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To cite this article: Kadoda, G. and Hale, S. (2020). The Radical Imaginations of Sudanese Women: A Gendered Revolution. *Al-Raida*, 44(1), 73-92. DOI: 10.32380/alrj.v44i1.1825

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32380/alrj.v44i1.1825>

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Article type: Article

Published online: 20<sup>th</sup> August 2020

Publisher: Arab Institute for Women

Publication support provided by: Escienta

Journal ISSN: 0259-9953

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# *The Radical Imaginations of Sudanese Women: A Gendered Revolution*

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**Keywords:** Revolution, consciousness revolution, women, women’s rights, Sudan

## Introduction

Since the December 2018 popular revolution began in Sudan, Sudanese (and some Sudanists<sup>1</sup>) have been experiencing a surge of critical thinking, a “consciousness revolution,” as some have dubbed it.<sup>2</sup> The slogans “Freedom, peace, and justice—revolution is the people’s choice” and “All Sudan is Darfur” (in reference to the well-documented atrocities perpetrated by the militias of the Ingaz (“salvation”) Islamist military regime since 2003) dominated the streets of Sudanese cities and towns.<sup>3</sup> The language used in the revolution was direct and simple, and also revealing. Initially, the dominant slogan among the thousands who assembled was “*Tasgut—bas*,” translated on social media as “just fall—that is all.” Eventually, as the military tried to play musical chairs with the protesters after the fall of President Omar Al-Bashir on April 11, 2019, civilian protesters played on that slogan with the variation “Fall once—you will fall twice, and thrice,” thus rejecting any military head of state before the July settlement.<sup>4</sup>

Sudanese women took center stage in the revolution: participating in, and oftentimes leading, the street demonstrations; forming neighborhood resistance centers; hiding male activists; and playing leading roles in “tent cities,” offering medical care, providing food, cooking,

and supporting the spread of political information.<sup>5</sup> Considering the negative experiences women all over Sudan had suffered at the hands of the three-decade regime, it seems only logical that because of their suffering under the oppressive public order law, for example, their consciousness, given an opening, might be pushed toward action.<sup>6</sup> It is also women that have been the most victimized by the conflicts that have raged in different parts of Sudan, for example through rape and sexual violence, increasing and strenuous family burdens, and general violence when they are helpless in their villages.

While this participation has been highly publicized in the international media, now is the time to ask whether women's involvement in the revolution has translated into concrete measures for the post-Ingaz era, specifically the measures put forward by the Forces of Freedom and Change<sup>7</sup> and the new government. Were women able to join together to demand concrete change, and if they did, were they heard?

What is happening now to the Sudanese revolution should perhaps have been predicted, as it follows the common pattern of many other revolutions in world history, especially those in recent decades: divisions ensue among revolutionary forces, as well as among various women's groups; old and conservative political parties attempt to stage a comeback; and in the case of Sudan, Islamists continue to mobilize at home and abroad.

With these factors in play, many questions can be raised about the potential for the revolution to succeed for women. Although it is possibly too early to tell, the main questions addressed in this article derive from ongoing conversations among revolutionaries. Do Sudanese revolutionaries have the will to convert their fine words about women's liberation into concrete proposals? Do women themselves have the political will to make concrete changes happen on their behalf? Clearly, we are writing in a moment when all scenarios are still open for speculation.

## Context: Background and Description

To analyze the conditions that led to the December 2018 popular revolution would require the writing of an entire book, if not two or three.<sup>8</sup> In summary, severe inflation and rampant corruption—which are often among the various characteristics of a failed state—led to economic hardships for everyone, and brought thousands into the streets in peaceful demonstrations across many cities, towns, and even small villages (Baldo & Oette, 2019). Despite the known and unknown<sup>9</sup> facets of the heavy-handedness of the security apparatus, which culminated in April 2019 in a massacre of protesters in front of the army headquarters, the revolution touched people across the country. Since the beginning of the demonstrations—whether you take the starting point as December 6, 2018 in Mayrno (a small town in Blue Nile state), December 16 in Al-Fashir and Al-Damazin,<sup>10</sup> or December 19 in Atbara—the revolution hailed from the peripheries. Protests did not start in Khartoum, Omdurman, or Khartoum North until December 25. According to Dwamena (2019), this set a historical precedent, given the central place that the tripartite capital of Khartoum, Omdurman, and Khartoum North has occupied in Sudanese revolutionary memory. This precedent was celebrated by the revolutionaries, who commemorated the first anniversary of the revolution in December 2019 by visiting the spots that had sparked or been prominent in the action. While opposition to the public order law ignited gender, race, and class protests, this was only the tip of the iceberg, and a manifestation of deeply embedded values (and practices) of women’s oppression in Sudanese societies. Such oppressive conditions foster the ongoing revolution, for even during this transitional period, we have witnessed setbacks for women, as well as delays in the fulfillment of urgent revolutionary demands (such as retribution for the sit-in massacre).

