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Sudanese Women's Demands for Freedom, Peace, and Justice in the 2019 Revolution

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The world-admired Sudanese revolution is marked by unprecedented contribution and participation of women throughout the country, including women from all walks of lives. The participation of women is not a by-chance event, as Sudanese women own a strong history of resistance in the face of dictatorships and patriarchy. Women were very active resisting the hegemony of the previous regime and its laws and practices.¹

–Asha Al-Karib, Sudanese activist

Introduction

The popular uprising against the Islamist-military regime of Omar al-Bashir lasted for eight months beginning in December 2018 and women were at the forefront of the peaceful protests. Across many areas, women constituted the majority of the protesters (Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2019). Women from diverse backgrounds in terms of class, generation, religion, education, and ethnicity occupied the streets of Sudan, facing risk of arrest, torture, sexual assault, tear gas, and live bullets. After the ousting of Omar al-Bashir on 11 April 2019, a transitional military council (TMC) consisting of Bashir's former allies took control of the state. At this moment during the protests, women formed a sit-in outside the military headquarters – especially young women. Even after the 'Khartoum massacre' on 3 June 2019, when the military violently slaughtered participants and reportedly sexually abused protesters, women went back to the streets, refusing to back down (Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2019). Negotiations between the TMC and the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) in August facilitated a new constitutional declaration and the formation of the Sovereign Council (consisting of members of both the

¹ Interview with Asha Al-Karib, activist and founder of Sudanese Organization for Research and Development (SOR), Khartoum State, 19 August 2019.

FFC and the TMC) as the collective head of state of Sudan for a three-year period and a transitional government consisting of technocrats under the leadership of Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok (Sudan 2019).

This chapter aims to understand why women were so visibly involved in the most recent revolution and how it relates to their struggles for peace, justice, and freedom during the dictatorship of Bashir. Women's activism against discrimination and inequality that hamper their ability to live free of violence and contribute to society as full citizens has a long trajectory. Drawing on recent scholarship on women and the Arab Spring (Moghadam 2018; see also Singerman 2013; Khalil 2014; Al-Ali 2012; Sadiqi 2016), we argue that women's legal and social status before the Sudanese revolution shaped women protesters' demands. Drawing insights from the wider literature on why women protest, we contend that higher levels of gender discrimination and the presence of women's organisations increase the likelihood of women's protest (Murdie and Peksen 2014). As in other revolutions in the region's recent history, women's participation was not spontaneous or momentary, but linked to women's central role in defying these dictatorships through organised movements and what Asef Bayat (2013) has termed non-movements (see for example Wahba 2016). Women's rights have been an important political symbol at the heart of what Sudanese Islamists have codified as *shar'ia*, exemplified in the codification of one of the most conservative Islamic family laws in the region and adherence to strict public morality laws. Women's activism against dictatorship represents a long trajectory in Sudan. Women's opposition to Bashir's regime is, therefore, central to understanding their strong involvement in the revolution.

Although our findings suggest that, at least at the beginning of the protests, women's issues were deprioritised to focus on the demand to overthrow the Bashir regime, through our interviews with women protesters it became clear that they regarded regime change as pivotal for any positive changes in women's status and situation. The women we interviewed delineated three different women-specific agendas related to the governmental changes they espouse: 1) accountability for sexual violence, 2) freedom to make life choices, and 3) women's political representation in the new civilian government structures. The agenda of women protesters can be traced back to demands for reform by women's rights activists in the aftermath of the Bill of Rights in the 2005 Interim National Constitution. This shows that the demands of what is often described as an urban-based and elitist women's movement have broader appeal to women of diverse backgrounds who regard it as part of their vision for the country in terms of freedom, peace, and justice.

However, it was not until the formation of the sit-in, and especially after women were largely excluded from the negotiations between TMC and FFC, that women's demands for political representation figured more prominently in the slogans and public discourse. Women expressed in

the public discourse and through our interviews that their marginalisation during the peace negotiations was seen as a threat to women as a group and a betrayal of what is widely perceived as a women-led revolution (R. Abbas 2020a). Drawing insight from Charles Tilly (1978), who saw threat as an important factor driving the mobilisation of a group into contentious political action, women protesters perceived their exclusion from the negotiation table as a threat and a manifestation of patriarchal culture. This represented what Lisa Baldez (2002) calls a tipping point for women's protest as the event precipitated the coalescence of diverse women's groups into collective mobilisation for political inclusion of women. From this point on, women's issues were no longer subordinated by the overall aims of the revolution but at the very forefront of the public political discourse, where groups of women voiced women-specific agendas through advocacy, art, poetry, social media, and street demonstrations.

The first part of the chapter elaborates on women's role in the 2019 revolution, tracing it back to their involvement in ousting military dictatorships in 1964 and 1985. The second part looks at the centrality of women's issues in the Islamist political project and how women as a group became disproportionately disadvantaged when the Bashir regime codified a series of laws that were labelled as *shar'ia* law during the early 1990s. Women's groups independent from Bashir's regime have actively advocated against these Islamist policies despite widespread suppression of civil society. The third part of the chapter analyses the three agendas of women revolutionaries and links these agendas to women's mobilisation for legal reform during the dictatorship of Bashir.

Methods

To explore women's role in the protests, their motivation for participating in the revolution, and their interpretation of the main revolutionary slogan 'Freedom, Peace, and Justice', we interviewed 68 women protesters and 10 women's rights activists at two critical moments during the revolution: in April 2019 when former President Omar al-Bashir was ousted from office, and in August 2019 during ongoing negotiations between the TMC and the FFC. The FFC is a coalition representing the protesters through unions, civil society including women's organisations, political parties, and neighbourhood committees. The sample is of course not representative of all Sudanese women participating in the revolution, but these interviews give us important insights into women's agendas beyond the elite-based women's movement in the country. We asked all interviewees open-ended questions about their role in the protests, motivation, their interpretation of the slogan 'Freedom, Peace, and Justice', and their vision for the future.

We interviewed women protesters face to face and by telephone,

with support from a team of research assistants. The interviewees were between 16 and 60 years of age and from a variety of backgrounds in terms of marital status, generation, educational level, political affiliation, and ethnicity. All the interviews were conducted in Khartoum, but the women had diverse backgrounds including origin from Khartoum, Blue Nile, Atbara, Kordofan, and Elgazira. The protesters interviewed mostly included women who had no prior record of activism and protest, including housewives, government employees, journalists, engineers, medical doctors, scholars, university administrators, university students, private sector managers, and small business owners. Some of the women interviewed were women's rights activists or politicians who had participated in sit-ins or other protests previously and were part of organised (social media) groups.

We conducted the interviews in Arabic and Samia al-Nagar translated them into English for coding and interpretation. We have analysed the interview material using thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Our inductive approach emphasises the participants' perceptions and experiences as the paramount object of study.

Sudan's Three Revolutions and Women's Role

Sudan's third revolution in 2019 started with strikes and demonstrations in the south-east and north-east of the country. Protests soon spread throughout the entire country with slogans such as 'Freedom, Peace, and Justice'; 'Just Fall, That is All'; and 'Revolution Is the People's Choice'. Growing dissatisfaction with the regime's political and economic mismanagement and oppression under Omar al-Bashir, an alleged supporter of terrorism and war criminal, turned into peaceful demonstrations across the country. The Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) coordinated many of these protests. Established in 2012, the SPA is an umbrella group of trade unions for professionals. It operated mostly clandestinely during Bashir's regime to avoid arrest.

