Beyond the pan-Africanist agenda: Sudanese women's movement, achievements and challenges

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Pan-Africanism has inspired women's movements in Africa and generated debate around many issues such as the role of women in the political process of their countries and the emancipation of women. This paper focuses on the achievements and challenges of Sudanese women's movements in the context of pan-Africanism. In particular, I examine the history and experiences of the Sudanese Women's Union (SWU), the first women's organisation in Sudan. The SWU is considerably the largest and most provocative post-independence women's organisation in Africa. From this position, this paper explores pan-Africanist influences on the Sudanese women's movements. I argue that Sudanese women have politically engaged in the pan-African anti-colonial struggle for liberation, promotion of cooperation, unity, stability and human rights in all African nations, and that they have also actively participated in post–independence national political agendas.

Women in Sudan, like women elsewhere in Africa, perceived liberation from colonialism as a prerequisite for their liberation from illiteracy, poverty, inequality and ignorance, and later, for democracy and national development. From the colonial to post-independence years, women's movements have faced intensifying challenges resulting from a dire national political situation characterised by ongoing conflicts, and the eventual partition of the country in 2011. Women's movements became more visible as they continued to address post-independence challenges which notably include underdevelopment, lack of democracy, poverty and inequality. Moreover, women have developed their own agenda for the promotion of peace and stability, and specifically addressed the issues of violence against women, both in the home during times of peace, and during armed conflicts. Sudanese women have faced many national and local obstacles in the pursuit of the organisational autonomy necessary to pursue these agendas.

Pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism demands the unity of all Africans, regardless of social and political differences on the basis that African peoples on the continent and in the diaspora have a common history and destiny. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) now renamed the African Union (AU), has been advocating for unity and cooperation among African nations since its establishment in 1963. Nevertheless, the instability and conflicts that have shaken many countries, including Sudan, have posed a constant obstacle to Africa's unity and undermined post-independence development. The AU mandate requires it to address conflict and instability in the interest of unity. Measures have included establishing a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution (MCPMR) and the deployment of African peacekeeping missions to war zones such as Burundi in 2003–2004, and Darfur in 2004. The philosophy and ideology behind this approach is seen as a part of the quest for African approaches to African problems (Francis 2006:126). Unlike the commission that successfully dealt with decolonisation and racism, today's peace and security mission lacks successful stories (Francis 2006:124-125). These missions, I argue, also fail to address gender-based violence with any seriousness.

African development has been an important concern of pan-Africanism since the early 1950s. Pan-Africanist thinkers and philosophers have proposed models of development based on the creation of African institutions to foster political and socio-economic transformation and people-centred democracy (Martin, 2011: 28). Julius Nyerere for example, believed that to develop, Africa needed to depend upon its own resources and to develop policies based on collective self-reliance (Nyerere 2000, cited in Martin 2011:34). Social justice, poverty, illiteracy, ignorance and disease were identified by the philosophers of pan-Africanism, in particular Kwame Nkrumah, as the main challenges to the independent African nations and to the pan-Africanist vision of a liberated continent (Dodoo 2012).

To keep up with Africa's post-independence challenges, new agendas were developed. These are expressed clearly in the AU's new vision which is aiming for "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena" (AU 2014b). Following the liberation of South Africa from apartheid, and the accelerated globalisation of the late 20th century world economy, the concept of an

African Renaissance was popularised by then-President Thabo Mbeki, who sought to revitalise pan-Africanism, throwing South African support behind regional institutions. The African Renaissance refers to "a period of time when Africa will experience great development in its economy and culture" (Jonas 2012: 83). Pan-Africanist scholars, activists and researchers historicise underdevelopment, attributing it to Africa's marginalisation through slavery and colonialism, and motivating for a forward-looking platform for change. For instance, the declaration of the AU Commission Consultative Conference of women stakeholders on the topic "Pan-Africanism, Renaissance and Agenda 2063", held in Addis Ababa in May 2013, which resolved to "eradicate poverty, underdevelopment, inequality, conflict and disease."

