



# **GENDERED FRONTLINES:**

Feminist Readings of  
Militarization in Sudan,  
South Sudan, and Eritrea

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research investigates the gendered dimensions of militarization in Sudan, South Sudan, and Eritrea—three countries where protracted conflict, authoritarian governance, and colonial legacies have deeply shaped civic life. It begins with a central question: *How does militarization, as both a political strategy and a lived reality reshape gender roles, identities, and power?* Rather than viewing militarization as a singular event or policy, the research approaches it as a long-term historical process—rooted in colonial violence, sustained by post-independence elites, and perpetuated through the securitization of everyday life.

Through structured interviews with feminist activists, academics, political organizers, and crisis journalists, alongside focus group discussions with displaced women and girls, the study uncovers how militarized states produce and depend on violent masculinities. These systems cast women as both targets and tools of conflict—weaponized through gender-based violence and simultaneously erased from formal political processes.

The findings reveal that militarization increases both physical and mental risks faced by women and marginalized groups. It diverts public resources from social welfare toward state violence, thereby deepening poverty among those already most vulnerable and adding layers of violence to women's daily lives. Crucially, the research highlights a recurring pattern: women are central to resistance movements, yet routinely sidelined once the struggle transitions into formal politics. Although their contributions are instrumental in times of upheaval, feminist and women's agendas are often suppressed and sidelined during peacebuilding processes and state formation.

This research calls for a reimagining of security beyond militarization—centered on care, justice, and gender equity—and amplifies the voices of those resisting authoritarianism from the margins.



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We express our sincere gratitude to the experts who participated in the validation workshop, where they reflected on and shared their opinions about the key findings and the thematic focus of this research.

Special thanks to those who courageously lent their voices to the podcast component of this project, helping to bring complex realities into the public domain through storytelling.

This research was produced with the acknowledgement of the deeply sensitive and politically dangerous nature of this topic. In militarized environments where dissent is often criminalized and feminist or rights-based activism is targeted, conducting research on gendered violence, state militarism, and resistance carries significant personal and collective risk. This reality has shaped both the methodology and ethics of our work, and underscores our commitment to protecting the identities and safety of those who contributed.



# BACKGROUND

The East African region has witnessed conflicts and militarization for most of its post-independence era. *How can these dynamics be understood through a gendered lens, and what are their specific impacts on women and marginalized groups?* These are the key questions of this study.

Militarization can be understood as a cultural and ideological phenomenon in which military priorities, ideals, and values come to pervade the larger society.<sup>1</sup> Militarization includes four basic dimensions: an expanded military force structure, military dominance of politics, a preference for coercive solutions to political problems, and cultural underpinnings of state-organized violence<sup>2</sup>.

Both Sudan and South Sudan have shared history marked with state violence, civil war, mobilisation, and

a political economy shaping most of their political landscape. The post-independence political era in South Sudan manifests as a continuation of the same state repression, corruption and militarization, inheriting similar strategies from Sudan in the securitization and political economy of violence.

As Sudan's history continues to take the same path with the current war that erupted in April 2023, Eritrea's politics witnessed no change since president Isaias Afwerki's political regime consolidated power in 1994. The country has no functioning constitution, no elections, no independent press, and no civil society outside state control. A core feature of this system is indefinite national service, which militarizes everyday life and leaves women especially vulnerable to gender-based violence and abuse within military structures.



<sup>1</sup> Key Concepts in Politics, Andrew Heywood, Palgrave MacMillan, 2000, P 170.

<sup>2</sup> «Militarized,» Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus (Cambridge University Press), accessed on 2023/7/21, at: [https://acr.ps/1L9zR\(q](https://acr.ps/1L9zR(q)

# RATIONALE

With increasing militarization in the East African region, the impact of militarization on gendered relations is crucial for both policy making and for a better understanding of these communities and realities. This study includes Sudan, South Sudan, and Eritrea to examine how the legacies of war, displacement, and militarization continue to shape gender roles, restrict civic space, and limit women's participation in political and social life across generations and borders. Linking militarization and its impact with the realities of women and girls in Sudan, South Sudan, and Eritrea is key to developing a framework for tracing the issue of gender equality, women's rights, and feminist aspirations for

just and dignified communities. Informing activists, academics, and practitioners, this study aims to impact future academic work and practitioners' interventions that address the impact of histories of colonialism, political economies of war and neocolonialism, weapon trade, gender, and sexuality, among other themes. Just as importantly, it speaks to broader audiences across the East and Horn of Africa—particularly those directly experiencing the effects of militarization. By unpacking how these systems shape daily life, this research seeks to build knowledge that empowers communities to recognize, resist, and reimagine alternatives to militarized power.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF MILITARIZATION

This study aimed to investigate the gendered impact of militarization on women and girls in East Africa, focusing on social, economic, and psychological effects, and the ways in which militarization undermined agency.

The interconnected relationship between militarization and gender discourse is worth tracing, "The militarization of society has implications for the workings of gender discourses. Similarly, gender discourses influence the ways in which militarization works as well as the necessary ordering of society in times of conflict. For example, during situations of armed conflict (as well as those of rising tensions and fragile transitions to peace) certain ways of being men and women gain precedence in order for the logic of warring (or violence) to work. Militarization thus depends upon men being 'men' or 'masculine' and women being 'women' or 'feminine'".<sup>3</sup>

Cynthia Enloe examines the gendered dynamics of militarization<sup>4</sup>, highlighting how aggression, strength, and protection are predominantly linked to masculinity, while femininity is often framed around vulnerability, peace, and caregiving roles. The constructs of military training, norms, and culture serve to perpetuate hegemonic masculinity within these contexts. Additionally, women are frequently portrayed as needing protection or rendered invisible in militaristic narratives, unless they occupy positions that conform to masculine ideals, such as military spouses or healthcare providers within the military framework.

Amina Mama and Margo Okazawa-Rey engage with

the concept of militarism, which they explain as rooted in the understanding that war and conflict are not just isolated events, but rather visible manifestations of deeply ingrained dynamics related to gender, ethnicity, and class. These dynamics often exist long before conflict arises, escalate significantly during the fighting, and continue to affect society long after a peace agreement is reached and overt hostilities come to an end.<sup>5</sup>

This approach enables us to develop feminist theories of gender-based violence as expressions of unequal gender relations and dynamics that are more widespread than specific instances of actual violence.<sup>6</sup> "The military needs to marginalize women in order to reassert its masculine identity"<sup>7</sup> with such remark, a whole context of sexual violence and violence against women, marginalized communities, and marginalized groups can be understood.

In the context of militarization, politics of rape are dominant, where rape is used by the fighters as a weapon against those they are fighting. Whether within the army institutions, or in the context of conflicts, the dominance of rape and sexual abuse is pointing out the violent social relations within these contexts. And "it takes many forms, including the mass rape of female civilians as recreation and/or as a prize for military victory, the mass rape of female civilians as a strategy or weapon of war, and the enslavement of women and girls to provide sexual service for soldiers and officers".<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Gender and Armed Conflict, Maria Stern and Malin Nystrand, SIDA, 2006, P 51.

<sup>4</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, University of California Press, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Militarism, Conflict and Women's Activism Amina Mama and Margo Okazawa-Rey, *Feminist Africa 10* Militarism, Conflict and Women's Activism, Issue 10: August 2008, accessed through this link: [https://feministafrica.net/wp-content/uploads/10/2019/feminist\\_africa\\_10.pdf](https://feministafrica.net/wp-content/uploads/10/2019/feminist_africa_10.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, P. 3

<sup>7</sup> Women and Militarism, Colleen Burke, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, P11 [https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/10/2012/Unknownyear\\_Women\\_and\\_Militarism.pdf](https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/10/2012/Unknownyear_Women_and_Militarism.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Whisnant, Rebecca, «Feminist Perspectives on Rape», *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), accessed through this link: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/feminism-rape/>.

And to understand the “why” behind the politics of rape in the militarized and conflict contexts, Ruth Seifert suggested that “rape is a routine element of military strategy, aimed at undermining the will, morale, cohesion, and self-conception of the enemy population”.<sup>9</sup>

She further added that “women are those who hold the families and communities together. Their physical and emotional destruction aims at destroying social and cultural stability .... in many cultures [the female body] embodies the nation as a whole .... The rape of women of a community, culture, or nation can be regarded ... as a symbolic rape of the body of that community”.<sup>10</sup>

And in an important note, Amina Mama and Margo Okazawa-Rey understood the idea of establishing an army as a colonial mission, “We should not be surprised by this, as the capacity to maintain a standing army, in peacetime, has been a defining feature of the state since its inception. Societies that did not (as in many parts of Africa) were defined as ‘stateless’ or ‘acephalous’. Establishing an all-male army was an essential aspect of the ‘civilizing’ mission of colonization to the production of masculinity among the natives”.<sup>11</sup>

The importance of adopting a feminist lens in analyzing militarization in Africa and its gendered impact lies in the possibilities of the feminist theory to address the historical factors, such as colonialism and its legacies, such as the military institutions themselves, and how colonialism has helped construct militarized masculinities. In addition to understanding the historical legacies, feminist theories explore the role of capitalism

in deepening the nation-state crises, through debts and international monetary institutions and globalized policies, capitalism and colonialism have interwoven to create a constant state of poverty, inequality, and state oppression and violence.

In the African context, the creation of militias and armed groups and the militarization of communities can be understood as a direct result of privatization, the securitization of annual budgets, and the limited expenditure on public institutions such as health and education, in other words: it’s a care crisis.

The Military-Industrial Complex is a symbiotic coalition formed between the various branches of the military and their industrial suppliers, which includes defence contractors, manufacturers, and technology firms. This partnership often prioritizes bureaucratic interests over the genuine needs of national security, leading to increased defence expenditures. This dynamic can result in allocating substantial government resources towards weapon systems and military projects that may not always align with the nation’s most pressing security challenges. Consequently, this can foster a cycle where the interests of military contractors and bureaucratic entities drive policy decisions, potentially sidelining critical assessments of defence needs and affecting the overall efficiency and effectiveness of military funding and strategy.

Militaristic nationalism encourages polarization in which a group identity is defined as being in opposition to the «other.»

## WOMEN AS MILITARIZED AGENTS

Cynthia Enloe criticized militarization ideology and considered it as an element that directly contributes to women’s oppression. Other feminists argue that “the military itself uses the argument of promoting women’s equality in its recruitment information; however, an institution built on masculine ideals such as aggression can hardly be expected to play a sincere part in women’s emancipation. If in joining the military women

are also turned into unquestioning killing machines, then what progress or liberation exists in that? What kind of society are they defending?”<sup>12</sup>

A knowledge gap persists in our understanding of women’s involvement in militarization in battles of liberation or self-defence for themselves and their communities.

