

## Women in Arab Civil Society:

# A Case Study from Sudan

By Amira Osman

This article will endeavor to explore Sudanese women's involvement in civil society. It will investigate their roles as actors in public life with emphasis on their roles in conflict resolution and peace reconstruction. The paper argues that Sudanese women are active members in civil society, yet they face many obstacles, which could hinder their full involvement in development and the peace process.

### The Country (Area and Population)

Sudan is the largest country in Africa, with an area of one million square miles. It is located between the Arab world and sub-Saharan Africa. This location largely explains the diversity of its 30 million population where 80% of the inhabitants live in rural areas. There are more than 130 tribes in Sudan. Black Africans are dominant in the South, whereas, people of Arab origin dominate in the North (Suliman 1992:3). Islamic religion and Arab culture exist beside non-Arab/African culture and the Christian religion.

### Gender Profile

Sudan has a low Human Development Index (HDI) so it ranks at 143 out of 174 countries. Female adult literacy rate is 43% while 68% for male. Combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrollment ration for female is 31% whilst for males it is 37%. Maternal mortality rate (per 100, 000 live births) during the period 1990-98 is 550. Female life expectancy is 54 years (Human Development Report 2000: 157-165).

In terms of Gender Related Development Index (GDI) (e.g. female professional and technical workers), it ranks at 118 (value 0.45). Statistics on Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) are unavailable. Female economic activity rate (as % of male rate) is 40%, and data on unemployment rate is unavailable. In terms of women's political participation, as I will indicate later, Sudanese women got the right to vote and to stand for election as early as 1964. However in 1998, there were no women at the ministerial or sub-ministerial level in the Sudanese government (Human Development Report 2000: 166-265).

From the above data, it is clear that both the political arena and public service are generally dominated by men. However consciousness-raising campaigns run by women's organizations and other civil society organizations (e.g. trade unions) have raised the number of women who have entered these areas.

### Definition of Civil Society

There is a considerable debate about the meaning of civil society, its relation to the state and its relevance to social and political life. For example, G. White defines civil society as:

An intermediate associational realm between the state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values (White, 1994: 379).

In civil society people work collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, ideas and goals. Civil society organizations (e.g. trade unions, women's organizations, ex-soldier associations, environment associations and community-based organizations) have no fixed boundaries as they represent the need of people. Their wider range of activities includes political, cultural, ethical and economic activities which enrich the public work and the democratic process.

Despite the fact that non-partisan, active and creative civil society is required to foster development, conflict resolution and peace processes, many governments still have the right to ban any civil society organization which does not abide by the rules. The state fears that the potential and ability of civil society organizations (e.g. trade unions) to organize people outside of the state structure may undermine its control on the public order especially in remote areas and among ethnic minorities.

#### **Civil Society in Sudan**

Historically, civil society in Sudan has been active in social and political life. Trade unions, professional associations, farmers' union, journalists, academics, lawyers, women's organizations and the like have been active in setting the agenda for human rights and democracy (Alternatives 2000).

In fact, non-violent and organized civil society protests had overthrown military dictatorships in 1964 and 1985 and sought democratic changes with other political parties. However, in 1989 the military regime dissolved trade unions, professional and women's organizations and intensified its assault on civil society and democracy activists and ethnic minorities. As a result, the number of civil society organizations declined and fewer people were involved in voluntary work. Union membership has also declined and political and social activities have been made illegal. Nevertheless, this did not last long owing to a number of factors. First, people have felt that the government is not doing enough to address their social and political problems especially the issue of poverty, unemployment, education, democracy and peace. Second, the government is more concerned about establishing civil society organizations, which support the government rather than encouraging the growth of grass-root organizations, which represent the interests of the masses, especially the poor and marginalized groups. Third, the brutality of the civil war and its human costs have brought the issues of peace, human rights and democracy to the forefront. Civil society organizations are becoming increasingly more concerned with the related problems of war at the local, national and regional levels.

They have realized that violent conflict is the major obstacle to development.

#### **Sudanese Women in Civil Society**

In Sudan, the number of women's civil society organizations is not as numerous as other civil society organizations. Some of them are voluntary or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which focus on the well being of society. They provide services and are engaged in welfare activities such as child-care and income generating activities, but they do not challenge the status quo in many civil arenas. Some of them have links with international organizations and most of them are urban -based though they conduct many activities in rural areas.

This welfare approach adopted by most women's civic organizations is part of the Women in Development approach (WID). The most remarkable contribution towards the WID approach was Easter Boserup's (1970) pioneering book *Women's Role in Economic Development*. In this book Boserup highlighted, for the first time, women's contribution in the production process. The welfare approach assumes that women are basic recipients of development benefits because their role is a reproductive one: motherhood, child-bearing and rearing and caring for the elderly. By contrast, men's work is productive (Synder and Tadesse, 1995: 9).

Moser has argued that welfare programs tend to increase women's dependency rather than help them to be more independent because these programs do not question traditional gender division of labor (1993: 61). The criticism of the welfare approach and its limitations has resulted in the development of alternative approaches such as Gender and Development (GAD).

