



## Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 13

Issue 5 *Arab Women Arab Spring*

Article 8

Oct-2012

# Women at a Crossroads: Sudanese Women and Political Transformation

Leah F. Sherwood

---

### Recommended Citation

Sherwood, Leah F. (2012). Women at a Crossroads: Sudanese Women and Political Transformation. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13(5), 77-90.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol13/iss5/8>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

## **Women at a Crossroads: Sudanese Women and Political Transformation**

By Leah F. Sherwood<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The 'Arab Spring' is a nuanced phenomenon of significance to African democracy and women's rights in Sudan – north and south. Political transformation processes underway in post-revolution Arab states simultaneously give voice to human rights advocates and rise to Islamist political groups. The reverberating trend presents a risk of deepening Islamist governance in Sudan and reinforcing patriarchal patterns of kinship in South Sudan. It also offers opportunity, north and south, for Sudanese women to form a common agenda, engage politically, promote a vibrant civil society, challenge human rights violations and develop a voice through participation. Given the Islamist upsurge in the region, a review of literature highlights what women in post-revolution Arab states have reported back in terms of the effect the popular uprisings have had on their rights. In light of the outcomes, approaches are advanced that will strengthen Sudanese women's movements and better position them to exploit opportunity for progress in the period of political transformation on the horizon in Sudan and South Sudan.

*Keywords:* Sudan, Arab Spring, women and political change

### **Introduction**

The Middle East and North African region has long been marked by political instability, human rights violations and protracted humanitarian crises. Sudan has had a tumultuous history; the root causes of its conflict are structurally embedded in social, political and economic norms. The current fighting along the new border is the newest example of entrenched conflict indicators manifesting into actual war. During 2011, the wider region witnessed a historical transformation – popularized as the 'Arab Spring' – a series of revolutions inspired by socio-economic and governance issues ranging from persistent corruption, weak political representation, high levels of unemployment, expensive food and fuel, acute water scarcity and a volatile political and security context (UNHCR, 2011). However, the tendency to discuss the 'Arab Spring' as a monolithic phenomenon is dangerous. Granted, the national uprisings have common features such as the demonstrations being youth driven, organized via cell phones and social networking websites to circumvent state controls as well as being marked by an absence of visible leadership making them essentially grassroots movements. The 'Arab Spring' has also largely given Islamism a boost in post-revolution states and others in the region such as Sudan.

Yet the experiences of each Arab state have been distinct. In some countries the military defected from the regime (Tunisia and Egypt) while in others the military by and large stayed loyal to the president (Libya, Yemen and Syria). Some pro-democracy groups succeeded in 'liberating' parts of cities (Tahrir Square in Cairo, Pearl Square in Manama, the University quarter in Sanaa), or in the case of Libya, segments of the state. The Syrian authorities are preventing protesters from establishing any such liberated enclaves. While it would appear each popular uprising began as an internal affair, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) intervened in Bahrain and NATO was drawn into Libya. The 'Arab Spring' as cohesive movement has many nuances that must be recognized to avoid a thin reading of the events. This paper aims to take stock of the significance of the 'Arab Spring' phenomenon for African democracy and political transformation in the context of women's rights in Sudan – north and south. The objective is to

---

<sup>1</sup> Leah Sherwood, is Research Associate at the Institute for International and Civil Security (IICS), University of Science, Technology and Research, Abou Dhabi, UAE.

evaluate risk and opportunity for Sudanese women from the perspective of South Sudan's post-conflict reconstruction environment and the Islamist government in the north against the backdrop of regional calls for greater democracy. Examining outcomes for women in post-revolution Arab states allows the author to suggest that the political transformation process embodied in 'Arab Spring' protests is not a model to enhance women's rights. Seeking a way forward, barriers to women's political mobilization are highlighted and approaches are advanced to strengthen women's development and rights.

Before the Arab Spring, Sudan was the only country in the Arab world to publically revolt and oust two military dictatorships. In 1964 and 1985, Sudanese citizens took to the streets and made their voices heard (BBC, 2012). The same conditions that sparked the previous uprisings in Sudan still exist today, coupled with several new ones. For many Sudanese, political oppression and harsh economic conditions may just be the tip of the iceberg. While President Omar al-Bashir's ruling party the National Congress Party (NCP) remains in power, conflict zones continue to erupt, political unrest persists and a rise in conservative Islamist governance threatens women in the north. In South Sudan, corruption is taking hold and tribal violence undermines basic human security. 'Arab Spring' protests, demanding greater political freedom, economic opportunity and an end to systemic corruption, have resonated with Sudanese. Africa is home to the majority of the world's democratizing states and even modest reverberations from the popular 'Arab Spring' will have implications for Sudanese governance norms, stability and by extension women's development in the north and south.