Women from diverse backgrounds played a major role in the peaceful protests that ousted the dictator Bashir and after that were persistently present in the sit-in in front of the military headquarters in Khartoum. Although international media outlets have portrayed women's participation in the revolution as exceptional, it represents a long trajectory in Sudan. Before the 2019 revolution, there had been several Arab Spring-like demonstrations, in which women played an active part, in 2011 and 2013 (African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies 2013). Unlike its Arab neighbours in northern Africa, the Sudanese people have ousted military dictatorships before, in October 1964 and in May 1985. In both uprisings, women played an active part.

Women's Participation in Sudan's First Revolution (October 1964)

Sudanese women participated in the October revolution in 1964, Sudan's first revolution. This revolution brought the downfall of the military regime of General Ibrahim Abboud, who had taken power through a military coup d'état in 1958. Professional women, women students, secondary school girls, and even housewives participated extensively in the protests, mainly in Sudan's capital of Khartoum. Although the majority of casualties were men, the October revolution also had a woman martyr, Bakhita Al Hafian, who was shot demonstrating with her children and grandchildren (Al Amin and Magied 2001, 11–12; Al-Gadal 2016, 39–40). At the university of Khartoum, 'posters in the names of female students' declared that they were prepared to sacrifice their lives. Women ululated to motivate protesters, a role they have also taken in Sudan's most recent and third revolution. According to Berridge, women helped 'deter the military from taking action against demonstrators by standing at the forefront of the crowds and humiliating soldiers with chants like, 'Go back to the barracks, you girls'. Although women acted according to socially conservative understandings of femininity by using ululation to support men protesters and shaming soldiers, they also participated as political actors demanding rights (Berridge 2016, 33–34). The Women's Union, the main women's group at the time with a Marxist ideology and close ties to the Sudanese Communist Party, took the opportunity to intensify its advocacy for women's right to vote and stand for election, which was later granted by the new democratic government (1965–69) in 1965. Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim became the first woman to be elected to Sudan's National Assembly (Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2017a). However, the scant literature on the topic suggests that women's issues were largely subordinate to the national cause of ousting the Abboud dictatorship. (Ibrahim 2015; Berridge 2016).

Women's Participation in Sudan's Second Revolution (April 1985)

As in the October revolution, the 1985 uprising against the dictatorship of Jaafar Nimeiri, who took power in 1969, was led by a national alliance composed of professionals, trade unions, and political parties. Women participated primarily as members of professional unions in preparation for the general strike that occurred during this revolution. Many of them also took part in demonstrations, and housewives allowed secret political meetings in their homes. However, women's rights were not at the forefront of the strikes and uprisings and were considered secondary to the political overthrow of the regime. The new transitional government excluded women from political decision-making, because they constituted neither a trade union nor a political party, and women quickly became discouraged. A move to reserve seats for women in the national legislative

assembly was not approved because it was considered ‘undemocratic’. *shar’ia* laws introduced by Nimeiri in 1983 that were restrictive to women were not abrogated by the 1986 democratic government headed by Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi. Instead, the government issued a decree stipulating that women in the civil service would receive only two-thirds of the housing allowance of male officials. In addition, a women’s committee was instituted at the department of passports and immigration to enforce restrictions on the travel of women abroad (Al Bakri 1995). Although Sudan signed several international human rights conventions in 1986 under the new civilian government headed by Sadiq al-Mahdi, the Convention against Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was overlooked. According to activist Asha Al-Karib, ‘Women’s presence in the transitional and democratic periods [1964–69 and 1986–89] was invisible. There was no effort for women [as a] collective and our agenda was dissolved in the political agenda.’²

Women’s Participation in Sudan’s Third Revolution (April 2019)

Professional and elite women participated in the 1964 and 1985 revolutions, and they also participated in the 2019 revolution. For example, Alaa Salah was dubbed an icon of the most recent revolution after she was seen wearing the national Sudanese dress known as a *toube*, while motivating other women at a protest (Salih 2019).³ However, although Alaa Salah, a university student, embodies this history of professional women playing a key role in previous popular uprisings in Sudan, this image does not capture the fact that women’s participation in the most recent revolution has been much broader than in the earlier ones, in terms of their region, class, and ethnicity.⁴ Previous revolutions involved primarily Khartoum-based professional women, but the 2019 revolution involved a more diverse group of women. For example, the women’s Food and Tea Seller’s Cooperative in Khartoum, headed by Awadeya Mahmoud Koko, played a major role in distributing food to protesters at the sit-ins (Lavrilleux 2019). But at the forefront were young women, or girls as they are called in Sudan. In a country where 61 per cent of the population is under the age of 25, this was a revolution of youth (S. Abbas 2020).

² Interview, August 2019.

³ There has been a critical discussion about coining Alaa Salah as the icon of the revolution. See a summary of the discussion in Engeler et al. (2020).

⁴ The image of Alaa Salah as the icon representing Sudanese women has been critiqued. It iconises a particular *kind* of Sudanese woman: northern, Arab, urban, and educated. Malik (2019) underscores that the white *tobe*, a garment worn by white-collar professional women, is deeply entangled in ethnic and classed structures of Sudanese society and thus far from representative of ‘Sudanese women’ but of certain women who have been part of the elites since the country’s independence. The irony, according to Sara Nugdallah (2020, 90) ‘rests in the fact that the image assuming to represent a revolution of change is continuing with the upholding of the very divisions that drove it’.

Some women played an important role in Sudan's third revolution by using *zagharid* (ululation) to motivate protesters. Videos of female protesters reciting poems and chanting revolutionary slogans went viral. This echoes a long tradition of Sudanese women performing praise and lament poems to honour the dead, boost the morale of warriors, and defy ruthless leaders. In addition, housewives played a role from their homes in supporting the protesters – for example, by distributing sandwiches and milk to protesters who were tear-gassed, continuing the roles played by women during previous uprisings. A 35-year-old married female government employee who participated in the protests explained, 'After the gathering of protesters in a specific place, the protest starts by ululation from a lady, and this is the sign for everyone to move and start protesting, and this is the role of the leader.'⁵

Looking beyond women in important but traditional roles, they also took part in the leadership of the SPA, which took a lead in organising protests throughout the country. Especially during the sit-in period, women took on roles that challenged social and political gender stereotypes. For example, they worked night shifts and shared responsibilities at security checkpoints, theatres, political discussion sessions, and kitchens providing food and drink services. They even slept in the camp, something that breaks with prevailing norms stipulating that it is not appropriate for women to be in public spaces without a male guardian because it puts them at risk of sexual assault and bringing shame to the family.

Social media allowed for new ways of participating. Women's groups in the most recent revolution were also vocal and active in challenging gender stereotypes, especially on social media. At one point, chanting protesters described Bashir as a 'weak woman'. Feminist activists called it out on social media and the slogan did not catch on. They launched the campaign 'Waqt wa naso', which means 'This is the time, and these are its people' on social media to break such gender stereotypes. This followed the suggestion of SPA's service committee that women should take particular responsibility for cleaning the sit-in area because they 'cared more about cleaning'. Women's anger about the sexist attitudes of male protesters mushroomed into anger about how women are treated in all aspects of Sudanese society. The SPA later apologised for urging women (and not men) to clean the streets. And a cleanup day in Khartoum did take place – with both men and women taking part. The Noon movement, which was established during the revolution, called attention to sexual harassment in the sit-in area. *Maydanik* (a gendered word translating to 'her space') were created within the sit-in area as safe zones for women providing victims of sexual harassment with legal and psychological support (Nugdalla 2020). Other groups were also active in creating awareness around women's issues, including representation in political

⁵ Interview, April 2019.

decision-making bodies in the transitional government and a reform of discriminatory laws codified by the Bashir regime.