GAD approach has been used by a few of the women's civic organizations, which have succeeded in going further and challenging the sexual division of labor and women's empowerment. These organizations challenge the unequal distribution of power between men and women. They seek to improve women's access to development resources by challenging male culture, economic and social privileges. They emphasize that women should be able to make equal social and economic profits out of the same resources. In order to mainstream gender into the development process, strategic gender interests should be met (Moser, 1993: 40).

#### **The Role of Women's Civic Organizations in Conflict Resolution and Peace Reconstruction**

Although Sudanese women's role in development is generally acknowledged, their participation in policy

making and the democratization processes is limited. This has marginalized them in this area and denied the country the use of women's talents, experiences and skills as agents for peace and development. This neglect of the role of women in policy-making can only make any political process weaker and less insightful.

The lingering aspects of the war e.g. death, torture, violence and rape have brought conflict resolution and peace building issues to women's civil society organizations agenda. For example, immediately after the UN Fourth Conference in Beijing many women's organizations including Sudanese Women's Union, Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace and Babiker Badri Scientific Association for Women Studies have come together calling on warring parties to end the war and work towards a lasting peace" (Engendered Peace Process 1998). Women in exile have also formed their own organizations. For example, The Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace in Nairobi has placed peace building and the strengthening of the role of women in the peace process on top of its agenda. Recently, the Netherlands' Initiative has yielded a profound networking for peace. It has given support to Sudanese women to:

- \* identify important issues related to the peace process
- \* contribute to peace education and culture
- \* move the peace process forward
- \* take a lead in the peace process
- \* benefit from international support and recognition (Initiative to facilitate the participation of Sudanese women in the peace process, Royal Netherlands Embassies, Khartoum/Nairobi)

The positive outcome of this initiative can be summed up as follows:

1. It has focused on the issue of engendering the conflict resolution and the peace process in Sudan as well as recognizing the importance of women's participation in peace negotiation.
2. It has brought women with different cultural and geographical backgrounds to work together for peace.

However, this initiative has not fully succeeded to mobilize women's grass-roots organizations. For example, awareness-raising campaigns haven't been extended to reach women in remote areas, displaced women, and refugee women. This raises a new challenge for women's organizations. They have to expand to include the interests and contributions of victims of war, particularly women. In this respect it helps if local languages are used when addressing grass-roots and community based organizations. This will facilitate building common peace consciousness and allowing women to speak for themselves using their own native language.

Women's civil society organizations still have a long and difficult road ahead. Gender-based discrimination is still deeply entrenched. Women are overburdened with domestic work which prevents them from participating in public work or in decision-making activities, and men are not yet willing or sensitized to share some of the load that women carry in this area.

Nevertheless, women's civil society organizations are eager to take a leading role in the peace process and to become active partners in official efforts to promote peace. Since a legitimate peace process requires the elimination of all forms of oppression and discrimination, women's civil society organizations should encourage and lobby the government to ratify international instruments promoting the rights of women including the convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Another issue is how to use the media to disseminate a culture of peace. Unfortunately, women's civil society organizations generally lack access to the media even though the role of the media in conflict resolution and peace building is essential. Women's civil society organizations and other civil society organizations should be aware of that and should work towards using the media to disseminate a culture of peace by broadcasting messages of peace through songs, drama and other forms of entertainment using local languages. Here I would like to mention how a group of women who represented many women's organizations used the media to disseminate a culture of peace in 1987 immediately after returning from an international peace conference in Moscow. Radio interviews and a night program including peace talk and songs were presented to tell the public about what had been achieved in that conference and what should be done to continue working for peace at the local level.

As indicated earlier, women's organizations as a part of civil society have expressed their willingness and commitment to work for development and peace. They have been involved in social mobilizations, empowering women and generating small-scale livelihood projects, reducing potential conflict among marginalized and impoverished groups. Their livelihood programs help to meet immediate necessities, reducing communal conflict on natural resources (e.g. water and pasture) and thus contributing to peace building. Unfortunately, this potential has not been given due recognition in the official peace process.

Although women have formed their own organizations for conflict resolution and peace building and have their own initiatives for lasting peace, they haven't been represented in peace processes at the official level (e.g. the IGAD initiative and Libyan and

Egyptian initiative) since these initiatives are male dominated, irrespective of women's efforts to resolve conflict and promote peace.

How to take women's civil society organizations into consideration in the above mentioned initiatives and other future efforts for peace?

First, a dialogue with political leaders should be held to discuss the issue of women's participation at the decision-making level for development and peace initiatives. Women's civic organizations need to enhance their organizational capacity by taking the initiative to seek out effective ways of achieving peace, supporting networking among themselves and other civil society organizations, and fostering improved dialogue among non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations (CBS) and trade unions. In other words, enhancing the chances for peace by building from below.

Second, gender awareness campaigns have to be launched, and perceptions and attitudes must be changed. Decision-makers have to understand the role of women in promoting the peace process, and to work towards integrating women in peace efforts. Therefore, the proposed women's conference which was announced by NDA leaders in the second NDA congress in Mosawa (Eritrea) in 2000 can be seen as a serious step towards the participation of women in decision making and their involvement in efforts for making peace a reality.