## THE POLITICAL MARKETPLACE FRAMEWORK

The ‘political marketplace’ framework is a lens for understanding everyday political transactions. In a country where kleptocratic transactional politics trumps institutions and laws, outcomes are driven by the discretionary ‘political budgets’ that politicians have at their disposal, along with the going rate for buying political loyalties, services, and offices.<sup>13</sup>

The political marketplace allows us to understand how politics work in Sudan and South Sudan. It examines politics as a marketplace in which public offices,

political loyalties, and political services have become commoditized. The Sudanese political class regularly creates militias and makes peace deals afterwards to engage with the political marketplace.

Since signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, South Sudan has functioned as an oil-based rentier political marketplace, in which the ruler (President Salva Kiir) provided access to oil rents in return for political loyalty.<sup>14</sup>

9 Ibid

10 Ruth Seifert, *The Second Front: The Logic of Sexual Violence in Wars*, 1996, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 43–35 : (2/1)19.

11 Militarism, Conflict and Women’s Activism Amina Mama and Margo Okazawa-Rey, *Feminist Africa 10 Militarism, Conflict and Women’s Activism*, Issue 10: August 2008, P. 4. Accessed through this link: [https://feministafrica.net/wp-content/uploads/10/2019/feminist\\_africa\\_10.pdf](https://feministafrica.net/wp-content/uploads/10/2019/feminist_africa_10.pdf)

12 Women and Militarism, Colleen Burke, [https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/10/2012/Unknownyear\\_Women\\_and\\_Militarism.pdf](https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/10/2012/Unknownyear_Women_and_Militarism.pdf)

13 <https://worldpeacefoundation.org/project/political-marketplace/>

14 A Political Marketplace Analysis of South Sudan’s ‘Peace’, Alex de Waal, World Peace Foundation, March 2016, access through this link: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08962ed915d622c0001b7/JSRP-Brief2-.pdf>

## METHODOLOGY AND FEMINIST APPROACHES



### Research Design

- **Approach:** Qualitative study
- **Type of Study:** Descriptive and exploratory.



### Data Collection Methods

- **Literature Review**
  - Comprehensive review of existing literature on militarization and its gendered impacts, focusing on East Africa, specifically examining South Sudan, Sudan and Eritrea.
  - Identify gaps in the current research and design a responsive scope for this study.
- **Qualitative Data:**
  - **Interviews:** 11 in-depth interviews with activists, feminists, academics and journalists from Sudan, South Sudan, and Eritrea were conducted to better understand the context of militarization and its social and gendered impact.
  - **Focus Group Discussions:** 3 focus group discussions were conducted with those affected by militarization, as well as key informants to gather diverse perspectives and experiences.
  - **Secondary Data:** Data analysis from governmental and non-governmental

organizations and sources on militarization and gender impacts.



### Research Questions

1. What is the gendered social, economic and political impact of the current wave of militarization across the Horn of Africa from the perspective of women in the region?
2. How does militarization influence the psychological well-being of women and girls, their safety and security, and their ability to organize?
3. How does militarization contribute to the construction of militarized masculinities?

This study has centred on women and girls' experiences, as well as men's testimonies, on the impact of militarization on gender dynamics and their everyday lives, acknowledging that personal experiences are essential when producing feminist knowledge.

Intersectionality serves as a theoretical framework in the design of the research methodology. Women from diverse social classes, ethnicities, abilities/disabilities, age groups, and other positionalities were taken into consideration during this research, allowing for a non-essentialist view of gender.

## SCOPE, LIMITATIONS, AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study focuses on three countries—Sudan, South Sudan, and Eritrea—and is structured around three core thematic areas. First, it examines the history of militarization in these contexts, analyzing how it emerged as a dominant political, social, and economic phenomenon and how it has been shaped by regional and international political economies. Second, it explores the social and community-level impacts of militarization, tracing its effects on different communities. Finally, the study investigates the gendered dimensions of militarization and how they have shaped the experiences of women and men differently.

The impact of militarization on knowledge production regarding the situation in Eritrea is constrained by the regime's revenge against those involved in such activities or any critique of the political regime in Eritrea. The research team has reached out to many activists for interviews, but they declined the request, fearing for their lives and the lives of their loved ones who are still living in Eritrea. Similarly, Eritrean women in diaspora were hesitant before joining the FGDs.

Exploring the impact of militarization on minorities and nonconforming gender identities as part of this study is very limited as this theme is understudied and access

to activists is constrained by criminalization and social stigma.

Ethical considerations that have been followed in this research are the following:

- **Informed consent:** All key informant interviews included reviewing and agreeing to the consent form. The FGD participants were briefed on the study's purpose and assured of their right to withdraw at any time.
- **Confidentiality and anonymity:** no names were mentioned, and pseudonyms were used when needed.
- **To avoid any potential risks,** we have removed any information that might lead to the identification of the KIs or those who participated in the FGDs.
- **Data security:** of audio recordings, transcripts, and notes, stored securely and accessible only to authorized research team members.
- **Trauma-Informed data collection approach:** when addressing militarization and conflict, and engaging with cultural sensitivity and respect.

## STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

This paper is structured into six main sections. Following the introduction, section two introduces the Theoretical Framework to conceptualize militarization and the gendered elements related to it. The third section, Historical and Political Context, presents country profiles and the historical and political dimensions that contributed to the phenomenon of militarization in the

three countries researched in this study, Sudan, South Sudan, and Eritrea. The fourth section captures the key themes across the different countries, which are: Women as Fighters, The Impact of War and Militarization on Women and Girls, and Women as Refugees. The fifth section presents the conclusion, while the sixth section outlines the key recommendations of this study.



# HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

## SUDAN

### Overview

After a peaceful revolution ousted the 30 years regime of Omer Al-Bashir, a power-sharing agreement was signed in 2019 between civilian and military groups. The partnership did not last as a military coup in October 2021 dissolved the agreement. Negotiations between military parties and civilians continued in an attempt to sign a framework agreement. Negotiations culminated with the outbreak of urban warfare between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in April 2023 resulting in one of the largest humanitarian crises in the region and a displacement of more than 12 million people within Sudan and about 3 million are refugees and asylum seekers by June 2025<sup>15</sup>. Since then, peace negotiations through support from the former United States administration and mediated by Saudi Arabia have been held, but a peace agreement remains elusive. As fighting rages on more than two years later, significant captures and recaptures of states within Sudan between the RSF and SAF dim hopes for an amicable resolution to the conflict.

Gender equality and women's political participation remain pressing issues in Sudan, despite some progress in legislative and policy reforms during the transitional period from 2019 to 2021. While Sudanese women played a prominent role in the protests that led to al-Bashir's ousting, their representation in formal political institutions was limited during the transitional period. The 2019 Constitutional Declaration enshrined principles of gender equality and non-discrimination, it also required a %40 parliamentary quota for women, but implementation never took shape. Prior to the war, women continued to face discriminatory laws and practices, limited access to education and economic opportunities, and high rates of gender-based violence.

The challenges have since been multiplied since the war. The situation of women became more volatile with deterioration of security in the country, reports on gender violence and utilization of rape as weapon in the ongoing war<sup>16</sup> are of high concern.

### The History of Militarization in Sudan

Sudan has gone through a long and turbulent history of militarization, military coups, and rule by force. Since independence, the country has witnessed 35 attempted coups, six of which were successful, some of which brought the coup plotters to power for years.<sup>17</sup>

History extends from the Southern Regiment Rebellion in



South Sudan in August 1955, to General Abboud's military coup in 1958, Colonel Jaafar Nimeiri's coup in 1969, the joint military-Islamist coup in 1989, and the military takeover during the transitional period in October 2021.

Sudan's history has always been characterized by militarism. From the moment it emerged as an

<sup>15</sup> Sudan Situation, UNHCR, June 2025, accessed through this link: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sudansituation>

<sup>16</sup> Rape and sexual violence in Sudan's ongoing conflict may amount to war crimes, a new UN report says | PBS NewsHour

<sup>17</sup> Sudan's Conflict in the Shadow of Coups and Military Rule, Gashaw Ayferam, Sada, Carnegie's Middle East Program, Published on 17 August 2023 accessed through this link: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/08/2023/sudans-conflict-in-the-shadow-of-coups-and-military-rule?lang=en>

independent state, the country witnessed its first war. Armed conflict and political instability have plagued it ever since, largely due to the failure to establish a social contract that promotes equal citizenship and balanced development, and failure to dismantle the legacy of colonialism. For much of its political timeline, it wasn't democratic institutions that governed Sudan, but the military, far removed from public influence or accountability.

"There's a recurring model across the region, where a social crisis rooted in developmental failures with economic and social dimensions, leads to rising discontent. When the state can no longer meet economic or social demands, protest erupts, sometimes escalating into armed resistance. The state, in turn, turns to the military to suppress dissent, spending more on militarization and repression than it would have on development."<sup>18</sup>

This model is strikingly familiar in Sudan. The state's reliance on coercion rather than its role as a provider has only deepened conflict and contradiction. Sudan's long history of war, beginning with the First Civil War, which started with the Torit Battalion's mutiny in 1955 and ended with the Addis Ababa Agreement in 1972; followed by the Second Civil War, which broke out in 1983 and concluded with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005; and the conflict in Darfur, which erupted in 2003 and took on ethnic dimensions when the state-armed Arab tribes committed horrific abuses against communities perceived as non-Arab, has entrenched militarization as a permanent condition.

This recurring pattern has positioned the military not only as a political actor but also as an economic one. The persistent state of militarization placed huge demands on the state, which it could not meet, leading the military to engage in various economic activities to sustain its needs, including arms procurement and ongoing recruitment. In this way, the state became effectively hijacked and consumed by the military institution. The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) both expanded their presence in the economic sector.

By 2020, the SAF and RSF collectively owned around 250 companies. Meanwhile, over 200 companies were affiliated with the Military Industrial Corporation, generating annual revenues of about 110 billion Sudanese pounds (equivalent to approximately 2\$ billion at the time).<sup>19</sup>

The current conflict also has deep roots in a long chain of violence and systemic abuses embedded in Sudan's economic and social structures, including political violence. Most of Sudan's post-independence

governments have come to power, and remained there, through violence, atrocities, and crimes affecting both civilians and the military.<sup>20</sup>

At the final workshop of the Framework Agreement, titled "Security and Military Reform," no representative from the Sudanese Armed Forces attended. This was widely seen as a sign of the military leadership's rejection of the agreement, particularly the proposed timeline for integrating the RSF into the SAF. The proposal called for a ten-year integration period, while the SAF insisted on a maximum of two years, aligned with the length of the newly proposed transitional period. Before the workshop, Hemedti, leader of the RSF, had already demanded that the issue of security and military reform be removed from the discussion, seen by many as a clear rejection of integrating the RSF into the SAF. This move appeared aimed at preserving the RSF's independence and Hemedti's own economic and political influence, separate from the army. Ultimately, this divergence in visions led to an open and ongoing conflict.<sup>21</sup>

The political tensions and conflicts driven by economic interests have also generated a state of comprehensive militarization. The April 15th war represents an example of how political conflicts linked to the pursuit of economic interests can escalate into full-blown violence and warfare. The conflict between the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese Army Forces has been closely linked to both groups' growing influence in the economic sector as well as the political arena. The proposal to integrate the RSF into the Sudanese military was perceived as a threat to this influence, effectively signaling an end to the RSF's autonomy and an attempt to cut back its power.