Gender-Discriminatory Policies and Women's Activism against Islamism

The role of women and their demands in Sudan's third revolution cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the regime they were opposing and how its policies had affected women as a group. Bashir described the implementation of Sudan's public order law as conflicting with *shar'ia* just before he was ousted from the presidential palace. Even the long-term head of the security forces, Salah Gosh, stated (before he fled the country) that the demonstrations erupted because the government was too strict with the implementation of *shar'ia* laws in Sudan.

Women's rights had served as a symbolic political signifier of the Islamist political project in Sudan, which the country's leaders had called the 'civilization project' (*al-Mashru al-Hadari*) (Nageeb 2004; Hale 1997; Tønnessen 2011). Women's rights had been at the crux of the 'Islamisation' of Sudan's laws, and these changes had disproportionately and negatively affected women. The civilisation project interpreted Islamic law in a particularly fundamentalist way, and political leaders introduced new *shar'ia* laws that significantly changed women's citizenship rights.

The Islamist state's gender ideology propagated gender equity (*insaf*) (Tønnessen 2011). Gender equity was proposed as a route to women's empowerment that was an alternative to both traditional Islam and Western feminism. Muslim women from certain urban class positions and certain Arabic ethnic tribes became the face of a modern Islam as they combined piety with their presence in the public sphere, including in politics. Resources were put into state institutions (first and foremost, Sudan's Ministry of Security and Social Development) and state organisations (mainly, the Sudanese Women General Union and the International Muslim Women's Union), forwarding the state's view of gender equity. After broad mobilisation for a gender quota, Islamists introduced a policy of reserving 25 per cent of the seats for women in national and subnational legislative assemblies to ensure their representation in politics. Not only is women's political role in alignment with Islam but, according to Islamists, complementarity between the hard rational male and the soft emotional female politician is needed in order to make good and sound policies (Tønnessen 2018). The idea of complementarity – that men and women have different rights and obligations because of their biological differences – is central to this gender ideology. However, according to Sudanese Islamists women should only be active participants in the public sphere – obtaining an education, working, and participating in trade and politics – *if* they behave and look pious, moral, and chaste.

But this vision has an important class dimension; for example, it is only possible to combine work and piousness if you are educated and working in blue-collar professions, not if you are working as a street vendor delivering direct service to men (Tønnessen 2019).

During the early 1990s, the Islamist state imposed new legal restrictions on women, particularly on their movement and dress. These laws are collectively known as the 'Public Order Law' in Sudan and have been intrinsically linked with the gender ideology of the Bashir regime. In December 1991, the hijab became the official dress code for women by presidential decree. Several stipulations in the Criminal Law of 1991 under the title, 'Honor, Reputation, and Public Morality' (articles 145–160), related to adultery, homosexuality, indecent and immoral acts, prostitution, etc, regulated public order. Among other things, it mandated 'decent' attire and behaviour, and criminalised fornication and adultery. Specialised public order police upheld the 'public order' set by these rules (SIHA 2009). In the various states, public order laws were enacted, with varying stipulations. In Khartoum state, the public order law (among other things) introduced regulations aimed at reducing gender mixing in public spaces in order to avoid *fitna*, which is in the Sudanese concept translated into 'sexual chaos', whereby immoral and religiously forbidden behaviour became rampant (SIHA 2009; Tønnessen 2011). For example, dancing might create sexual temptation and therefore should be avoided. Another example was the potential temptation that could be caused by unrelated women and men sitting next to each other on public transport or standing in public queues, which therefore should be segregated. The darkening of windows on private vehicles was strictly prohibited to ensure that they were not misused for immoral acts.

All of these laws and decrees making up the 'Public Order Law' in Sudan underline how moral bodies are disciplined by the state in a fashion that normalises and naturalises particular ways of being. This represses those who do not subscribe to state definitions of the norms of the idealised Muslim woman through various methods of control, marginalisation, silencing, and abuse (Nugdalla 2020). Class and ethnicity often compound such state repression. For example, the Labor Act of 1997 restricts women's working hours but differentiates between women of different classes. *Unskilled* women are not allowed to work during evenings and nights, but *skilled* women like doctors are allowed to do so.

The Muslim Family Law (1991) was a central law introduced by the Bashir regime that significantly changed women's legal rights. It regulated women's rights within marriage, custody, divorce, and inheritance and has emerged as a contested piece of legislation in contemporary Sudan.⁶ It

⁶ According to Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, throughout most of the 20th century, *shar'ia* law in Sudan developed through judicial circulars. Before the Islamist takeover and codification of the Muslim Family Law in 1991, these circulars had a pattern of 'an enlightened and liberal interpretation'. In fact, Sudan 'has been a leader in legal reform, anticipating innovations which were not introduced into other Muslim regions until years or even decades later'

has been described as a backlash against women's rights activists, because it (among other things) legalised child marriage (with the minimum age for marriage set at 10 years), stipulated a wife's obedience to her husband, gave a husband the right to divorce his wife outside the courts without cause, and denied wives the possibility of working outside the home without their husbands' permission (Abdel Halim 2011b). It built on the principle of male guardianship (*qawama*) within the family, the idea that the man is the protector, provider, and decision-maker of the household, while the woman is the obedient caregiver and nurturer. It is the most conservative Muslim family law in the Middle East and North Africa, despite decades of mobilisation for reform.

Women's groups and activists who were pushing for an expansion of women's rights and basic freedom and dignity faced an oppressive political environment during the Bashir regime (Nugdalla 2020). The laws that women's rights activists opposed had been used strategically to silence them (SIHA 2009). For example, 'public order laws' had been used to arrest activists as part of a strategy to ruin their reputations by labelling them 'immoral' and 'promiscuous' because of their attire and behaviour in public spaces (*ibid*). Government security forces, especially the National Intelligence and Security Service, raped and sexually abused women activists with impunity, a trend that continued during Sudan's third revolution (SORD 2020). The Bill of Rights in the Interim National Constitution, which followed immediately after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005, intensified demands for reform and opened up a political space for women's rights activists. Despite surveillance, harassment, and a violent crackdown on women's NGOs, women's rights activists persevered in opposing the regime's discriminatory policies. Although mobilisation had often been fragmented and reactive to the regime's brutality in, for example, arbitrarily arresting and flogging women, women's rights activists continued to work both visibly and behind the scenes in preparation for the fall of the Bashir regime. As women's rights activist and Ahfad University for Women Professor Balghis Badri put it during an interview with us:

Although this regime is oppressive, there have never been so many women's NGOs and there has never been so much awareness. There is more engagement. We have had more exposure to the international community; we have started to learn and see; we have started to mature during this repressive regime. We are ready!⁷

Although women with no prior political engagement participated in the 2019 revolution, some of the women did have such experience, including

(1994, 117). This codification was significant because it marked the transition of family law from the religious field to the political field. With the 1991 codification, family politics became an area of political contestation, with the state rather than the clergy becoming the principal religious authority (Tønnessen 2011).

