

POLICY BRIEF **03.21.23**

Sudanese Women on the Move in Cairo Defy Stereotypes

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The media often presents a misleading picture of people on the move, depicting them as vulnerable: arriving at borders, drowning in the sea, or lining up in front of an organization for assistance. This stereotypical visual representation frames people on the move as the poor and helpless “other.” As observers, we assume we understand their narratives and can sympathize with them, though we do this from afar. Women on the move, in particular, are often considered fragile, as their vulnerabilities within and outside the household are exacerbated by the situations in which they are seen.

This stereotype¹ is furthered by the humanitarian–development complex consisting of the international community (governments, donors, United Nations agencies, and non-governmental organizations), public discourse, and the private sector. Since World War II, this complex has assisted during emergencies, such as armed conflicts (the humanitarian agenda) or with structural issues, such as systemic poverty (the development agenda). But the stereotypes created by this complex do not account for the human capital, knowledge, experiences, and opportunities that people build for themselves. As a result, people on the move are often perceived as passive victims and anonymous, agentless bodies with no known faces, voices, or stories. This brief seeks to present a more realistic view of people on the move, specifically Sudanese women living in Cairo.

It is important to note that the humanitarian–development complex distinguishes between different groups of people on the move, including refugees and migrants. Refugees flee their habitual residences and cannot return due to fear of persecution.² Migrants, such as migrant workers, choose to move away from their residences, either temporarily or permanently.³ However, both categories are often blurred when conducting fieldwork, as these distinctions do not align with how people on the move perceive themselves. Therefore, this brief uses the term “on the move” not to box people into legal categories, especially as their journeys from their home countries as well as within or beyond Cairo are often not pre-planned. In a globalized world, where events are often unanticipated, many people, including refugees and migrants, are constantly moving within and across cities and borders. Through mobility, people do not move between fixed land points nor in pre-planned journeys but, instead, move through trajectories, navigating their surroundings and negotiating sets of possibilities for their lives.⁴

Against the perception of people on the move as helpless and passive, this brief draws on the stories of 12 Sudanese females residing in Ard El-Lewa, a densely populated informal urban area in Cairo with a substantial presence of Sudanese. This ethnographic fieldwork was conducted between January and June 2021. Admittedly,



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IMAGE 1 — SUDANESE SHOP NAMED OMDURMAN CENTRE



SOURCE Third Participant Observation. June 2021. *Narrating Sudanese-ness in Cairo* [Personal communication – Sandoog].

NOTE The shop is named after Sudan's major city, Omdurman.

these stories do not represent whole communities of people on the move. But they are a glimpse into the lives of the Sudanese women I collaborated with, interviewed, and observed through fieldwork. More importantly, these stories showcase how people on the move are not mute victims. This brief demonstrates that the stories and voices of people on the move should be noticed and reflected, and that people on the move should have a leading say regarding the contexts and conditions that affect them, as well as how they are represented.

UNDERSTANDING SUDANESE ON THE MOVE IN EGYPT

This brief focuses on Sudanese individuals because they have a long history of movement/migration to Egypt and are one of the primary groups of people on the move in Cairo. Egypt is home to more than 100 million Egyptians and has a history

of hosting migrants and refugees. As of December 31, 2022, Egypt was home to 288,524 registered refugees with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), including 58,237 Sudanese.⁵ As for migrants, no official data is available. However, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah ElSisi, claimed in 2018 that there were more than 5 million migrants living in Egypt⁶ and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) echoed this number soon after.