Mobilization campaigns and their accompanying narratives, often framed as defending «land and honor», have extended the state of militarization into new communities and regions. These campaigns have drawn in children under the age of 18, many of whom are now stationed on various frontlines.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, they are present at security checkpoints on highways between cities, as well as in neighborhoods and on main streets, armed. These numerous checkpoints and the thorough inspections conducted there reflect a broader militarization that impacts freedom of movement. Moreover, many travelers, both men and women, face suspicion based on their physical features, which may be perceived as indicative of certain ethnic backgrounds, or due to their places of birth. This points to a form of ethnic profiling, where individual identity becomes associated with presumed allegiance to one of the warring parties.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with security sector reform researcher, December 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Sudan's Military Companies Go Civilian: How the Recent Divestment Agreement Can Succeed?, Yezid Sayigh, Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, April 2021. The report can be accessed at this link: [carnegieendowment.org/research/04/2021/sudans-military-companies-go-civilian-how-the-recent-divestment-agreement-can-succeed?lang=ar&er=middle-eas](https://carnegieendowment.org/research/04/2021/sudans-military-companies-go-civilian-how-the-recent-divestment-agreement-can-succeed?lang=ar&er=middle-eas)

<sup>20</sup> A Feminist Perspective on Armed Conflict in Sudan, Zainab Badawi, Sudanese Transparency and Policy Observatory, June 2024. The study can be accessed via this link: <https://sudantransparency.org/wp-content/uploads/07/2024/FeministAR.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Breakout of Armed Conflict in Sudan: Causes and Potential Implications, Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, April 2023, 20, accessible at this link: <https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/PoliticalStudies/Pages/breakout-of-armed-conflict-in-sudan-background-and-implications.aspx>

<sup>22</sup> Child recruitment in Sudan... multiple methods and three parties in the dock, Alhurra, March 2024, 19. The report can be accessed via this link: <https://rb.gy/licm6f>

## Militarized Cultures and Societies

When looking for the social roots of violence and the construction of militarized masculinities, popular culture is one of the key sites for such explorations.

Banona bint Al-Mak Nimir, composed a mourning poem for her brother, the brave warrior who died of fever, lamenting that he did not die on the battlefield. In her words, she grieved:

*"I don't want for you a death confined to a sickbed.  
I wished for a death where your blood would grace  
your garments.  
Your lifeless body is here and the battlefield dust is  
scorching.  
Your sword aches with sorrow for the warrior once  
served."*

Banona's poem expresses sorrow that her brother did not die while showcasing his bravery in combat. These lines speak volumes about the social constructs of masculinity, valor, and the expectations placed upon men in society, expectations that continue to push men toward constant militarization and a readiness to take up arms. These societal expectations and structures continue to reproduce militarized ideals through popular culture. Songs performed in times of conflict carry these same undertones. For example, Eiman Al-Shareef, a popular singer sings:

*"In Madani's men, honor finds its rightful home."*

While another singer, Mayada Qamar Eldin, declares:

*"Kekl bears the shield of the nation."*

Proverbs and folk sayings also resurface and circulate widely within these militarized contexts. One such saying: *"A man without a weapon leaves his mother in sorrow,"* is often repeated in times of violent conflict, where weaponry speaks louder than words and grants easier access to everything from resources to political power. The militarization of language and terminology has deeply influenced everyday life, along with pop culture, especially music and other forms of art. For instance, the word "jaghem" has entered daily use to describe defeat or dominance.

Popular culture plays a major role in both shaping and reproducing societal notions of masculinity. It also

influences how protection and the protector's role are perceived. These norms are constantly evolving. We've seen this shift reflected clearly in music, where romantic and social desirability has been linked to the wealth and power associated with certain roles. Once, songs praised "the gold miner" (al-dhahabi), then moved on to express desire to marry a currency trader, and later, following the Yemen war and the prosperity enjoyed by RSF fighters, came the line:

*"I want to marry a Daami - RSF soldier"*

As the armed conflict in Sudan escalated, songs from various regions began to echo a new refrain:

*"I want to marry a soldier... wearing khaki."*

These lyrical shifts reflect broader class, social, and economic transformations, particularly those connected to political economy and access to wealth by certain groups during different periods.<sup>23</sup>

There have also been significant shifts in how the state sees us and how we see the state. The army's repeated failures to protect people in many contexts have raised fundamental questions about the state's legitimacy. When civilians are forced to arm themselves to defend their families and land, it becomes a form of protest against the state and a challenge to the unwritten social contract with both the military and the state itself. Militarization has now spread widely across Sudan, reaching areas where people had never before felt compelled to carry weapons. Today, many of them are armed and participating in military mobilization campaigns led either by the army or its allied groups, such as the Al-Baraa Ibn Malik brigade affiliated with the Islamic Movement.

Children are systematically trained and integrated into this militarized culture. In preschool institutions, children are taught to perform military drills and chants and practice to military music while dressed in army uniforms. Children's games and conversations revolve heavily around war outside these educational settings. Many boys and girls are now highly aware of the ongoing conflict; they can name the warring parties and recognize prominent military figures currently shaping the battlefield.

## Women's Groups, Feminism, and Solidarity

Several initiatives have been launched to stop the war, focusing on advocacy at regional and international levels to draw attention to the violations and atrocities happening in Sudan. Other groups, such as the Women's Emergency Rooms, have actively engaged in humanitarian work and providing services focused on women and girls affected by the war.<sup>24</sup>

However, a significant issue arises with women's groups that are aligned with one side of the conflict, raising questions about the positioning of feminist activism in the context of this war. This division affects the ability to push for peace and highlights internal splits within feminist groups regarding their participation in political alliances. There are differing views on their stances and rhetoric against the war. These divisions widen the gap

<sup>23</sup> An interview with a feminist activist, December 2024.

<sup>24</sup> For more on the contributions of feminist activists and advocates in the context of this war, see <https://noonmovement.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/%D%85%D%8B%D%8A%D%87%D%85%D%8A%D%8A-%D%8A%D%84%D%86%D%8A%D%8B%D%8A%D%8A1-.pdf>

between feminist groups that once worked collectively and effectively in the struggle against militarization and its impacts on both women and men, as well as on entire communities.<sup>25</sup>

Understanding the different positions of feminist groups in the context of this war requires a separate research, but it is clear that their fragmentation and lack of coordinated efforts have weakened their voice in opposing the violence faced by women and communities in the ongoing conflict since April 15.

Additionally, the feminist movement has not consistently and in detail engaged in discussions about

security issues, security sector reforms, and security arrangements. These are often viewed as technical matters, when in fact they are deeply political issues that affect women on a daily basis.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, both sides of the conflict use women's issues and their voices to strengthen their own narratives about the war and the importance of victory. At the same time, no policies or legal frameworks are adopted to preserve and protect women's rights. The more effective feminist groups are aligning with the issues of citizens during the current war, and the greater the opportunity it creates for larger spaces of activism and political action after the war.

## Social Cohesion

Social cohesion has emerged in the context of this war through forms of solidarity, such as the Emergency Response Rooms and Women's Emergency Rooms, despite the significant societal divisions and increasing hate and racist rhetoric. The risk of social tensions and racism is growing, particularly with targeted attacks based on skin color, facial features, and ethnic backgrounds, reflecting the escalating militarization intertwined with racism. This has led to the division of society into «us» and «them.» These are the repercussions of the war that must be addressed in the future. The social profiling of certain groups as supporters of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) exemplifies this trend.

*«I lost contact with some of my friends because they sided with the RSF, and due to the increasing hate speech in our community.»* A Sudanese displaced female, who joined the FGDs conducted in Sudan, reflected on the social impact of the current war in Sudan. This testimony illustrates how the war has created deeper societal divisions based on allegiance to one side of the conflict in Sudan. It highlights how the war has affected friendships and social ties through various forms of violence committed by both sides of the conflict, as well as the narratives produced around the war and its motivations, which have polarized people into differing political positions.

A Sudanese journalist told us that *«Hate speech spread with the current war, but it has a history that goes back beyond this conflict. The use of proverbs, jokes, and social framing of certain social groups in Sudan is common and widespread. What has happened now is that it has intensified and become more prominent in social media».*

The current war has also raised questions about the history of racism, discrimination, and marginalization in Sudan. The violence directed at marginalized and impoverished communities by both sides of the conflict has victimized them a second time. Furthermore, the more focus there is on neglecting the development of these communities and denying them access to economic and social rights, the easier it becomes to militarize these communities. The historical marginalization based

on ethnicity and tribal affiliation in Sudan is closely tied to the impoverishment and exclusion these communities have endured.

The phenomenon of ethnic militarization arises when the state fails to suppress protests, which may take an armed form, against the government's failure to deliver development. In such cases, the state mobilizes and arms different communities and ethnic groups to fight each other, framing these conflicts as social tensions rather than the result of the state's abandonment of its developmental role. This is how the conflict in Darfur has been depicted.

An increasing number of militias are rising within this war as a political strategy of the Islamists to suppress rebellion and insurgencies in the rural settings, what Alex de Waal called "Counter-Insurgency on the Cheap". Through this history, we can understand the rise of RSF as an evolution of one of these local militias, the Darfuri Arab Janjaweed mobilised at the beginning of the conflict in Darfur more than twenty years ago. It later became the RSF by President al Bashir's decree in 2013.<sup>27</sup>

Poverty surrounding rural settings allowed mobilization of youth for such militias made by the state. Similar strategies are now used by both RSF and SAF to recruit. An increasing number of armed groups are rising in Eastern Sudan and in the Northern region as a response to the threat posed by the RSF and as a reaction to the mobilization rhetoric used by SAF.

In addition to the ethnically mobilized armed groups during this war, the politically motivated brigade of Al-Baraa Ibn Malik, an Islamist armed group, is well equipped and has influence over the military.

The Juba Agreement, signed in 2020 between the transitional government and some of the country's armed movements, is also experiencing fragmentations and tensions among the signatories during this war, in addition to hate speech targeting the leaders of these armed groups.

25 Feminist Awareness in Resisting State Militarization, Shadia Abdel Moneim, Farida Feminist Magazine, Issue 1, September 2024. The article can be accessed via this link: <https://faridamagazine.com/?p=1257>

26 Interview with security sector reform researcher, December 2024.

27 <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/armies-militias-and-the-quagmire-of-politico-military-alliances207389->

## Oscillating Between War and Peace

Sudan has long oscillated between states of war and peace. After the civil war that ended with the independence of South Sudan, wars broke out in South Kordofan and Blue Nile, followed by the war in Darfur. The country has been divided between areas under the weight of armed conflict and regions living in relative stability but still impacted by the war economy and the overall militarization of the country.

