts since the 1950s. The country's two civil wars have resulted from fighting between the government and southern armed groups – the first from 1955–72, and the second starting in 1983 when former army colonel John Garang de Mabior formed the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). The region of Darfur has also seen extensive fighting in the 2000s.

The causes of conflict in Sudan are interwoven: economic, ethnic, cultural, religious and international dimensions have all played a role. At the root of each conflict are questions over the control and distribution of resources – the most important of which are land and oil. These causes are underpinned politically by the state's crisis of legitimacy and role in economic exploitation.

In the second civil war, Khartoum increasingly used tribal militias to fight 'rebels', with famine and forced migration among the intended or unintended consequences. In over 20 years of conflict more than two million people died, four million were uprooted and some 600,000 people became refugees. By 1997 a stalemate had developed between the Sudanese government and the SPLM/A, and regional and international pressure to end the violence had increased. The parties were persuaded to accept mediation from the regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development

(IGAD) states, supported by the IGAD Partners' Forum (Italy, Norway, the UK and the US). From 2001 onwards the parties signed a series of agreements, including the Protocol of Machakos, 2002; the Protocol on Wealth-Sharing, 2004; and the Protocol on Power-Sharing, 2004. This culminated in the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in January 2005.

The recognition this process gave to the SPLM/A, and the framing of the IGAD talks as between a unified north and a unified south, alienated others who felt marginalised. These sentiments contributed significantly to the outbreak of war in Darfur in early 2003. Regional mediation, this time by the African Union, between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) and Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) led to a series of talks starting in Addis Ababa in 2004. The Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) was eventually signed by Abuja in 2006.

The DPA mirrored the CPA, covering power-sharing, wealth-sharing and security, but it failed to hold. A major criticism has been that Sudan's regional peace processes have been addressed independently of each other, and have failed to bring a comprehensive approach to Sudan. At the time this Accord article was written in 2006, implementation of the CPA was uncertain, while in Darfur there was increased instability and conflict.

Guests at the table? The role of women in Sudan's peace processes

Anne Itto

Dr Anne Itto was a member of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) delegation to the Naivasha talks. She has taught at the University of Juba and served as the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry in the Government of National Unity from 2005–2011. Dr Itto was also the Secretary General for the southern sector of the SPLM, and was nominated to the National Assembly in 2005. She became chairperson for the

Political Committee of the Joint National Transitional Team, one of the specialised bodies created by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in January 2005. Before her involvement in the peace negotiations, she chaired the Natural Resource Management and Utilisation Committee and was an advisor to the SPLM Economic Commission on Agriculture and Natural Resources Development.

At the Machakos (2002) and Naivasha (2004) negotiations between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) it was assumed that resolving the Sudanese conflict meant sharing power and resources between political forces along regional or geographical divides. This approach neglected other constituencies and the fact that a just and sustainable peace, based on good governance, equity, justice and democracy, requires an environment where every citizen has the opportunity to contribute to decision-making and development. In particular, Sudanese women play a very central role in their society, in physical and psychological welfare as well as conflict prevention and peacebuilding. It is therefore important that women are not just seen as passive victims, or as representatives of political parties, or as having no political affiliation or perspective, but that they are encouraged to participate fully and see their perspectives taken seriously and incorporated into solutions to political conflicts.

The complex roles of women

Women were never simply guests at the negotiating table. The roles they play as combatants, supporters of fighting forces and peacemakers qualify them to sit at the negotiating table and to assume an active role in implementation.

Thousands of women had joined the southern liberation struggle in response to a political situation that affected whole communities, leaving the comfort and security of their homes not just to accompany their husbands but to fight for freedom, democracy, equity, justice, rights and dignity. Their roles in the conflict ranged from combatants to providers of support to fighters, including feeding and caring for sick and wounded soldiers. Although in any armed conflict women are victims of violence, bombing, landmines, hunger and diseases, it is not correct to portray them simply as innocent victims. In Khartoum, women contributed gold in support of the jihad and encouraged their sons to join up, while in the south, the Nuba Mountains and southern Blue Nile women contributed food and encouraged their sons to join the SPLA to fight marginalisation and oppression by the government in Khartoum.