Nowadays it is widely recognised that Africa's Renaissance will not materialise without the involvement of women in all aspects of the political, economic and social affairs of the continent. Despite the AU gender policy, much more needs to be done to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment. The marginalisation of African women in the pan-African movement has been denounced by African women's movements. Francis argues that despite women's activism against colonialism and apartheid in many African countries, pan-Africanism has remained a male-dominated ideology. Its narratives and discourses give credit to men and ignore women's contributions (2006: 14). Bineta Diop, founder of *Femmes Africa Solidarité* (FAS), in Senegal notes:

> "They created the OAU without having women in the centre of the debate, and as a consequence, women's issues were not adequately addressed." (African Union, 2013).

Despite this marginalisation, feminists in Africa assert that the struggle for Africa's liberation and development go hand in hand with the struggle for women's liberation and gender equality (Winyi 2013:13). This vision has led to the creation of hundreds of women's organisations working in a wide range of areas, both locally and regionally. A good example is the African Women's Development and Communication Network, FEMNET. Established in 1988 to promote pan-African agendas and improve the quality of African women's lives, FEMNET focuses on improving women's economic and social status. It also works to strengthen African women's leadership capacity and facilitate the creativity and communication of their diverse cultural identities and practices (Winyi 2013:13-15).

The Sudanese Women's Movement

Literature on women's movements in Sudan is scarce, as little has been written on the political role of women during the colonial or pre-colonial era. The few studies that exist ignore pan-Africanism and its influence on women's movements. Furthermore, the gender biases of recorded histories are not particularly helpful for those invested in examining how women and men historically interacted and what roles they played. This poses a major challenge to gender and feminist research and activism in Sudan. Ajoba (2002: 1-2) criticises the writing of Sudanese historians, such as Shibeika (1959) and Said (1965) who not only ignore the role of Sudanese women and their contributions to all major historical events, but also disregard how historical events affected them, thus portraying history as a male domain, where men are the only actors. Moreover, the political environment, in particular since the Islamic military coup in 1989, has become hostile to research on gender relations. The crackdown on women scholars and activists obstructs the study of women's contribution to political processes. In 2004 for example, security officers raided a civil society organisation, the Gender Centre for Research and Training (GCRT), to disrupt a workshop on gender and political participation, arresting the speakers and some of the participants.[1]

Women in Southern Sudan have rarely been the subject of scholarly work, a fact attributable to the many years of war (Fluehr-Lobban 2005). As a result, little is known about them outside their immediate communities. Nevertheless, the limited literature on women in Sudan, while it focuses on the North of the country, is largely by women and about women, (Ibrahim 1966, Badri 2009). However, these scholars have focused on the national context, and have not discussed the Sudanese women's movement from a pan-African perspective. Ibrahim (1966) provides an early analysis of the experience of the SWU from the time of its establishment during the colonial era, its contribution to achieving national independence, and its work to improve women's participation in the socio-economic and political fields. Ibrahim explores how the SWU worked for a democratic society where women would enjoy equal rights and highlights the importance of solidarity among women in Africa and the Arab world. However, Ibrahim's research was carried out in the 1960s and retains a largely national focus.

Badri (2009) uses a historical perspective to highlight the role of different women's organisations in promoting girls' education and how girls benefited

from different educational systems such as adult education, Koranic schools (*khalwa*) and night school clubs. She also discusses how missionary education has been used to spread Christianity, particularly in the Southern part of Sudan (Badri 2009:62). She argues that women embraced education as a great opportunity that would open doors for them to enter employment, especially after the October revolution in 1964 (Badri, 2009:72). However, Badri also remains within a national framework that does not situate Sudanese women's education in a wider African context. This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature.

Engagement with pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism inspired the Sudanese women's movement during the struggle against colonialism and into the post-independence era. In the last years of colonialism women scaled up their struggle and participated in demonstrations against colonialism and for independence. However, despite such contributions, sectarian political parties such as the Umma and Khatmiyya, excluded women from the political sphere (Hale 1997:83). The Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) was the only party that opened its doors to women. In 1952, at the peak of the independence struggle, women graduates and teachers established the SWU. The first executive committee was composed of Fatima Talib, Khalda Zahir, and Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim. They drew their inspiration from the nationalist struggle, at that time predominantly expressed through an ideology that was both socialist and pan-Africanist. SWU became the first women's organisation to carry out consciousness-raising campaigns and advocate women's emancipation.