The state of emergency has been a model for ongoing militarization, leading to the suspension of some civil rights, such as the right to organize or protest. For instance, the southern region of Tokar has been under a state of emergency for 27 years, with the emergency declaration lifted only in February of this year.<sup>28</sup> The Aqeeq locality in south Tokar has been under emergency orders since 1997, following the outbreak of war between the government and opposition (The National Democratic Alliance at that time). This has continued to the present day under the pretext of combating smuggling to neighboring countries.

This state of emergency is tied to military governance, as the appointment of military governors in regions

has been one of the strongest manifestations of militarization. We have seen this in various historical periods in Sudan's history. Even now, in the context of the current war, several states are governed by military commanders appointed as governors. This extended militarization has also affected public policies, including the integration of civilian institutions into the military and security sectors, such as the police, intelligence services, and other civil service institutions like civil defense—despite their civilian and service-oriented nature.

At the grassroots level, the imbalanced relationship between citizens and those wearing uniforms, whether they belong to the police, military, or armed groups, threatens citizens' rights to move safely in public spaces. Several women have shared experiences of harassment and ethnic profiling at checkpoints set up in neighborhoods, where they are scrutinized for their origins and reasons for being in public spaces continuously.<sup>29</sup> This state of mobilization, or "alert," has preceded current waves of militarization and recruitment for the armed forces. We can now find recruitment tents in markets and public spaces, further militarizing these public spaces.

## Regional and International Impacts on Militarization in Sudan

Sudan is surrounded by militarized states, with Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Chad, and South Sudan all governed by military regimes or having militarized borders. These countries also represent cases of dictatorship and police states that continually suppress their citizens.

Historically, Sudan has developed varied relationships with these countries, ranging from border disputes to security and military cooperation. In the context of the current war, there has been increased cooperation between SAF and Eritrea, for example. Numerous camps have been opened for training armed movements from eastern Sudan and some Darfuri armed groups, such as the Sudan Liberation Movement – Minnawi, which trained several new recruits in Eritrean camps.

Sudan has also been significantly impacted by political

and security transformations in the region. The tensions between Iran and Gulf states, for instance, led to Sudan's involvement in regional conflicts. Sudanese fighters have been seen as expendable soldiers in these wars. For example, in the war in Yemen, both the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces have fought alongside the UAE and Saudi-led coalition since 2015. The number of Sudanese fighters in Yemen reached up to 30,000, with 40% of them children. The Sudanese forces' role was mainly in ground operations and guarding UAE bases in southern Yemen.<sup>30</sup>

The competitiveness and desire of many to participate in the war in Yemen, driven by the financial gains they receive, speaks volumes about poverty and inequality in Sudan's relationship with militarization.

## The Political Economy of the April 15th War

Estimates from the International Food Policy Research Institute suggested that Sudan would lose approximately 15\$ billion by the end of 2023, equivalent to 48% of its gross national product due to the war. This implies a reduction in the contribution of industry, services, and agriculture to the GDP by 49%, 70%, and 21%, respectively.<sup>31</sup>

Goods in the markets of Dagalo (infamous markets in Khartoum where home furniture and equipment are sold) are primarily sourced from looting the homes and dwelling of those who fled the war. At the start of the war, civilians and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) fighters looted private homes. As the war progressed, looting intensified, becoming both a form of intimidation and a means for the RSF to sustain itself. The checkpoints

28 Emergency orders in South Tokar, Red Sea State, cancelled after 27 years, Radio Dabanga, February 2025. The news can be accessed via this link: <https://www.dabangasudan.org/ar/all-news/article/%D%8A%5D%84%9D%8BA%D%8A%7D%8A%-1D%8A%3D%88%9D%8A%7D%85%9D%8B-1%D%8A%7D%84%9D%8B%7D%88%9D%8A%7D%8B%1D%8A%-6D%81%9D%89A-%D%8AC%D%86%9D%88%9D%8A%-8D%8B%7D%88%9D%83%9D%8B-1%D%8A%8D%88%9D%84%9D%8A%7D%89AD>

29 Focus group discussion with women from Eastern Sudan region, January 2025.

30 30,000 Sudanese fighters in Yemen. Learn about their salaries, areas of deployment and the roles assigned to them, Al Jazeera website, November 2019, the report can be accessed via the link: <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2/11/2019/%D%8A%7D%84%9D%82%9D%88%9D%8A%7D%8AA-%D%8A%7D%84%9D%8B3%D%88%9D%8AF%D%8A%7D%86%9D%89A%D%8A%-9D%8A%8D%8A%7D%84%9D%89A%D%85%9D%-86%9D%8A%3D%8B%9D%8AF%D%8A%7D%8AF%D%87%9D%8A7%D%8A%7D%84%9D%8B%7D%88%9D%8A%7D%8B%1D%8A%-6D%81%9D%89A-%D%8AC%D%86%9D%88%9D%8A%-8D%8B%7D%88%9D%83%9D%8B-1%D%8A%8D%88%9D%84%9D%8A%7D%89AD>

31 The Political Economy of Sudan's War, Bandar Nouri, Sifar website, January 2024, at the link: <https://alsifr.org/political-economy-sudan-war>

established by the RSF function actively as a way to collect money from traders transporting goods across the localities and cities under RSF control. They also impose taxes on transport vehicles that move people between different regions. The RSF has developed this form of taxation as a key political strategy to shape mobile economies. Furthermore, RSF personnel in markets in the areas they control are actively involved in issuing permits, collecting taxes, and monitoring activities.<sup>32</sup> These organized looting operations, along with the checkpoints, have become a primary source of resources for the RSF, funding its fighters, in addition to continuous logistical and weapon support from the UAE.

In contrast, the Sudanese army is attempting to strengthen its diplomatic relations and gain political legitimacy through ties with countries like Russia.

Discussions have been ongoing since 2018 regarding a naval base on the Red Sea. The export of livestock and gold continues, even to countries hostile to Sudan, such as the UAE. The export of gold is supervised by a committee consisting of the Sudanese Standards and Metrology Authority, the Sudanese Mineral Resources Company, the Ministry of Finance, the Central Bank of Sudan, customs, and security and military agencies.<sup>33</sup>

The current budget of the government led by the Sudanese army is based on a continuous increase in taxes on imported goods. Recently, heavy taxes have been imposed on production inputs, alongside austerity measures in public spending on services like healthcare and education, while an estimated 90% of expenditures go towards the war economy.<sup>34</sup>



<sup>32</sup> The Republic of Kadamel: A Portrait of the Rapid Support Forces at War, Joshua Craze and Raga Makawi, Small Arms Survey, 2025. Accessed through: <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-HSBA-Briefing-Paper-2025-RSF-EN.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Gold exports rise above Sudan-UAE rivalry, Sudan Tribune, February 2024 ,13, at: <https://sudantribune.net/article282237/>

<sup>34</sup> Sudan: Secret Budget Boosts Military Spending and Shatters Citizens' Hopes, Ayin Network, February 2025 ,5, available at: <https://3ayin.com/balancing/>

## SOUTH SUDAN

### Country Overview

Since gaining independence from Sudan in 2011, South Sudan has grappled with a tumultuous security situation characterized by internal conflicts and ethnic based violence. Two years after its independence, the country plunged into a devastating civil war in December 2013, sparked by political tensions between President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar, culminating in widespread displacement and humanitarian crisis. The conflict, which lasted until a peace agreement was signed in September 2018, resulted in approximately 400,000<sup>35</sup> deaths and the displacement of 2.3 millions of people<sup>36</sup>, making it one of Africa's deadliest conflicts.

Despite the signing of the peace deal and the formation of a Transitional Government of National Unity in February 2020, significant challenges persist in implementing key provisions of the agreement and achieving lasting peace. Issues such as the integration of rival armed groups into a unified national army and the delineation of state boundaries remain contentious, hindering progress towards sustainable peace and stability. These tensions climaxed in March 2025, with the house arrest of Riek Machar, signaling the collapse of the 2018 peace deal and threatening to hurl the nation back to civil war.

Politically, South Sudan's landscape is marked by a delicate balance of power between various factions, often characterized by corruption, lack of accountability, and exclusion of marginalized groups. The formation of the transitional government represented a significant milestone towards peace, yet the participation of all stakeholders, particularly women, remains limited in decision-making processes. Women's representation in political institutions remains disproportionately low, with only about 32% of seats in the national parliament held by women<sup>37</sup>, highlighting the persistent gender gap in the country's political landscape.

Despite these challenges, women in South Sudan have been active agents of peacebuilding; using their accumulated experience of advocacy and resistance within the Sudan–South Sudan decades of civil war. South Sudanese women were actively advocating for reconciliation and inclusion in the peace process. Women's organizations and grassroots activists played

pivotal roles in promoting dialogue and mediation at the community level, often facing significant risks and obstacles. The 2018 peace agreement included provisions for women's participation and representation in peace negotiations and transitional institutions, recognizing the critical role of women in building sustainable peace.



### Militarization in South Sudan

*“South Sudan is a militarized state. Even politics is militarized; it's a highly militarized state. Because militarization is visible in everyday life, it is visible in the militant presence; in the military language at the institutional level, it's visible in the everyday expression of life in South Sudan.”<sup>38</sup>*

This reflection from a South Sudan peace activist summarizes the history of South Sudan as a state that lived wars throughout its post-independence life. The long struggle of the Ananya movement, which spanned from 1955 to 1972 and culminated in the Addis Ababa agreement, resurfaced in 1983 when the Gaafar Nimeiry

<sup>35</sup> CRS INSIGHT (South Sudan's Civil War: Nearly 400,000 Estimated Dead) Updated September 2018 ,28

<sup>36</sup> According to UNHCR until July 2023.

<sup>37</sup> <https://dashboards.sdindex.org/map/indicators/seats-held-by-women-in-national-parliament>

<sup>38</sup> Interview with South Sudan peace activist, December 2024.

government violated the agreement. From 1983, the civil war only stopped in 2005 with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed between the Islamist government and the SPLM leaders, with heavy international diplomacy led by the USA and foreign diplomats. All this history talks about how war and violence have shaped both politics and the people.

South Sudan gained independence from Sudan in July 2011 after a referendum. The hard-won celebration was short-lived. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), the ruling political party that originally led the way for independence, divided and fought for power. In December 2013, political infighting erupted into violence in the streets of the capital, Juba, after South Sudan's president accused his vice president of an attempted coup. Fighting between the two factions of government forces loyal to each soon moved to Bor and Bentiu.<sup>39</sup> The country's civil war, which began in December 2013, initially pitted supporters of President Salva Kiir Mayardit, whose political base rests in the Bahr el Ghazal region in the country's northwest, against rebels from the Greater Upper Nile region in the northeast.