It is impossible to state an 'Arab Spring' style revolution will certainly occur in Sudan or predict when it would happen precisely, but Sudan is unstable. Although differences exist between Sudan and MENA counties, they share many of the same problems that triggered the revolutions: high youth unemployment, rising food and fuel costs, persistent corruption, denial of basic rights and limited participation in decision-making. Well-known Kenyan human rights activist, Wangari Maathai, declared "A wind is blowing. It is heading south, and won't be suppressed forever" (Sterling-Folker, 2006, 12). A remarkable fact about the revolutions that toppled Tunisian and Egyptian dictators is that so few Middle Eastern Studies scholars anticipated them. The reasons for such relate to the tendency of scholars to emphasize large-scale political processes and social forces while discounting the role of ideas and individuals (Schlumberger, 2007). One lesson to heed from the 'Arab Spring' experience is that the role of chance and incident must be respected when consideration is given to how structural change occurs. No one anticipated Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation would trigger a revolution or Google executive Wael Ghonim's TV interview would lead crowds to Cairo's Tahrir Square the next day (Elman, 2012). Passionate espousal of powerful values - freedom, dignity, and justice - is what brought thousands into the streets in the MENA region, not calculated interest (Sterling-Folker, 2006).

Recognizing that a single incident or person may ignite a widely supported revolutionary movement and the presence of a large contingent of poor, aggrieved people in Sudan on both sides of the border, regime change is on the horizon. Against a backdrop of a readiness for change in the region, the Khartoum government is attacking Abyei, fighting a war in the Nuba Mountains supporting ongoing offensives against civilians in Darfur, committing assaults on the Blue Nile border state and recently declared that "guns and bullets" (Al Jazeera News, 2012) is the language it will use with South Sudan. All this activity is inside a recently fractured nation with peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction underway in South while in the north stricter Islamic values are being imposed. Therefore, it is not far-fetched to imagine that Sudan as a

whole will reach a tipping point. Potential is growing for a more united opposition advocating for structural change in Sudan. Darfur, Abyei, South Kordofan, the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile, and the Nuba in the far North all represent opposition to the regime, armed or unarmed, with similar grievances that have yet to fully coordinate their activities. The author suspects that a popular alliance will form and dislodge Bashir's regime while opposition political parties and civil society organizations continue to agitate for greater democracy and inclusive government. Women are actively building civil societies that demonstrate resilience, unity and power, especially in the south. In sum, Sudan stands at an unprecedented crossroads that could be a moment of opportunity for both Sudans—current internal, regional and international dynamics may well provide a real catalyst for political change.

### **Sudanese Women**

To clarify, Sudan's female population is culturally diverse; it comprises a large majority of Muslims in the north and traditional African animist religions in the south. Recent research has pointed out Sudanese Muslim women's perception of gender equality is not unitary (Badri, 2011 & NORAD, 2011). Liberal Muslim activists advocate for gender equality in all areas of law; conservative Muslim activists deem gender equality unnecessary. They both source their claims within Islam and offer different interpretations of the Islamic law (Tønnessen & Kjøstved Granås, 2010). The Sudanese women's movement is dominated by well educated women in Khartoum and there is little participation from rural, uneducated women. But, the same schisms between women's perceptions about women's movements are visible in the south. Thus, Sudanese women are not a homogenous group; different religious beliefs, social and economic positions and ethnicities define them as a group. That said women do represent a group of people who have unequal access to education, health care and political representation on both sides of the border and are assigned gendered roles which are reinforced by cultural norms, religion, societal perceptions, socialization processes, and patriarchal practices (Edward, 2011).

Taken that political change will occur in Sudan, a review will be provided on women's status under Islamic government and later in the south's post-conflict environment to envisage how the tides of Sudanese political transformation might affect them. From the outset, it is necessary to make three position statements which are assumed to be true in the following discussion. One, the historical lack of women's meaningful political participation in Sudan is one of the reasons for its underdevelopment (Verveer, 2011). Two, greater promotion of women's rights was high on the agenda during the popular uprisings. And, gender equity is central to lasting peace and human security.

### **Women under Islamic Rule**

On June 30, 1989, a bloodless coup d'état occurred and Sudan became the first Sunni country to be governed according to Islamist principle (Abdullahi, 2008). Since South Sudan succeeded and north Sudan emerged as a new political entity, the role of Islam in politics has burgeoned. Trade unions, political parties and women's organizations were all curtailed then and face new threats if a bolder Islamic Constitution is instituted in the face of less ethnic and religious diversity since the south separated (Sudan Tribune, 2012). One salient feature of the April 2010 Sudanese elections was the consolidation of the Islamist-military coalition in Khartoum. Stricter laws that diminished women's status in society were imposed although technically illegal, such as female circumcision and early marriage. Women are being increasingly beaten and flogged under unclear laws (Glassborow, *et al.*, 2011). Since 2005, human rights and women's groups have brought a number of cases to Sudan's constitutional

court claiming that laws or their implementation violate the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the interim constitution, but few have been successful (Glassborow, *et al.*, 2011).

This development changes the arena where gender politics is largely played out: namely Islam itself. Political activism can be seen among Muslim women who support and criticize the Islamization of the state, but most seek a role for themselves inside Islam. Islamist gender politics in Sudan therefore provide insight into the broader political contestation about the role of Islam in state and society and not whether one exists. Political critique of the relationship between Islam and the state generally, and shari'a and women in particular is extremely politicized and polarized.

