



FORCED PROSTITUTION: THE EFFECTS OF THE SUDAN WAR ON WOMEN AND GIRLS



Figure 1 Photo Credit: Getty Images

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Executive summary

Since 1955, Sudan has witnessed several civil wars and consequently signed several peace agreements in a bid to restore peace. For example, in 2005 the Government of Sudan and the SPLM signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and agreed to end the second civil war. Unfortunately, failure by both parties to uphold their obligations has often led to a new series of conflicts and subsequent Peace Agreements i.e. the Darfur Peace Agreements were signed by the Government of Sudan and Darfur-based rebel groups in 2006, 2011, and 2020 to end the Darfur civil war.

Throughout all these conflicts, SGBV against women and girls has been used as a tool of war, whether through gender-specific violations, neglect, or political exploitation. Unfortunately, women have been ignored in peacemaking efforts in Sudan even though they have been the most affected group. Women form majority of the victims of displacement and asylum in camps for example, in 1983 majority of the IDPs in the Al-Kanabi camp were female. Currently, the greater percentage of IDPs and refugees in camps are women and girls. Additionally, women are mothers of child soldiers, wives of soldiers and rebels, and also mothers to children born of war. The absence of justice, economic, social, and education policies has further exposed women and girls to these violations. The restrictive and repressive laws such as the Public Order Act further frustrate the rights of women in Sudan.

The December 2018 Revolution highlighted the important role of women as they comprised 60% of the protesters. However, during the current Sudan, the warring parties have been accused of committing several violations against women and girls. In this report, ACJPS documents the Forced Prostitution trade in the city of Nyala, South Darfur as a case study of what is going on in Sudan. The report aims to shed light on the situation and provide information about the growing practice as one of the effects of the Sudan war on Women and girls.

Introduction

Armed conflict erupted in Sudan on 15 April 2023, between the national army (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) following brewing conflict for the greed for power. An estimated **20,000** people have been killed¹ and thousands of others injured. More than **10 million** people (or over one in every five people) have fled their homes, including **8.1 million** who have been displaced within Sudan and another **2.4 million** who crossed the borders to neighboring and other countries. Private and public property are looted and destroyed without compensation.

Despite efforts and attempts to end the conflict, SAF still insists on the preconditions before joining any negotiation to end the war. Civilians calling for the cessation of the war have been met with arbitrary arrests, and cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment while in detention. Furthermore, civilians have continued to suffer at the hands of the warring parties especially in cities under siege by the RSF, such as El Fashir in North Darfur and Senar city in Central Sudan.

¹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/glance-protection-impacts-conflict-update-no-29-15-july-2024>

The visible manifestations of the war, including killing, bombing, shelling, etc. are matched with violations against individuals such as enforced disappearance, sexual violence, arbitrary arrests, and torture while in detention.

SGBV particularly against women and girls in its different forms have been employed E.g modern-day slavery; women and girls are abducted, enslaved, used for manual labor in farms, forced into prostitution, verbally abused, humiliated, and discriminated against.

Hate speech has been used by the warring parties to create a divide amongst the population and further fuel the war. Hate speech is always based on the treatment or description of others as “less than” i.e. comparing them to animals and insects, to justify the violations against them including genital mutilation, slaughter, violent killing in public spaces, etc.

As the war continues to escalate it is clear that the warring parties are only interested in the show of power and a fight for resources at the expense of the civilians who are suffering violations. The prolongation of the war and the denial of access to basic humanitarian aid, whether by preventing its entry or by looting such aid, represents a violation of international humanitarian law leading to a series of other violations such as Forced prostitution and sexual slavery.

Forced prostitution

Forced prostitution and related violations of the same nature constitute crimes against humanity under Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, "*Violation of the dignity of the person, in particular, humiliating and degrading treatment*". In 1949, the UN General Assembly adopted the [Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others](#). This Convention supersedes several earlier conventions that covered some aspects of forced prostitution and also deals with other aspects of prostitution. It penalizes the procurement and enticement of prostitution as well as the maintenance of brothels.

Forced prostitution can generally be defined as the act of forcing someone to engage in one or more acts of a sexual nature with another person to obtain financial or other benefits in exchange for food, money, housing, drugs, etc. The benefit obtained in exchange for forced prostitution does not necessarily have to be received by the victim herself, it can also be received by a third party. The European Institute for Gender Equality defines Forced Prostitution as a form of slavery that is incompatible with the protection of human dignity and fundamental rights.