⁷ Interview, October 2012.

from women's and human rights NGOs that had worked for peace, justice, and freedom since the inception of the Bashir regime.⁸ Key to many of these groups and movements was the dismantling of the legal architecture legitimised within Islam, which is seen as representing the regime's 'moral preoccupations with women's bodies and movement' (Nugdallah 2020, 84).

Female Protesters' Demands Linked to Past Women's Activism against Islamism

Although the motivations behind the 2018 and 2019 protests were complex and covered a broad range of issues, interviews conducted with female protesters suggest that understanding the Bashir regime's restrictive laws and discriminatory policies towards women was crucial to understanding why women were so strongly involved in the revolution. However, this does not mean that all female protesters interviewed for this study supported a feminist agenda for gender equality, nor does it suggest that the demands were entirely secular, as seems to be the case in Algeria (see Chapter 6 in this book by Aili Mari Tripp). Although the narratives were clearly anti-Islamist or against the *Inghaz* (which directly translates into 'Salvation', the popular name for Bashir's regime because it declared the coup d'état in 1989 a national salvation), our interviews show that this critique is often based on how Islamists either took the strictest interpretation of Islam or outright misrepresented Islam to control Sudan's citizens. The most frequently mentioned examples are the restrictions on women's dress, that women need their male guardians' permission to work for a wage or visit family, and how public interactions between genders are controlled, all in the name of Islamic morality. A 30-year-old university graduate and female protester asserted that 'the regime has used Islam as a way to mask its oppressive nature.'⁹ This critique should not be misinterpreted as a call for complete separation from religion. Only one political party, or rather the Aziz al-Hilu faction of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North, has demanded a secular Sudanese state ('Sudan's peace talks ...' 2020).

The diversity of opinion is also reflected in our interview material as it relates to women's demands for justice. We found support for both gender equality and the Islamist concept of complementarity among our interviewees. For example, one married 40-year-old female protester with three children said, 'There is no equality and that is why I went out and

⁸ In 2009, the civil society organisations working on peacebuilding were 241 registered CSOs in all Darfur states, in addition to 232 based in Khartoum, and 57 per cent of these organisations were led by women (Partners in Development Services, 2009. 'Mapping and Capacity Assessment of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) In Darfur.' UNDP: Sudan.)

⁹ Interview, April 2019.

participated in the demonstrations ... I believe in gender equality.¹⁰ But another protester, 29 years old and married, explained that she did *not* protest for gender equality:

We're protesting for a better life. Not for equality between genders, because at the end of the day we are Muslims. We are asking for our rights, but not in all aspects. We should put in mind that we are a conservative society and our demands should reflect that. Yes, women were active in the revolution since its beginning, complementing men's role inside and outside of the uprising.¹¹

Whether female protesters supported a feminist agenda, three specific women's agendas emerge from our rare interview material: 1) freedom to make life choices, 2) accountability for sexual violence, and 3) increased women's political participation and representation. These demands are not new to the political agenda in Sudan. Women's rights activists continually demanded these outcomes during Bashir's rule, particularly after the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the Bill of Rights in the National Interim Constitution, which was a critical political juncture for voicing legal demands. During this time, there was an explosion in women's groups advocating for legal reform. Women's rights retain strong symbolic significance and are at the heart of the codified *shar'ia* law in Sudan. Thus, the polarisation of Islamist women's groups within the government and women's groups independent of the government became more evident to the extent that the Bashir regime attempted to silence women's rights advocates through different violent measures (Tønnessen and al-Nagar 2013; Tønnessen 2017).

Justice: Challenging Laws Granting Impunity

Demands that the Sudanese state should be held accountable for injustices committed during Bashir's 30-year reign are widespread. Although peace was negotiated between north and south in 2005 and in eastern Sudan in 2006, the conflict in Darfur that erupted in 2003 was continuous throughout the period that Bashir remained dictator of the country. After the secession of South Sudan in 2011, conflict erupted along the border between the two countries.

For the women we interviewed, especially those from war zones, demands for accountability are specifically related to sexual violence, which according to the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur (2005), has been widespread and systematic in the Darfur conflict. Despite the fact that the International Criminal Court (ICC) indicted Bashir and several of his comrades in 2009 for systematic and widespread sexual

¹⁰ Interview, April 2019.

¹¹ Interview, April 2019.

violence in Darfur, victims of sexual abuse have not yet seen justice in the country (ICC 2009). One 35-year-old female protester explained, 'Women have demands to hold accountable and punish the perpetrators of sexual abuse in Darfur and other parts of the country.'¹² Female protesters from Darfur who participated in the sit-in in front of the military headquarters in Khartoum made a poster with the text, 'Raped women demand prosecution of criminal *Janjaweed* immediately.' The *Janjaweed* is a militia that operated in Darfur on behalf of Bashir's regime. It is renowned for its use of sexual assault. Bashir later made this militia into the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), legitimising it as an official branch of Sudan's military forces. The RSF's current leader, Mohamed Hamdan 'Hemeti' Dagalo, is a member of Sudan's Sovereign Council, in spite of the fact that the RSF is widely considered to be responsible, together with the national security forces, for the Khartoum massacre on 3 June 2019, which has been described as a 'campaign of terror' to disperse the peaceful sit-in (S. Abbas 2020).

Reports of sexual abuse of female protesters by the RSF during the Khartoum massacre went viral on social media, something we regard as likely to further fuel such claims to justice. The use of sexual violence against female protesters (and the fear of such use) by different branches of the military was a recurring theme in some of the interviews we conducted before 3 June 2019, especially among young female protesters. One 35-year-old married university graduate explained, 'Although women wear proper clothes, they are exposed to verbal abuse and physical violence, and this [the abusers] do with Islam as their cover.'¹³

The regime's notorious record for the use of sexual violence to oppress, silence, and engage in ethnic cleansing was on the agenda of women's rights activists long before the revolution started. However, our analysis suggests that this issue first rose to prominence when the ICC indicted the former president and several of his cronies for the systematic and widespread use of sexual abuse in Darfur (Tønnessen 2014, 2017). The idea that state officials should be held accountable for the use of genocide, rape, and sexual violence was a clear message that arose when we asked female protesters what justice means for women, particularly when we spoke with female protesters from areas of the country most affected by war – specifically Darfur, Blue Nile, and South Kordofan. One female protester from South Kordofan, a region where testimonies of sexual violence are also coming to the surface, declared:

Justice to me is that all of the parties in the previous regime should pay for what they put our nation through. They should be held accountable and punished for the sexual abuse in Darfur and other parts of the country.¹⁴

¹² Interview, April 2019.

¹³ Interview, April 2019.

¹⁴ Interview, April 2019.

