

# Beyond Survival: Women in Sudan - A quest for Peace and Security

## Transcript

Fathiaa Abdalla

Okay, good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Fathiaa Abdalla. I worked for the UN over 30 years, probably in the global humanitarian sector, mainly in conflict zones, like Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq, and other related. So I'm very glad to be here, not on the subject I'm going to talk about, but to contribute to this important conference. and I appreciate the opportunity to share with you aspect of the Sudan conflict and its impact on the society, in particular women and girls who bear the brunt of the conflict. At the same time, with heavy heart, my thoughts go to those who are being affected directly or indirectly by the conflict in my country, Sudan. My session We'll cover the background, current situation, which is basically the war, not basically, by large, the impact on women and girls and the women role and their contribution. And then I leave you with some conclusion. And I think this platform gave me the opportunity really to highlight Sudan, because Sudan is not competing with Gaza, it's not competing with Ukraine. But you will see the atrocities. And it is described the biggest and the worst humanitarian and protection crisis in the world, which I will tell you about. Now, what is Sudan? Do you have a pointer? Okay, I'll just maybe use this. Okay, I don't have a pointer to show you, but this is the map of Sudan. And therefore, those who don't know it, is the biggest country in Africa. Until 2011, the Sudan separated, the South Sudan separated from Sudan and became a country of its own. It shared the borders with seven countries, as you see it in the map. And again, it shared the longest coastal of the Red Sea with Saudi Arabia and Eritrea. The confluence of the Blue Nile coming from Uganda, and the Blue Nile coming from Ethiopia, and the White Nile coming from Uganda. Melgin and Khartoum is a notable geographic feature within Sudan. Sudan is rich in mineral, water, agri-land and livestock. And you will see later how these resources did not contribute to peace, but rather to conflict. In the past, Sudan hosted generously millions of people, millions of refugees from Ethiopia and Eritrea. But today, you will see the number of refugees going out of Sudan seeking protection out of prosecution. It has 50 million population, It is capital Khartoum. I think many of the people here in UK, they know Khartoum because it is a British colony and it is got it is independent in 1956. Just to say a little bit about the history, Sudan really, the event in Sudan is characterized by domination of military coup with episodes of civilian government for a short period. The significant, maybe coup I'll mention, in 1969 lasted for 16 years. And another one in 1989 lasted for 30 years. Until 2019, a revolution came

where women participated and only lasted, the revolution and the civilian government lasted for about a year. And another coup led to the conflict we have today. So the conflict in Sudan started with a peaceful administration, broke out in several cities, led to removal of the 30 years military, as I just mentioned. The ongoing war erupted in Khartoum on a quiet Saturday, in 15th of April 2023 until today. That is exactly 39 days when I came out of Khartoum visiting a family. And it was beautiful, but I didn't know that is the end and that is my bye to Khartoum. So it's quite emotional for me. I left Sudan with the hope that I will go back, but of course it didn't happen. The struggle happened or the conflict between two forces of the government, army men. One is called Sudanese Armed Forces and the other one is Rabid Support Force, which is RSF. This led to the destruction of facilities, Sudan mass displacement, killing, fear, and total chaos. institutions destroyed, including the TV, which was established in 1962, hospitals, museums, raising history. Now, the key fact about this conflict, you will see the number, but as I said, it is described as the world's humanitarian crisis and protection crisis by the UN. About 14 million people have been displaced. over three years now, and internally displaced people, 10 million. That is the size of London. You can imagine. Four million people cross the border over those countries surrounding Sudan. 30.4 million is in need of humanitarian assistance. That is half of the population. And 3.7 million of children and breastfeeding mothers, children under 5, suffering from acute malnutrition, and if they do not get the support, of course they will die. We know that for a fact. 14 million children are out of school, out of 17 million children. You can imagine this are lost generation, and we know that education is the savior and protection for girls in particular. There was disease outbreak, cholera and others. A most affected area now face largest scale of explosive hazard contamination. So people are trying trying to go back from Egypt, from Kyats, from all those countries, to go back to Khartoum because they love their home, they love that country, and they did not go far. But then they can't go back. Famine was confirmed in that forum. I'll speak about that forum later. The UN has appealed for \$4 million to address the issues, the humanitarian issues only, and they only got 28%. The professor talks about the funding. and catastrophic funding when it comes to peace. This is not only for, this is not for peace. This is for food, for water, for health. And this is what we, have. Now, Al-Fashir, I think you heard on the news that there's this city in Darfur, and Darfur is about 11 million people maybe, experienced a war in 2003, which displaced 2 million people. And the perpetrator attracted the attention of the ICC. Now, again, in this in October, end of October, the people start to be displaced because of the attacks of the one of the army forces, which is the RSF. Alfashir is the biggest city in Darfur, and now for 500 days or 18 months has been under siege. You will see in the picture, the people who have been displaced are majority women and children, because the men were either killed or detained. So it is a very difficult situation. And this is one of the calm people were going to, that was in April 2025, and now in October 2025 in November, people are moving again to another city, which will host more than half a million people. The UN