SUDANESE IN CAIRO FACE SIGNIFICANT SOCIAL AND SAFETY CHALLENGES

Sudanese on the move in Cairo often live in populated informal urban areas, including Ard El-Lewa, where they face social and protection challenges, including discrimination and verbal, physical, and sexual violence. For example, women are often subject to sexual assault and harassment. Furthermore, racism is an uncontrollable stressor for Sudanese living in Cairo. Fieldwork shows that forbearance and avoidance, in terms of ignoring racism and racial slurs, or applying positive racial identity dimensions that can buffer the psychological effects of racism, have become coping mechanisms that Sudanese adopt to navigate their everyday lives. In addition, many Sudanese children do not enroll in Egyptian schools, despite their legal rights, because of bullying and bureaucratic impediments, including a lack of required documentation.⁷ Discrimination and economic barriers also obstruct their access to health care services in Egypt.⁸ And even though Sudanese can access formal jobs, the Egyptian Labor Law requires an employer to provide extensive legal and medical documents and to pay higher taxes to hire non-Egyptians for formal jobs.⁹ This lengthy bureaucratic process to land jobs in Egypt leads many Sudanese — as well as 63% of all Egyptians — into the informal economy.

CHRONICLING THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF 12 SUDANESE WOMEN

Through ethnographic fieldwork, my research looked into Sudanese women who are considered on the move in Cairo. As part

of this research, I accompanied them to community events and shared Sudanese customs through participant observation. The 12 Sudanese women participating were in their 20s to mid-50s, exemplifying the diversity within Cairo's larger Sudanese on-the-move population. Most of them were middle-class single mothers from different areas in Sudan, each with unique aspirations ranging from seeking refuge to finding work opportunities and accessing education. Their stay in Cairo varied between a few months to 20 years.

TEMPORARY COMMUNITY-MAKING PROVIDES PROTECTION AND ESSENTIAL RESOURCES

The fieldwork presented in this brief demonstrates the importance of interdependency and protection spaces among these Sudanese women in Cairo. These spaces emerged as the women hosted each other in times of distress and maneuvered around the failures of institutions that should have protected them. For example, the Sudanese community served as the family support system for Samia (one of the participants) when a group of Egyptians stabbed her ex-husband and threatened to attack their home.¹⁰ The Sudanese community secured Samia's safe exit from her home after the police failed to show up, demonstrating their ability to operate independently of formal institutions.

This study also illustrates how community-making unfolds when Sudanese women carve out spaces based on commonalities and create support networks in order to come together and endure everyday challenges. It predominantly focuses on community associations, community schooling, and *sanadiq* (monetary savings groups), which bring seemingly heterogeneous people into a state of temporary togetherness against Cairo's hardships. While community associations and schools are not gender-specific, women exclusively come together through these informal savings groups that are created by and for women to generate opportunities for togetherness and financial support. Men, alternatively, come together through visits to the *qahwa*.¹¹

Even though associations and schools are structures that both Sudanese women and men establish, the ones specifically formed by women illustrate how Sudanese women on the move are not necessarily vulnerable, but instead lead diversified lives both within and outside the household. Sudanese women in Cairo also showcase how women on the move can create better prospects for themselves through various improvisational efforts.

SELF-ORGANIZING COMMUNITY STRUCTURES SERVE AS PARALLEL GOVERNANCE

In addition to the individual women-driven activities detailed above, Sudanese community associations in Cairo act as structured alternative support systems for Sudanese women on the move in place of formal services or assistance provided by international service providers such as the UNHCR.

Mona, one of the participants interviewed and observed in this study, leads the Women's Center association, an example of a Sudanese community structure created by and for women in Cairo. The Egyptian state does not register non-Egyptian community associations, which makes obtaining funding or opening a bank account very challenging. As a community leader, Mona initiated her association through a UNHCR program, which trained, certified, and granted her 15,000 Egyptian pounds (EGP) in 2017 (equivalent to US\$842 in 2017).¹² Nevertheless, the association has since been running independently through its resources and networks, providing services for refugee or migrant women and children, including parenting and vocational courses for mothers. It also offers indirect services, such as housing and medical support, through diverse partnerships established with other organizations and individuals. Through her efforts, Mona, who is also co-experiencing hardships with her community members, has created a support system where Sudanese women represent and voice themselves. Her association helps Sudanese women gain accessibility to the city — aside from

Community-making unfolds when Sudanese women carve out spaces based on commonalities and create support networks in order to come together and endure everyday challenges.