Since President Omar Al Bashir came to power, women's rights in Sudan have been significantly eroded. Ms. Hashim, director of the Khartoum-based Salmmah Women's Resource Centre, said women bore the brunt of his initial purge, with 80 per cent of them being dismissed (Adeba, 2007). "As the new government pursued economic liberalization, girls' education and maternal health care were hit hard by budget cuts. The gains that Sudanese women had made during the 1960s and the 1970s were significantly reduced," Ms. Hashim said (Adeba, 2007). Worse, she continued, this has produced a culture of silence around women's rights. Fighting to regain the rights lost under Al Bashir's government is fraught with hurdles. Harassment of women's organizations by government security agents is common and the government does not allow women's organizations to register as NGOs; the stealthy habit of registering as business associations to circumvent state controls is being prevented now. Women's unions and organizations not sanctioned by the regime are suppressed, but those that are such as the Sudan Women's General Union (SWGU) are tolerated. Islamists also criticize traditional dress of Sudanese women as too revealing and advocate "proper Islamic dress," the hijab (Wallace, 2009). This is producing cultural shifts which have a pronounced effect on women. In December 2010, Human Rights Watch reported the arrest of over 60 Sudanese women's rights activists following a peaceful protest against an incident in which a woman had been flogged by police (Wallace, 2009). Human rights groups say activists who raise their voices and call for change are detained by the powerful National Intelligence and Security Service and are sometimes beaten or worse (Glassborow, *et al.*, 2011).

Women who call for more democratic freedoms and human rights are branded as Westernized elite intellectuals. Nevertheless, Muslim female activists courageously strive to get women's issues on the agenda, despite authoritarian constraints such as a weak parliament, lack of judicial independence and media censorship. Women activists have learned to relate, adapt, accommodate, subvert, resist, bargain, and negotiate with the Islamist state in new and perhaps unexpected ways, strategies which have bore fruit (Tønnessen, 2011). Furthermore, after the civil war ended in the signing of the CPA in 2005, the Sudanese women, in line with UNSCR 1325, increased women's political participation. The 25% women's quota was implemented in the National Elections Act of 2008, ensuring a minimum of 112 of the 450 representatives of the National Assembly were women after the 2010 election, a significant milestone. At present, Sudan has 13% female parliamentarians, the most in the country's history (Tønnessen & Kjøstved Granås, 2010). However, "strength in numbers" does not mean legal reform of gender discriminatory laws or inclusion of all women since those in government tend to be elite female voices.

Historically, Sudanese women activists have forsaken women's civil rights in exchange for progress on political and economic rights. Nahid Jbarallah, human rights activist, stressed that "political rights are not an objective in itself, but a frame for other rights, to protect other

rights. Civil rights are an objective in itself” (Tønnessen & Kjøstved Granås, 2010, 38). But according to Asma Muhammad Taha, the daughter of the late Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, executed for apostasy in 1985, “pushing for equality in the public sphere does not matter unless you do reform the most important area: family law” (Tønnessen & Kjøstved Granås, 2010, 6). One of the most important debates in contemporary Islamic Sudan concerns women’s civil rights and Muslim family law. Women in parliament have not been able to bridge the political, ethnic and religious divides and set aside competing agendas to stand together as women to address this gap. The issue stems from what some women refer to as the “correct” interpretation of Islam.

Sudan's 1998 Islamist Constitution, article 21, states that all persons are equal before the law (Tønnessen & Kjøstved Granås, 2010). It did not limit the rights of women in terms of education, work and political rights. However, the Islamists did limit women’s rights in certain areas, particularly those relating to family law (Mutawinaat Group, 1997). Several articles within the Muslim Family Law (1991), the Criminal Law (1991) and the Public Order Act (1996), codified during Islamist reign discriminate against women and girls when it comes to social and civil rights. The Public Order Act, for instance, is framed so widely that it allows almost any mixed social gathering to be considered a setting for fornication and enables the virtual exclusion of women from the public sphere. These laws are unconstitutional. In Sudan, rape is a punishable crime. There is no law criminalizing domestic violence; nor does there appear to be any legislation protecting women from sexual harassment nor is spousal rape addressed in the law (SIGI, 2012). Furthermore, state-sponsored Islamic organizations increasingly pressure women to stay at home and follow “Islamic” roles. To date, arguments for the abolition of shari’a have been successfully suppressed and are hardly visible in public debate, particularly with respect to the woman question. To the surprise of some, Sudanese women’s activism has produced rivaling Islamic models which neither comply with nor defy the Islamic government, but fall somewhere in between. Islamic governance is not incompatible with women’s desires as a concept, but in some of its application.

In terms of human development indicators, they are generally better in Sudan than South Sudan. But, widespread use of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Sudan contributes to high maternal mortality rates (MMR) which increased between 1990 and 2006 from 537 to 638 per 100,000 respectively in part due to the flourishing FGM practice (NORAD, 2011, 13). To compare, MMR rates for South Sudan were 1,939 per 100,000 in 2010 (UNDP, 2010). Sudanese culture correlates a man’s success to the number of his offspring thereby placing enormous burdens on women to bear children. The 2010 report from the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) reported weak efforts to prevent human rights abuses of women in Darfur (Johnson, 2007 and UNHRC, 2010). Sudan has not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security was fragmented. (NORAD, 2011) While the equal rights of women and girls are written into the Constitution and Bill of Rights, customary law is upheld.