Many scholars and activists have analyzed recent global insurrections—such as the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring—to illustrate these movements’ departures from and subversions of modernist frameworks (see Hale, 2014). In analyzing the 2018–2019 uprising in Sudan, writers have also attempted to show both its departure from and its similarities to recent movements,

including those mentioned above. Many agree that this new wave of uprisings has been characterized by antistatism, antiauthoritarianism, and nonhierarchical structures.<sup>11</sup> Among participants, there is a high percentage of women and youth (men and women), who are acting within new formations, using a new language, and developing different modes of organizing (Kadoda & Hale, 2015). Although we can see similar elements in Sudan, the 2018–2019 revolution, instead of being antistatist, envisions the formation of a supposedly “democratic” state. However, we want to postulate that states in a social environment such as Sudan’s might still evolve in highly authoritarian/patriarchal ways. We also recognize that the uprising might end with what has happened to women in any number of revolutionary movements, even when they were in the vanguard of planning and street activities—that is, many of the rights promised during the struggle were dissolved once women returned to “normal” life. In Eritrea, for example, women who had married Muslims while in combat zones were forced to dissolve their marriages and marry Christians; they were also forced back into the domestic sphere, reinforcing many of the dominant cultural norms that had preceded the revolutionary moment. In Sudan, these issues are still being vigorously debated, and negotiations are still taking place among civilians, the military, the reemerging Islamists, young men and women, women in general, and the myriad new grassroots formations.

Although Sudan experienced two successful popular/civilian uprisings against its authoritarian military regimes in 1964 and 1985,<sup>12</sup> both the 2013 uprising, which was fairly quickly quelled by force, and the 2018–2019 uprisings have been seen by some as imitating the Arab Spring.<sup>13</sup> Mubarak Ardol (2019) argues instead that Sudan’s December revolution differs from the Arab Spring in that (1) Islamists in Sudan had held power for nearly 30 years, which contrasts with the antiregime stance of Islamists in countries that underwent the Arab Spring, and (2) Sudanese have been adamant about using nonviolence (Ardol, 2019). There are a number of similarities, however, such as the people’s discontent vis-à-vis a failed state (Sherwood, 2012), and the avid use of social media, especially by the youth (Kadoda & Hale, 2015). We might say that this last point about similarities seems obvious, and that it is the differences that are more salient, specifically the notion that Sudanese resentment and popular uprisings are somehow imitations

of other movements across the region and globally. More important are such factors as the nature of the leadership, the oppositional tactics, and the all-important grassroots and neighborhood activism.

In Khartoum, leadership of the demonstrations emerged in a number of forms, but was initially the purview of the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), which called for what became a highly successful march in Khartoum on December 25, 2018. Through social media, the SPA issued national schedules for resistance actions (marches, civil disobedience days, street cleaning, strikes, etc.) and ultimately called for a dramatic sit-in in front of the central military headquarters on April 6, 2019, which garnered international attention (AFP, 2019).

Just four months earlier, on January 1, a coalition named the Forces of Freedom and Change was formed after the major opposition force signed the SPA-proposed “Declaration of freedom and change,” which called on Bashir to step down and for the formation of a civilian-led transitional government. Bashir did indeed step down on April 11, a few days into the sit-in. But the struggle did not end there, and nor did the sit-in and its lasting effects (both its glory and its tragedy) on the people of Sudan.<sup>14</sup> For a time it seemed that it was only a regime change, with the military—still wielding state power—negotiating with the Forces of Freedom and Change, who were wielding “street” power. After a power-sharing agreement that recognized the army and General Mohamed “Hemedti” Hamdan Dagalo’s forces as “partners in change,” women and women’s groups began to see that they were being overlooked and omitted (Lynch, 2019). They forcefully began the difficult task of ensuring their place in the nascent power structure.