IMAGE 2 — A COMMUNITY SCHOOL THAT IS RUN BY SUDANESE WOMEN IN ARD EL-LEWA.



SOURCE First Participant Observation. April 2021. *Narrating Sudanese in Cairo* [Personal communication – Sudanese Community School].

residency and legal rights and services — despite a backdrop of physical and social barriers.

The Women's Center currently has more than 300 members who pay a monthly membership fee of 20 EGP (US\$1.27 in 2021) to finance the association's activities.¹³ Even though Mona lost the association's premises due to her inability to afford rent, she has been funding and running the association from her small makeshift Sudanese restaurant. She also uses other spaces around the community to host community events, as witnessed during the 2021 Ramadan food distribution at a Sudanese community school.¹⁴ During the food distribution, Mona knew the details of each community member's situation, greeting them by name and asking about their work and children's school.¹⁵ For example, when a sick woman walked in, Mona asked her why she had come as she was planning to bring a food bag to her.

The event overall seemed like a safe space, where community members shared their struggles in Cairo, including their difficulties making a living, as well as the protection issues they face. This shows that community structures are more than platforms for alternate services. They are spaces where individuals can share a sense of belonging and relate to each other's circumstances.

EDUCATING THEIR CHILDREN THROUGH IMPROVISED COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

There are many Sudanese community schools in Cairo, per an agreement between the Sudanese and Egyptian governments on how to establish Sudanese schools and teach Sudanese curricula in Egypt. Some schools accommodate either refugees or migrants while others serve both groups. Unlike refugee schools, schools that cater to migrants must obtain the Sudanese Embassy's approval to teach Sudanese curricula.

Sudanese community schools are parallel, alternate schooling structures formed by and for the community to maneuver the Egyptian public school system's problems. My fieldwork indicated that community leaders mobilize networks around their communities in order to obtain resources and provide assets that help establish and support community schools, including human assets such as teachers and other staff. This process demonstrates the creativity of Sudanese people on the move when it comes to maximizing resources within their community to generate opportunities, come together, and proceed with building different prospects for their lives.

The participants in this study stressed that Sudanese community schools psychologically benefit children by providing them with spaces to meet other children with similar experiences, allowing them to navigate trauma together. Sudanese children attending Egyptian schools often struggle, as seen in the interview with Hanan, one of the participants. Adel, her youngest child, cried at the nursery when he was 3 years old and often refused to go because he was the only Sudanese and "Asmarani" (dark person) there.¹⁶

In contrast, another participant, Elham, reflected that her children were able to begin overcoming their pain — after losing their father and moving from Darfur to Cairo — when a Sudanese community school welcomed them, even allowing them to forego the deposit and pay the required fees in installments.¹⁷ That helped Elham to avoid being held captive to past trauma, embrace both parental roles, land a teaching job, and

find better alternatives for her family. Her narrative illustrates how Sudanese women attempt to keep living while also defying stereotypical gender roles at the family and community levels.

SUDANESE SCHOOLS PROVIDE A SENSE OF NORMALCY

During my fieldwork, I visited a community school run by Sudanese women, where I witnessed a sense of safety and community.¹⁸ Students' laughter and their talkativeness felt like signs of well-being that created a sense of normalcy brought into their uncertain lives. There were also open dialogues between students, teachers, and the school's superintendent. While I was seated in the superintendent's office with the door open, teachers casually came in to discuss schedules and student circumstances. As a result, the school felt like more than just a place that granted children their universal right to education. It also felt like a community where its members listened, understood, and supported one another, allowing both individuals and the collective group to progress.

Nonetheless, Sudanese community schools do face internal and external challenges. There are ongoing discussions by the Egyptian government on closing refugee community schools, including Sudanese schools, and integrating refugee/migrant children into the Egyptian educational system. Furthermore, teachers do not receive adequate salaries and occasionally go on strike, which hinders the ability of students to learn. For example, Elham and Ibtesam — employed respectively as English and religion teachers by Sudanese community schools — are paid a mere 1,200 EGP monthly (US\$76 in 2021) for morning and evening shifts.¹⁹ In addition, fees for Sudanese children to take the Sudanese exams in the last year of preparatory school and throughout secondary school at the Sudanese Embassy are costly. But passing these exams is necessary for students to receive accredited certificates from the Sudanese and Egyptian Ministries of Education and proceed to higher education.

