

Sudanese Women in Times of War: An Intersectional Analysis of Resilience, Stress, and the Reconfiguration of Power

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In Sudan, the impact of war on women cannot be understood from a single perspective or experience. War does not inflict suffering uniformly; rather, it redistributes vulnerability and power in complex ways—so that every woman’s experience is different, even if their pain overlaps.

Based on my personal experience and my work with women in local communities as part of the “Women First” project with the organization PAX, it became clear that women in Sudan experience war not only as victims, but as active participants within a complex structure of imposed roles, limited options, and survival strategies.

War as a Double Gender-Based Burden

The war in Sudan has not created new roles for women, but has multiplied existing ones.

Women who were already responsible for caregiving within the family found themselves facing an additional burden: ensuring survival in a context of economic and security collapse.

However, this burden was not the same for all women. Displaced women, mothers, low-income women, and women active in public life were exposed to a higher degree of pressure and vulnerability.

On a personal level, after I was displaced, my financial responsibility toward my family became more pressing. It wasn’t a choice, but a necessity. I found myself constantly looking for work or clinging to opportunities that might not have been suitable, just to balance the demands of motherhood with the pressure to survive.

This experience shows that war does not merely affect women as a group, but reshapes their roles within the family and society—in a way that reinforces existing inequalities.

Displacement: The Reproduction of Vulnerability

Displacement, one of the most defining features of war, was not merely a geographical movement but a process of reproducing vulnerability.

The sudden abandonment of one's home into the unknown meant not only the loss of shelter but also the loss of social, economic, and psychological safety nets. Yet even here, women did not experience displacement in the same way.

Pregnant women, mothers, and women without access to resources faced a range of challenges: from limited access to food and water to a lack of health services, as well as a shortage of basic gender-specific supplies such as menstrual products.

These seemingly simple details reveal deep gaps in humanitarian aid, which often overlooks gender-specific needs.

In addition, women were more vulnerable to violence, kidnapping, arrest, and enforced disappearance—especially female activists. Here, gender and political activism intersect, creating a more complex form of vulnerability.

From Vulnerability to Agency: Unplanned Transformations

Despite these circumstances, women did not remain solely in a position of vulnerability. Rather, communities witnessed significant changes in women's roles, particularly during times of crisis.

In many cases, as the war spread into residential areas, men fell into a state of shock or temporary paralysis, which—albeit unintentionally—created opportunities for women.

However, these “spaces” should not be understood as traditional empowerment processes, but rather as a forced response to a lack of alternatives.

Women began to organize daily life, make crucial decisions, and manage limited resources. In areas affected by displacement, they engaged in informal economic activities to rebuild their livelihoods.

This reveals a fundamental paradox:

While war is a source of vulnerability, it sometimes creates opportunities to redefine roles—albeit at a high cost.

Solidarity as an Intersectional Survival Strategy

From an intersectional perspective, women's responses cannot be understood without taking networks of solidarity into account.

This solidarity was not merely social support, but a survival strategy. The shared sense of suffering—despite differing contexts—forged deep bonds between women.

These informal networks facilitated the exchange of resources, psychosocial support, and practical knowledge. They also provided women with relatively safe spaces in unstable environments.

Over time, these networks evolved into organized initiatives. In Gedaref State, for example, women established feminist emergency shelters to address the needs of displaced persons and children.

These initiatives demonstrate how women can rebuild forms of social organization outside official structures, even in fragile contexts.

From the bottom up: Redefining leadership

Through my experience with the “Women First” project, I participated in discussions that clearly showed how female leadership takes shape in a war context—not from the top down, but from the bottom up.

It became clear that women’s leadership in Sudan today is not based on individual figures, but rather on shared power and collective leadership in the face of deeply entrenched structures such as patriarchy, the glass ceiling, and various forms of marginalization.