The Sudanese Criminal Code classifies sexual violations as adultery, even when the pregnancy results from rape. This legal framework is particularly problematic as forced prostitution is not explicitly defined despite amendments made in 2009.

Children born from forced prostitution and other forms of SGBV are the most vulnerable victims of these heinous crimes. The lack of access to healthcare for both mothers and children exacerbates the suffering. Women and girls face significant health risks, including exposure to sexually transmitted diseases like HIV and hepatitis B. Young girls are particularly vulnerable to forced

prostitution and its associated health dangers. Safe abortion is not an option in the absence of accessible healthcare. Additionally, malnutrition and food scarcity further compound the challenges faced by victims forcing them into prostitution.

In Sudan now, Women and girls have resorted to offering sex to soldiers and fighters in exchange for food and money due to the dire economic conditions resulting from the war (the loss of sources of income, no access to humanitarian aid, cities under siege, and restriction of movement).

Victims have testified that in some case intimacy has turned into rape and physical/verbal abuse. One victim testified to ACJPS that “... *Sometimes the soldiers do not pay what was agreed upon before getting intimate but instead we are beaten, bullied and verbally abused. I was one time called a filthy whore and that I did not even deserve a single pound....*”

Women have played a crucial role in rescuing victims of sexual violence either physically or through advocacy. ACJPS [previously documented](#) an incident in which the mother of a perpetrator helped a female victim flee after being abducted and sexually enslaved.

Victims of forced prostitution face significant stigma from society, compounded by the challenges including unwanted pregnancy and subsequent motherhood, lack of housing, and the legal recognition of their newborn.

ACJPS has monitored an increase in forced prostitution in Nyala city, South Darfur. We have tracked the existence of several houses used for the practice, involving groups of women and girls aged between 17 and 25 years. One such place began its activities early on at the beginning of the war and to date is still used as a brothel and a safe house for keeping abductees awaiting payment of ransom. The facility operates under the protection of RSF officers and supervised by an RSF major.

Middlemen (pimps) in the trade of forced prostitution

In the illegal trade of forced prostitution and sexual slavery, there exist third parties known as “pimps” who either engage the victims directly or through social media platforms such as WhatsApp groups. These pimps receive partial compensation from perpetrators before recruiting a victim, and the balance is paid upon completion of the “business”. The pimps have also been lured into this illegal practice because of the current economic crisis caused by the war. They are subjected to threats associated with the nature of their street-based work, making them vulnerable to exploitation and coercion. Sometimes, they are forced to facilitate forced sex between a soldier/fighter and the victim who is in a similarly bad humanitarian situation.

Mr. Mustafa (a pseudonym), a taxi driver, informed ACJPS that there is a popular tea shop in the Al-Andalus neighborhood of Nyala, South Darfur used for the trade. The shop is run by a woman in the guise of selling tea. “... *I used to frequent that particular tea shop. One time, I noticed 4 to 5 girls, aged between 17 to 25 years, sitting near the shop owner. Out of curiosity, I asked the owner about them. She revealed that the girls were waiting for customers. I then inquired about the fee and she told me that it ranged between 20,000 to 50,000 Sudanese pounds (approximately*

7-20 US dollars), depending on the agreement and the customer's financial standing. She further informed me that she was merely a pimp who earned between 10,000 and 20,000 Sudanese pounds as commission from a transaction.....”

Forced prostitution in Nyala city

The division of the city into two i.e. northern and southern Nyala by the local ceasefire committee led to the early displacement of residents in May 2023. Those who stayed in the city continued living in fear of being targeted for their ethnicity, profession, or political affiliation.

After the outbreak of this current war, thousands of people fled the city of Nyala, particularly from the areas surrounding the SAF's 16th Division headquarters, which was captured by the RSF and turned into an RSF base and detention center. SAF has continued to attempt to re-capture their headquarters by severally aerial bombing the surrounding further driving residents out of the city center, turning Nyala into a ghost town.

Those involved in forced prostitution have taken advantage and occupied the abandoned houses in the guise of selling food and tea to RSF fighters stationed at checkpoints and within the headquarters. These houses are brothels for forced prostitution, where pimps actively host girls and women after spotting them in markets. It is reported that sometimes, deals are made between the customer and the girl or woman at the marketplace, and upon payment they are directed to the brothel.