The SWU mobilised Sudanese women to show their solidarity with women in Southern Africa and to campaign against apartheid in Zambia, South Africa and Namibia (Al-Gaddal, undated: 28). In the early days of the Abboud dictatorship, the SWU mobilised women who took to the streets to protest against the execution of one of the prominent figures of pan-Africanism; the then elected Prime Minster Patrice Lumumba, to express solidarity with the people of the Republic of Congo (Abdalal nd:15). Women from this movement also presented a memorandum to the Minister of Foreign Affairs criticising the government for allowing planes carrying weapons to pass through Sudan to Congo. The SWU also organised rallies and marched to the French Embassy in Khartoum protesting against the arrest of Djamila Bouhired, the Algerian

freedom fighter against the French occupation and demanded her immediate release. The SWU also showed solidarity with Arab women freedom fighters in many countries including Palestine. In 1954 the SWU joined the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) and later the Women's Arab Union (Al-Gaddal nd:28). In 1955 it published *Sawt al-Mara: Women's Voice*, the organisation's magazine. *Women's Voice* provided a forum to lobby and campaign for women's emancipation on both national and continental levels. It also generated debates on women's rights and duties in the social, economic and political development of the newly independent nation of Sudan. The magazine set out to mobilise the masses of women, with some success.

During colonial rule, the SWU opposed a British education system that neglected to educate girls, and campaigned to improve girls' education. Hale (1997:17) points out that this educational system targeted boys exclusively, encouraging a small minority to attend school so they could work in low rank administrative jobs. Some girls benefited from attending *khalwa* where they learnt how to read the Koran and pray. However, like the British, conservative religious leaders opposed girls' education in modern schools, arguing this went against women's role as housewives and would disrupt their reproductive duties.

In 1907 Sheikh Babikar took the initiative to open the first formal school for girls in Rufaa (Badri 2009:52). Formal education of girls was initially opposed by the British administration, and it was not until 1911 that the colonial administration opened five primary schools for girls (Badri 2009: 52). It was to be another thirty years before the first intermediate school was opened in Omdurman in 1948, illustrating the reluctance of the colonial regime with regard to girls' education. Nevertheless, the SWU was able to establish two more intermediate schools for girls in Khartoum and Omdurman in 1953, despite the many obstacles imposed by the colonial administration (Badri 2009: 54). Women not only grasped at the few educational and training opportunities opened for them to be midwives, teachers and nurses, but also demanded more to compete in male-dominated subjects, such as science.

In 1970, the SWU organised an international conference focusing on illiteracy among women and proposing plans to tackle it. The conference was attended by many women's organisations from other African nations, and it offered an opportunity for learning from one another by exchanging

experiences. This conference also served as a platform to bring African women's socio-economic concerns into a common women's agenda under a pan-African banner.[2]

Within the national context, the SWU adopted a country and community level approach. After independence the SWU established evening classes for adult women, including literacy classes alongside the more conventional sewing, cooking and handicraft skills. Women, particularly in rural areas, benefited from these classes, and were able to sell some of their products (Badri 2009:91-93). The SWU understood the importance of health as a welfare indicator and established community classes to teach women public hygiene, child-care and nutrition. It campaigned and encouraged women to seek assistance from a midwife during childbirth and to attend hospital in case of emergency, and demanded provision of mother and child-care services in villages and small town. SWU members also campaigned against under-age and forced marriages, insisting that girls' consent should be sought in the presence of a judge when they got married. It demanded that polygamy be regulated and that the husband should consult his wife before seeking another wife.