Over the past several years, the reform of the section of Sudan's 1991 Criminal Law that deals with rape and *zina* (unlawful sexual relations) has become a priority for Sudanese women's rights activists. In January 2010, the Alliance of 149, a network of women's NGOs working against article 149 of this law, announced a campaign to reform Sudan's rape laws as part of the UN initiative, Sixteen Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence. Salmmah Women's Resource Centre, one of the most radical feminist groups active in Sudan, coordinated this advocacy for law reform.¹⁵

The main focus of the campaign was article 149 and the legal obstacle it creates for rape victims (Gayoum 2011). Until 2015, what the Islamist regime defined as the *shar'ia*-based Criminal Law of 1991 defined rape as sexual intercourse taking place without consent outside a marriage contract. Sexual intercourse outside a marriage contract is punishable with 100 lashes for those who are unmarried and stoning to death for those who are married. Stoning for adultery has never been enforced in Sudan, but people are regularly whipped for fornication. Confusion between rape, adultery, and fornication has serious consequences for rape victims (Abdel Halim 2011a). Prosecuting rape, according to the 1991 law, requires proof of *zina*: a confession or the testimony of four male witnesses, which is practically impossible to obtain. On the other hand, pregnancy is sufficient evidence to prove fornication. This means that the perpetrator of a rape crime almost always goes free, while the rape victim runs the risk of being punished for adultery or fornication if she confesses she had sexual intercourse and cannot prove that she tried to resist, or if she is later found to be pregnant because of the rape (Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2015). In cases where perpetrators are convicted, it is for the lesser crime of gross indecency (*ibid*).

Another focus in the campaign was to lift immunities against prosecution for criminal acts that members of the police, security, and military forces commit in the course of their duty (Alliance of 149, 2010). Although rape was clearly differentiated from *zina* in a 2015 amendment to the 1991 Criminal Law, the perpetrators of war rape are still protected by immunities in article 33(b) of the National Security Forces Act of 1999, article 45(2) of the Police Act of 2008, and article 34(1) of the Armed Forces Act of 2007 (OHCHR 2007, para. 9). Women's rights activists pointed out other limitations of the 2015 reform, but their campaign

¹⁵ The Salmmah Women's Resource Centre was founded in 1997 by a group of leading Sudanese activists as an independent feminist resource centre. Its main focus was mobilising and empowering women and women's groups to influence policy and overcome structural, political, and legal obstacles to the advancement of women's equal rights. Other members of the alliance included Sudanese Women's Empowerment for Peace (SuWEP), SORD, Mutawinat, the Alalag Centre for Media Services, the Sudanese Society for Environment Protection, and the Sudanese Observatory for Human Rights. Before the campaign was launched, other Sudanese NGOs were also involved, but they were also shut down. These other groups included the Khartoum Center for Human Rights and the Amal Centre for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence.

was effectively silenced when Bashir's regime closed down the women's NGO leading the campaign, Salmah Women's Resource Centre (Salah 2015; Tønnessen 2018). However, immunity continues to be granted even in Sudan's new constitutional charter that protects members of the state from criminal proceedings, including Hemeti as deputy chairman of the Sovereign Council. Hemeti's role in Sudan's transition, alongside other Bashir-era military generals, leaves little hope of justice during the transitional period. Since the Legislative Assembly has the ability to lift such immunities through the enactment of new laws and a permanent constitution, there is speculation that the delay in the announcement of Sudan's national parliament is deliberate and that the military elements of the Sovereign Council are intentionally delaying the process. Although an all-male committee was appointed by Prime Minister Hamdok to investigate the Khartoum massacre, the process has not been transparent, and the results have not yet been announced (Amin 2020).

With the 2019 revolution, demands for justice for rape victims have surfaced again, especially in the aftermath of the Khartoum massacre and what Hind Baraka, a women's rights activist, called the 'inhumane treatment of women'.¹⁶ Although the investigating committee has not made much progress thus far, women's rights activists continue to bring the issue to the fore. The Sudan Organization for Development and Research (SORD) published a book documenting cases of sexual abuse during the revolution. The women's rights activist Sawsan Alshawia explained to the authors in an interview, 'After the massacre, the protesters' call for justice has been intensified. Justice entails taking all those responsible, RSF, security, and Islamist militia to court, and no one would escape punishment by impunity.'¹⁷

Women's rights activists continue to bring the issue of justice to the fore internationally, as well. When Alaa Salah, who became the icon of the revolution in international media, spoke on behalf of women's groups to the Security Council on 29 October 2019, she called for an independent international investigation of human rights violations, including sexual and gender-based violence, and to hold perpetrators accountable.

Freedom: Challenging Discriminatory Laws

Many protesters, especially younger protesters, have also articulated that freedom to make life choices is essential for a positive change in women's status. A young female protester said in an interview, 'I specifically want a change of "patriarchal thinking" that justifies restricting women's freedoms and violating their rights.'¹⁸ In particular, two laws codified by

¹⁶ Interview, April 2019.

¹⁷ Interview, August 2019.

¹⁸ Interview, May 2019.

the Islamist-military government stand out in the interview material as restrictive and discriminatory to women – the Muslim Family Law of 1991 and the Public Order Law.

The transitional government has the mandate, according to the Constitutional Declaration, to ‘repeal laws and provisions that restrict freedoms or that discriminate between citizens on the basis of gender’. At the time of writing, only Public Order Laws in all states were repealed on 26 November 2019, at the same time as the National Congress Party, which was the Islamist political party backing Bashir, was dissolved (‘Sudan’s government endorses ... ’ 2019). This demonstrates the strong link between the former ruling party and its vision for women’s rights, especially as it was displayed in the Public Order Law and the high symbolic value of dismantling both. This was one of the first acts of Prime Minister Hamdok’s transitional government, but other discriminatory laws are yet to be appealed or revised at the time of writing.

The Muslim Family Law

A female university student asserted, ‘Women were tortured by restrictions within the family. I want to be free to decide what I wear and where to go out and when to come back home.’¹⁹ The female protesters interviewed explicitly mentioned certain restrictions in Sudan’s Muslim Family Law of 1991, such as those that regulate the age of marriage, a woman’s right to choose her husband, her ability to work outside the marital home, her capacity to have custody of her children, and her obligation to be obedient to her husband. This is showcased in the testimony of one of the protesters we interviewed, who is a business owner, married with three children: ‘I demonstrate against the family law that will take my children away from me if I divorce my husband. I want to divorce my husband, but I cannot be separated from my children.’²⁰ Another protester, 22 years old, unmarried, and a student at Ahfad University for Women, said, ‘The legalising and permitting of child marriage. I am very angry about that.’²¹

Women’s rights activists’ call for reform of the Muslim Family Law can be traced back to its codification in 1991, when women gathered behind closed doors to critique it. Since then, many reviews of the law and calls for reform have taken place, including in public spaces.²² The call for reform reached a peak in 2009 when SORD initiated a broad and

¹⁹ Interview, April 2019.

²⁰ Interview, April 2019.

²¹ Interview, April 2019.

²² A group of female lawyers established Mutawinat (literally translated from Arabic as ‘cooperating women’) in 1988 to provide legal aid to women and children. The lawyer Samia al-Hashmi currently heads this group. Mutawinat registered as a non-governmental, non-political, and non-religious benevolent company in 1990. Its aim is to better protect women’s and children’s legal rights in Sudan. Mutawinat is especially focused on offering free legal services to protect the rights of vulnerable women and children of Sudan.

inclusive consultative process on family law reform, which eventually culminated in the drafting of an alternative law that was launched in 2012 (SORD 2012). The alternative law addresses many of the concerns noted by the female protesters we interviewed, including making 18 years the minimum age for marriage, giving a woman the freedom to decide whom to marry, and revoking a man's unilateral right to divorce. The alternative law also stipulates that a mother has custodial rights to her children until they attain the age of legal responsibility and that they remain in her custody even if she subsequently marries another man (Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2017b; SORD 2012). The Bashir regime found the alternative law too radical in its demands and did not initiate any reform or amendment of the 1991 Muslim Family Law.

