

Unseen Frontlines: Narratives on Sudanese Women in War

Written by Aida Abbashar

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AIDA ABBASHAR, MAR 1 2025

Representation in war narratives is a critical aspect of shaping public perceptions, policy responses, and historical memory. Traditional narratives of war tend to prioritise the experiences of male combatants and political elites, marginalising the roles, experiences and voices of women. This exclusion reinforces existing gender hierarchies and perpetuates the notion that warfare is inherently masculine (Enloe, 2014). Feminist scholars argue that the erasure of women from war narratives is not a mere oversight but a deliberate mechanism of structural power that upholds patriarchal systems (Cockburn, 2007). The absence of women's perspectives in these accounts has tangible consequences, affecting post-war reconstruction efforts and policy-making, where women remain underrepresented in governance and transitional justice initiatives (True, 2013). Postcolonial feminist theorists (Mohanty, 1988) highlight how representations of women in war, particularly those from the Global South, are often framed through a Western-centric lens that reduces them to passive victims of violence. This narrative not only distorts reality but also influences international intervention policies that prioritise top-down approaches over grassroots, women-led solutions (Ticktin, 2011).

Frantz Fanon (1961) argues that colonial violence and its aftermath deeply shape the roles of women in conflict, often reducing them to symbols of cultural integrity while simultaneously excluding them from revolutionary leadership. In his work *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon critiques how nationalist movements, despite relying on women's participation in resistance efforts, often relegate them to the private sphere post-independence. Applying Fanon's framework to Sudan's war narratives reveals how women's contributions to grassroots mobilisation and community resilience are acknowledged during times of crisis but systematically erased in post-conflict governance and decision-making. Furthermore, the lived experiences of women in war are shaped by multiple and intersecting axes of oppression, including race, class, and ethnicity. Applying an intersectional lens to Sudan's war narratives reveals how the experiences of Sudanese women are not monolithic but vary depending on their geographic location, ethnic identity, and socio-economic status.

Sylvia Wynter (1994) expands on Fanon's ideas by emphasising how historical narratives are shaped by Eurocentric frameworks that categorise people into hierarchical structures, often marginalising the voices of those outside dominant power structures. Wynter's critique of the 'overrepresentation of Man' is useful in understanding how Sudanese women's roles in war are systematically excluded from official accounts in favour of militarised and elite-centric narratives. Similarly, Walter Dignolo (2011) contends that the colonial matrix of power continues to dictate which voices are considered authoritative and which are dismissed. His concept of 'epistemic disobedience' can be applied to the context of women in war, whereby reclaiming women's war narratives requires actively challenging these dominant frameworks and constructing alternative knowledge systems that centre the experiences of women impacted by war.

An analysis of historical silences demonstrates how power determines which stories are preserved and which are omitted from official historical accounts. The exclusion of women's voices from Sudan's war narratives is part of a broader pattern of erasing marginalised groups from mainstream history. The ongoing conflict in Sudan is not merely a struggle for political power but also a battleground for competing narratives of resistance and survival. The exclusion of women from dominant war discourses mirrors broader global patterns, where gendered experiences of

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war are often side-lined in favour of militarised and elite-centric perspectives. Understanding the Sudanese conflict through this lens allows for a more nuanced examination of how women navigate, resist, and reshape their roles in war-torn societies.

Context

The ongoing war in Sudan, which erupted in April 2023, is rooted in a power struggle between two rival factions: the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) commanded by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemedti. This conflict is the culmination of decades of political instability, militarisation, and economic crises, exacerbated by the country's colonial past and subsequent authoritarian rule (Deng, 2010). Sudan's failure to transition to civilian governance after the 2019 revolution created a vacuum where military factions competed for control, ultimately leading to the current devastating conflict (Abbashar, 2023).

Women in Sudan occupy diverse and multifaceted roles across social, economic, and political spheres. Historically, Sudanese women have been central to civil society movements, including the resistance against British colonial rule, the 1964 and 1985 uprisings, and the 2019 revolution (Sikainga, 2002). Their participation in trade unions, student movements, and political organisations has shaped the country's democratic aspirations, yet they remain systematically marginalised from formal governance structures. Economically, women contribute significantly to both the formal and informal sectors, with many working as agricultural labourers, entrepreneurs, and educators, while also navigating restrictive legal and social barriers (Badri, 2017). In the domestic sphere, women also participate in caregiving, often acting as the primary providers for families displaced by war and economic hardship (Abbashar, 2023).

The ongoing war has disproportionately affected women, exacerbating existing gender inequalities. Reports indicate that women face heightened risks of sexual violence, forced displacement, and economic marginalisation across the country (Abdelmoniem, 2023). Women have also played crucial roles in mitigating the effects of war, engaging in grassroots organising, leading humanitarian initiatives, and resisting militarisation through local peace efforts (Emad, 2025). However, their contributions and experiences remain underrepresented in mainstream narratives, which continue to prioritise the perspectives of male political and military actors.