Some of these houses (brothels) are located at the cinema, Jamhoria, Mazad, Imtidad and the Al Wadi neighborhoods. These houses are used for sexual slavery and the keeping of captives/abductees before payment of ransom by their families. These facilities enjoy the protection of RSF officers.

Testimonies

Ms. Mariam (a pseudonym) aged 26, a vendor at Al-Andalus Market in Nyala says that prostitution has become widespread these days. She attributes this to the difficult economic situation. She adds that some women have children who need to feed and drink and that husbands are not providing thus forcing them into prostitution. She added that selling tea no longer covers the costs of food and other necessities. Ms. Mariam continued to say that the girls go with whoever pays more money. “... *Some girls don't have work in the market but they come with their friends to look for clients. Women have now formed groups, cooperating to find clients. There is no fixed amount but it is just based on agreement but usually ranges between 20,000 and 50,000 Sudanese pounds. In some cases, girls have ended up getting pregnant especially those between the ages of 17 and 20. I know five girls who got pregnant this way. Sometimes the customers fail to pay and instead verbally and physically abuse the girls.*”

Another witness told ACJPS that some women offer themselves to men for only food and a drink and not money.

Ms. Hawa (a pseudonym), a 29-year-old vegetable vendor said that the practice of prostitution increased following the outbreak of the war last year. She added that women have become so desperate that they will go with a man for very little money. She pointed out and mentioned specific buildings and houses in Al-Wihda Quarter located south of Al-Andalus, that are known for these activities. She revealed that she was forced into the trade due to the economic situation and that her job barely covered her family's needs. Ms. Hawa said that she has four children whose father left before the war and hasn't returned. She expressed the desire to quit the trade as soon as she found an alternative means to make a living.

Ms. Nadia (a pseudonym) a 45-year-old businesswoman in the business brewing and selling local liquor known as "Marisa" in the Riyadh Quarter north said “... *before the war, I only made liquor and had regular customers who would come to my home to buy and drink the liquor. After the war, things changed, and some male customers approached me suggesting to bring female companions to my home to spend time with them. I agreed and prepared one of the rooms with a large bed and a table for an amount between 30,000 and 50,000 Sudanese pounds, depending on the agreement and their financial capabilities. Most of the frequent visitors are thieves, RSF soldiers, and militia. I later started bringing them some women who were willing to have sex for money usually for only 20,000 pounds or less...*”

According to Mr. Abdallah (a pseudonym), a human rights defender in Nyala, the primary motivation behind forced prostitution is the dire economic situation and the harsh living conditions. This particularly impacts married women who are forced to provide for their children or dependents. The unmarried girls aged 17 to 22, are usually lured into the trade for financial benefits.

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

Humanitarian Situation

Efforts to open humanitarian aid routes have been challenged by the lack of cooperation from SAF. The national army has openly communicated its unwillingness to participate in the various peace-seeking platforms such as the Jeddah Platform thus leading to the failure of the forum.

Following several negotiations, on 6 August 2024, a group of international organizations, including the World Food Organization (WFP), Doctors Without Borders, and UNICEF began transporting humanitarian aid from Chad into Sudan through the Edri border in Western Darfur. Unfortunately, on 10 August 2024, the bridge leading to El Geneina, the capital of West Darfur collapsed due to heavy rains consequently halting the inflow of aid to the vulnerable population. The heavy rains also caused the collapse of the Morny Bridge linking the states of West and Central Darfur, further complicating the accessibility of any of the states of Darfur.

Cities under siege

States under the full control of RSF have limited or no access to humanitarian aid. The breakdown of civil services as well as insecurity have further encouraged theft and looting.

In October 2023, the RSF took control of the military's 16th Division headquarters further extending its control over all of South Darfur which is the third most populated state in Sudan, after Khartoum and El Gezira. South Darfur is the second biggest economically important state in Sudan due to its advantage of border trade with the Central African countries, South Sudan, Chad, and Cameroon, either directly or indirectly by supplying the states in Central and West Darfur. The tight security grip is the main feature of the RSF in Nyala. Ethnically motivated arrests based on appearance especially of individuals from the Masalit, Zaghawa, and Fur groups, have been activated because they share the same ethnic roots as the forces making up the "Joint Force" and the leaders of armed movements allied with the SAF, or for reasons related to economic reasons.