The first week of the conflict in December 2013 resulted in 1000 deaths and 100,000 displaced persons. These numbers reflect the intensity of the conflict since its beginning. In August 2015, IGAD efforts to resolve the dispute between Kiir and Machar were temporarily successful, but the conflict erupted again between the two rivals.

This conflict pushed South Sudan towards more militarization and to ethnic killings and ethnic tensions; the two rivals' conflict impacted social peace and South Sudanese communities' ability to live with the ghost of conflict and death shadowing their lives.

*“South Sudan is becoming more and more insecure. Moving between states is not safe. Intercommunal violence has gotten more and more militarized/armed. It is increasing at the communal level.”<sup>40</sup>*

Kiir also triggered another conflict with the Equatorians, in what has been called Africa's most significant refugee exodus since the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

## Payroll Peace

As peace agreements have not brought about significant changes to the nature of power or the state's structures, apart from changing the faces and names, peace deals don't lead to a shift towards sustainable peace or even political stability. It also remains a root for the coming conflicts. As Phillip Kasaija Apuuli said

Hundreds of thousands fled the country to Uganda to seek refuge as a result of the conflict that erupted in 2016, when thousands of newly mobilized opposition forces demanded recognition in the shaky peace accord. Even as the government began its own abusive counterinsurgency campaign.<sup>41</sup>

To understand the interwoven relationship between the elite class, politics and economy in South Sudan, the political marketplace framework is of great help. We are speaking about a political field “where members of the elite compete for power, profit, and position within a market framework in which the possibilities of rents and material support determine the potential alliances between different actors. In the CPA period, ‘the political production function of the GoSS [Government of Southern Sudan] and SPLM/A was, at its core, to turn oil revenues into political payoffs.’”<sup>42</sup>

*“The state of militarization was driven by social justice issues and questions of political and social marginalization by the mother country Sudan, such as rights and citizenry. Those were the drivers of militarization. It was an armed resistance movement versus a state; however, at that time there was militarization; it was a social-justice derived militarization. Now, there's a lot of regional, international and proxy interference.”<sup>43</sup>*

As of June 2025, The number of children at risk of acute malnutrition across South Sudan has risen to 2.3 million, 7.7 million people (57 percent of the population) continue to face acute food insecurity, and there have been persistent pockets of catastrophic hunger in South Sudan in recent years.<sup>44</sup> This is an ongoing threat, reminding us of the 2017 famine in Unity state, and not new to the South Sudanese as a nation or as a state. Until the cycle of violence and militarized governance is broken, food insecurity will remain a systemic condition, not a temporary crisis.

‘previous failures to reform the security sector are at the heart of the most recent chaos’.<sup>45</sup>

Peace agreements have also been adopted as political frameworks for governance. The CPA in 2005 served as the basis for the interim constitution until

<sup>39</sup> The facts: What you need to know about the South Sudan crisis, Mercy Corps, June 2019, 24, accessed through this link: <https://www.mercycorps.org/blog/south-sudan-crisis#crisis-south-sudan-start>

<sup>40</sup> Interview with a feminist activist from South Sudan, December 2024.

<sup>41</sup> Conflict and Crisis in South Sudan's Equatoria, Alan Boswell, United States Institute of Peace, April

<sup>42</sup> MAKING MARKETS: SOUTH SUDAN'S WAR ECONOMY IN THE 21ST CENTURY, Joshua Craze, World Peace Foundation, February 2023, access through this link: <https://worldpeacefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/03/2024/Making-Markets.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> Interview with a South Sudanese peace activist, January 2025.

<sup>44</sup> Conflict, Displacement and disease drive food insecurity and malnutrition to alarming level in parts of South Sudan, World Food Program, 12 June 2025. Accessed through this link:

<https://www.wfp.org/news/conflict-displacement-and-disease-drive-food-insecurity-and-malnutrition-alarming-level-parts>

<sup>45</sup> Phillip Kasaija Apuuli, ‘Durable Stability in South Sudan: What Are the Prerequisites?’, (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, May 2018, 29): <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/durable-stability-south-sudan-what-are-prerequisites>.

the independence of South Sudan, after which it was amended to accommodate the changes following South Sudan's independence.

*“We have been surviving on peace agreements as a form of governance for the longest time. The country was acquired through the CPA, which was supposed to be a temporary process. Two years later, we returned to the original peace agreement. So we haven't been able to shift from armed power-sharing agreements to a sustainable constitution governing the country.”<sup>46</sup>*

The political economy of peace deals also reveals a great deal about the rationale behind heavy international mediation and intervention in the peace-making process, as well as the perception of governments regarding peace-making processes and their outcomes, which is often based on the sharing of power and wealth between rivals. And this is what happened in South Sudan. The peace agreements never addressed the root cause of the conflicts, but reinstated politicians into power.

## Declining Civic Politics

*“The minister told people, don't go on protests because we don't have rubber bullets, we have real bullets. It's a statement that they are ready to kill.”<sup>48</sup>*

The newly born state has inherited the police regime from Sudan; the same practices and methods of suppressing civil and political rights, criminalisation of freedom of speech and the censorship of media houses and outlets.

Militarization in South Sudan led to an increasingly shrinking civic space, while freedom of assembly and freedom of expression remain restricted. The government had still not amended the 2014 National Security Services Act, despite being obliged under the 2015 and 2018 peace agreements to do so. The act granted NSS officers' police-like powers of arrest and detention, in violation of the NSS's constitutional mandate to gather intelligence.<sup>49</sup>

To maintain its power, the South Sudanese government has placed many restrictions on the exercise of key civil and political rights, such as freedom of expression and

Renewed conflicts between the SPLM/IO and SSPDF since 2015 reflect the fragile peace deals, leaving South Sudan swaying between war and peace. In addition to this, poor management of the economy, corruption, and high spending on militarization have created other crises. Soldiers have gone over 11 months without salaries; many unknown gunmen in Juba are reportedly soldiers. They need to feed themselves and their families, and utilizing checkpoints to collect extra fees is a way for soldiers to support themselves.<sup>47</sup>

Another factor contributing to the state of militarization is the private militias or armed groups that belong to politicians, as a way to protect those individuals, and a labour market for thousands of unemployed youth and for those who never had the chance to access the educational system. This increasing number of private militias and armed groups reflects a massive inequality and social injustice gap in South Sudan, and at the same time poses a challenge to stability and peace in South Sudan.

freedom of assembly.

Co-authored by UNMISS and the UN Human Rights Office, the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression in South Sudan identifies 60 verified incidents which violate the legitimate right to freedom of expression of 102 victims, including 17 women, in the period from July 2016 to December 2017.<sup>50</sup>

Incidents include the killing of two people, the arbitrary arrest and detention of 58 others, 16 people dismissed from their jobs, the closure or suspension of three media houses, censorship of newspaper articles, and the blocking of websites. Those targeted were seen to be critical of the Government, tarnishing the country's reputation, or dealing with sensitive issues.

When it comes to associational and organisational rights, civil society organizations are required to issue permission for any public gatherings or meetings; permissions are issued by the national security services, which maintain the militarized and policed nature of the space of the civil society in South Sudan.

## Social and Economic Manifestations of Militarization

*“It's in the language used; this glorification of being the military; the military as supreme. There's the aspect of everyone wanting to be in the military because it is looked at as the ultimate protection even though there are no salaries; they think 'as long as they give me a uniform and a gun'.”*

Tracing the events of conflict and political violence in South Sudan reveals contradictory messages. On the one hand, these conflicts are presented as tensions and competitions among different social groups and interests, ignoring the political dimensions and motives behind such conflicts. Much of this unrest has been cast as 'communal' and 'inter-ethnic' in nature by South

<sup>46</sup> Interview with a feminist activist from South Sudan, December, 2024.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with a South Sudanese activist, January 2025.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with a South Sudanese journalist, December 2024.

<sup>49</sup> South Sudan 2023 Report, Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/east-africa-the-horn-and-great-lakes/south-sudan/report-south-sudan/>

<sup>50</sup> Freedom of expression essential for peace in South Sudan— UN report, United Nations Mission in South Sudan, February 2018. <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/freedom-expression-essential-peace-south-sudan%E-93%80%2un-report>

Sudan's elite. "At the same time, targeted killings linked to these events continue to be attributed to the seemingly ubiquitous 'unknown gunmen.' Although such violence is presented as being chaotic or random, the frequency and intensity of these conflicts have tended to increase during times of increased competition and discordance among South Sudan's elites".<sup>51</sup>

The most recent South Sudan Household Budget Survey, conducted in 2022, finds that 76 per cent of South Sudanese live below the national poverty line. Extreme poverty, those living on less than 2.15\$ per person per

day, affects over two-thirds of the population.<sup>52</sup>

Cycles of violence between the different communities have been repeatedly happening, Women and children are used as weapons, rape and killing of children became a tool for revenge. People were divided along tribal lines in the 2013 conflict that was waged after a dispute between Kiir and Machar, and the conflict turned out to be "Dinka versus Nuer". "It's no longer us versus them. People don't have a common enemy. People are leaving this to be a battle between elites".<sup>53</sup>

## Living Under Fear

The constant status of fear situates the issue of mental health and wellbeing of the South Sudanese at the centre of the discussion on militarization and its impact.

All the interviewees for this research have highlighted the issue of the shadow of fear of conflict that clouds the daily lives of those living in Juba or elsewhere. It became part of the political dynamic in South Sudan: political disagreements and competition turned into deadly conflicts.

The collective memory of the South Sudanese communities is heavily packed with war memories, recent violent events pose more challenges to the well-being of South Sudanese refugees, and other forcibly

displaced South Sudanese have had to cope with losses, family disruptions and disconnection from their community support systems. Many South Sudanese women and girls have experienced gender-based violence.<sup>54</sup>

*“Women are experiencing trauma as part of their daily lives; part of their memory is attached to the civil war and to the 2013 conflict and the following events.”*

## Political Economy of War

*“Being armed has become a legitimate way to access power.”*

Nicki Kindersley stressed on an important fact that "Many communities have taken up arms in the wars since 2013 because of real societal economic harms.<sup>55</sup> These vary across South Sudan, but centre generally on the impacts of commodification of land and resources, and their alienation or appropriation from local residents".<sup>56</sup>

While the South Sudanese communities struggle with a wide gap of inequality and social injustice, the South Sudanese leadership's economic tendency towards investors and foreign investments is increasing, with no impact on the citizens' access to resources and basic rights. Gold mining was done in Eastern and Western Equatoria, and oil in Upper Nile. Residents across the country have also (over the last fifteen years or so) seen international corporations and investors partner with

local politicians in leasing large areas of land for various forms of speculation and future large-scale agriculture, including appropriating established coffee plantations in Central Equatoria. Local conflicts and injustices have proliferated around peri-urban land racketeering, market taxation, and border trade and movement controls.