### **Our Place and the Place of Criticism**

Because of the ongoing nature of the events that this article addresses, offering a critical interrogation of revolutionary objectives is difficult but imperative. It is difficult because of our support for the revolution and our simultaneous commitment to the critical analysis of the situation as it continues to unfold.<sup>15</sup> Such a position rubs against the grain of the general anticritique atmosphere among the revolutionaries during the actual physical struggle. This

anticritique atmosphere resulted from the desire to protect the revolution from its enemies, and to preserve the unity of its different forces at crucial times. The unintended consequence of this move, however, has been the suppression of the critical voices needed to understand the meaning of the uprising while it is still developing. These essential critical voices have emerged and become louder since the signing of the agreement between the military and civilian opposition forces (“2019–2021 Sudanese transition to democracy,” 2020). What was essential for women and their allies was convincing the civilian power brokers that national development was at stake, and that by subverting the social structures that had traditionally impeded women’s empowerment, Sudanese society could more easily make progress. Such thinking requires an understanding of the limits of policy and of the law, which may be crucial for establishing and protecting women’s rights, but may not change the actual everyday lives of women or the underlying social values that uphold gender inequality. The question among women and women’s groups, then and now, is whether women and progressive elements of society should struggle against oppressive laws, or against the ideas that generated them, or both simultaneously.

This article examines only some of the varied roles that women played in the December 2018 Sudanese revolution. What follows is dedicated to probing a sample of slogans and proposals, to explore their revolutionary content as well as our capability to dismantle the structures that hold women in the grip of inequity. While Sudan stands at a crossroads, the thrust of this article upholds the revolutionary spirit, while also trying to think of ways in which the slogans raised during the struggle can be realized. Thus in a way the article engages in continuing revolutionary acts to build the “new Sudan.”<sup>16</sup> With that in mind, we need to ask what reaching agreement between the military and the civilian revolutionaries has meant for women so far. How are women’s groups faring, and how are they dealing with each other?

### **What Have We Learned So Far About the Possible Futures of Sudanese Women?**

Women have been leaders in this revolution. They have played multiples roles: spokeswomen or members of the SPA<sup>17</sup>; representatives of political parties, and signatories of

various post-Ingaz proposals; on the streets; providing safe houses for protesters; supporting the revolution from the diaspora; getting beaten, arrested, or killed; even serving on the sovereign council, ministries, or judiciary of the new government. Images of women in the revolution shared on social media were compiled into an article by Sondos Al Ali and Nazik Awad (2019), who warned of the state's possible violent backlash against the prominent role women were playing, a prediction that came true at the sit-in massacre. Since Al Ali and Awad's article, writings on the "kandaka" (queen) and videos documenting women's stories from the revolution have proliferated.<sup>18</sup> In a way, women are exploring whether their stories are reflected in the slogans and language of the revolution. By doing so, they are evaluating political decisions and the signals that tell them in which direction the future is taking them. Will it be toward "traditional"/conventional or revolutionary ideas about women? Is what we are seeing "the start of a social revolution," as al-Nagar and Tønnessen argued (2019)?

### *Learning from Language*

In order to understand how the future might shape up for women in the post-Ingaz era, we can see language as a signal. It is therefore useful to analyze the language used in slogans, statements, and documents from a gender perspective, and to contrast it with later proposals and events, for example after the formation of the new government. For the revolution to bring about justice, it is important for women activists to examine the contradictions between ideas, plans, and action. This analysis needs to be intersectional, inclusive, and considerate of regional disparities.

One of the revolutionary slogans chanted by young women called on all of us "to be resilient" because "our revolution is a girls' revolution." This chant was about self-pride, and indicated the high stakes that women felt they had in the revolution. Simultaneously, protesters also voiced insulting chants aimed at the police and military, calling them "women" when they ran away from the revolutionaries. This begs the question: should women challenge sexist language during rallies? When is a "good" time to try to reeducate the male leadership? Many men and women protesters saw critiques of language as unnecessary complaints that were spoiling the



revolutionary atmosphere. Should we, the chanting women, “remind ourselves that women’s participation in peace and democratic transformations cannot be meaningful unless women acknowledge and unpack women’s inherited subordination and the magnitude of their political battle” (Alkarib, 2019)? Does this quote suggest that we should reeducate ourselves first?