The same old tactics used by the former regime such as arbitrary arrests and incommunicado detention have been adopted by the RSF, especially in Nyala. SAF on the other hand has continued to launch intensive aerial bombardments without taking civilians into account. The bombings target detention centers and bases controlled by the RSF, resulting in the death and injuring of detainees and civilians. ACJPS recently [documented](#) an incident where the SAF Airforce unit aerial bombed several RSF sites in Nyala resulting in the killing of several civilians and detainees².

Economic crisis and widespread poverty.

Sudan is currently experiencing an economic crisis. The war has had a devastating impact on Sudan's economic performance. Real GDP contracted due to the destruction of production capacity and disruption of economic activities, with a decline in services dragging down growth on the supply side. On the demand side, the loss of income and the massive displacements have reduced consumption. The businessmen have taken advantage of the situation by charging exorbitant prices for commodities. The heavy rains and floods have cut off aid routes and destroyed crops in farms further worsening the already bad situation.

The heavy rains have also exposed the population to waterborne diseases such as malaria, diarrhea, typhoid, and cholera without access to medical care.

The reality of war coupled with the deteriorating economic conditions in Sudan has driven girls and women to look for other means of earning income. Markets have become the primary place for manual and unskilled labor like selling food and beverages.

Amidst such a bad economic situation, women burdened with the fate of hungry children have loitered in the markets given the reality that those frequenting food and beverage stalls are often members of the RSF or allied militias. These are the only groups with some money attained from their earnings or the proceeds of looting. Several girls and women have found themselves engaging in the sex trade driven by economic necessity, with markets serving as the primary hubs for "finding work".

²ACJPS, South Darfur: SAF Airforce unit launches airstrike on RSF sites in Nyala
<https://www.acjps.org/publications/south-darfur-saf-airforce-unit-launches-airstrike-on-rsf-sites-in-nyala>

Effects of the war on pastoral/Nomadic communities

The ongoing war in Sudan has cast a dark shadow over various Sudanese states. However, South Darfur has been particularly affected, as it is the origin of the biggest number of Rapid Support Forces fighters (RSF has strong ties to pastoralist communities). South Darfur is one of the centers of pastoral production. The involvement of these communities in support of the RSF has contributed to the breakdown and neglect of pastoral production resulting in widespread casualties, increasing the number of families who have lost their primary or only income earners.

Failure of the state to protect civilians

Civilians especially those in cities under siege, are living in terror and fear of militant control by those who have seized the city. The de facto military authorities have exercised illegal and unlawful power over civilians in these areas under the watch of the State. These violations include restriction of freedom of, movement, and expression i.e. those advocating against the war, for humanitarian aid protesting the behavior of soldiers, are arbitrarily arrested and detained.

The perpetrators have also exploited the dire humanitarian situation as civilians need food, water, and other basic needs and subjected areas in their control to military rule accompanied by emergency decrees that legitimize their actions. These violations are committed in the absence of functional legal systems.

The warring parties continue to commit various violations against the population without consequences. For example, a detainee may be subjected to sexual violence and other forms of torture in official or unofficial places of detention as long as there is a belief that those accused are “not deserving” of fair treatment. Most times such detainees end up being falsely imprisoned for prolonged periods without being charged or presented before the courts of law.

Conclusion

The protection and respect of civilian rights guaranteed under the national laws and international conventions is the first step to restoring peace and ending violence in Sudan. This includes ensuring access to humanitarian assistance. In cases of sexual violence, individuals and the armed groups are individually and vicariously liable/responsible and the defense of consent cannot suffice under such circumstances.

Recommendations

- √ We call upon the warring parties to desist from using SGBV as a tool of war in Sudan ensure the safety of survivors and their children, and take all necessary measures to alleviate their suffering.
- √ We call upon the Sudanese authorities to take urgent protection measures for victims/survivors and hold the perpetrators accountable.

- √ We further call upon the Sudanese authorities to amend national laws like Criminal law that discriminate against women to include the crimes of Forced Prostitution.
- √ The warring parties to allow the entry of humanitarian aid as soon as possible to save girls and women from Forced Prostitution.