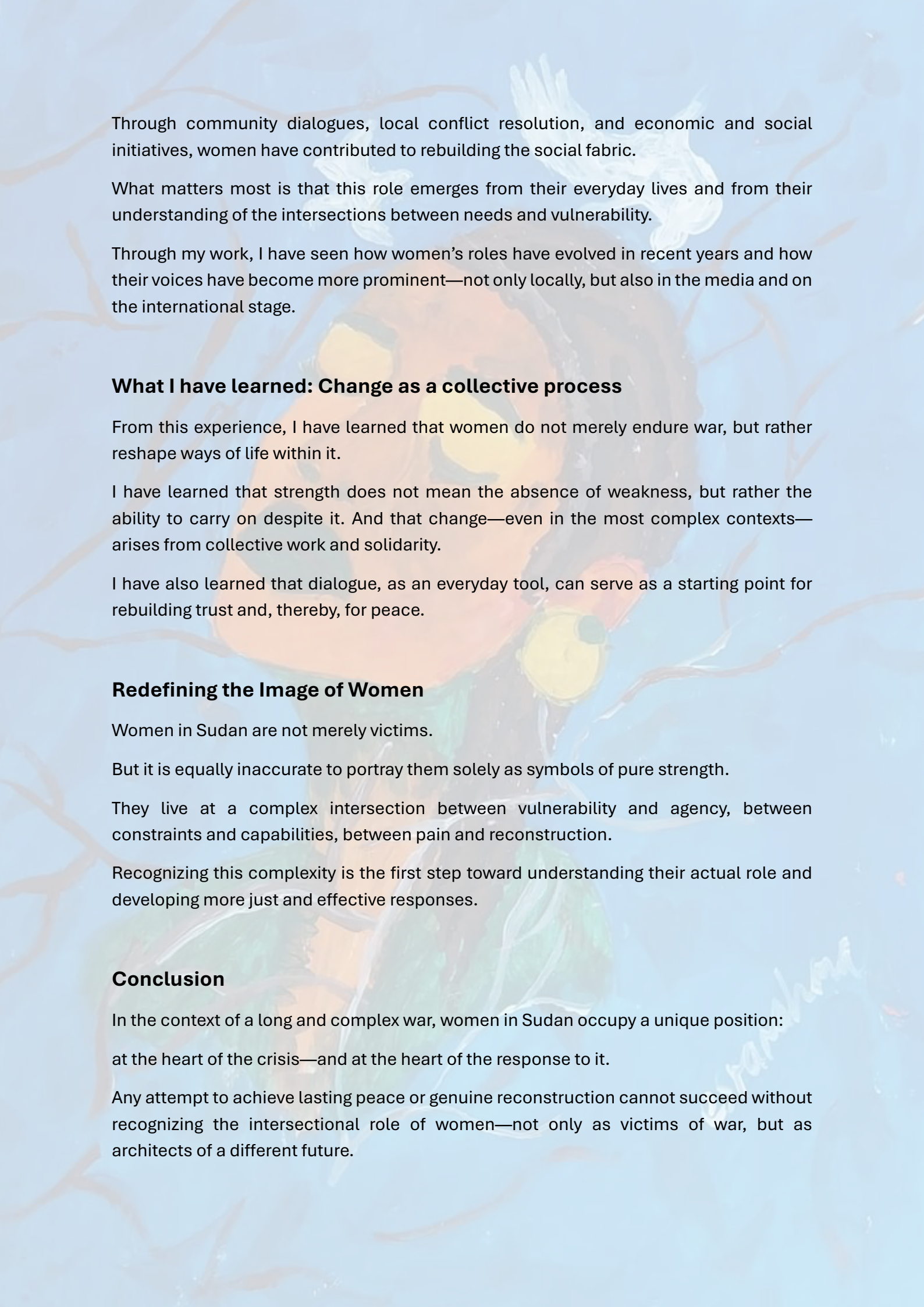
Here, leadership is linked to concepts of justice, care, and agency, and stems from the fundamental structures of society. Women lead not only in formal settings but also in everyday life—from the distribution of basic resources such as seeds, to the organization of emergency shelters, to the building of alliances and the formulation of a new feminist discourse.

These experiences confirm that, from a feminist perspective, peace does not begin solely at the negotiating table, but within communities—and among women who work every day to rebuild their lives.

Despite threats and challenges, the feminist movement in Sudan has demonstrated a remarkable ability to transform lived experiences—with all their pain and complexity—into mobilization processes that contribute to a more just and inclusive peace.

Women and Peacebuilding: From the Margins to the Center

In many discussions, women are portrayed as victims of war or as beneficiaries of peace programs. The reality, however, is that women are key actors in grassroots peacebuilding.



Through community dialogues, local conflict resolution, and economic and social initiatives, women have contributed to rebuilding the social fabric.

What matters most is that this role emerges from their everyday lives and from their understanding of the intersections between needs and vulnerability.

Through my work, I have seen how women's roles have evolved in recent years and how their voices have become more prominent—not only locally, but also in the media and on the international stage.

What I have learned: Change as a collective process

From this experience, I have learned that women do not merely endure war, but rather reshape ways of life within it.

I have learned that strength does not mean the absence of weakness, but rather the ability to carry on despite it. And that change—even in the most complex contexts—arises from collective work and solidarity.

I have also learned that dialogue, as an everyday tool, can serve as a starting point for rebuilding trust and, thereby, for peace.

Redefining the Image of Women

Women in Sudan are not merely victims.

But it is equally inaccurate to portray them solely as symbols of pure strength.

They live at a complex intersection between vulnerability and agency, between constraints and capabilities, between pain and reconstruction.

Recognizing this complexity is the first step toward understanding their actual role and developing more just and effective responses.

Conclusion

In the context of a long and complex war, women in Sudan occupy a unique position: at the heart of the crisis—and at the heart of the response to it.

Any attempt to achieve lasting peace or genuine reconstruction cannot succeed without recognizing the intersectional role of women—not only as victims of war, but as architects of a different future.