

Situational Analysis

Violence Against Women & Girls During the Current Conflict in Sudan

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Gender-Based Violence (GBV) refers to “harmful acts directed at an individual or a group of individuals based on their gender,” and includes physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, and socio-economic violence.¹ While GBV is predominantly experienced by women and girls, boys, men, and LGBTQ+ people are also targeted, and the harm extends to families and communities. A dominant form of GBV, sexual violence is a weapon used to terrorise and control communities in times of armed political conflict. In April 2024, an estimated 210 thousand women and girls in Sudan were at heightened risk of GBV as a result of the ongoing conflict.² As of June 2024, an estimated 6.7 million people are at risk of GBV in Sudan. Displaced, refugee, and migrant women and girls are particularly vulnerable.³

The United Nations Refugee Agency has identified among its key priorities, the provision of cash assistance to GBV survivors to access services including transportation to medical care, legal, and psychosocial support; the regular distribution of dignity kits; enhanced engagement with Women Led Organizations and other community-based structures to support self-reliance and to minimise the risk of GBV and sexual exploitation.⁴

Underreporting

Due to the mass telecommunication blackouts and shutdowns of health service centres and hospitals, sexual assault reports are severely limited.⁵ Stigma, shame, and lack of legal frameworks within Sudan also contribute to the decreased likelihood of reporting.⁶ Under these circumstances, it is estimated that only 3% of cases are reported. According to UN estimates in December 2023, 4.2 million Sudanese women and girls were in need of gender-based violence care that is not available to them.⁷ As of December 2023, 118 reports of conflict-related sexual violence GBV, have been received by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights with real numbers likely in the thousands.⁸ It is imperative to understand that the number of reports does not begin to truly describe the magnitude

of sexual violence perpetrated against women, girls, men, boys, and LGBTQ+ people in Sudan as a result of the ongoing conflict.

1. What are the dominant types of violence perpetrated against women and girls?

The dominant types of violence being perpetrated against women and girls in Sudan at present are physical and sexual, very often a combination of the two.⁹ However, the impact of socio-economic violence due to displacement should not be overlooked, as it puts displaced people at heightened risk of physical and sexual violence.¹⁰ Likewise, while the focus here is on sexual and physical violence perpetrated by the warring factions, intimate partner violence inside the home is also an ongoing concern.¹¹

Sexual assault as a prominent type of violence acted out against Sudanese women and girls stems from the historical use of rape as a weapon of war.¹² Sexual violence is used to terrorize communities and exert control, particularly politically and economically.¹³ Sexual slavery, sex trafficking, forced and child marriage, and sexual exploitation are just some of the modes of sexual assault that happen in Sudan.¹⁴ Physical beatings are also common before, during, and after an attack with weapons such as sticks, whips, and axes.¹⁵ The lack of reporting means that many unique instances of assault and rape have not been identified, includes those perpetrated against LGBTQ+ people, boys, and men. There has been a 60% increase in the number of women and girls in need of GBV services since the start of the conflict.¹⁶ However, the actual number of Sudanese women and girls impacted by gender-based violence remains unknown, but the issue continues to grow in prominence since the heightening of hostilities in April 2023.¹⁷

2. Who does violence against women and girls affect, and how?

It is estimated that 2.5 million women and girls are currently displaced in Sudan and 1.2 million are malnourished and in need of aid.¹⁸ More than 19 million children are unable to attend school, constituting what UNICEF has described as the “largest child displacement crisis in the world.”¹⁹ Lack of access to secure learning environments makes girls particularly vulnerable to sexual violence including child marriage and other human rights violations.²⁰

Among the displaced, more than 1.5 million are individuals of reproductive age, 150,000 of whom are currently pregnant.²¹ Due to the reduction in access to essential life-saving services including sexual health and reproductive services, in combination with malnutrition and famine, it is estimated that seven thousand pregnant women could die in the next few months.²² A looming theme across the sexual violence is the inability to obtain essential goods and services due to the high likelihood of being attacked while outside their homes.²³ Women and girls often fear leaving their homes and only do so when looking for food, resulting in a disproportionate amount of famine for women and girls.²⁴ Foreign women, including journalists, refugees, and those fleeing the heavy fighting areas, are also at risk of attack.²⁵

3. Who are the main perpetrators of violence against women and girls in Sudan?

The main perpetrators of sexual violence in Sudan are the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Army.²⁶ Acts of sexual violence are committed by multiple perpetrators in approximately reported 85% of cases compared to 10% perpetrated by a single aggressor.²⁷ While it is important to note once again that GBV is severely underreported, two-thirds of reports made involve RSF soldiers.²⁸

4. Where is violence taking place (domestic and/or public spaces)?

The violence in Sudan is predominately taking place in public spaces, with victims being ambushed while performing essential everyday errands.²⁹ This violence is most frequently occurring in urban areas where the war and conflict is most intense.³⁰ Those attempting to flee the conflict, or seeking refuge in other Sudanese cities are also targeted.³¹ Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) against women and girls has predominantly documented in urban zones, with intense fighting, confining civilians to their residencies. Notable areas where the CRSV has been reported include Darfur (most notably Ag Geneina in West Darfur), Khartoum, and North and West Kordofan.³² These horrific acts of violence, including gang rapes, have been witnessed in front of communities, and individuals who resist are reported to be killed.³³ Although underreporting impacts the analysis of domestic intimate partner violence, there has been a noticeable surge in cases as the conflict persists. Conflict, economic hardship, rising tension within households, men's unemployment,

financial constraints, and displacement, increases the risk for heightened intimate partner violence especially when large groups of people cohabitate particularly in overcrowded settings such as camps and other collective shelters.³⁴