said, blood on the sun, blood on the hand, UN really decries the world failure as Sudan al-Fashf fall. And this is a big city with many millions of people. And you will see that Tom Fletcher as well leading the advocacy and he was saying we fail in Sudan and Sudan is descending even in a darker hall. And here you see a bunker, traditional bunker digged by people to hide themselves in this bunker. I lived in Afghanistan for two years and I worked there and I know what bunkers means to protect people. We run through those bunkers when there's explosion outside our offices or near the IDB camp. This is not save people, but that's the desperation of people and they're trying to do their best to survive. Now, this one you might not see properly, but you can see Tom Fletcher saying that Sudan already, the scene of catastrophic levels of human suffering has descended into an even darker hell. Now, before really I talk about the impact of the war on women, let me tell you who are these women we're talking about and who and what is really their contribution to Sudan as well and to the region. So the Sudanese women have participated and bioneers in many fields. For example, the first female doctor in Sudan in 1946. broke the gender barriers in medicine. In 1952, Sudanese Women's Union was founded, uniting women across the region to fight the equal rights for women. Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim, who has lived here in the UK and died here, the late Fatima, became the first woman elected to the African Parliament in 1965, championed women's rights. So Sudanese women were in instrumental in Sudanese journalists and writers across decades, and have been engaged in activism, promotion for education, and leadership, which led to the peaceful administration in 2019, and unfortunately it did not last. Here you will see, this is one of the kandaka, and kandaka means in the Sudanese Arabic, he's a Nubian queen. This has been an ancient vocabulary used describing the resilience and the courage of women at the time. And this is one of the Sudanese young women participated in the peaceful demonstration which led to the downfall of the military that has been there for 30 years. Now, the conflict impact of women, what does it mean really? And what happened to these women, which we just talked about, many of them like that. So there's a breakdown of the social fabric. Many women become single-headed household. There is multiple displacement even within the country. People run away, women in particular, from one place to another, from one city to another. And there is family separation and disappearances. My family will tell me the most thing, you know, made them to run away is that they worried their children will be raped. the bullet become really like the one, the red become like a bullet. And women bodies are used as a war weapon. So, and there's loss of income. Women have lost their income, even their little business, and there's a burden of caring. As you know, women naturally, they care for families, they care for communities, but then that has become a burden, extra one. And lack of access, of course, to health services. You'll see later, what happened to women who got pregnant out of rape. And then there's forced child marriage. Many families fear rape and they made their daughters to, you know, to marry by force. So then the impact of the sexual violence itself. Remember, there is no rule of law. Imbunity and perpetrators are free today in Sudan to do more