Overwhelmed by the work to address women's immediate needs, the SWU tended to fall short of the more strategic and transformative goals of feminism. However, SWU also campaigned for more job opportunities for women as well as equal pay for the same work. In this sense, the SWU was able to address strategic gender interests, because they challenged the unequal sexual division of labour (Molyneux 1985:233). The SWU also addressed the marginalisation of ethnic minorities and gave support to those who were persecuted. For instance, it stood against the Islamic government's forcible removal from the capital of people designated as 'African' and not considered to be of 'Arab' ethnic origin, and demanded that they should be treated as equal citizens. Jacobsen et al (2001:86) argue that the removal of some people outside Khartoum was part of the pan-Islamic agenda adopted by the Islamic state. Thus pan-Islamic ideology displaced pan-Africanism, and developed into a serious threat to national unity, not to mention regional integration.

The SWU regularly challenged the Islamic government's discourse, which depicts African cultures as inferior to the Arab culture, and advocated for a united Sudan. To promote national unity, the SWU, along with other women's organisations, promoted dialogue with women's organisations across the Arab-

African divide, meeting with women from Southern Sudan, Darfur and the Nuba Mountains. The SWU also built transnational networks with women's organisations in other African nations, as I will elaborate later. All of these activities point to a Sudanese women's movement, led by the SWU, which embraces the unifying principles and practices of pan-Africanism with regard to ethnicity and religious diversity as well as socio-economic development, stability and national unity.

Since independence Sudan has experienced many developmental challenges, which include lack of democracy, poverty, poor social services, notably in the fields of education and health, as has been the case in many African countries. The SWU became actively involved in tackling the post-independence challenges by promoting women's access to health and education using a practical approach that responded to women's needs, such as the need for shelter, education and training. All such programs have ceased since the demise of democratic, secular government following the 1989 coup d'état, and the banning of the SWU soon thereafter.

Gains

The post-independence state in Sudan, as the case in many African countries, did initially promote girls' education, enabling many women to complete secondary school and some, but not many, to go to university. The enrolment of women in studies dominated by men, such as medicine, engineering, science and law, increased. The number of female graduates also increased and many became doctors, engineers, nurses and teachers. Politically, women graduates won the right to vote. After the October revolution in 1964 the right to vote was extended to all women regardless of their literacy status. Women also won the right to stand for election. Fatima Ibrahim, the leader of the SWU, was elected to the Constitutional Assembly as the first women to win such a position (Fluehr-Lobban 2005:277). The women's movement flourished and women became active in the public arena.

During the 1960s and 1970s campaigns by women's activists including members of the SWU saw women make further gains as significant family law reform took place (Fluehr-Lobban 2005:270). The Constitution of 1973 granted equal rights for all citizens regardless of their gender. Moreover, a moderate state feminist agenda was implemented and many Northern women were given ministerial, judicial and other official jobs. However, women from

the Southern region and other marginalised areas were denied that right (Fluehr-Lobban, 2005:277). The marginalisation of communities of non-Arab people; designated 'African', notably in Southern and Western Sudan had dire effects on women, some of whose husbands, children and extended families spanned this ethnic division. The economic, political and social marginalisation of the South ran counter to pan-Africanism's more unifying democratic values. With the regime identifying itself as 'Arab' in a manner that reactivates the long histories of Arab racism against those ethnic groups they disparage and refer to as 'Africans', as if Sudan were not an African nation itself, and all Sudanese Africans.

During the mid-1980s, in particular after the March-April uprising of 1985, women benefited from the democratic environment, promoting their role and image in the public sphere. They were able, once again, to form autonomous civil society organisations that remain active in many areas that affect women's lives, notably women's human rights, democracy, conflict resolution and peace building. Women also enjoyed greater freedom of movement. Although the new, democratically elected government failed to abolish *Shari'a* (Islamic law), the law was not used to harass women to the same extent as previously.

However, this progressive trend came under threat again in 1989 after the Islamic regime, backed by the National Islamic Front (NIF), took power, ignoring pan-African values in relation to women's rights, stability and democracy as it proceeded to dissolve trade unions, professional associations and women's organisations, including the SWU. The regime intensified assaults on civil society, ethnic minorities, democracy and human rights activists, causing a decline in the number of civil society organisations. Union and civil society membership fell and political activities were made illegal (Osman 2002:39). The *Shari'a* regime contradicted pan-African principles regarding women's emancipation when it introduced *al-Mashru' al-Hadari*, 'The Civilising Programme.'