5. How are different types of violence and their causes and consequences perceived?

Gender-based violence (GBV) in Sudan is often used as a war tactic, not only to harm and terrorise women and girls, but also to humiliate or and emasculate the enemy's men, by assaulting them or the women in their lives. They feel this equates to the destruction or symbols of "honour" and "purity", of the women and girls.³⁵ The low awareness of GBV and lack of reporting mechanisms foster a fear of stigma and retaliation amongst the victims.³⁶ Existing laws for gender equality offer minimal protection against GBV victims, increasing men's power over women and driving the violence.³⁷ The impacts of GBV include, but are not limited, to social stigma and negative economic, social, health, mental health, and human rights consequences.³⁸ It is reported that in cases where girls become pregnant as a result of a rape, their mothers also face an increased risk of physical assault due to the traditional beliefs in East Darfur, which hold the mother accountable for their family's "dishonour".³⁹ GBV services have reported long-term effects of conflict-related sexual violence, including injuries to women and girls, including the transmission of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV.⁴⁰

6. What is the current availability/accessibility of services?

Every aspect of daily living necessities are scarcely available due to power blackouts, lack of funding, and loss of natural resources.⁴¹ Unstable shelters and displaced living situations amplify protection risks.⁴² 80% of hospitals and other health services have shut down as a result of the conflict, impacting all who remain in heavy conflict areas as well as those who are displaced.⁴³ Survivor-centred services for those who have endured gender-based violence are limited or completely cut across the majority of Sudan, impeding access to victim services and reporting mechanisms.⁴⁴ Many international organizations are attempting to fund and support Sudanese women-led services to increase the availability of services such as UN Women,⁴⁵ Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MPHSS),⁴⁶ and other gender-based violence responders. It is estimated that they have been able to reach

over 170,000 people in need of support since the beginning of the war, but continue to face security and access challenges in the areas of Sudan with high rates of violence.⁴⁷

7. How many women are seeking support and where are they located?

More than 6.6 million people in Sudan, or 14% of the population, are at risk for GBV, with over 3 million of them being women and girls, making this conflict a “war on women.”⁴⁸ In addition to the challenges facing the internally displaced, refugee women and girls in neighbouring countries hoping to find safety face significant challenges accessing basic commodities and services due to the underfunded humanitarian crisis in the host countries.⁴⁹ Challenges due to continued hostilities, weather conditions, poor infrastructure, and insecurity have hindered the capacity to access and deliver aid to those in need.⁵⁰ The humanitarian response plan for Sudan calls for \$63 million USD for prevention and response services to address these critical needs.⁵¹

¹ United Nations Women Australia, “Types of violence against women and girls,” UN Women Australia, November 24, 2020.

² Apofeed, “Women and Girls Endure a Year of Conflict in Sudan,” African Business, April 11, 2024.

³ United Nations Population Fund, “Sexual Violence and Conflict in Sudan: A War on the Bodies of Women and Girls,” United Nations Population Fund, June 18, 2024.

⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Sudan Situation: Gender-Based Violence Update (June 2024),” ReliefWeb, July 8, 2024, 2.

⁵ United Nations Women, “A Year of Suffering for Sudanese Women and Girls,” UN Women – Headquarters, April 14, 2024

⁶ Samia Nihar, “Sexual violence in Sudan: From denial to recognition,” February 2024, 2.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ CARE International, “Because They Are Women: How the Sudan Conflict Has Created a War on Women and Girls,” CARE International, April 11, 2024, 2.

⁹ ACAPS Analysis Hub, “SUDAN: Impact of the war on women and girls,” January 23, 2024, 5.

¹⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1.

¹¹ ACAPS Analysis Hub, 6.

¹² Ibid, 1.

¹³ United Nations Population Fund.

¹⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1.

¹⁵ ACAPS Analysis Hub, 4.

¹⁶ CARE International, 2.

¹⁷ ACAPS Analysis Hub, 5.

¹⁸ Apofeed.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ ACAPS Analysis Hub, 6.

²¹ CARE International, 2.

²² Ibid and United Nations Women.

²³ United Nations Population Fund.

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- ²⁴ CARE International, 3.
- ²⁵ Insecurity Insight, "Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Sudan 15 April to 30 September 2023," Insecurity Insight, October 2023, 6.
- ²⁶ Nihar and Nahid Widaatalla, "Bodies into Battlefields: Gender-Based Violence in Sudan," Think Global Health, March 25, 2024.
- ²⁷ Insecurity Insight, 9.
- ²⁸ Ibid, 5.
- ²⁹ United Nations Population Fund.
- ³⁰ Insecurity Insight, 2.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² ACAPS Analysis Hub, 5.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ ACAPS Analysis Hub, 6.
- ³⁵ Widaatalla.
- ³⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2.
- ³⁷ ACAPS Analysis Hub, 4.
- ³⁸ Ibid, 4.
- ³⁹ Ibid, 5.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1.
- ⁴² United Nations Population Fund.
- ⁴³ Insecurity Insight, 9.
- ⁴⁴ ACAPS Analysis Hub, 2.
- ⁴⁵ Apofeed.
- ⁴⁶ ACAPS Analysis Hub, 1.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ CARE International, 1.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid, 1.
- ⁵⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1.
- ⁵¹ World Health Organization.

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