### **Sudanese Women in Post-conflict South Sudan**

Gender issues are more complex for the women of South Sudan; they often face many of the same challenges as their northern neighbour, but also have to deal with a range of additional issues. In South Sudan, there are many external threats to security as tensions with Sudan continue to seethe. Assaults from militia groups and tribal clashes threaten local and national stability; ramifications of conflict and insecurity are felt most acutely among women. Aside from

traditional notions of security being under siege, many South Sudanese women are living without basic forms human security, health care or economic stability. They lack access to food. One in three South Sudanese women are either moderately or severely food insecure, according to the U.N and prices of staple foods, such as maize and sorghum, jumped by 100 to 250 per cent between 2010 and 2011 (Baath, 2011). Women in South Sudan do not live lives free from fear of violence. Threats to women are often most stark at their homes—a truth often disregarded.

In 2011, a Human Security Baseline Assessment was carried out by conducting interviews with hundreds of South Sudanese women. Fifty-nine per cent of the women interviewed stated that violence occurred in their homes (Institute for International and Development Studies, 2012). Personal accounts also indicate that the incidence of domestic violence has increased since the CPA was signed in 2005 (Institute for International and Development Studies, 2012). In many parts of South Sudanese society, domestic violence against a wife is socially acceptable. This can be explained in part by the practice of paying a dowry because husbands perceive they then own their wives. A woman cannot seek divorce without the approval of her family, which would be atypical. Women generally do not earn an income or own property (IRIN, n.d). Furthermore, early marriage has negative effects on girl's development. The constitution provides for a minimum age of 18 years before marriage, but this is often not the case in practice (Baath, 2011). South Sudanese women are held captive by a lack of material assets underscored by cultural power structures that supersede new legal provisions.

Although women's participation in political life has not been seen to be a woman's prerogative much the same as the north, there is good news for women's empowerment in South Sudan. Due to the post-conflict transformation process taking place, women have been able to take on a variety of new political roles and challenge traditional gender norms (Ali, 2011). Security Council Resolution 1325 recognizes the importance of women's representation at all levels of conflict resolution, post-conflict peacebuilding and governance. While Sudan blocks initiatives to engage women's issues due to conservative Islamic governance, South Sudan is forming the habit of embracing them (Ali, 2011). Historically, the largest gains for African women have occurred during post-conflict transition periods as government and constitutions are typically reorganized (Patti, 2011). For instance, women's political participation increased in Rwanda after the 1994 genocide and its parliament now has the world's highest level of female representation. Post-war Liberia elected Africa's first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Amnesty International, 2012). South Africa now has one of the most gender-sensitive constitutions in the world, and constitutional reform after Kenya's post-election violence in 2008 enabled women to strengthen constitutional provisions. The National Interim Constitution (2005) was an occasion to make progress on women's legal rights, but as stated cultural traditions have impeded the implementation of these laws. Despite hurdles, 25% of South Sudan's parliamentary seats were allocated to women after the 2010 parliamentary election to redress historical imbalances. An important aspect of that election was that 60% of the voters were women (Ortega & Assad, 2010, 6).

Post-conflict environments often produce change, at least in the form of legal rights guarantees, but powerful traditional laws are barriers to them as they are oral not written and no state authority can negotiate new rights if the old ones are informal. Thus, the lack of codification thwarts change. Efforts to codify certain rights have been made, but customary law is still applied to women's rights regarding sexual violations, reproductive rights, divorce, and child custody. Customary law remains the rule of law. The United Nations Population Fund 2011 report estimated that "over 90 percent of day-to-day criminal and civil cases are executed

under customary law, which is inconsistent with international human rights laws, [and] favours men” (UNPF, 2011). In periods of political transformation, too often concepts of civil rights and democracy are only nominally promoted (Jok, 2011). Post-conflict change can be a double-edged sword for women and the risk of old pattern reinforcement is real. Women’s progress can be constrained given their roles in reproducing generations lost during the war biologically and culturally (Yuval-Davis, 1997). However, the same process can open up the political space for dialogue about citizenship and inclusion.

### **The ‘Arab Spring,’ Political Transformation and Women’s Rights**

Political transformation will likely occur in Sudan, but will these developments benefit women? Regionally, the ‘Arab Spring’ so far appears to be providing limited rights and freedom for women while laying a wider foundation for the augmentation of conservative Islamist governance typically not associated with women’s human rights. Mass protest created an opportunity for change, but some claim the power vacuum is being seized by fundamentalist religious groups who seek to institute their version of reform. Islamism is a consequence of the ‘Arab Spring,’ social injustice being its cause. This outcome was not intentional and for some groups could be counter to the aims of the protest. Sudan has so far not experienced wide-spread social upheaval, but the regional environment of transformation has allowed it to institute a stricter brand of Islam. Change does not immediately imply improvement and women must be cautious about transformations brought about by ‘Arab Spring’ inspired events. All change is not good change. By evaluating the outcomes for Arab women in post-revolution states it may be possible to see patterns, learn lessons and develop strategies for Sudanese women’s empowerment.