Historical Precedents

The historical marginalisation of Sudanese women in political movements reflects broader structural exclusions that have shaped the country's post-colonial trajectory. The 1985 intifada and the 2019 revolution were defining moments of popular resistance, yet women's significant roles in these uprisings were largely downplayed or erased from mainstream narratives. Women were central to organising protests, leading grassroots mobilisations, and sustaining revolutionary momentum, yet their contributions were often relegated to the periphery of political discourse (Badri, 2017).

During the 1985 unrest, women's activism extended beyond public demonstrations to critical logistical and organisational roles. They coordinated supply chains, disseminated information, and mobilised communities against the repressive rule of President Jaafar Nimeiri. However, despite their integral role, women were largely excluded from transitional governance structures, reinforcing a long-standing pattern in which female activism is recognised during moments of crisis but dismissed in post-conflict political settlements (Elhoussein, 2020).

A similar trajectory unfolded in the 2019 revolution. Women were not only visible participants but also key strategists in the mass protests that led to the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir. Their leadership in the resistance committees and professional associations was instrumental in sustaining the movement. The image of Alaa Salah wearing Sudanese women traditional cloth *white toab* became emblematic of the revolution. After the fall of Omar al-Bashir in 2019, the transitional period signalled moments of hope for improved gender equity and inclusion (Mohamed et al, 2023). However, despite their visibility and leadership, diverse women's voices were side-lined during this period (Mohamed et al, 2023), with their demands for gender equity overshadowed by elite negotiations

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between military and political factions (Elhussein, 2020).

Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (1995) concept of 'silencing the past' provides a useful analytical lens to understand this erasure. Power structures determine which voices are preserved in historical memory and which are omitted, reinforcing hegemonic narratives that privilege male leadership while rendering women's contributions invisible. This systematic exclusion not only distorts historical accounts but also impacts contemporary governance, as women continue to be underrepresented in decision-making bodies and peace negotiations. The historical erasure of women's roles in these uprisings has tangible consequences for their political legitimacy in present-day Sudan. By neglecting their activism in resistance movements, both within and outside of Khartoum, governance frameworks perpetuate their marginalisation, limiting their access to leadership roles in transitional processes.

Erasure of Women's Stories – Grassroots Organising and Humanitarian Efforts

Despite their pivotal roles in grassroots organising and humanitarian work, Sudanese women are often excluded from mainstream war narratives. Throughout this ongoing conflict, women have played crucial roles in providing aid, coordinating relief efforts, and advocating for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). For instance, emergency response rooms, many set up and led by women activists, have become critical hubs for coordinating relief efforts, including managing the distribution of food, water, and medical supplies to their communities (Badr et al, 2024). Furthermore, mutual aid efforts have been particularly critical in delivering support to women in war-affected areas, where formal humanitarian operations are often limited by security concerns (Emad, 2025). Women activists have mobilised through informal channels, such as WhatsApp and Signal groups, to coordinate food deliveries, share safety alerts, and raise emergency funds for those in need. In the absence of adequate state or international intervention, these grassroots networks have become lifelines for many civilians, particularly in regions where violence has disrupted formal supply chains (Emad 2025). Finally, they have also played a significant role in maintaining economic structures despite immense precarity, sustaining families through informal economies and mutual aid networks.

These informal support structures challenge the dominant war narratives that depict women primarily as victims rather than as agents of survival and resistance. Instead of being passive recipients of aid, Sudanese women have actively shaped crisis response strategies, leveraging their local knowledge and community ties to fill gaps left by both national and international actors. Many have taken on leadership roles within displaced communities, ensuring access to essential services such as maternal healthcare, psychological support, and legal assistance for survivors of conflict-related violence. Their efforts, however, continue to be overlooked in both media coverage and policy discussions, which often prioritise militarised and male-dominated perspectives on the war. Recognising the role of women in humanitarian responses is not just about visibility, it is crucial to designing more effective, community-driven approaches to relief and post-conflict reconstruction. Without acknowledging their contributions, efforts to rebuild Sudan risk reinforcing the very exclusions that have historically marginalised women in political and social spheres.

Instrumentalisation of Women's Suffering

The instrumentalisation of women's suffering in Sudan's war presents a complex dynamic that both highlights and obscures their lived experiences. While the crimes committed against women are severe and warrant urgent redress, they are often weaponised in political discourse in ways that strip women of their agency and position their bodies as contested sites of power in warfare. The suffering of women is frequently invoked to delegitimise one faction over another. This selective outrage not only obscures the full scope of violence but also reduces women to passive symbols of victimhood rather than recognising their active resistance and contributions to survival and recovery efforts.