Another issue to be raised at the official level is human rights abuses that accompany armed conflict. Experience has shown that armed conflict has a disproportionate effect on women. However, women's experience in times of war is often un-acknowledged. Women have been socialized into a culture of silence, where their experiences of pain and suffering are ignored. That silence must be broken and women must be encouraged to tell their stories. This remains an urgent issue which must be addressed if there is to be any chance of a lasting peace in Sudan.

Women's civil society organizations also need to address the issue of protecting innocent civilians especially women and children. The collapse of the social infrastructure e.g. schools and hospitals and the break down of communities and families during conflict, destroy children's immediate sources of care and protection. Furthermore, children, are abused, oppressed and forced to carry guns and fight. Accordingly, women's civic organizations, human rights activists as well as the international community need to act together to ensure the protection of children during conflict.

Another issue that must be handled is the need to prepare for the post-conflict period. As one woman from Lebanon puts it, "The real experience of war is not the shelling and so on, those are just moments, though they are the ones you see on TV. War is what happens afterwards, the years of suffering hopelessly with a disabled husband and no money, or struggling to rebuild when all your property has been destroyed" (Bennett et al 1995).

Women's different needs in post war reconstruction periods need to be dealt with seriously though there are some difficulties with women's contribution in conflict resolution. Since women have been excluded from democratic participation for so long, the need arises for consciousness raising campaigns about the importance of women's participation in the peace process since it will yield gender sensitive programs for reconstruction and building peace.

Rensen (1998) refers to women's political reconstruction by arguing that women's participation in post-war political reconstruction depends on two main issues. First, the nature of the emerging political system and its understanding of women's rights, needs and interests. Second, whether or not women will be allowed to be active participants in the political process. Of course, women's earlier position in the conflict (as displaced refugees, victims of rape or torture or ex-combatants) will determine their post-conflict concerns, needs and contributions. For example, displaced women may be more interested in re-building their lost livelihoods, whereas women who suffer rape may need psycho-social help before getting involved in any socio-political activities.

Women's civil society organizations need to provide psycho-social support and related health care services for victims of gender-related violence in a friendly and supportive atmosphere. This is not only a good mechanism for healing the pain of the victims of the war. It is the foundation on which society has some hope of living in peace and justice.

Although war may "empower" women by increasing their responsibilities in taking on what is traditionally referred to as male roles, experience has shown that traditional discriminatory social attitudes may re-emerge immediately after the war is over as was the case in Eritrea (Eugenia Date-Bah from ILO in a WILPF conference) where women were asked to leave the public arena and go back to their traditional domain. The challenge is how to ensure that women hold on to the changed roles they acquired during war.

In some countries the post- conflict constitutions may generally recognize women's political rights

e.g. the right to vote. However, women may face some difficulties exercising that right because they are expected not to vote against male relatives. Another obstacle in this regard is time. Women may face difficulties in finding time to participate in politics and to understand political programs. To solve this problem, women's civic organizations could disseminate political information in a simple way using simple/appropriate techniques which can be understood by women especially those who lack political experience and consciousness. This could also help more women to stand for election. Furthermore, women need to be represented in committees that will supervise the election process (Rensen, 1998).

In Eritrea, the constitution has recognized women's rights in general. A draft stated that "any act that violates the human rights of women or limits or otherwise thwarts their role or participation is prohibited" (Tsfai 1996 cited in Rensen 1998). Furthermore, women have been given access to land and female circumcision is prohibited by law. Furthermore, maternity leave has been extended (Iyob, 1997). This Eritrean experience, among others, should be considered when drafting legislations related to women's rights in post-conflict Sudan.

Finally, improving the role of women's civic organizations in the peace process and conflict resolution requires building the leadership potential of women to make meaningful contributions to the peace making process at all levels: "Joint decisions are not the only outcome or even the most common response to conflicts, but such decisions may be one of the most valuable outcome" (Accord Handbook in Basic Conflict Resolution, undated: 12).

### Conclusion

Civil society in Sudan has been active in many fields including development, politics and peace. Although there was a time when civil society contribution to public life was abandoned and ignored by the government, civil society organizations have not given up and have continued to play a leading role on issues concerning development, peace and democracy.

Sudanese women have entered the public life as active members in male dominated civil society organizations e.g. trade unions. Later they were able to form their own civil society organizations concerned with welfare programs such as income generating activities for poor women. Nevertheless, few women's civic organizations have been able to question male domination of public life in regard to conflict resolution, the peace process and development.

### Recommendations

1. More training for women leaders is needed in conflict resolution, mediation and negotiations.
2. Women's civil society organizations should appeal to the international community to support democratization and the peace processes in Sudan.
3. Women's civil society organizations should mobilize marginalized women e.g. displaced women, refugee women and poor women and ensure that all voices of oppressed women are heard.
4. The government should listen to the voices of the masses through their civic organizations and give a "bottom up approach" a chance.
5. Women's civil society organizations which have committed themselves to networking should be active members in all decision-making process.
6. Women's organizations should improve their capacity building to be active actors in the post-conflict reconstruction.
7. Women's civic society organizations should work to meet women's strategic gender interests for empowering women.

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