IMAGE 3 — A COMMUNITY SCHOOL THAT IS RUN BY SUDANESE WOMEN IN ARD EL-LEWA.



SOURCE First Participant Observation. April 2021. *Narrating Sudanese-ness in Cairo* [Personal communication – Sudanese Community School].

SANADIQ GROUPS PROVIDE ESSENTIAL SUPPORT

Sudanese women on the move often financially support each other to deal with Cairo's economic difficulties. An example is the *sanadiq* — the monetary savings groups previously mentioned — which are formed by Sudanese women to collectively save money to support their families financially. These groups also challenge the commonly held notion of men as sole financial providers. Through these groups, women can take out loans to meet family needs, including rent, school fees, and medical services. However, *sanadiq* are more than savings schemes. They also allow Sudanese women to gather and practice their customs, including sharing Sudanese meals and singing Sudanese songs.

Accompanying Mona to a *sandoog*²⁰ in Ard El-Lewa, I met many Sudanese women at the *sandoog*'s host's home where the smell of Sudanese *bokhoor* (incense) prevailed, and *tobes* (Sudanese dress wear) embellished the setting.²¹ The *sandoog* had 13 members meeting every Thursday. However, there were 18 women present at the gathering I attended, because even those who are not part of a *sandoog* can join it as a social event without financially contributing to it. Invitees brought along

IMAGE 4 — SUDANESE WOMEN AT A SANDOOQ IN ARD EL-LEWA WHERE THEY SHARED FOOD AND DRINKS, SOCIALIZED, AND SANG.



SOURCE Third Participant Observation. June 2021. Narrating Sudanese-ness in Cairo [Personal communication – *Sandooq*].

families and friends to exchange information, talk, and laugh, as exceptional hospitality is a custom that they have brought to Cairo and continue to practice. At the *sandooq*, women also sold Sudanese products, creating parallel markets and providing financial support for one another. It is important to note that through these *sanadiq*, Sudanese women on the move are not waiting for the cash assistance offered by international aid organizations, nor are they confined by their circumstances. Even though formal employment is scarce, work is fashioned everywhere through human capital and social networks.

Information sharing was an important part of the get-together. For example, Mona pitched her community association (as detailed earlier), emphasizing the pride of Sudanese women establishing an association and collectively enduring Cairo's everyday challenges. The gathering then became a social event where the host served Sudanese food and drinks, and women played the *dalouka* (Sudanese drums), sang, and danced in a room full of laughter.

The women I spoke to indicated that *sanadiq* are not only about saving money, but also about *wanasa* (companionship). In the end, the women passed around

an envelope with a notebook for each member to put money in and to write down how many memberships they had paid for — with each membership worth 50 EGP (US\$3.19 in 2021). Overall, the *sanadiq* are a coping strategy that Sudanese women have adopted to circumvent economic barriers, planting the seeds for community-making and social capital in Cairo.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Sudanese community associations, schools, and *sanadiq* groups in Cairo demonstrate how the narrative that people on the move are helpless and voiceless fails to reflect the human and social capital, skills, and resources of Sudanese individuals and communities. Importantly, this brief does not discount the horrors and abuses of structural issues that Sudanese migrants and refugees face in Cairo, but rather shows how Sudanese women create different opportunities in their everyday lives. Their stories showcase how people on the move carve out their own networks of information, slowly build trust, and create communities by pooling resources and exchanging experiences. Community spaces created by women allow them to navigate hardships in Cairo together, even if this togetherness is unstructured or temporary. This sense of community serves as a survival coping mechanism for cultivating endurance demonstrated through women on the move's improvisational acts.