Sylvia Wynter (1994) critiques how dominant narratives, shaped by colonial and patriarchal frameworks, construct suffering as the primary lens through which marginalised communities, particularly women of the Global South, are viewed. She argues that this erasure of agency reinforces a dehumanising paradigm in which women's experiences are only acknowledged insofar as they serve external political and humanitarian agendas. In Sudan, this plays out in

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the discrediting of women's active participation in grassroots organising, relief work, and advocacy. Women's bodies have long been weaponised as tools of war, serving as sites where political and ethnic conflicts are violently enacted. Rape and sexual violence are not merely incidental but products of war; they are calculated strategies of domination and territorial control meant to destabilise communities and instil fear (Mookherjee, 2015). In Sudan, as in conflicts in Bosnia, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, armed groups have deployed gender-based violence as a means of asserting power, undermining resistance, and fracturing social cohesion. The control of women's bodies becomes a proxy for controlling entire communities and resolidifying patriarchal hierarchies that long predate the conflict itself. This dynamic underscores the urgency of reframing war narratives to highlight not only the horrors of gendered violence but also the ways in which women resist, endure, and reclaim agency in the face of systemic oppression.

The legal and social structures that allow for the continued violence against women are deeply embedded within Sudan's governance framework. The Sudanese legal system, long influenced by patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law, has historically constrained women's rights, particularly in relation to sexual violence and bodily autonomy. Even in peacetime, these constraints placed significant barriers to survivors' access to justice. In war, these same structures serve to legitimise impunity, reinforcing a cycle where crimes against women are not only tolerated but instrumentalised for broader political narratives. Without dismantling these systemic inequities, any attempt at addressing wartime violence against women will be superficial at best.

Implications for Post-Conflict Sudan

The elimination of women's experiences in war narratives undermines their political legitimacy and perpetuates structural inequalities. As the war wages on, and when Sudan eventually transitions towards peace, ensuring women's inclusion in governance and decision-making processes will be essential. However, this requires addressing the systemic and historical factors that have excluded them, from patriarchal legal frameworks to media and policy biases. Without active intervention, post-conflict reconstruction risks reinforcing the same gendered hierarchies that have long marginalised women's contributions to resistance, peacebuilding, and economic recovery.

The exclusion of women from transitional justice mechanisms and political negotiations has profound consequences, as has been observed in previous post-conflict settings where male-dominated governance structures have failed to integrate gender perspectives into policy reforms (Enloe, 2014). Women's demands for justice, particularly concerning gender-based violence and economic displacement, must be addressed through formal legal mechanisms, including truth commissions and reparations programs. However, for such mechanisms to be meaningful, they must be shaped by those directly affected. This means creating spaces where Sudanese women, particularly those from marginalised ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, have direct influence over legal and institutional reforms. In addition to diverse political inclusion, economic reintegration is central to rebuilding Sudan in a way that acknowledges and values women's contributions. A post-war economic framework that fails to account for these contributions risks further entrenching women's economic precarity. Policies that prioritise women's access to land ownership, financial resources, and employment in key industries will be indispensable to building a sustainable and inclusive economy.

Furthermore, the role of media and historical documentation in shaping post-conflict narratives cannot be overstated. If the dominant narrative of the war continues to erase or instrumentalise women's suffering without acknowledging their agency, future generations will inherit a distorted version of history that perpetuates patriarchal power structures (Trouillot, 1995). Correcting this requires a deliberate effort to centre women's perspectives in historical documentation, including oral histories, archival projects, and policy discourses that frame women not as victims but as active agents of resistance and reconstruction.

Conclusion

The erasure of Sudanese women's experiences in war narratives reflects deeply embedded structural inequalities that persist beyond the battlefield. While women have been disproportionately affected by violence, displacement, and economic marginalisation, they have also been central to resistance efforts, humanitarian response, and

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grassroots organising. However, their roles remain overlooked in both national and international discourses. Recognising women's agency requires a shift away from narratives that frame them solely as victims, instead acknowledging their leadership in shaping Sudan's political and social landscape. As Sudan moves toward post-conflict reconstruction, it is imperative that women's voices are not just included but centred on governance, legal reforms, and economic rebuilding. Without this structural shift, the patterns of exclusion that have historically silenced Sudanese women will persist, undermining any attempt at achieving lasting peace and justice.

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Aida Abbashar is completing her PhD at Durham University, focusing on the role of constitutional imaginaries in Sudanese governance, resistance, and social transformation. Her work explores the intersections of law, political mobilisation, and grassroots activism, and the contributions of women in Sudan's democratic struggles. She has contributed to various academic and policy discussions on Sudan's resistance movements, gendered political participation, and decolonial thought. She is the author of 'Decolonising Security, Epistemic Disobedience, and Revolutionary Change in Sudan' (*African Historical Review*, 2025), 'Sudan's Resistance Committees: Grassroots Democracy and the Struggle for Political Change' (*PeaceRep*, 2023), and 'Women's Career Motivation: Social Barriers and Enablers in Sudan' (*Frontiers in Psychology*, 2023).