Women and Islamisation

The Islamic regime proceeded to oppress women and to limit their role in the public sphere with legislation and policies that contradicted both the Sudanese Constitution and pan-African values. These included the Public Order Act (POA), and the institution of a moral police force to control the

way women dressed and behaved in public. The POA states that all women, regardless of their cultural background, should wear full Islamic dress that covers their bodies, in flagrant suppression of the majority of Sudan's rich cultures and women's rights. The POA provided a pretext for detaining, beating and otherwise humiliating, large numbers of women and girls, particularly those identifiably as "non-Arab", mostly by skin tone and dress. Little of this widespread abuse is reported because of the indignity and shame associated with it (Amnesty International 2010:4). Stoning to death for adultery was also introduced at this time (Doebbler 2001:10). Such measures fly in the face of Africa's cultural diversity, and its relation to security and development at national and regional levels, as proclaimed by African leaders at many AU submits and conferences, including, ironically, the sixth AU submit held in Khartoum in 2006.

Women's freedom of movement has also been targeted and women were prevented from travelling abroad without a *muhrim*, an immediate male relative. In 1990, for instance, a university lecturer was prevented from travelling to attend a conference in Tanzania, at which she was to be the main speaker, ostensibly because she did not have a *muhrim* to accompany her (Fluehr-Lobban 2005: 270). In effect women cannot travel if their husband or other male relative refuses to grant his permission, regardless of her skills, abilities, needs or talents. Women also have to seek permission from their male guardians if they want to work outside their homes, a law which strengthens male power in the domestic sphere (Fluehr-Lobban 2005: 271), and has many implications for gender roles and relations and the degree of social economic autonomy women can exercise. These discriminatory laws limit women's life prospects by constraining their access to training and further education at home or abroad, and restricting their chances of promotion to decision-making and management positions. Overall these developments set back the gains Sudanese women made in the post-independence years, reinforcing women's reproductive roles at the expense of their productive roles and their rights as citizens. To sum up the politics of gender Islamisation has become a threat to women's gains, to the overall gender, ethnic and religious justice principles of pan-Africanism, as well as the commitments to peace and unity enshrined in the AU.

New trends in Women's Activism

The signing of the CPA and drafting of the transitional Constitution in 2005 provided a marginal democratisation that allows women to reorganise themselves and form new civil society organisations. Women's movements are stimulating public debates and actions on and working to bring related issues such as reconciliation, cultural diversity, gender-based violence and justice for victims of armed conflicts to the fore of the post-conflict policy agenda. Women have been able to rebuild community-level women's organisations seeking justice for women, particularly those who have suffered the worst consequences of conflict.

A new generation of women activists made up of students, human rights defenders, graduates, lawyers, cultural workers, trade unionists, journalists and peace activists has entered the scene. These activists use old and new means of activism, such as demonstrations and street rallies and the use of mobile phones and social media, such as Facebook and online forums to campaign against violations of women's rights and for justice and democracy. This helps Sudanese women activists to make connections with women's organisations across the continent and in the diaspora to draw the attention of the international community to women's oppression in Sudan.

Nowadays, local and regional partnerships and networks link women's organisations together. These networks help women to exchange experiences, learn from each other and set plans for the future. The Women's Movement has become a consistent voice in the demands and agendas for democracy, political participations and peace building. Key local networks are the Sudanese Network for the Abolition of Female Genital Mutilation, the Poverty Network, the Sudanese Women Solidarity Group, the No to Women's Oppression Coalition, and Sudanese Women Empowerment for Peace. Regional networks in which Sudanese women are active include the Network for African Peace Builders (NAPs), and Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF), which advocates for the legal rights of women in Africa by pursuing legal reforms to end discriminatory laws. The Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) is a civil society network of organisations from Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Somaliland, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Uganda that addresses women and human rights issues and supports women and girls in war zones. SIHA submitted a statement to the 51st session of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights to expose the gross violations of

women's rights in Sudan under the POA. Sudanese women's organisations have also joined international women's networks, to become active in the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), which on peace and security issues of direct relevance to Sudanese women (GNWP 2013).