Successful uprisings in North Africa (Tunisia, Egypt and Libya) sparked mass movements across the Middle East and Gulf region for democratization and constitutions that protected gender equality, free speech and fair elections. Women were integral to these uprising; they organized, sacrificed and marched alongside men. Now, as countries in the region are rebuilding new governments, women’s rights activists know they must fight to institutionalize meaningful change. The political transformation across the region offers veritable opportunities for women to gain rights, but it is balanced with a danger of regression just as South Sudan’s post-conflict environment. The call for wider ranging women’s rights was heard, but many fear women’s rights being curtailed paradoxically. A 2012 report from the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) concluded that the ‘Arab Spring’ is failing to deliver gains in women’s rights commensurate with their participation in the protests that led to the region’s transitions (FIDH, 2012). Women’s important role during revolutions does not guarantee them a role in the political bodies of the new regimes.

One theme that seems to run through post-revolutions states is that women played an essential role in the uprisings, only to be marginalized once transitions began. The lessons of history must be remembered: Hard won advances towards equal rights for women face relentless opposition and are easily eroded. The story of Algeria’s fight against colonialism epitomizes the misfortune of women in revolutions. Another example is Yemen in the 1960s when women fought tyranny alongside men, but the new regime reduced respect for their rights (Democracy Digest, 2012). Moushira Khattab, a former Egyptian ambassador to South Africa and Minister of Family and Population, states that women joined men in Tahrir Square and then "the train of change has not only left them behind, but has in fact turned against them...(and) dormant conservative value systems are being manipulated by a religious discourse that denies women their rights"(Democracy Digest, 2012). Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian Nobel Peace Prize winner and



human rights activist, said " [...] the 'Arab Spring' is not an accurate description [...]" of what has taken place and compares the period after Iran's revolution when religious tyranny took hold rather than democracy to today (Coleman, 2012).

The 'Arab Spring' has produced a resurgence of political Islam. Many women fear the revolutionary dust will settle and Islamist governments will take hold of the Arab region forcing them out of the political arena, a thought echoed by Kuwaiti women's rights activist, Ebtahal al-Khatib, who said the rise of the Islamists will "first and foremost negatively affect the role of women" in the Arab world. In Egypt, where Islamists dominated recent parliamentary and senate elections, female representation in parliament fell from 12 percent to just two percent, and a quota that gave women 64 seats was abandoned. "Women are now confronting attempts to exclude them from public life, as well as acts of discrimination and violence, perpetrated with impunity by extremist groups and security forces," said in a report by FIDH (Al Arabiya News, 2012). For example, in Egypt, female protesters have been subjected to virginity tests by the ruling military, a practice calculated to humiliate them, according to Amnesty International (Amnesty International, 2011). Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, whose Freedom and Justice Party dominated the newly-elected constituent assembly, recently affirmed that a woman cannot become president. "Any law that agrees with shari'a is welcome. Those that do not, aren't" said Mahmoud Ghozlan, a Brotherhood spokesman (Al Arabiya News, 2012).

Rola Dashti, a former member of the Kuwaiti parliament, says that "women's presence and participation in public life—specifically in politics, decision-making positions and state affairs—moved from marginalization during repressive regimes to rejection with Islamist regimes" (Democracy Digest, 2012). All of Kuwait's female women parliamentarians lost their seats following an Islamist surge in recent elections. A first draft of the electoral law in Libya reserved 10 percent of seats in the constituent assembly for women, but that was later abandoned, much to the outrage of women's rights advocates (McDowall, 2012). A Moroccan law adopted in October 2011 established a quota of only 15% and Tunisia's 41-member government contains only 3 women (Democracy Digest, 2012). While proclaiming Libya's liberation, National Transitional Council (NTC) Chairman Mustafa Abdul-Jalil said that certain laws, such as those restricting polygamy, would be voided on the basis of shari'a. Libya's women reacted with indignation that the NTC would transform Libya into a theocracy (Verveer, 2011).

Rend Al-Rahim, who served as the first ambassador to the United States in Iraq's post-Saddam government and currently manages the Iraq Foundation suggested that constricting rights for women is more related to a revival of patriarchal, conservative social traditions entrenched in antiquated tribal customs than religion. Shari'a, she claims, is cover for a deeper impulse for male authority (Coleman, 2012). While women played crucial roles in the 'Arab Spring' resistance movements and recorded unprecedented visibility, shattering stereotypes as they demonstrated strength, tenacity and solidarity, they risk the burgeoning rise in political Islam arresting momentum or worse reversing progress. Across the region, new governments are faced with the challenge of institutionalizing provisions for human rights and democracy to placate the masses while balancing the desires of increasingly powerful Islamist political parties. It is too early to tell how women's rights will ultimately fare in the longer term. Each post-revolution country will evolve differently and Sudan will chart its own course. But, the 'Arab Spring' as a means for political transformation helping women achieve equality has proven to be a double-edged sword.

### **Women's Development: Policies and Approaches**

In light of 'Arab Spring' transitions, there is a need in Sudan and South Sudan to strategize for the future knowing that political change may bring burdens for women if support is in place in advance. Being positioned to capitalize on opportunity is key. Sudanese women, especially those in South Sudan, are closely monitoring regional changes and working to protect gender equality both privately and publicly, legitimize women's role in public affairs, and be included in the implementation process to achieve these effects (Harrington, 2011). The world has seen the capacity of women as peacemakers during the 'Arab Spring'. The very act of participation has irreversibly changed the role of women and indeed how they perceive their identities. The gateway for Sudan's and South Sudan's women during transition lies in being included in the consultation processes. It is problematic that discussion currently underway on Sudan's new constitutional changes is excluding women and civil society. Women must continue to push for great visibility in permanent government structures whereby they can pose challenges to the exercise of customary laws, the considerable vestige that holds them back and applications of shari'a law. Moroccan professor, Souad Eddouada, argues that the 'Arab Spring' gave birth to grassroots youth activism and empowerment regardless of gender or social class due to access to social media tools (Harrington, 2011). This suggests that a powerful fire has been ignited that will be difficult to extinguish. Sudanese women have a working model and can adapt the concept to their local context.