Thus, in order to protect these community strengths, this brief recommends the following:

1. It is vital for the international community, including governments, donors, United Nations agencies, and non-governmental organizations, to understand the stories of people on the move without drawing conclusions and generalizations that do not account for their contexts. The international community should reconsider the universal and stereotypical approach when dealing with people on the move or forming perceptions of them. This rhetoric often silences and, at times,

dehumanizes people. Understanding and recognizing the stories of people on the move will allow the international community to engage with refugees and migrants on what they need rather than on what the international community assumes they need.

2. Donors should pool their resources toward funding and supporting efforts to strengthen the community structures of people on the move in partnership with the communities, rather than on their behalf.
3. The international community, donors, and the Egyptian government should support community schools and help them navigate their challenges instead of working toward higher enrollment of refugee and migrant children, including Sudanese in Egyptian schools. Community schools provide more than access to education. They give children a community that is difficult to find in other settings.
4. The international community should advocate with the Egyptian government for registering non-Egyptian community associations, including Sudanese to facilitate their role in supporting their communities.
5. The media should improve its representation of people on the move by promoting their right to have their voices and stories heard and represented with identifiable faces.
6. Finally, the international community should participate with communities on the move to represent and voice themselves.

3. IOM (International Organization for Migration), “Who is a Migrant?” accessed December 20, 2021, <https://www.iom.int/who-migrant-0>.

4. Bruce Janz, “The territory is not the map: Place, Deleuze, Guattari, and African philosophy,” *Philosophia Africana: Analysis of Philosophy and Issues in Africa and the Black Diaspora* Volume 5, Issue 1 (2002): 396.

5. UNHCR, “UNHCR Egypt Monthly Statistical Report as of 31 December 2022,” 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/egypt/unhcr-egypt-monthly-statistical-report-31-december-2022>.

6. IOM, “Egypt 2019 Humanitarian Compendium,” 2019, <https://humanitariancompendium.iom.int/appeals/egypt-2019>.

7. Elżbieta Goździak and Alissa Walter, “Urban Refugees in Cairo,” Institute for the Study of International Migration, Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies (2013): 11.

8. Emily Eidenier, “Providing Health Care Information to Refugees in Cairo: Questions of Access and Integration,” American University in Cairo, 2005, <https://documents.aucegypt.edu/Docs/GAPP/Eidenier.pdf>.

9. Maha Soliman, “Local Integration of African Refugees in Egypt: The Policy Challenges,” American University in Cairo, 2016.

10. Samia. May 2021. *Narrating Sudanese in Cairo* [Personal communication].

11. *Qahwa* are informal, affordable gathering places that are found every couple of blocks in informal urban settings. Sudanese men depend on the *qahwa* as spaces of communing where they discuss Sudanese events, their personal stories, and which organizations they deal with on a daily basis. They also feast together on Sudanese meals.

12. Mona. March 2021. *Narrating Sudanese in Cairo* [Personal communication]; Mona. June 2021. *Narrating Sudanese in Cairo* [Personal communication].

13. Ibid.

14. Second Participant Observation. April 2021. *Narrating Sudanese in Cairo* [Personal communication – Ramadan Food Distribution].

ENDNOTES

1. Liisa Malkki, “Refugees and Exile: From ‘Refugee Studies’ to the National Order of Things,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 497.

2. UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees,” 1951 and 1967, <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>.

15. Ibid.
16. Hanan. March 2021. *Narrating Sudanese in Cairo* [Personal communication].
17. Elham. April 2021. *Narrating Sudanese in Cairo* [Personal communication].
18. First Participant Observation. April 2021. *Narrating Sudanese in Cairo* [Personal communication – Sudanese Community School].
19. Elham. April 2021. *Narrating Sudanese in Cairo* [Personal communication]; Ibtesam. May 2021. *Narrating Sudanese in Cairo* [Personal communication].
20. Singular form of *sanadiq*.
21. Third Participant Observation. June 2021. *Narrating Sudanese in Cairo* [Personal communication – *Sandooq*].
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