The magnitude of this political battle was most obvious when the male chair of the Higher Council for Peace used the word “*khadam*” (enslaved women) in reference to women’s participation, in response to a question asked by a female staffer while he was introducing her to his team. This incident was condemned by women activists; MANSAM, a coalition of political and civil society women’s groups, issued a public statement addressed to government councils, and petitioned for the chairman’s removal from office.<sup>19</sup> What is interesting is not that this man remains in office, but that some women condemned the petition, for several reasons. Some saw in this rebuke an attack against their specific ethnic group—they claimed that “*khadam*” was commonly used in their dialect, and therefore was a reflection of their particular culture; others saw this as an unnecessary battle, and a distraction from women’s priorities.

While opinions were split about the patriarchal speech of the revolution, there was a common agreement to postpone this critique for fear of risking the potential success of the revolution. In other words, challenging patriarchy would have to wait until the revolution was successful. It is worth noting, however, that some voices broke ranks early on and used the hashtag *#wagto-wonus* (the-time-is-now) as a rallying cry for those who wanted to stay vigilant about such patriarchal language and what it embodies. “It will fall and we will marry a *kandaka*” and “It falls twice and we will marry two *kandaka*,” popular slogans during the sit-in, are just two examples of the loaded revolutionary vocabulary to which Sudanese feminists were responding. However, it is easier to hold entities responsible than to change individual minds and belief systems. This was evidenced by a public apology that the SPA issued for gender stereotyping in one of its statements about women and cleaning. The apology pleased Sudanese feminists and infuriated staunch SPA supporters. Many commentators, both women and men, did not see the apology as necessary, although others did see that it was problematic to name “Al Kandaka” as the most “keen and able

cleaner” when the weekly protest schedule included a cleaning day. It was pressure from women activists on social media, particularly those without political party affiliations, that brought the change in language. In contrast, the conservatism of many women who are members of long-standing political parties is often a roadblock for women, young people of both genders, and others to move forward. It was not a lack of knowledge, education, or analytical abilities that caused women party members to overlook the language used by the SPA, as many were also self-proclaimed feminists, or knew about debates regarding how words contribute to women’s inequality. What is it, then, about belonging to a political party that often curtails solidarity among women? Responses to such questions are kept under wraps, internal to certain groups, for fear of further dividing women. Language has inflamed the various debates among women; it is, after all, the most basic element of Castells’s (2012) networked society, adding to our understanding of this “new species” of social movement.

### ***Learning Among Generations***

There are other stories of the revolution that reveal discrepancies among women. For example, during the mobilization for the demonstration to celebrate the achievements of Sudanese women, scheduled on March 7, 2019, there was an initiative that called on all women to wear a white *toub*.<sup>20</sup> The call spread across social media and generated intense debate. Those that defended this initiative saw it as a celebration of local dress against the foreign black Saudi *’abaya*,<sup>21</sup> which many women had started to wear after 1989, and which was imposed by the Ingaz’s strict dress code and persecution of women. Some opposing views were that the *toub* did not represent all Sudanese women, but only those in the center and the north of the country; others recalled their struggle in the 1960s and 1970s to be allowed out in public without a *toub*. Still others went further, calling out revolutionary men who were becoming nostalgic for the *toub* and reminding them that the revolution was also about dismantling the system of guardianship. Yet the *toub* was instrumental in producing one of the most iconic images of the revolution, celebrated in both local and international media.<sup>22</sup> The image of a young woman in a white *toub* speaking to a crowd with her arm raised was seen by many as representing Sudanese liberty.

Generational splits are not the only splits, of course. There is often a combination of generational, urban/rural, political party lines, or educational divisions, to name only a few. It is precisely the raised consciousness that often increases during revolutions that can strengthen coalitions across these various divides, in order to overcome the oppressive structures, both material and ideological, that place the priorities of the nonelite second. In this revolution, MANSAM started as a mostly urban and educated coalition, as opposed to RATINA, another coalition that is more concerned with rural women, especially those affected by conflict. These coalitions are primarily composed of an older generation of women activists, while younger activists have formed their own communities, in social media and on the ground.

