

# **Competing Masculinities: Probing Political Disputes as Acts of Violence against Women from Southern Sudan and Darfur**

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This article identifies the major forces militating against the promotion of women's rights in the Sudan. These factors are intimately linked to the country's multiple political disputes including Darfur and southern Sudan. The effects of political violence is elaborated through a detailed examination of women's political, economic and cultural rights. The article concludes by identifying the promotion of good governance and democratization as fundamental pre-requisites for advancing human rights and sustainable peace in the war-torn nation.

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each state, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 22)

## **Introduction**

The Sudan, Africa's largest country in area, is a territory with incredible historical and political importance. The land and its location at the crossroads of Africa and the Middle East have influenced the course of its history and politics in a dramatic fashion. The country is the place of birth of numerous ethnolinguistic groups, all with distinctive outlooks on life, culture, faith traditions, cosmology, and experiential knowledge. This remarkable variety is in itself not a cause for clash and fragmentation. However, ethnic differences coupled with widespread competition over scarce resources and systematic marginalization had presented grounds for conflict and hostility rather than providing a basis for concord and tranquility as group differences became increasingly politicized under successive military regimes.

One observer astutely pointed out that the Sudan is a country at war with itself, and in so being, it infringes upon numerous conventions, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which declares that, "In those states in which ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities should not be denied the right, in community with the other members

of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed the Sudan’s past and present civil wars contradict every feature set forth in the Covenant, working against human rights in general and women’s rights in particular, in devastating ways. First, these conflicts violate the rights of indigenous people of southern Sudan and Darfur in general by undermining the functioning of their communities to live in security critical to human welfare. Second, these wars led to substantial population displacement, forcing people to flee to locations where they become subjected to laws and regulations that ignore their rights to culture and self-determination and dismiss the legitimacy and soundness of their indigenous associations and modes of knowing. The Qanoon El-Nizzam El-Amm, or Public Order Law, in Khartoum, for instance, is a case in point. This law has been demoralizing to Sudanese displaced people by restricting their mobility and participation in some labor-force occupations viewed illicit by the Islamic State.

In his article, I comment on the effects of the multiple civil wars in the Sudan on women’s rights from the regions of southern Sudan and Darfur. I will bring into play material gathered in various Sudanese shantytowns in order to illuminate the specificity of gender-based violence in Sudan’s political disputes. I will then advance to provide particular examples on the breach of cultural, social, and economic rights in those locations. I end by highlighting the emergent sense of political subjectivity and agency among displaced women as the unintended consequences of these fierce disputes. It should be stated at the outset, however, that highlighting individual rights and self-determination, in this case, should not be understood as mere advocacy of a liberal tradition that has no roots in Sudanese society. Defenders of the liberal traditions of human rights would argue that, “While we are right to be concerned about the cultural health of minority communities, this gives us insufficient reason to abandon, modify, or reinterpret liberalism. Far from being indifferent to claims of minorities, liberalism puts concern for minorities at the forefront.”<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this commentary, pointing out to the pervasive contraventions of the rights of Sudanese indigenous people problematizes and interrogates the institutionalized state power over minorities, especially defenseless populations such as displaced women from southern Sudan and Darfur.

### **Case 1: Southern Sudan**

Elsewhere I have argued that the Sudan is a perfect illustration of an African country unable to achieve nationhood despite a successful struggle for independence. As a result, the southern Sudanese people in general, and women in particular, have been enduring the wrath of the longest running civil strife in world’s history. A report titled, “Follow the Women and the Cows,” by the U.S. Committee on Refugees, stated that the death toll of southern Sudanese is larger than the combined fatalities suffered in recent wars in Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Somalia and Algeria.<sup>3</sup> Since the civil war started, an estimated 1.9