On the other hand, Sudanese women have worked very hard to keep families and communities together during conflicts

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through singing peace songs, persuading their husbands, sons and brothers to stop fighting, risking dangerous peace missions across enemy territories, or marrying across enemy lines to unite or reconcile warring communities. There were times when women stopped conflict from escalating by defying or opposing decisions by male members of the community to go to war. In one case women from a community in southern Sudan were reported to have threatened not to comply with their conjugal obligations until their husbands stopped killing each other, while in some areas of the south women threatened to expose their nakedness (a curse in most Sudanese customary beliefs) to protest ethnic conflict.

Women have also taken a leading role in creating links and forums for resolving inter-ethnic conflict, leading to many grass-roots peace accords. Examples include the people-to-people processes, such as the Wunlit Covenant between the Nuer and the Dinka and the Lilir Covenant between Nuer groups. It has been reported that when it was decided by Dinka elders that a peace delegation was to be sent to Nuer land, no one wanted to go; it was the brave wife of a Dinka chief who demanded that her husband lead his people to Nuer land, even though she was aware of the high risk involved. Another example where women stood together in solidarity against their husband's political position was the period following the split in the SPLM/A. Women from both sides of the split continued to visit one another, maintain communication and provide a forum to discuss issues that affected their communities, something no man was capable of.

In order to effectively address social, economic and general problems of war facing women, many women organised themselves into groups, networks and NGOs on both sides of the political divide. These activist networks (including the Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace, New Sudan Women's Federation and New Sudan Women's Association) went all over the world advocating peace and drawing attention to what was then referred to as 'the forgotten war'. In Washington DC, the UN Headquarters in New York, the Hague and Beijing, women lobbied the international community to pressure Sudan's warring parties to end the war.

It is clear that the absence of women at the negotiating table in Naivasha or Abuja was not due to lack of experience and capacity, but to the perceptions of their role.

A gender-blind agreement

Despite the active role women played at various levels to bring peace to the Sudan their role has tended to be underestimated or ignored during negotiations. This may have originated from the misconception that women are passive victims of war, forgetting the very important role they have played in negotiating, keeping and building peace in their communities.

The most disappointing aspect of the 2005 *Comprehensive Peace Agreement* (CPA) and 2006 *Darfur Peace Agreement* (DPA) was that negotiations for an equitable share of power and resources were premised around political forces and regional interests. Neither mediators nor drafters gave much thought to other constituencies or dimensions, such as gender, along which power and wealth could be shared.

Yet conflict in Sudan is not just a matter of political rivalry but is triggered by many forms of marginalisation. The late Dr John Garang, the SPLM/A leader and briefly the First Vice-President of Sudan and President of Government of Southern Sudan, publicly recognised women as the 'marginalised of the marginalised'. Long before the negotiations, he used affirmative action (quotas and training) aimed at creating a critical mass of women capable of influencing policies and decisions.

The SPLM/A leadership nominated a handful of women leaders as members of the delegation to Machakos and subsequent rounds of negotiations. However, this did not necessarily enable their strong participation: the women were often co-opted to these delegations at short notice with very little opportunity to consult with each other and develop a women's peace agenda; they were expected to contribute to the overall party position which was gender-blind to begin with; and they were always a minority, ill-prepared for debates with seasoned politicians who ridiculed or intimidated anyone who dared to spend much time on gender issues.

For example, during the negotiations SPLM/A women proposed a minimum quota of 25 per cent for the representation of women in the civil service, legislative and executive at all levels of government, as provided for by the SPLM/A constitution. One senior male member of the SPLM/A delegation laughed and asked me where the women would be found to fill these positions. The 25 per cent quota was eventually accepted in the larger group, where there were at



A participant expresses herself at a peacebuilding workshop organised by Pact Sudan, 2006 // © Pact Sudan/Alex Dianga

least three women, but then the all-male SPLM/A drafting committee reduced this figure to 5 per cent. The SPLM/A Chairman raised this to 10 per cent as a compromise. Later on we learned that it had been dropped altogether when government negotiators refused a quota for women in power-sharing on the grounds that they had not been fighting women.

There are articles in the final agreement that recognise customs, traditions and religion as sources of moral strength for the Sudanese people; personal and family matters including marriage, divorce, inheritance and succession fall under the competency of customary law. Yet some customs and traditions have contributed to the marginalisation of women.

Even when women were consulted about gender issues or directly included in the peace negotiations, it was only a gesture to showcase democracy and inclusiveness: their perspectives and their experiences in peacebuilding and negotiation were not recognised or fully utilised.

Learning from experience

The SPLM/A women's realisation that the CPA did not require any party to achieve gender-related targets prompted them