One of the early revolutionary documents was “The manifesto of the revolution girls,” developed by a feminist scholar and member of MANSAM.<sup>23</sup> This was followed by efforts by others, including MANSAM members, to produce “The Sudanese women’s rights document,” “The declaration of Sudanese women for change,” “Women declaration for peace,” and others. While MANSAM used these documents to push its demands into the negotiations, they also generated conversations and eventually more work to produce the vision and structure of the anticipated commission for women envisioned in the constitutional agreement.<sup>24</sup> Several young women’s groups—including newly formed ones such as Medanak (your sit-in ground), which is concerned about sexual harassment, and older groups such as the women-only Facebook group Minbar Chat, or Security Forces of the Revolution (SFR)—were active throughout the revolution in exposing security forces members who had infiltrated revolutionary groups (Alhour, 2019). Members of the SFR made themselves publicly visible for the first time on April 17 at the sit-in. Another social media-savvy feminist young women’s group emerged during the debate among civilians on the negotiating team concerning women’s participation in the new government. This new feminist group was dismayed at the percentage agreed on, which was only 40%. The #50 campaign on social media went viral and elicited responses from various entities, including a government spokesman. Rather than participating through formal negotiation channels, they took the issue of women’s participation to another platform by calling for a public debate with the Forces of Freedom and Change. While this public debate did not take place, the group managed to agitate

as never before. Despite these initiatives, it remains to be seen whether Sudanese women will bridge their generational, ideological, and ethnic differences to create the breakthrough they deserve after the most oppressive period in Sudan's modern history. The indications are not positive. Although changes are occurring as we write, we see that the exit of three major women's groups from MANSAM's coordinating body reveals more discord than accord, much of which revolves around how to handle the military component in the government, where opinions and positions vary from the pragmatic to the uncompromising.<sup>25</sup>

### *Learning from Contradictions*

Does it matter if women unite or not? And why should they need to in order to achieve an equal share of power? Worse, maybe the delay in putting forward a unified women's agenda, or the inability to agree on a standardized set of steps for transitioning to a post-Ingaz government, has opened the way for antirevolutionary forces to gather momentum. This could potentially jeopardize the futures proposed for Sudanese women, and Sudan more generally. An early sign was the fact that none of the proposals put forward gave women a 50% share in decision-making positions in the post-Ingaz Sudan. This included the "Declaration of freedom and change," which was signed by all the major opposition forces and the Forces of Freedom and Change. The amendment to this declaration, a political charter, provided a 30% share, while some signatories differed in their individual political party's proposals—for example, a 40% share was recommended by the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP). Even major coalitions such as the National Consensus Alliance, of which the SCP is part, deviated from the threshold set by the declaration in their proposed constitution for a democratic Sudan. There, they offered one seat (out of eight) for women on the presidential council, which is the highest governing body.

Proposals also varied in terms of how to address women's issues. For instance, the National Consensus Alliance made clear references to dismantling the social structures that undermine women's dignity, and stated their aspiration to achieve equity, for example by abolishing the public order law and dismantling the social status laws. At the other end of the spectrum was the Umma Party,<sup>26</sup> which agreed to a 30% share of government seats for women— similarly to the Forces of

Freedom and Change—but barely mentioned any plan to empower women. In the final negotiated agreement, women got a 40% share on paper. In reality, the participation of women in the higher government structure is 20%. It is also worth noting that none of the Forces of Freedom and Change—including the liberal Sudanese Congress Party and the SCP—proposed or even gestured toward a secular constitution that would not depend on the interpretation of any particular religion or religious scholar. Since the public order and social status laws essentially took their authority from Islamic texts, it was hard for most feminists to see how religion could fully liberate women from subordination and hegemony. Even though secularism is not mentioned in the proposals, the political declaration of the Forces of Freedom and Change seeks to establish a “citizenship state,” which seems to be a gesture toward secularism. But what exactly that will mean on the ground is being negotiated between the new government, the Forces of Freedom and Change, and armed resistance groups. Note that the sovereign council is in charge of the peace agenda and holds primary power for the first six months. It is doubtful that the sovereign council will want to rock the boat just now.