In 2018, the case of Noura Hussein provoked renewed calls for reform by women's rights activists, especially regarding child marriage, forced marriage, and marital rape. Noura Hussein was betrothed to her much older cousin by her father at age 15 without her consent. She ran away and stayed in hiding for three years, but her family tricked her into returning home and married her off by force. After refusing to consummate the marriage for five days, she was raped by her husband with the assistance of his brother and a relative, who pinned her to the bed. When he tried to rape her again the following night – this time threatening her with a knife – she stabbed him to death. She was initially sentenced to death, but mobilisation of feminist activists successfully reduced the sentence to five years in prison and a restitution payment of 337,000 Sudanese pounds (US\$18,700). However, it did not result in any changes to the 1991 law (Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2017b).

There are high hopes that the transitional government of Hamdok will address the issue, especially considering that 13 political parties have signed a petition to adopt the alternative law if there is a regime change in the country. However, because family law is at the very heart of codified *shar'ia* law in the country, it is inevitable that reform in this area will create controversy and potential counter-mobilisation from conservative religious and political actors. As a strategy to bypass those conservative actors who will compete for office after the three-year transitional period, women's rights activists are calling for the transitional government to ratify CEDAW *without* reservations (Salah 2019). This is important because many Muslim majority countries have reservations against article 16 on equality within the family (all countries in the Middle East and northern Africa except Tunisia and Morocco), because it contradicts the codification of *shar'ia*, which constitutes an obstacle for women's rights activists in these countries. Although there are rumours circulating that a range of laws are being reviewed by the Ministry of Justice, we have not seen any reform or amendment of the 1991 law thus far.²³ Women's

²³ News circulating about a legal reform allowing mothers to travel with their children without the need for permission from the guardian is not entirely correct. The transitional government abolished article 12 of the 2015 Passports and Immigration Law, including

groups have not been invited into a dialogue with the Ministry of Justice concerning legal reform. The transitional government has not signalled whether it intends to reform the 1991 Muslim Family Law or replace it with a secular or civil law. In fact, women's groups have been completely excluded from these processes within the transitional government. Women's groups are disappointed that the transitional government is excluding them in the same manner as the former regime, but are starting to organise to ensure that their voices are heard. Currently SORD and other women's groups like the Civil and Political Sudanese Coalition (MNSM) and Alalag Center are discussing organising advocacy for family law reform (including through social media), educational/discussion sessions on the 1991 law, and a review of alternative law. They will invite and include the Ministry of Labor and Social Development and Ministry of Justice.²⁴

Public Order Laws

Demands for freedom to move in public places and to dress according to one's desire, free of state regulation, were particularly prominent among the women we interviewed. Regulations on women's dress and behaviour in public spaces are codified in a range of vaguely defined 'morality' or public order laws enforced by the public order police, including the Criminal Law of 1991, the Public Order Acts at the state level, the 1997 Labor Act, and decrees mandating the hijab. Public order police are empowered to make arrests under these laws without charge and to imprison alleged offenders without trial (SIHA 2009). One 29-year-old female, married, government employee, and protester declared, 'I'm against all of the laws of this regime ... especially the Public Order Law, which has tortured the Sudanese woman and limited her thinking, freedom, and movement.'²⁵ Another female respondent, a 19-year-old married student of rural development, spoke out against the strict Islamic dress code: 'The most annoying thing for me is the forced hijab.'²⁶ The protesters we interviewed also object to the idea that a woman's religiosity is showcased by how she dresses. The young, married student of rural development put it like this: 'I think religion is about your relationship with God ... my relation[ship] with God might be better than theirs and

section 3.E, which stipulated that an exit visa shall not be granted to a child who has not attained the age of 18 without the consent of the guardian. Removing this requirement, however, is not enough to allow mothers to travel abroad with their children without the explicit permission of guardians. This is because articles 119-1 and 120-2 of the 1991 Muslim Family Law stipulate that the custodian and child-guardian are not allowed a passport without the permission of their 'male guardian' ('Civil Society Statement ...' 2020).

²⁴ Communication with Asha Al-Karib, 13 June 2020.

²⁵ Interview, April 2019.

²⁶ Interview, April 2019.

it is not important to show that through the hijab.²⁷ Women protest for the freedom to dress and move in public spaces without being considered 'bad' Muslims and immoral women by the state.

It is noticeable in the interviews that female protesters from different class backgrounds, from university students to tea sellers, expressed the restrictions they feel because of these laws. The Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA 2009) has previously documented the use of *kasha* (sweep and arrest) campaigns against marginalised and vulnerable groups of women who are unskilled workers in the informal sector. They are typically arrested for working during the night, something that is believed to incite promiscuous and immoral behaviour and is prohibited for unskilled workers under the 1997 Labor Act.

Women's rights activists have long argued for abolishing these laws, calling them unconstitutional and unIslamic. Activists who regard whipping as a cruel, inhumane, and degrading punishment refer to article 33 of the Bill of Rights of the previous 2005 Interim National Constitution, which guarantees that no person should be subject to such treatment. Such punishment is viewed by women's rights activists as a tool of oppression and contrary to women's dignity and the fundamental freedom to live their lives as they wish. Several cases of the arrest and flogging of women have prompted activism and received heightened attention by international media. The 'No to Women's Oppression' initiative was established in 2009, in the aftermath of an incident of public order police forces arresting Sudanese female journalist Lubna Hussein for wearing trousers and accusing her of violating article 152 of the Criminal Law, which prohibits indecent and immoral dress and behaviour and provides a punishment of up to 40 lashes.²⁸ Lubna Hussein called these laws unIslamic: 'Show me what paragraph of the Qur'an, or quote me Prophet Muhammad saying it is the responsibility of the government to punish people in this way' (quoted in Copnall 2009). She stated further:

Islam does not say whether a woman can wear trousers or not. The clothes I was wearing when the police caught me – I pray in them. I pray to my God in them. And neither does Islam flog women because of what they wear. If any Muslim in the world says Islamic law or sharia law flogs women for their clothes, let them show me what the Qur'an or Prophet Muhammad said on that issue. There is nothing. It is not about religion, it is about men treating women badly. (Copnall 2009)

²⁷ Interview, April 2019.

²⁸ Article 152 states, '(1) Whoever commits, in a public place, an act, or conducts himself in an indecent manner, or a manner contrary to public morality, or wears an indecent, or immoral dress, which causes annoyance to public feelings, shall be punished, with whipping, not exceeding forty lashes, or with fine, or with both; (2) The act shall be deemed contrary to public morality, if it is so considered in the religion of the doer, or the custom of the country where the act occurs.'