Anger and collective losses from this expropriation have been compounded across the country by the deep inequalities of wealth, not only between elite warlords in Juba and the rural poor, but locally between most village residents and regional urban centres, as economic inequalities have expanded.<sup>57</sup>

*“At the social level, the militarization of communities is because security forces have failed to protect communities.”*<sup>58</sup>

51 Surface Tension: 'Communal' Violence and Elite Ambitions in South Sudan, Dan Watson, ACLED, August 2021, <https://acleddata.com/19/08/2021/surface-tension-communal-violence-and-elite-ambitions-in-south-sudan/>

52 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/10/12/2024/new-report-reveals-that-poverty-and-vulnerability-remain-endemic-in-af-south-sudan>

53 Interview with refugee rights South Sudanese activist, December 2024

54 Culture, Context and Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-Being of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons from South Sudan, UNHCR, accessed through this link: <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/culture-context-and-mental-health-and-psychosocial-well-being-refugees-and-internally-displaced-persons-south-sudan>

55 Interview with a South Sudanese Peace activist, January 2025.

56 Nicki Kindersley, "Armed Work and State Reconstruction in South Sudan: Beyond the Peace Deal", June 2019, can be accessed through this link: [https://archives.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/9960850/585543/file/-201906Armed\\_work\\_and\\_state\\_reconstruction\\_in\\_South\\_Sudan\\_Beyond\\_the\\_peace\\_deal-Note\\_n%C2B010.pdf](https://archives.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/9960850/585543/file/-201906Armed_work_and_state_reconstruction_in_South_Sudan_Beyond_the_peace_deal-Note_n%C2B010.pdf)

57 Stringham and Forney, 'It Takes a Village to Raise a Militia': 184; Øystein H. Rolandsen, 'Small and Far Between: Peacekeeping Economies in South Sudan', Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding 9, no. 3 (July 71–353 :2015 :3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2015.1070024>

58 Interview with a South Sudanese peace activist, January 2025.

A new UAE's oil deal sets all the oil production for the UAE for the coming 20 years, in exchange for a 13 billion USD loan to the South Sudanese government.<sup>59</sup> Such agreements reveal the trap the South Sudanese

government is grappling with now, and for a long time; the economy is almost entirely oil-dependent. According to the World Bank, oil accounts for %90 of the country's revenue and nearly all of its exports.

## The Gendered Impact of Militarization

*"Violence, so much violence. Brutality at the hands of armed men in uniform"*<sup>60</sup> said a South Sudanese peace activist, describing her lived experience in South Sudan. Violence is the norm to her.

War traumas and economic hardship have left men with anger, frustration, and a sense of helplessness. At the same time, the economy is based on/shaped by militarization, so they opt to join militias, enlist for the SSPDF, gangs and armed groups, as a way to access resources and practice authority and dominance. Also, one of the elements of this militarized masculinity is the rare expression of emotions unless it's anger or victory. Emotions of tears are associated with "womanhood".

Such realities heavily impact women; sexual violence has been used widely during community conflicts the 2013 conflict, and all the conflicts following the war in 2013. The Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan's (CHRSS) report, published in April 2023, highlighted the continuing cycles of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence in parts of the country. Violations were perpetrated mainly by members of the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, the Sudan People's Liberation Army-In Opposition (SPLA-IO), armed youth groups affiliated to the government, opposition forces, and other armed elements.

The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) documented 193 cases of conflict-related sexual violence affecting 142 women, 46 girls and 5 men. A further 25 cases, which occurred between 2014 and 2019, affecting 14 women, 8 girls and 3 men, were also verified in 2020. Perpetrators included community-based militias, civil defence groups and other armed elements.<sup>61</sup>

Both quantitative and qualitative data highlighted the extremely high rates of Non-Partner Sexual Violence (NPSV) amongst girls who were of adolescent age during the 2013 crisis. Overall, 26.5% of all respondents reported that they had experienced some form of NPSV at least once during their lifetimes and the largest proportion of respondents had experienced the most serious form of NPSV – rape or an attempted rape (21.9%).<sup>62</sup>

Poverty is also a reality lived by women, and displacement during the times of conflicts added more fragility to the situation of women and girls. As of 2018, 82% of women in

South Sudan were facing poverty. Malnutrition and lack of food security have become a reality for women in South Sudan- whether there is an active conflict or not.

Feminists and women's rights groups organised to stand against state violence. In response to the violence in 2016, women's protests presented women's stance regarding the constant violence in South Sudan, and a rejection of the militarized and masculine nature of politics in South Sudan.

A look into women's role since pre-independence in South Sudan, as fighters and as caregivers and suppliers, reveals that their voices and agency have been suppressed. Women's absence from peace talks and political processes reflects the hegemony of the masculine politics. The negotiations and the peace agreements were predominantly led and signed by male representatives from the warring factions while women's participation was largely limited to advisory roles from civil society organizations.<sup>63</sup> Although, the (R-ARCSS) adopted the 35% gender quota, which required one of the vice presidencies to be a woman, this was not reflected in full in reality.

Looking into this reality poses many questions about the challenges facing the women's/feminist movements and groups in South Sudan, including how to challenge such masculine politics and navigate their movement-building agenda. At the same time, they are surrounded by violence, and they rise above the ethnic and social divisions. Solidarity politics in South Sudan needs further investigation to understand its origins, dynamics and key trends.



<sup>59</sup> UAE firm pledged \$13 billion for 20 years of South Sudan oil, Radio Tamazuj, April 2024, access through this link: <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/uae-firm-pledged-13-billion-for-20-years-of-south-sudan-oil>

<sup>60</sup> Interview with a South Sudanese peace activist, January 2025.

<sup>61</sup> Report on sexual violence in conflicts: South Sudan, UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General, access through this link: <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/countries/south-sudan/>

<sup>62</sup> Report on sexual violence in conflicts: South Sudan, UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General, access through this link: <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/countries/south-sudan/>

<sup>63</sup> Women's Political Participation in South Sudan: Recommendations for the Forthcoming Elections and the Ongoing Constitutional Review Process, Dr. Victoria Lihiru, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, October 2024, accessed through this link: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/suedsudan/21616.pdf>

## Overview

Eritrea has been under the control of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) since independence. The government's authoritarian rule, characterized by limited political freedoms, media censorship, and compulsory national service, has led to widespread human rights abuses, including arbitrary detention, forced labor, and restrictions on freedom of expression. Eritrea has been criticized for its widespread practice of arbitrary detention, including prolonged and indefinite detention without trial. Many individuals, including political dissidents, journalists, and members of religious groups, have been subjected to arbitrary arrests. Additionally, the government's national service program has been associated with forced labor, as conscripts are often subjected to long periods of service.

Conflict and authoritarian governance in Eritrea have had adverse effects on gender equality. Women and girls face challenges such as limited access to education, gender-based violence, and restrictions on their rights and freedoms. The creation of Sawa military training camp, a central institution of the country's militarized national service program, has been a defining feature of Eritrea's socio-political landscape. The requirement for final-year high school students, including girls, to attend Sawa military training disrupts their education. This interruption can have long-lasting consequences for girls' educational attainment, as they may not have the same opportunities to pursue further studies or gain skills necessary for future employment.

The relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia has experienced significant shifts over the years. Tensions and conflicts persisted between the two nations, particularly during the Eritrean-Ethiopian War from 1998 to 2000. However, in recent years, there have been positive developments, including the signing of a peace agreement in 2018 which has also resulted in Eritrea taking part in the war against Tigray. Eritrea has been involved in the Tigray war, which began in November 2020, and has been a subject of significant concern and allegations of human rights violations. There have been allegations of serious human rights abuses, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), committed by Eritrean forces during the conflict. In recent times, after the signing of the Pretoria Peace Agreement ending the Tigray war, tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia have steadily been rising prompting fears of another war.

## A Life-long National Service

Eritrea's history with militarization and unrest can be understood by tracking colonialism's impact, UN interventions, and political elites' dictatorship.

Eritrea suffered under Italian colonial domination from 1894 until 1941, when Italy was defeated in the Second World War. Britain took control and established a protectorate over Eritrea as the Second World War



rearranged the colonization map in Africa. Eritrea became an important center for British and American operations in the region during the war.<sup>64</sup>

The UN got involved and issued a resolution deciding on the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia. The 1950 United Nations resolution federating Eritrea with Ethiopia took effect in 1952. The UN resolution reflected the desire of the

64 [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Country\\_Specific/erit\\_outline.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Country_Specific/erit_outline.html)

United States, along with other major powers, to guard their interest through linking Eritrea with Ethiopia.<sup>65</sup> The resolution ignored Eritreans' desire for independence but guaranteed them some democratic rights and autonomy.

The Eritrean People's Liberation Front struggled for 30 years to achieve independence (1961– 1991). The war resulted in a referendum, in which 99 per cent of the Eritrean population voted in favour of independence. The rebel movement became the ruling party, and a consultative process to write the constitution was created.<sup>66</sup> President Isaias Afwerki refused to adopt the one ratified by parliament in 1997 and ruled by proclamation and decree ever since. Political dissent and associations outside that of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice movement have not been allowed.

What started in 1994 as an -18month training program has turned into a lifetime military training program with no time limits. This reality has shaped the lives of every Eritrean citizen since then. This program was motivated by the border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The national service in Eritrea limited Eritreans' access to education. The academic year was until grade 11, but a 12th grade was added, and it needed to be spent in SAWA defence training centre. Meaning, students finalize their secondary education only through completing the military training. This restriction also limited their ability and right of movement, as students were not allowed to have passports or leave the country before finishing their national service training. Getting the clearance certificate to prove the completion of the national service is mandatory.

In addition to this long-term conscription, access to the Internet is limited and available only in specific internet cafes, which charge a fee.

*“The Eritrean regime uses the ‘divide and rule’ technique to control the population.”<sup>67</sup>*

According to an interview we conducted for this research, an Eritrean activist reflected on the role of state organizations and supporters in sabotaging the freedoms and rights of the Eritrean citizens: *“Pro-government organisations, such as youth organisations, play a crucial role in maintaining authoritarianism in Eritrea; they spy on other youth in universities and report on their behaviour”*.<sup>68</sup>

In 2008, an additional group called the People's Army was set up. It picked up people who couldn't report to

SAWA or were discharged. This unit is also interesting because it has a parallel track to the Ministry of Defence and is directly connected to the president's office. It picks people over 50 to work at night and on weekends.<sup>69</sup>

Kidnapping for national service or free services is a form of slavery. Using state violence, the Eritrean regime has turned these violations into a daily reality for the Eritreans, according to an Eritrean activist we interviewed.

Politics of fear have also been used in the regime discourse, blaming and portraying regional and international actors as enemies to the Eritrean state and to the nation has been used constantly. According to an Eritrean activist we interviewed, the Eritrean regime used propaganda narratives such as “Americans always want to see regime change in Africa.” These narratives are circulated through the regime discourse in public speeches, the newspaper, and other mediums.