Perhaps one of the greatest contradictions with which the people and politicians are dealing is Hemedti’s position and prominence in the peace talks and various negotiations. Many consider him a war criminal.<sup>27</sup> The recent dilemma started when he refused to follow Bashir’s orders to shoot at the protesters at the sit-in in front of army headquarters on April 6, 2019. April 6 marked the 34<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1985 intifada, which had seen one of the largest sit-ins ever documented in Sudan. The orders to shoot were justified using a fatwa that gave Bashir permission to kill two-thirds of the protesters to bring order. Refusing to massacre the protesters was a shrewd move by Hemedti, because he could emerge from the fray as a “hero.” On April 11, 2019, Bashir was ousted; on the next day, April 12, the self-declared head of the military council, who had taken charge of the government, was also ousted. Between April 13 and June 3, the negotiating team of the Forces of Freedom and Change met with the team representing the military council, headed by Generals Burhan and Hemedti. On the Forces of Freedom and Change side were both the army and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) members who had refused to follow the order to shoot civilians. The negotiations between the two sides were complex, with factions

forming to retain more power during the transitional period. The facts that Hemedti became the second man on the military council and later the sovereign council, and that his militia, the RSF, had supposedly played a part in “protecting” protesters at the sit-in, put the revolutionary forces in an ethical dilemma.<sup>28</sup> The dilemma was whether or not the revolutionary forces should accept protection from forces implicated in killings, rapes, and burnings in Darfur. There was concern that such cooperation would jeopardize the newly found unity among Sudanese people. There were questions raised about how women from Darfur who had been terrorized by the Janjaweed would respond to this cooperation. The same was true of the concern that armed opposition groups in the conflict areas would see this as a betrayal. Will we have anything to say to Badryia, the 19 year-old mother killed by government forces while protesting at a camp for internally displaced people in Zalinji, Darfur, on April 6 (Awad, 2019)? How will women fare if pragmatism prevails over principle?

On the part of the Forces of Freedom and Change, contradictions are visible at every turn, from the percentage of women in the negotiations to the ethnic and regional composition of the government.<sup>29</sup> While there are critical voices questioning these compromises and confronting what they see as a departure from the slogans of the revolution, the danger of antirevolutionary backlash while the deep state is still intact, and of conflict within and among revolutionary forces, including women’s coalitions, is present and visible.

### **Sudanese Women at a Crossroads: Looking Forward**

The political situation is far more complex and fluid than this article can describe. The agreements and negotiations between the military council and the Forces of Freedom and Change have gained and lost from both pressure and support from regional and international powers (Cafiero, 2019). The political awareness of the revolutionary environment in places such as tent cities—which were not unlike Tahrir Square in Egypt, where people raised their own and each other’s consciousness by educating one another, sharing materials, food, medical help, and humor, and just being together—cannot be overestimated. Such consciousness shows that “the

construction of meaning in people’s minds is a more decisive and more stable source of power” (Castells, 2012, p. 5). No doubt, much of this article will be history by the time it is published. Still, what remains true is that a nonviolent revolution was fought and won. A bloody revolution was never what the Sudanese people intended. But at this point it is hard to distinguish what has been “won” for Sudan, and what has been “won” for Sudanese *women*.

Our observations in this article, although they are among the few that have been written from women’s perspectives, have stopped short of proposing specific solutions. Rather, we are interested in highlighting some of the signals or “perceptions of change, that can bring about new ideas of the future [...] where time is new and not merely the extension of the past [...] and history is not only perceived as something that just happens, but also as something that is produced by the actions of the people [...], their intentions and decisions” (Quijano, 2000, p. 537). There is much that has happened in just a few months that warrants calling the uprising in Sudan a “revolution of consciousness,” and many have noted that the environment is ripe for even more critical thinking in the upcoming days and months. There are the written words, art, poetry, and songs of the revolution, “entangle[d] within contemporary political and cultural processes.”<sup>30</sup> If those that have produced these important “pieces” of the revolution—whether journalists, poets, artists, or scholars—are committed, then they will continue to engage with these critical entanglements. At their disposal is a “pedagogy of revolution” (McLaren, 2000) that emerged in Sudan in December 2018 and is encapsulated in three simple words—freedom, peace, and justice.