Since then, other cases, including those of the ‘YouTube girl’ (flogged in public by public order police in 2010) and Amira Osman (arrested in 2013 for refusing to cover her hair) have prompted renewed calls for abolishing these laws. For example, the Salmamah Women’s Resource Centre had a special focus on law reform efforts dealing with violence against women before it was shut down in 2014. The No to Women’s Oppression initiative has had a focus of 1) monitoring women’s human rights violations in the country (particularly incidents stemming from the public order law), 2) engaging in advocacy campaigns to support victims, and 3) providing lawyers to represent victims in court and support their cases through fundraising.²⁹ In conjunction with its membership, SIHA³⁰ has undertaken research, capacity-building, sub-granting, and advocacy on women’s human rights, especially in the area of gender-based violence and the threats faced by female defenders of human rights. In particular, it aims to bring the voices and interests of poor and marginalised women to the mainstream political agenda. Among other things, SIHA submitted a call for urgent reform of Sudan’s public order laws to the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights (SIHA 2009).

Samia Nihar, a women’s rights activist, believes that the oppressive nature of the public order laws has fuelled the revolution, especially among young women. The fact that women bear the brunt of these laws, combined with the campaigns of women’s rights activists, has successfully raised awareness of the injustices these laws cause for ordinary women. She explained in an interview:

I do think that the public order law is one of the engines of the revolution because it is the law that directly affected girls and women from the public. Moreover, the public order law is also an example of a law where the women’s movement succeeded in showing its awfulness openly, assisted by social media – especially in the cases of Lubna and the ‘YouTube girl’. These two cases were the basis for the public feeling of injustice and targeting of women by this specific law. Through these cases, the public order law embarrassed the government very strongly, but the government did not take any action at that time. Other cases followed, addressed by the social media, and public people were concerned by them. In the former President’s latest speech, he included a declaration that the public order law was flawed but he was trying to improve the image of the regime too late.³¹

In an attempt to cling to power, Bashir promised to reform the public order laws. This testifies to how central such discriminatory laws have been to disadvantaging women and, accordingly, why women have been at the forefront of the revolution. However, it is important to note that although

²⁹ No to Women’s Oppression was established in 2009 and is currently led by Ihsan Fagiri.

³⁰ Established in 1995, SIHA is a regional network that works in Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Somalia, Somaliland, and Djibouti.

³¹ Email interview, April 2019.

the female protesters we interviewed demand freedom to dress and move in public spaces, they make it clear that this does not necessarily entail throwing away their hijab or putting on a miniskirt. Rather, they assert that how they dress and behave should be between them and God, not something the state should control or punish in the name of Islam.

The abolition of public order acts at the state level and with it the notorious public order police was welcomed and widely celebrated as a revolutionary gain for women. In July 2020, the government announced a range of amendments to the Criminal Law, including the articles under the 'Honor, Reputation, and Public Morality' (articles 145–160) part of the Miscellaneous Act. This included the abolishment of flogging as a punishment, reformed the formulations regarding dress in article 152 and the definition of prostitution in article 156. Other articles related to the crime of *zina* (fornication and adultery) remain unchanged (Redress 2020). In a civil society statement, several groups (including women's groups) critique the weakness of these reforms and claims that the Criminal Law continues to deny basic freedoms. The statement says the following regarding article 152:

This amended article, although it removed the phrase (disguised in an indecent dress), still allows policemen to assess the nature of the disobedient act or statement, which allows for the continued interference in personal freedoms by policemen who have the right to assess the matter according to what they deem to be a breach of modesty, without the protections of an objective standard. ('Civil Society Statement ... ' 2020)

The process of amending the Criminal Law of 1991, in which the Miscellaneous Act 2020 is the first step, has been driven by the transitional government without report from civil society (*ibid*). Women's groups are disappointed at the lack of engagement and inclusion in the discussion about legal reform.

Inclusion: Expanding the Representation of Women in the Decision-Making Processes

Although Sudanese women had played a key role in ousting military dictatorships before (in 1964 and 1985), their contributions were quickly sidelined in the political negotiations that followed. Women were also largely excluded from the peace negotiations that ended armed conflicts between Sudan and South Sudan in 2005 and in East Sudan in 2006, and they had only marginal representation in the Darfur peace negotiations (Itto 2006). History is repeating itself, as women have largely been excluded from the negotiations between the TMC and the FFC. Only one woman participated in the negotiations. Two women were in the FFC negotiations that culminated in an agreement on 17 August 2019. One

represented the National Umma Party (Mariam Sadiq al-Mahdi), but she was replaced by a man during the first month of negotiations. The other young woman, Mervat Hamadaneel, representing civil society, struggled alone until the end of the negotiations.

In the transitional government of Abdallah Hamdok, two women, Rajaa Nicola Eisa and Asha Musa Al Saeed (one of whom was nominated by MNSM) out of 11 members have been appointed to the Sovereign Council. In addition, four of the 14 ministers who were initially appointed (including three MNSM nominees) are women holding the posts of Foreign Affairs, Labor and Social Development, Youth and Sports, and Higher Education. This is compared with two women out of 21 in the last Cabinet under the Bashir era. In addition, a woman was appointed as the chief justice (Mohiedeen 2019). Women's representation in the current governance structure thus falls far below the demand of 50 per cent parity, but in a historical perspective it has more representation of women than any other. Female protesters and women's rights activists were disenchanted by being relegated to guests at the negotiating table, especially considering that the majority of protesters had been women (Tønnessen and al-Nagar 2020). The appointment of women in the governing structures also falls short of their expectations of gender parity.

Female protesters and women's rights activists perceived their exclusion from the negotiation table as a threat and a manifestation of a patriarchal culture, something that sparked collective mobilisation for political inclusion. At this point, groups of women from diverse backgrounds, many with no track record of political activism, started gendering the revolutionary slogans and discourse for change. As such it represented a tipping point in the revolution as female protesters started demanding rights as women in consolidating a just, peaceful, and free Sudan. For example, young women started to call for 50/50 representation in the decision-making structures of a new transitional government, delivered speeches on women's rights in sit-in forum areas, made art pieces with the slogan 'This is a woman's revolution', stood in front of the building where the negotiations took place carrying posters with slogans, and put up posters in the offices of the SPA, one of the leading organisations of the FFC. In the speeches in the sit-in area, the recognition of international conventions related to women, such as CEDAW, was mentioned (in contrast to Resolution 1325) but did not play a prominent role. This is partly related to historical divisions within the women's movement regarding international human rights and what are considered feminist ideas regarding gender equality (Tønnessen 2013). However, in the post-revolutionary period the demand for CEDAW and the Maputo Protocols has become increasingly pronounced as women's groups have demonstrated for ratification. In a letter handed over to the Minister of Justice, a diverse set of women's groups urged him to take action and state the following:

We strongly believe that the international legal framework will provide a legislative umbrella for the protection of women, in their diverse backgrounds, and will allow them to effectively participate in public life in a way that ensures justice and equity. ('Sudanese women demonstrate ... ' 2020)

The slogans used by female protesters and women's rights activists have included the following:

You thank us in demonstrations and forget about us in negotiations.

If you wait, your rights will not come to you. You have to fight for your rights. 50 per cent is a right for women.

I am a 100 per cent protesting female but am outside the power structures.

I am not only an ululation; I am an existing human being.

If your budget is not balanced, gender will balance it.

We are active partners and not followers.

We are not going to be victims of patriarchy.

Women's political participation is a right and not a donation.

We are 50 per cent and our rights are for 50 per cent.