*“The Eritrean government, which I refer to as the Junta, has continuously used the narrative of an external national threat to justify its extreme militarization. This perceived threat is largely fabricated, designed to instill fear and maintain control over the population. While military defense is essential for national sovereignty, the extent of militarization in Eritrea is unnecessary and excessive.”<sup>70</sup>*

The discourse is used to impose a level of importance on the regime's existence to protect the nation from external enemies. At the same time, this same regime collaborated with all those who had been named enemies. Assab port, located in southeastern Eritrea, on the coast of the Red Sea, hosted many military training sessions for other militarized regimes. Eritrea has become a place in East Africa for training militias, joining the collaboration between the different authoritarian regimes in the region to support each other.

Eritrea's involvement in the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia was not the first experience with neighbouring countries' conflicts and troubles. Eritrean soldiers were involved in the Somalia conflict, and in Yemen as well.

Eritreans expected de-escalation and peace after the deal between Isais and Abiy Ahmed. But in fact, the rounding up of people for national service continued and intensified, just before, during and after the Tigray war. Eritrean citizens experienced kidnapping and misleading information to be forced into battlegrounds.

vanguard party. It proposed a very egalitarian vision towards women and gender issues.

## Ethnicity, Class and Gender

EPLF started as a syncretistic, independent Marxist-inspired guerrilla movement and a secular, multi-ethnic

<sup>65</sup> Eritrea: The Independence Struggle and the Struggles of Independence, Terrence Lyons, in “Independence Movements and Their Aftermath: Self-Determination and the Struggle for Success” Ed. Jon B. Alterman and Will Todman, Center for Strategic and International Studies 2019, P36.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p37.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with an Eritrean Activist, January 2025

<sup>68</sup> Interview with an Eritrean Activist, January 2025

<sup>69</sup> Interview with an Eritrean Activist, January 2025

<sup>70</sup> Interview with an Eritrean Activist, January 2025

In her study “The State of the Women’s Movement in Eritrea”, Sondra Hale concluded that the wartime egalitarianism experienced by Eritrean women did not fully translate into lasting structural change. While the EPLF mobilized women as equals during the struggle, postwar reconstruction failed to institutionalize sustained gender equality. The persistent reassertion of patriarchal norms, lack of economic pathways, and closure of democratic space left many female fighters sidelined and traditional roles reinforced.<sup>71</sup>

Hale also argued that the contradictions women faced between their lives during the liberation movement and civilian life can not be ignored. *“The new gender norms invented in the field were both minor and cosmetic, such as dress and hairstyles and freer social relations with men, and highly significant, including the lack of social pressure toward marriage and childbearing, the collapse of the conventional gender division of labor, the recognition of the need for women to share political power, and the projection of the rights to land ownership for women after liberation”.*<sup>72</sup>

Militarization disproportionately affects certain groups of the nine tribes in Eritrea. Highlanders bear the brunt, while other communities, such as the Rashaida are exempt under the pretext that conscription would amount to ethnic cleansing. In reality, the government benefits from the Rashaida’s involvement in contraband and human trafficking.<sup>73</sup>

The Rashaida group has not been mobilised to join the national service. Muslim women who are part of Rashaida are being married off to avoid being recruited. Other Muslim ethnicities are also avoiding female recruitment.

## Extended Oppression

Beyond the nation-state violence, the Eritrean regime has extended its violence and contributed to the existence of very fragmented and distorted diaspora communities.

As much as one-third of the Eritrean-born population of around 6 million is estimated to live abroad<sup>79</sup>, scattered around the world. Media reports documented the rising tension between pro-Eritrean government groups – for example the “Blue Revolution Group” and opposition groups in the diaspora. The People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the ruling party in Eritrea, has set up a youth wing for the diaspora, described by one of its officials as a “militant” group, the ruling party has also established a youth branch abroad, for mobilization, some of its members would visit the country for military

When it comes to women, Muslim women are protected by their families, but at the cost of their higher education. Those who join, are faced with higher rates of sexual assault, rape and harassment.<sup>74</sup>

*“Money and connections work in our country. In the war in 2020, the majority were poor people. Rich citizens and those with high political power are not forced into conscription or forced to send their kids. This is also another thing that breaks the cohesion of the Eritrean communities.”*<sup>75</sup>

Rich people find ways to escape national service. The class dimension plays a key role in whether people are forced to join the national service or can escape it by buying visas to flee elsewhere.<sup>76</sup>

*“And when it comes to military power and hierarchies with the military institution itself, leadership positions are always filled with men, while women are positioned into very marginalized roles.”*<sup>77</sup>

Those whose life is permanently militarized face a lot of manual labour. They build houses, anything military leaders need – it’s free manual labour, a form of slavery, and a systemic tool used by the regime for suppression.

Men and boys primarily endure direct physical violence and forced labor, including working on farms for their supervisors and performing domestic duties. Military personnel are even assigned to provide entertainment services, such as playing in wedding bands for their superiors.<sup>78</sup>

training. Still, they are allowed to leave, unlike most Eritreans.<sup>80</sup>

Another dimension of militarization’s impact beyond the borders of the nation-state is the limited number of political organizations and the tensions and constant escalation between the existing ones.

The extreme militarization of Eritrea—and the pervasive fear it instills—posed significant challenges to this research. Many potential participants declined interviews, citing concerns for their own safety and that of their families back home. Even in the diaspora, fear of retaliation is deeply felt. This not only limited access to critical insights, but also underscored how militarization obstructs knowledge production and restricts the right to information itself.

71 The State of the Women’s Movement in Eritrea, Sondra Hale, Northeast African Studies, 2001, New Series, Vol. 8, No. 3, Special Issue: Women in the Horn of Africa: Oral Histories, Migrations, and Military and Civil Conflict (2001).

72 Ibid, P 158.

73 Interview with an Eritrean activist, January 2025.

74 Focus group discussion with Eritrean women in diaspora, January 2025.

75 Interview with an Eritrean activist, January 2025.

76 Interview with an Eritrean activist, January 2025.

77 Interview with an Eritrean activist, January 2025.

78 Interview with an Eritrean activist, January 2025.

79 Severe repression in Eritrea has prompted decades of exodus, Migration Policy Institute, April 2025, accessed through this link: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/eritrea-refugees-repression>

80 Why Eritreans are at war with each other around the world, BBC Report, Feb 2024. Accessed through this link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cw884l2wld8o>

# COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: GENDERED IMPACT OF MILITARIZATION

## WOMEN AS FIGHTERS

By the end of the struggle in 1991, women made up a third of the 95,000 fighters of the Eritrea People's Liberation Front and 13% of the front-line fighters.<sup>81</sup> They also actively engaged in noncombat positions, such as teachers, political organizers, technicians, drivers, and many other important positions. These roles opposed the traditional gendered understanding of women's role in the society as submissive and weak.<sup>82</sup>

As Gaim Kibreab questioned: *"whether women's participation in the liberation struggle led to their post-independence emancipation"*<sup>83</sup> is a key and vital question to ask, and realized that "although in the conservative and patriarchal Eritrean polity mobilization was liberating for most female combatants, women's gains during the liberation struggle were not translated automatically into progressive public policy after the shooting stopped".

During the 1998 war with Ethiopia, many women joined the military, leading to increased risks of sexual violence, unwanted pregnancies, and severe mental health consequences. Those who survived and returned from service were stigmatized as unfeminine, facing social rejection and deep psychological scars, including many who committed suicide.<sup>84</sup>

*"An Eritrean woman fighter told me in 1994, 'Of course the women fighters in the field were a model for the rest of society. We believed we could do anything that men can do—and in the long run we can change the whole society.'" Such buoyant optimism was not the rule. Another woman fighter of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) remarked bitterly: "As for us, upon re-entering [civil] society, we find that we are liberated but not free. In the field [the military struggle] we were not liberated, but [we were] free."*<sup>85</sup>

Based on these two points of views, Hale posed a key question: *"Are the women fighters of the EPLF going to succeed as models of emancipated women within a liberated society? Or, are they simply symbols of a romantic era that has passed, metaphors for and icons of the struggle?"*<sup>86</sup>

This was in the late 1990s, years later, the answer was revealed: oppression and militarization oppressed both

men and women.

Those who are in the military experience harassment and sexual violence. The social expectation about women's and girls' roles heavily impacts their realities during national service. They are expected to entertain military leaders or officers, making traditional coffee for them, chatting, and serving their other needs, such as washing, and they are treated as servants.

Former combatants who once fought for liberation, face relentless hardships—dying from neglect, suffering from mental trauma, and enduring sexual violence. The women's association, instead of standing up for them, remains silent. Former female combatants, who once sacrificed their lives for the nation's freedom, are now reduced to working as parking attendants, where they are subjected to verbal abuse and mocked for being «unfeminine.» A country that fails to respect the very women who fought for its liberation does not respect women at all.<sup>87</sup>

Female fighters are not able to access basic necessities, such as menstrual hygiene products, which are unaffordable, leaving many in distress. Upon leaving military service, social integration became a challenge because of social perceptions about their femininity or the views about their unsuitability for marriage because of their age. Or the psychological trauma they endured.<sup>88</sup>

“There was a time when they took you back, detained you, and shaved your hair. Shaving hair is not a good thing in our country – it's associated with her pride. This is to demoralise the woman.”<sup>89</sup>

Lack of independent women's rights groups, in addition to oppression, created a single voice, which is the national women's association, which acts as an extended branch of the regime and actively engages in the one-party system propaganda.

One of the early attempts of women to organize in Eritrea was the National Union for Eritrean Women (NUEW). NUEW was established in 1979, and attached to the EPLF, until 1993, just after independence, the group detached itself from EPLF.<sup>90</sup>

81 Historical Dictionary of Eritrea, Dan Connell, Tom Killian, Scarecrow Press, Oct 2010 ,14, p. 543.

82 Ibid, P.543.

83 Sexual Violence in the Eritrean National Service, Gaim Kibreab Source: African Studies Review, April 2017, Vol. 60, No. 1, pp. 143–123.

84 Interview with an Eritrean activist, January 2025.

85 The Soldier and the State Post-Liberation Women: The Case of Eritrea, Sondra Hale, in "Frontline Feminisms: Women, War, and Resistance", Edited by Marguerite R. Waller and Jennifer Rycenga, Routledge, New York/London, P. 343.

86 Ibid, P.343.

87 Interview with an Eritrean activist, January 2025.

88 Interview with an Eritrean activist, January 2025.

89 Interview with an Eritrean activist, January 2025.

90 The State of the Women's Movement in Eritrea, Sondra Hale, Northeast African Studies, 2001, New Series, Vol. 8, No. 3, Special Issue: Women in the Horn of Africa: Oral Histories, Migrations, and Military and Civil Conflict (2001), pp. 177–155, Published by: Michigan State University Press, P.