This article is a call to women in these political coalitions and parties, as well as women scholars and social media activists, to question the current negotiations and proposals, and to ask why women’s participation in the government has not reached even 30%, let alone the 40% that was established in the signed agreements. Women and their supporters should continue questioning why every committee formed by the Forces of Freedom and Change—from the negotiations in April, to the issues of retribution and peace more recently—are devoid of women. If the slogan “Freedom, peace, and justice” does not impact the daily life of the nomadic girl or the Nuba woman, who are said to act as the “water tap, tractor, and mill”<sup>31</sup> for Sudan—in other

words, who play an irreplaceable role in the well-being of the country—then the revolution *must* continue, and it has to be a revolution of *consciousness*.

One way to develop a revolution of consciousness is to utilize feminist methodologies for coalition-building efforts that will help in “understanding how political forces are deeply intersecting to (re)produce inequalities” across gender and ethnic or regional identities (Burke, 2017, p. 15). Another set of tools is critical pedagogies that can be adopted by Sudanese women revolutionaries to transform themselves in a way that overcomes their perceptions of their own social value and human capability (Freire, 1972; Kadoda & Hale, 2020). To realize equity and widen women’s participation, or to teach ourselves and each other to walk the talk of the revolution, it may be more realistic to aim for the future while “training the new generations to reflect and act on social justice transformation, [which] would require lucidity about our failings and contradictions, creating a culture that promotes diversity of thought, with the intention to change minds, to learn and unlearn” (Kadoda, 2018, p. 100). Walking through national failings and personal contradictions is a road much traveled by women across the world, and Sudan is no exception.

We need to be critical of the compromises we make, even those made with good intentions. It is more than a rhetorical set of questions to ask how, for example, negotiations with and between the military and war criminals such as Hemedti influence the outlook for transitional justice in Sudan, as stated in the Forces of Freedom and Change political declaration. It is more than a rhetorical set of questions to ask how the aspirations for freedom, peace, and justice—depicted in the artwork that adorned the sit-in grounds, and articulated through the revolutionary writings shared by protesters—will actually translate into material and ideological benefits for women in a historically conservative society. There are limited success stories where revolutions carry slogans about women’s liberation into the daily lives of women after the revolution has been completed. It is important to evaluate what Sudanese women have achieved in this revolution, but it is equally important to pay attention to the material gains that women are hoping to make because of the revolution. Instead of thinking *#ma-wagto* (not-time-yet), we need to continue to evaluate the role of women in Sudan as the revolution continues to unfold.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>A Sudanist is a scholar of non-Sudanese origin whose research focuses predominantly or exclusively on Sudan.

<sup>2</sup>Although “revolution” became the popular term that Sudanese used (and still use), Sudanists such as Hale were at first uneasy about using a term that has a specific meaning in the theoretical literature. Hale used “uprising” instead, until she became convinced that people should call their own movement whatever they want. Nonetheless, in this article we oscillate between the two terms. Part of the “consciousness revolution” terminology is that revolutionaries are convinced that this is not just a movement to unseat a military regime, but a movement to raise people’s consciousness about justice and freedom.

<sup>3</sup>In Darfur and some other areas, one of these militias was referred to as Janjaweed (“devils on horseback”).

<sup>4</sup>Initially, military personnel switched between positions in the power alignments. It was difficult to read the purpose behind the changes.

<sup>5</sup>“Tent cities” refers to temporary settlements established by protesters around various cities in Sudan to accommodate protesters. In Khartoum it refers to the sit-in outside the military headquarters.

<sup>6</sup>The public order law controlled how women (and men, although it was rarely applied to men except for such behavior as public drunkenness) acted in public with regard to modest dress (heads covered, for example) and general behavior, such as being in the company of a man who was not a spouse or relative, smoking, and many other social behaviors. Violating the law could result in public flogging, arrest, and imprisonment. In November 2019, this public order law was repealed by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok.

<sup>7</sup>Made up primarily of professionals, many of whom had been members of government-banned unions.

<sup>8</sup>In his work, University of Khartoum professor of political science Atta El-Battahani discusses the “problem of political transition in Sudan” (PSC Report, 2019). He presents a historical analysis of political development in Sudan, and poses the question of whether a historical settlement would be needed, instead of the kind of political settlement that often happens in transitional periods.