Investments in health and education where made will take time to bear fruit. Women should not wait for visible changes in the human development indicators to become politically empowered. According to Ms Lucie Luguga, UNIFEM's country Director in South Sudan, the time for women to participate in political life is now. Luguga stated "If you say the women are not ready they will never be ready" (Godia, 2009). The first opportunity southern women can capitalize on in the new electoral law which leaves 60% open for anyone who wants to go into competitive politics; the second is the 15% reserved in the party list as well as the 25% affirmative action which is enshrined in the CPA as the women's appropriation (Godia, 2009). Action toward mainstreaming women's issues in ordinary politics in South Sudan may shed light on a path to empowerment for women in Sudan. Any break coming from the current status quo of Islamic rule caused by a disturbance to Al Basir's reign may be an opportunity to infuse gender awareness and fresh dialogue into political discourse. Lessons learned from other societies in transition teach that when women play an active and inclusive role in societies – from participating in the drafting of new constitutions to rebuilding economies – the whole country benefits. As we saw in South Africa, Rwanda, and elsewhere, women's full participation improves governance, reduces conflict, and increases economic prosperity.

Sudanese women require practical "know how" on how to engage the political process. Furthermore, they must come together to form a common agenda. The challenge is, according to Luguga, that "... women are still lost as to what entails a common agenda and they need to understand the difference between political parties and women's movement" (South Sudan's Women's Agenda, 2012). It is necessary to promote gender, but it has to be from a shared platform. A good example of this happening was a women's conference producing the Juba Declaration of 2009: a common statement of women's aims (South Sudan's Women's Agenda, 2012). Although high on the list of South Sudan's women's priorities is food insecurity, education and violence, there is a real desire brewing in South Sudan not only to talk about women's issues, but to discuss issues that are of importance to citizens, democracy, peace and development. They seek to enhance their participation in peace and security as well as their role in governance and they are receiving some support from men (UN Women, 2011). In Sudan, the

best use of women's resources and time is to mimic the work of their southern neighbours who are striving to form a common, inclusive gender agenda. Unity confers strength.

Political contributions are hampered in much of South Sudan and rural Sudan due to a lack of capacity which is larger than gaps in training. Factors negatively affecting participation range from educational achievement, illiteracy, access to health care, financial assets, age, marital status, political party affiliation, ethnic and regional affiliation, religion, and other forms of social difference. These societal distinctions impact women's decisions, their chances and choices regarding involvement in political activities and public life at large. Literacy is required in order to compete for any seat in government. According to Section 52 of the National Electoral Act all candidates must be literate and section 56 sets fees for party affiliation; poverty and illiteracy are obstacles for some potential women candidates (Omukhango, 2009). Furthermore, existing customary laws make it difficult for women to escape the burden of domestic roles, multiple child bearing duties and the psychological barrier of being assigned second class citizen status. Moreover, many women have a limited understanding of gender and the concept of equality. This translates into a tendency to view gender as an alien concept and therefore illegitimate concern among so many competing priorities (Mustafa, 2011). Sudanese women have to define their gender priorities, which at the moment would ideally be very practical and step out in graduated terms.

Building competence is possible. To varying degrees Sudanese women in general need economic and political empowerment, as well as civic education on national and state issues. Programs centered on promoting greater competence for illiterate women, basic social service delivery, good governance, private sector engagement, petroleum revenue management, physical infrastructure and aid mobilization in support of women are all underway in some form and represent tangible opportunity for women (UN Women, 2012). South Sudanese women are collaborating ensure private sector development evenly distributes power and economic opportunities to men and women (Wilson, 2011). Additionally, there are efforts to promote active citizenship. One attribute of citizenship is the right to vote, but in order for citizens to be able to meaningfully exercise this right women must learn how the electoral process functions (EU Final Report, 2010). Civil society organizations have this role to fill. Civil society has been weakened in Sudan. Women in Sudan need to collaborate and pool resources whether economic, social or political to ensure that civil society bodies remain active. The structures exist; conviction to its continued existence is required.

Although women's organizations have existed historically, women's worldwide civil society activism has dramatically increased since the 1970s. Women's traditional exclusion from formal governing structures, elected or appointed, has been a driving force behind their involvement in civil society because it gave them "back door" access. Through civil society, women can create an autonomous political space where they are free to organize according to their own interests (Molyneux, 1998). Therefore, efforts that promote the inclusion of civil society in peace processes or invigorated democratic systems often translate into a larger role for women (Sen, 1998). Women's organizations should orient their work in this direction. South Sudanese women through civil society are engaging currently with international and regional policy-making institutions to promote gender, peace, democracy and development (Anderlini, 2001) and this is serving as a training exercise that can be replicated. This initiative is powerful.