harm, despite of documented report by the UN, by the human rights, by the ICC. But the same issue we talked about, the accountability and impunity. Why, there is no action? Why things doesn't happen when we have a group and when there's atrocities and crime? So here you have Of the magnitude, 12 million people in Sudan are at risk of sexual violence. Boys and girls, including infants as young as one year, are among the victims. And that gang rape and killing become really the feature. And gang rape is something the perpetrator use to humiliate women and girls in front of their families. Sexual slavery is a big thing. I used to think this is just a vocabulary in the books, but it's happening in her tomb today. Now, this is just testimonies from people who work with, for example, one woman said sexual violence has become as widespread as weapons, as guns and police. Women are at our facilities exhausted, traumatized, often after months of displacement, she told UNFPA. And then there's another one. Her name is, this is not her real name, Asel. She said, she told one of our focal point we work with, and we do work with an organization called Humanitarian Action. for Sudan. We support that. So what she said, I am only 17 years old, raped by armed men, became pregnant. With help of some people, I fled the area, and now in a safe place, gave birth to a girl. I cannot go back home, and I want to continue my education. And we know that education is important to them, but how would they access education? It's quite expensive as well, and it's not safe to go to any school. Agenda-based violence specialists in Sudan, she said, we have documented numerous cases of women and girls who have survived rape and sexual violence, including adolescent girls and women girls with disabilities. Many are left coping with unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infection, and deep psychological trauma. So the trauma is really huge. And as I said, this is an organization we work with, and The local respondent, I want to mention that. It's very important. We talked about peace, for example, from bottom up. And this local respondent, a young people, majority of women, work with their communities and try to help them, and they stayed. So they're supporting kitchens, in health, in other aspects, they support sexual survivors and other related, you know, needs. So as I said, we work with this humanitarian action for Sudan, and these are the people we support. So the communities come together to help in food and other things. And where did this come from? There's a word in Arabic in Sudan, it's called Nafir. It's very, very old and people do it during peacetime. So Nafir means people come together to do something for a family, for a community, to build a house, to build a cleaning, to build a shop. And this is the same concept and approach they have done during this war. Many women-led organizations pioneered how to support survival and try to protect them. As you know, UN is working there, humanitarian workers are working there, but there is insecurity and the access is very difficult. difficult. But they have been doing their best in Sudan. But of course, there are many limitations. So the diaspora support is very, very important. All of us here in the UK and around the world try to help Sudan. So one of the people we supported as well, the focal point told us, it is as though someone who had hope, who had lost hope and is in the dark, has

suddenly seen the light. We cannot believe there are people thinking of us. So people really lost hope. And when we send them some support, they could not believe that there are still people in the world thinking about them and supporting them. And now we're talking about the peace. This is a peace conference. And the peace effort in Sudan is very limited. When the war broke out in 15th of April 2023, there is one peace talk in Jeddah in May 2023, and a little bit here and there, but did not lead to anything. It failed. And now the last one is the Quad. The Quad is four countries came together, recently actually in September, and that is the U.S., Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates. And this is only happening in September and over October, and then overshadowed by that event I just told you in Al-Fashir. So we don't know where the peace is going to happen in Sudan and how. And then I think we have to watch the space as well, because even this squad, what people is talking about the peace, how this peace can be inclusive and effective. But again, some people, contemplating how four countries, three countries, let us say not the US, three countries involved in, have invested interest in Sudan. Egypt, United Arab Emirates, and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. How the same countries will broke peace while they have other interests. And I think these are kind of the truths we're talking about earlier on. So what do women of Sudan want? In line of the article 1325, women want participation and genuine inclusion in peace. It's not about the critical mass. Political mass is important, but they want genuine inclusion. They want protection, legal right. They want shelter and safe places to hide. And they want security. Justice and accountability we talked about. In terms of prevention, the conflict-related sexual violence is very high in Sudan, and the health and psychological support is very much needed. But why in Sudan we don't have MARA? MARA is a UN monitoring mission for sexual violence and reporting. It's not there in Sudan. So how people are reporting on this issue, we fear that documentation might have been lost, and later on accountability might not be there. Women want recognition of women because they've been peacebuilder. And as you saw, they participated in all peace initiative. So they want that recognition. And not all women at the top, all of them. And they want community engagement and dispelling the stigma about sexual violence. And I think if there is one thing, you could say brought an opportunity in this world, people start to talk about sexual violence. Because before it's like something shameful of women are blamed and no one should talk about it. So that is something maybe we can capitalize on. And then in conclusion, I just want to say, as I said, Sudan described as the biggest war. Why it's not on the agenda? Why you don't see much of it about the new, the paper? Why the media doesn't talk about it? Why the politician didn't talk about it? They talk a little bit, but it failed the following day. London did the London conference UK in May 2025 this year. And they hoped a lot will come out of it, but I mean, there was no cooperation by many countries probably didn't happy. Humanitarian response is important, but not sufficient to end the war. And we know that. Addressing sexual violence is life-saving and protection an alien matter for women and for all those who are affected. The success of localization agenda depends by large

or meaningful engage of local respondents, and they need support, again, finance and the others. Then the question is, what is peace for Sudan being the biggest crisis in the world, that loss of disease is very high. Humanity is tested. So what is peace and how are we going to have it? And peace cannot last without women's leadership. This is Amina Mohammed, the Guterres Deputy, Secretary General Deputy, said this as well. For me, my last Visit to Khartoum, as I said, in 2022 and 2023. All this icon you will see here, they were destroyed. But they are my memories and they are not there. But I carry that good memory with me and we hope we can be optimistic for the world to end and for everyone to be safe. Thank you.