<sup>9</sup>In an interview for *Sudania* 24, former vice-president Ali Osman Mohamed Taha warned protesters of the readiness of the Islamic movement to defend the regime using what he called “*katayeb alzel*” (shadow battalions). See Gordon et al. (2019).

<sup>10</sup>Al-Damazin is the capital of Blue Nile state, while Al-Fashir is the capital of North Darfur. In both cities on December 16, 2018, students started demonstrations against rising prices that spread to Atbara and other cities (Al-Jazeera, 2018). It is worth noting that the two states were already under emergency law.

<sup>11</sup>See Hale (2014), who uses Castells (2012) and draws on her own ethnographic research in Sudan over decades.

<sup>12</sup>Both Khalid Medani (2019) and Willow Berridge (2019) have written about what can be learned from these revolts.

<sup>13</sup>For example, by Bashir and his junta (Reuters, 2019).

<sup>14</sup>The sit-in was perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of the fortitude and perseverance of the revolutionaries, and gave greater visibility to the movement. However, the storming of the sit-in by military forces, which resulted in the killing and raping of many people, stunned the protesters. Bodies were being pulled out of the Nile for months afterwards; many are still missing. It was one of Sudan's greatest tragedies.

<sup>15</sup>One of us was there, living the revolution very directly. The other was yearning to be there.

<sup>16</sup>This phrase is borrowed from the vision of Dr. John Garang, a revolutionary South Sudanese intellectual who led the struggle for an inclusive country and warned that it would be divided otherwise. He was most likely assassinated, although this could not be proven.

<sup>17</sup>For the SPA's declarations, statements, and press releases, see its official website at <https://www.sudaneseprofessionals.org/en/>.

<sup>18</sup>For example, Griffin and Fathalrahman (2019) tell the story of three generations of women from the same family in the revolution, and InterParesCanada (2019) is a video that tells "stories of solidarity" from the "women uprising in Sudan."

<sup>19</sup>The incident is described in [MANSAM's petition \(2019\)](#), which includes a link to the group's public statement.

<sup>20</sup>Women's clothing in the form of a wrap, common in Sudan and other parts of Africa.

<sup>21</sup>Long black cloak that covers all but the hands and face in public. The 'abaya' is worn primarily by women in Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states.

<sup>22</sup>See Sirleaf's (2019) *New York Times* article about the prominence of women in the revolution, which features a photo of Alaa Salah, who produced one of the most iconic images in her white *toub*. It is worth noting that Salah has been nominated, jointly with the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), by the Peace Research Institute Oslo for the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize (PRIO, 2020). There has been both support for and opposition to her nomination, and great deal of debate on social media about the concept of an icon of the revolution and who deserves to be one.

<sup>23</sup>At the time of this writing, the manifesto is in draft form and has not been discussed by the general assembly of MANSAM. There is also disagreement about the use of "girls" as compared with "women."

<sup>24</sup>This was a joint effort between Ahfad University for Women and MANSAM in 2019.

<sup>25</sup>The three groups that have publicly left MANSAM are No to Women Oppression, the Coalition of Women in Political Parties, and more recently, the oldest and most prominent women's organization, the Sudanese Women Union.

<sup>26</sup>One of the two largest political parties in Sudan, it is led by Al-Sadig Al-Mahdi, who was also prime minister at the time of the Islamist coup in 1989.

<sup>27</sup>Hemedti was the leader of the notorious Janjaweed militia group that terrorized Darfur. Bashir, leery of Hemedti's power and the strong, expansive militia that he commanded, decided to make Hemedti's militia (now called the Rapid Support Forces) an official part of the Sudanese military. For more information, see Trew (2019).

<sup>28</sup>Hemedti is currently Burhan's deputy as leader of the military council that negotiated with the Forces of Freedom and Change.

<sup>29</sup>The five components that made up the Forces of Freedom and Change were the SPA, the Alliance of Civil Society, and three large coalitions of political parties: Sudan Call, National Consensus, and Unionists Opposition.

<sup>30</sup>In an interview on "decolonial options," Walter Mignolo reflects on artistic/aesthetic entanglements with which committed artists have an option to engage (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014).

<sup>31</sup>Quote from a statement by the director of the Association of Um Doreen Women for Development during an event celebrating International Women's Day, March 15, 2019, in Omdurman, Sudan.

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