In conclusion, in 1975, Henry Kissinger, former US Secretary of State and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, remarked "As a professor, I tend to think of history as run by impersonal forces.

But when you see it in practice, you see the difference personalities make." As experts continue to dissect the 'Arab Spring' and identify the large-scale forces that contributed to this movement for democracy, it would be wise to remember just how much the voices of courageous individuals also mattered. As civil society gains strength, women's movements unify, capacity is formed and opportunity opens up, Sudanese women will find ground to put forward a development agenda and have women in place to receive it politically. The time for women to be bound by patriarchal patterns of kinship, legalized discrimination and subjected to social subordination has come to an end. The promotion of women's human rights is neither a Western issue, nor an Arab issue, nor a religious issue. It is a matter of universal human rights and dignity. The prospect for women's empowerment in Sudan and South Sudan should not be discounted nor the need minimized.

### Works Cited

- Abdullahi A. Gallab. (2008). *The First Islamist Republic: Development and Disintegration of Islamism in the Sudan*. Aldershot Ashgate
- Adeba, Brian. (2007, 26) September. Sudan: Activists Take Their Own Hard Line on Improving Women's Rights in Sudan. *Women Living Under Muslim Laws*. Retrieved on May 16, 2012 from <http://www.wluml.org/node/4062>
- Al Arabiya News. (07 March 2012). Women on the back foot in the Arab Spring. Retrieved on 13 April 2012 from <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/03/07/199129.html>
- Al Jazeera News. (2012, 24 April). UN chief urges rival Sudans to hold dialogue. Retrieved on 24 April 2012 from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/04/201242434833182231.html>
- Ali, Nada. (December 2011). *Gender and Statebuilding in South Sudan*. United States Institute for Peace, pp.1
- Amnesty International. (31 March 2008). Liberia: A Flawed Post-War Process Discriminates against Women and Girls. London. Retrieved on January 30, 2012 from <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR34/004/2008/en>
- Amnesty International. (31 May 2011). Egypt: Admission of forced 'virginity tests' must lead to justice. Retrieved on March 12, 2012 from <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/egypt-admission-forced-virginity-tests-must-lead-justice-2011-05-31>
- Anderlini, Sanam Naraghi. (2001). From the Beijing Platform of Action to UN Security Council 1325 and Beyond. *International Alert*, London. pp. 11
- Badri, Balghis. (2005, 26-27 May) Feminist Perspectives in the Sudan: An Analytical Overview. Feminist Perspectives Workshop, Free University Berlin
- Batha, Emma (2011, 20 June) FACTBOX: Women in South Sudan. *Trust Law: A Thomas Reuters Foundation*. Retrieved on January 26, 2012 from <http://www.trust.org/trustlaw/news/factbox-women-in-south-sudan>
- BBC World News. (2012, 1 May). Sudan Profile: A chronology of key events. Retrieved on 4 May 2012 from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14095300>
- Coleman, Isobel. (8 March 2012). Why the Arab Spring Hasn't Been Better for Women. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved on March 20, 2012 from <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/why-the-arab-spring-hasnt-been-better-for-women/254150/>

- Democracy Digest. (2012, 8 March). Women's rights regressing in Arab Spring transitions? Retrieved on March 20, 2012 from <http://www.demdigest.net/blog/2012/03/womens-rights-regressing-in-arab-spring/>
- Edward, Jane, K. (2011, 17 September). Women and political participation in South Sudan. *Sudan Tribune*. Retrieved on January 25, 2012, from <http://www.sudantribune.com/Women-and-political-participation,40086>
- Elman, Miriam. (2012). The Arab Spring and the Future of Democracy in the Middle East: Rethinking Middle Eastern Studies. *Palestine-Israel Journal*, 100
- European Union Final Report. (11-15 April 2010). Election Observation Mission to Sudan: Executive and Legislative Elections, p.34
- Glassborow, Katy, *et al.* (2011, 8 Jul). Special Report: Rights Disregarded Under Sudan's Weak Constitution As Khartoum prepares for future without South Sudan, women's groups say its recent human rights record doesn't bode well for new era. International Justice: ICC. ACR Issue 299
- Godia, Jane. (2009, August). Sudanese women balancing the delicate political act. *South Sudan Women's Agenda*. Issue No.1. Retrieved on January 26, 2012 from [http://www.awcfs.org/dmdocuments/gem\\_sudan/SudanWomenAgenda.pdf](http://www.awcfs.org/dmdocuments/gem_sudan/SudanWomenAgenda.pdf)
- Harrington, Catherine. (2011, November). Women's Rights and the Arab Spring: Overview on the Middle East and North Africa. Women's Learning Partnership, 4-15 November 2011 Leadership Conference
- Institute of International and Development Studies. (2012 January). The Sudan Human Security Baseline Assessment Project 2011. Small Arms Survey, Geneva. Retrieved on January 30, 2012 from <http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/facts-figures-women-security-south-sudan.php>
- IRIN Humanitarian News and Analysis (n.d.). SUDAN: Special Report on women in the south. Retrieved January 24, 2012 from <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=45597>
- Johnson, Douglas (2007) *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars*. Indiana University Press. pp. 129
- Jok, Madut (October 2011) *Diversity, Unity, and Nation Building in South Sudan*. Special Report no. 287, U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, 15.
- McDowall, Angus. (2 January 2012). 10 Libyan assembly seats for women: draft law. [Electronic journal]. *The Daily Star Lebanon*. Retrieved on March 12, 2012 from <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/>
- Molyneux, Maxine. (1998). Analysing Women's Movements. *Development and Change*. Volume 29:2
- Mustafa Ali, Nada. (December 2011). *Gender and Statebuilding in South Sudan*. United States Institute for Peace, p.1
- Mutawinaat Group. (1997). Review of Sudanese Legislation Discriminating against Women. Unpublished report, Khartoum
- NORAD Report 17. (2011 July). Report Royal Norwegian Embassy Sudan: Gender Review of the Norwegian Embassy's Portfolio Khartoum, Sudan Final Report. Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation. pp.13-14
- Omukhango, Ruth. (2009, August). Gaps in Electoral Law threaten to derail women's ambitions. *South Sudan Women's Agenda*. Issue No.1. Retrieved on January 26, 2012 from [http://www.awcfs.org/dmdocuments/gem\\_sudan/SudanWomenAgenda.pdf](http://www.awcfs.org/dmdocuments/gem_sudan/SudanWomenAgenda.pdf)