The exclusion of women from the negotiation table has led to an increased demand from women's organisations to have political representation in the transitional government. The newly established MNSM, initiated by woman's rights activist Sawsan Alshawia, was an attempt to form a platform between diverse women's groups.³² MNSM and other groups have made women's political inclusion a top priority going forward. Women's rights activist Asha Al-Karib stated in an interview:

The current women's movement in Sudan is strongly demanding equal participation in the upcoming period. To this end, women are gathering beyond borders of age, ethnicity, and religion to build in solidarity their agenda during this critical juncture of our history. The process for change has already started, but it will be full of challenges, and the road for women will be particularly rocky and tough.³³

MNSM has made a declaration with the following demands:

We, the women of Sudan, declare our solid unity in claiming our right to the enjoyment of our human right to political participation including

³² MNSM consists of eight political women's groups, 26 civil society organisations (including young women's organisations), 16 women's sectors of political parties, and 17 civil groups including unions and forums and independent activists. It signed the FFC's Declaration of Freedom and Change and is a recognised body within the alliance.

³³ Interview, August 2019.

through the temporary special measures, which for us can neither be negotiated nor compromised. We, thereof, demand the following:

The representation of women in all governmental institutions, executive bodies, legislative, and the judiciary including at decision making with a percentage of not less than 50 per cent as a temporary measure while giving due consideration to female youth.

The representation of women must be subject to merit and required standards of competency (with due consideration to ethnicity, culture regional geographical representation including conflict affected states, and disability) and in a manner that significantly contributes to the formation of a strong, integral, and inclusive Sudanese Nation. (Quoted in Karama 2019)

Female activists have also initiated a Facebook campaign, 50#qualified women#. ³⁴ The campaign identifies highly qualified Sudanese women residing within the country or from the diaspora as nominees for political offices within the transitional government, including within masculine areas of political decision-making, such as transportation. The initiative is rooted in the experience women had in the aftermath of the stipulation of 25 per cent reserved seats for women in national and subnational legislative assemblies, put in place in 2008. Women's rights activists had high hopes that an increase in the numerical number of women in legislative assemblies would lead to the advancement of women's rights and the gendering of political processes, such as budgeting. However, in the 2010 elections, which were boycotted by the majority of political parties in opposition to the regime, the women elected came almost exclusively from the ruling Islamist political party and did not support gender equality. Women's rights activists realised the hard way the importance of putting women who support the advancement of women's rights into political decision-making bodies.

The initiative is also rooted in the understanding of Sudanese political culture as patriarchal. A common argument in the debate on women and politics in Sudan is that there are no qualified women, especially within political areas that are considered 'masculine' domains. Women are typically marginalised into what Sara Abbas has coined the *hoesh al-nisa*, or 'women's yard'. This refers 'to the traditional division of space in the Sudanese home where women have their own area in the house that they are meant to stick to' (S. Abbas 2010, 6). For example, in the political arena, women typically receive responsibility for areas related to women's issues and children – that is, not finance and defence. During the Islamist era, this was justified with the principle of complementarity, the argument being that, since women and men are biologically different, they should have different roles and women's emotional and caring nature makes them better at caring for vulnerable groups in society (Tønnessen

³⁴ See https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2538471939509138&id=100000390711761&sfnsn=mo (accessed 1 November 2019).

2018). This perspective became apparent in the form that the quota took – reserved seats, where women were nominated on separate lists rather than competing with men. The victory was therefore bittersweet for women's rights activists, according to Abbas (2010, 8), because they had advocated for a 30 per cent quota for women in party lists that also included mechanisms to ensure women's inclusion in the upper half of the list.

In the transitional period, the leadership of the alliance negotiating on behalf of the protesters, the FFC, has come under increased criticism for espousing a patriarchal mentality. A young, female university student activist and founder of the Noon movement, which is one of several newly established civil society groups in post-revolutionary Sudan, stated in an interview, 'The FFC are sexist. The few women who are publicly participating in the current scene are just there as a camouflage or appeasement to silence the international community.'³⁵ This patriarchal mentality or sexist approach is reflected also in the FFC Central Council, which is responsible for policies and nomination; it only includes three women and 23 men. Although Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok is widely recognised as a supporter of women's rights, he relies on the FFC coalition for nominations to governing structures in Sudan's post-revolution. Recently, the FFC Central Council sent a list to the Prime Minister nominating only men as governors for Sudan's 18 states. Arguments used to support this position were that 'Sudanese society will not accept a female governor' and 'government posts are given to those who are qualified; insinuating that women simply do not have the qualifications to occupy decision-making positions' (R. Abbas 2020b). The Prime Minister sent back the list asking the FFC Central Council to consider nominating women, but the Central Council sent back the same list without adding women. In response, the Sudanese Women Union, MNSM, and No for Oppression of Women prepared a joint list with potential women candidates for governors' posts and sent it to the Prime Minister. Prime Minister Hamdok completely disregarded these nominations, but did appoint two female governors in the River Nile and Northern States.

According to the constitutional declaration, women are supposed to make up 40 per cent of Sudan's National Assembly. Considering that the FFC Central Council has continuously been reluctant to nominate women for decision-making positions thus far, they doubt whether their constitutional right of 40 per cent representation in the legislative assembly will be fulfilled without a fight.

Conclusion: Reasons for Optimism?

How the new interim government deals with women's rights will be central to Sudan's future. Because discriminatory policies have been codified as the 'law of God', legal reforms are likely to meet resistance,

³⁵ Interview, August 2019.

not only from the old political and religious supporters of the Bashir regime or what is popularly referred to as the deep or parallel state in Sudan (Assal 2019), but also from conservative attitudes within Sudanese society. Legal reform is key to meeting the demands of women, whether they are directed towards lifting immunities for government officials who have perpetrated sexual assault or advancing women's rights and political representation in decision-making in all governing structures.

As it stands now, the Constitutional Declaration does not deal directly with the elephant in the room, namely, the role of religion and Islamic law in the transitional structure, a topic that is politically contested. Although women have been largely excluded from the negotiation table, reform of discriminatory laws codified by the Islamist-military regime is a top priority in the Constitutional Declaration. The exclusion of women from the negotiations, despite their major role in the uprising, testifies to what women's rights activists describe as a patriarchal mentality.³⁶ If women's rights activists and groups had been given a seat at the table, the declaration surely would have included stronger wording and clearer direction, including a mandate that the country ratify CEDAW. Instead of merely aiming to repeal discriminatory laws, women's rights activists would have demanded stronger protection against gender-based violence, which is currently sorely lacking in Sudan's legal frameworks despite women's demands for accountability and justice for sexual violence and attacks against women before, during, and after the revolution.

Although a repeal of discriminatory laws is on the political agenda in the transitional period, there might be conflicting visions for women's rights in a conservative political and social context, as well as further differences between political actors on what laws and stipulations are indeed considered discriminatory against women. Our interviews show that not all female protesters support gender equality in all spheres, so a radical advancement of women's rights (especially within the private sphere) may evoke resistance even among women themselves. Nonetheless, the transitional period of three years with a technocratic government is an immensely important window of opportunity for women to mobilise for the advancement of women's right, before conservative religious and political actors again compete for office. The fact that Hamdok's government has abolished the notorious Public Order Laws (November 2019) and more recently criminalised female genital mutilation and introduced other criminal law reforms as part of the Miscellaneous Act (July 2020) gives cause for optimism. But women are largely underwhelmed at the slow pace and disappointed at how the FFC continuously sidelines women and brushes away their concerns.

³⁶ Interview, August 2019.