Women have also been able to bring violence against women, including rape during war, to public attention. Female activists subjected to sexual abuse and rape also broke their silence and spoke out to expose their suffering and to seek justice. A well-known case is that of Safia Ishaq, a member of the Youth Forum for Social Peace. In February 2011 Safia was kidnapped by the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) in Khartoum and taken to a location where she was severely beaten and raped by three men. She was then released and told not to speak about what happened to her. The rape was confirmed after a medical examination in one of the biggest hospitals in Khartoum. When Safia reported the case to the police, she and her family received threats from the NISS who demanded the case be dropped (Gorani, 2011). Instead, Safia went to the public, spoke about her case to journalists and human rights activists, and recalled her arrest, beating, and rape in a video which appeared on YouTube to be seen by thousands all over the world. Safia's case showed how the government used rape as a weapon against female activists. Her courage confirms that new ways of female activism are developing in Sudan. By breaking the taboo that silenced women and prevented them from seeking justice for such crimes, her case encouraged many to speak about their rape experiences.

Women also led gender specific demonstrations. A good example was on Friday 13th July 2012 when Kandaka[3] Friday protests were organised as a beginning of series of an innovative new way of activism, where women activists, young and old, and from across the political spectrum including the SWU and civil society organisations, organised and led protests in many cities in Sudan. This was coupled by similar protests in the diaspora cities including London, Paris, Sydney, Stockholm, Dublin, New York, Nairobi and Cairo. Female youth activists played a leading role in these protests and chanted against the Islamic regime's brutal crackdown on demonstrators and against torturing and abusing of female activists at the hand of the NISS. Apart from the social media, the protests have been reported by TV channels including Alarabia, sky news Arabic, the BBC, CNN and RT TV and newspapers such as the Egyptian newspaper *Alahram*, and *Guardian* from the United Kingdom, as well as coverage on radio all over the world. At the time of writing, recent

crackdowns on civil society seem to be showing another tide of repression including the closure of Salmmah Women's Resource Centre in June 2014.[4]

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the experience of the Sudanese women's movements pioneered by the SWU and its commitment to ideals that reflected pan-Africanist principles, as it worked to tackle post-independence challenges and build national unity. While the SWU's leadership role continued until the Islamic military coup of 1989, there were also many other women's civil society organisations entering the political arena and forming networks to pursue gender interests across the social divisions of Sudan, as well as across borders, in a spirit that reflects pan-African ideals.

Women's movements have re-emerged in the Sudanese political landscape as a visible and laudable force, joining other civic and social movements invested in seeking democratic change and gender equality. This has made women's movements a threat to political Islam and its Islamisation agenda. As a result, the regime responded from the 1980's by eroding many post-independence advances, using unconstitutional statements and laws, and violating pan-African commitments to gender equality. Nevertheless women have since been able to develop new modes of organising and activism, lobbying to end gender-based violence, seeking justice for victims of violence, networking to address gender interests, and leading demonstrations, thus demonstrating resilience and the long-term capacity to cope with many challenges to their integrity and autonomy.

The history of activism demonstrated by women's movements in Sudan has always been informed by a pan-African consciousness that has gained currency through the participation of Sudanese feminists in the increasingly numerous national and transnational organisations and networks that have developed across the continent in recent decades. Sudanese women continue to struggle, offering a valuable contribution to a pan-African agenda that boasts its commitments to gender equality.

Endnotes

1. Interview with a female activist, GCRT, Khartoum 2007.
2. Interview with a female teacher and activist, Khartoum, 2014.

3. Kandaka is a strong queen who ruled during the Nubian civilisation, the pre-Islamic era in Northern Sudan.

4. http://www.awid.org/Library/Sudan-Closure-of-Salmmah-Women-s-Resource-Centre

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