- Ortega, A. & Asaad, M. (2010). Evaluation of the Support to Elections and Democratic Processes Project Report (UNDP). Khartoum, pp.6
- Patti Petesch. (2011). *Women's Empowerment Arising from Violent Conflict and Recovery: Life Stories from Four Middle-Income Countries*. Washington, DC: U.S. Agency for International Development
- Schlumberger, Oliver. (2007). *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes*. Stanford University Press, pp.1-10
- Sen, Gita, Caren Grown.(1998). *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*. London: DAWN Earthscan Publications.
- Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI). Sudan. Retrieved on May 20, 2012 from <http://genderindex.org/country/sudan>
- South Sudanese Women Call for their Full Engagement in the Development Planning for South Sudan. (2011, 13 December) *UN Women Press Release*. Retrieved on January 25, 2012 from <http://www.unwomen.org/2011/12/south-sudanese-women-call-for-their-full-engagement-in-the-development-planning-for-south-sudan/>
- Sterling-Folker, Jennifer. (2006). *Making Sense of International Relations Theory*. Lynne Reiner Publishers, Inc., pp. 12
- Sudan Islamists warn Bashir over Shariah constitution. (2012, 28 February). [Electronic Journal] *The Sudan Tribune*. Retrieved on May 23, 2012 from <http://www.sudantribune.com/Sudan-Islamists-warn-Bashir-over,41745>
- The Juba Declaration of Souther Sudan Women in Political Parties. *South Sudan Women's Agenda*. Issue No.1. Retrieved on January 26, 2012 from [http://www.awcfs.org/dmdocuments/gem\\_sudan/SudanWomenAgenda.pdf](http://www.awcfs.org/dmdocuments/gem_sudan/SudanWomenAgenda.pdf)
- Tønnessen, Liv (2011). *The many faces of political Islam in Sudan: Muslim women's activism for and against the state*. Bergen: University of Bergen.
- Tønnessen, Liv and Kjølsvædt Granås, Hilde. (2010). *The Politics of Women's Representation in Sudan: Debating Women's Rights in Islam from the Elites to the Grassroots*. CHR. Michelson Institute. CMI Report 2, pp.38
- UN Women (2011, 13 July). UN Women: Q & A with South Sudan Minister of Gender, Child and Social Welfare. Retrieved on January 26, 2012 from <http://www.trust.org/trustlaw/news/un-women-q-a-with-south-sudans-minister-of-gender-child-and-social-welfare/>
- UNHCR. ( 2011). *Update on UNHCR's Operations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)*. Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme. Sixty-second session, 3-7 October 2011. Geneva: UNHCR
- United Nations Development Programme Sudan. (2010). Status of MDGs in Sudan in 2010. Retrieved on February 1, 2012 from [http://www.sd.undp.org/mdg\\_fact.htm](http://www.sd.undp.org/mdg_fact.htm)
- United Nations Population Fund (2011, 20 January) Working with Police in South Sudan to Assist Survivors of Gender-Based Violence. Retrieved on January 26, 2012 from <http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/news/pid/7156>
- Verveer, Melanne. (2011, 11 November). Women and the Arab Spring. Statement Before the Subcommittees on International Operations and Organizations, Human Rights, Democracy, and Global Women's Issues and Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs of the Senate
- Wallace Adam. (2009, 3 August). Sudan Under New Scrutiny For Flogging Women who Wear Pants. [Electronic Journal] *The Cutting Edge*. Retrieved on 23 May 2012 from

<http://www.thecuttingedgenews.com/index.php?article=11495&pageid=89&pagename=Features>

Wilson, Amanda (2011, 15 December). South Sudan: Women Aim to Protect Their Rights in a Young State. *All Africa*. Retrieved on January 26, 2012 from <http://allafrica.com/stories/201112160236.html>

Women and the Arab Spring : Taking their place? (8 March 2012). International Federation for Human Rights (IFDH). Retrieved on March 26, 2012 from <http://arabwomenspring.fidh.net/index.php?title=Foreword>

Yuval-Davis, Nira (1997). *Gender and Nation*. London: Routledge.