“During the military struggle NUEW had worked on recruitment for the movement, on consciousness-raising in the villages of the liberated areas, and on international and national propaganda. In addition to recruitment, from independence to the election of the new leadership in 1999, the program of NUEW involved women’s land rights; literacy campaigns; developing cooperatives; representing women in the development.”<sup>91</sup>

In Sudan, in several areas of the Northern and Eastern regions, women and girls have joined public mobilization campaigns for various reasons, the most important of which is the atmosphere of danger and fear resulting from the violence perpetrated by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), especially the sexual violence that accompanied their invasions of towns and villages. These attacks have instilled in many women a growing sense of urgency to be able to protect themselves from future threats. Some women joined for economic reasons, motivated by the small financial compensation or food rations distributed during graduation ceremonies after military training, assistance that could help them get through a few days of hardship and provide for basic household needs like food and other expenses.

The first military recruitment camp for women was opened in the Nile River State in August 2023. It included over 200 women and girls between the ages of 17 and 50, most of whom were displaced from Khartoum after fleeing the war and the RSF’s control of neighborhoods and seizure of homes.<sup>92</sup> Women in the camps undergo first aid training and take on tasks related to collecting donations for injured soldiers and baking goods to supply the army’s positions. At the same time, efforts to mobilize women to support the armed forces in areas under their control continued. In Port Sudan, the capital of the Red Sea State, initiatives were launched to support the armed forces, such as the “Women of Sudan Supporting the Army” initiative, and camps were opened to train women.<sup>93</sup>

After graduating from these training camps, women are assigned to more traditionally feminine roles, such as

preparing food for those in need, treating the wounded, and other caregiving roles. Other groups joined these mobilization campaigns. In February of 2024, a group of Sudanese female journalists announced their enlistment under the slogan «One hand holds the pen, and one hand holds the weapon» and joined the campaign led by the Dignity Initiative in the Nile River State. In El Fasher, women fight alongside men in the city with the Joint Forces.<sup>94</sup> Meanwhile, hundreds of women left El Fasher to protect their lives and the lives of their families, seeking refuge in areas like Tawila and Golo, where they live in dire humanitarian conditions with no access to basic necessities.

The role of female performers and singers (hakamat) also stands out. Through their speeches and performances on social media, they play a significant role in reinforcing war narratives to support either side of the conflict, thus actively contributing to war propaganda. For these performers, the Darfur conflict of 2003 highlighted their role as strong social activists. In contrast, dozens of women and girls have engaged in humanitarian and volunteer work through emergency rooms and women’s spaces, providing psychological and social support for women and girls, working in neighborhood kitchens, and establishing safe spaces for women and children.

Female mobilization for conflict in Sudan brought back memories of the Popular Defence Forces of the early 1990s – armed groups that were ethnically mobilized but expanded to the urban settings also to recruit for the war in Southern Sudan during the civil war. The Forces had a considerable membership of women, who had been engaged in war propaganda and in collecting donations for the fighters in the Southern front.

In South Sudan’s Eastern Equatoria State, numerous women, including ex-combatants and those serving in the armed forces, are expressing their concerns about gender-based discrimination and a lack of opportunities for promotion within their units.<sup>95</sup>

## THE IMPACT OF WAR AND MILITARIZATION ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

In April 2024, UN Women reported that more than half of Sudan’s displaced population are women and girls,<sup>96</sup> raising serious concerns about their increased vulnerability to gender-based violence. The war has caused a significant regression in the rights and issues concerning women and girls. The rates of child marriage have risen due to poverty and fear of sexual violence, particularly from the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), against underage girls.

The current war has had direct and devastating effects on women and girls. UN reports have documented cases where Sudanese women were subjected to sexual extortion in exchange for food, specifically by RSF members. They have also faced sexual violence and slavery. Sexual violence against women, including rape, gang rape, sexual exploitation, abduction for sexual purposes, and allegations of forced marriage and cross-border trafficking for sex, has mostly occurred during

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, P 167.

<sup>92</sup> Girls’ recruitment camps in Sudan, activists consider it an invitation to continue the war, Sudan Tribune, August 2023, 20. The report can be accessed via this link: Girls’ recruitment camps in Sudan, activists consider it an invitation to continue the war – Sudan Tribune

<sup>93</sup> Previous report, Sudan Tribune

<sup>94</sup> From the «Girls’ Battalion» to the mobilized forces... Sudanese women in the crosshairs, by Khaled Ahmed, Ultra Sudan, can be reached via this link: <https://bitly.cx/iXiFZ>

<sup>95</sup> Women in armed forces protest gender bias, promotion gaps, Radio Tamazuj, December 2023, 18. Accessed through this link: <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/women-in-armed-forces-protest-gender-bias-promotion-gaps>

<sup>96</sup> Sudan: a Year of Suffering for Women and Girls <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/stories/in-focus/04/2024/sudan-a-year-of-suffering-for-women-and-girls>

invasions of towns and cities, attacks on displacement sites, or against civilians fleeing conflict zones, and during prolonged occupations of urban areas.<sup>97</sup>

According to UNICEF, service providers recorded a total of 221 cases of child rape since the beginning of 2024. The youngest reported survivors were four children, one of whom was only one year old. Of these cases, 66% involved girls, and 33% involved boys. The report also highlighted the importance of addressing sexual violence against boys and men in the context of this war, noting the profound psychological impact and social stigma associated with such experiences. Understanding these effects and developing appropriate responses is essential. Additionally, sexual violence perpetrated by both parties to the conflict has forced some girls to become mothers due to unwanted pregnancies resulting from rape.<sup>98</sup>

The state of emergency currently affecting most states has had a negative impact and posed a significant challenge for women working in the informal sector. They are often required to return home early, before curfews begin, and the widespread presence of mobilized fighters and checkpoints in neighborhoods and streets exposes them to harassment and sexual intimidation without any protection.<sup>99</sup>

Displaced women and girls face increased risks of sexual violence due to overcrowding in displacement sites, having to live among strangers, or being forced to take long, often nighttime, journeys to access basic services like water points or toilets. Many adolescent girls and women living in these harsh conditions have been forced to flee alone, leaving them socially and economically vulnerable.<sup>100</sup>

Women have also borne a heavy economic burden due to the war-driven economic shifts and repeated episodes of displacement. Many who previously worked in the formal sector have shifted to informal work, engaging in handicrafts or selling tea and food in markets and public spaces. Moreover, women working in crafts, beauty product production, and small industries have become increasingly disconnected from their economic networks.

This increasing rate of poverty and social and economic vulnerabilities is also impacted by racism and classism during this war. Women who are working in the informal sector, especially the tea sellers, are profiled as traitors and as spies who are collaborating with the RSF, and they face both the state violence and social stereotyping.

The war has stripped women and girls of their ability, even if already limited in many contexts, to have control over their lives and daily choices. Living in and adapting to shelter environments pulls individuals out of their private and intimate lives into crowded spaces filled with strangers, people who, like them, were forced into displacement by war.

To this day, we do not have a clear understanding of what public and family spaces will look like after the war, or if the current state of militarization continues. However, domestic violence has increased, and safe public spaces for women have shrunk, this alone speaks volumes about what the future might hold.

According to the World Health Organization, around 70% of public and private healthcare facilities had closed by the end of 2023.<sup>101</sup> Women's access to healthcare, especially sexual and reproductive health services, has been severely impacted. In some cases, women who give birth are being detained in hospitals until their medical bills are paid.<sup>102</sup> Access to menstrual hygiene products has become a major barrier to women's dignity, physical health, and mental well-being, as these supplies are now scarce and unaffordable for many.

The war has created additional barriers for women with disabilities. Access to essential aids, such as hearing devices and wheelchairs, has become both a major economic burden and a logistical challenge due to their scarcity. Women who were forced to remain in shelters suffer from a lack of safety, privacy, and access to basic facilities like toilets. Education and the right to work have become increasingly out of reach, and these women face deeper social exclusion and marginalization.<sup>103</sup>

The movement of women within Sudan has turned into a series of hardships. Constant inspections at various checkpoints during travel expose them to harassment, ethnic and racial profiling, and judgment based on the regions they come from.

“The last time I traveled within Sudan, we were accompanied by a pregnant woman from Wad Madani, Al-Gazira State. At one of the checkpoints, soldiers insisted she was pregnant because she had been raped by a member of the Rapid Support Forces, despite the fact that she was traveling with her husband. They continued to harass her based on this assumption, which caused her significant psychological harm.<sup>104</sup>

Cross-border migration, particularly smuggling into Egypt,<sup>105</sup> has become a dangerous journey that

97 <https://www.ohchr.org/ar/press-releases/10/2024/sudan-un-fact-finding-mission-documents-large-scale-sexual-violence-and>  
98 The Crisis of Sexual Violence against Children, UNICEF Sudan Office, March 2025. The report can be accessed via the following link: <https://rb.gy/x9kqv6>  
99 Focus group discussion with women from Eastern Sudan region, January 2025.  
100 The Crisis of Sexual Violence against Children, UNICEF Sudan Office, March 2025. The report can be accessed via the following link: <https://rb.gy/x9kqv6>  
101 World Health Organization (WHO) Sudan health emergency: situation report no. 2023:4. 4. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnbpcajpcglclefindmkaj/  
[https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/documents/emergencies/20240919\\_sudan-emergency-sitrep4-.pdf?sfvrsn=f15012a7\\_6&download=true](https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/documents/emergencies/20240919_sudan-emergency-sitrep4-.pdf?sfvrsn=f15012a7_6&download=true)  
102 After childbirth... «It remains until payment is made» is a harsh phrase that destroys the throne of mercy in hospitals – Sudan Tribune, access to  
the report: <https://sudantribune.net/%d%8a%8d%8b%9d%8af-%d%8a%7d%84%9d%88%9d%84%9d%8a%7d%8af%d%8a%-9d%8aa%d%8a%8d%82%9d-89%9>  
[%d%84%9d%8ad%8%9a%d%-86%9d%8a%7d%84%9d%8b%3d%8af%d%8a%7d%8af-%d%8b%9d%8a%8d%8a%7d%8b%1d%8a%-9d%82%9d%8a7/](https://sudantribune.net/%d%8a%8d%8b%9d%8af-%d%8a%7d%84%9d%88%9d%84%9d%8a%7d%8af-%d%8b%9d%8a%8d%8a%7d%8b%1d%8a%-9d%82%9d%8a7/)  
103 Focus group discussion with women from Eastern Sudan region, January 2025.  
104 Interview with a feminist activist, January 2025  
105 Sudanese turn to smugglers to cross border into Egypt, Middle East Eye, accessed on: 10 Feb 2025 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-egypt-border-migration-smugglers-police>

hundreds of women have been forced to undertake with their children, in search of education, safety, shelter, and basic services. Some have had to make this journey alongside elderly relatives and those with chronic illnesses, in desperate need of medical care and treatment.

While many men in conflict-affected areas chose to stay home due to the lack of job opportunities elsewhere, this decision is also linked to societal expectations of men. Their inability to provide or fulfill family responsibilities may be socially perceived as unacceptable.

This war has shifted the role of men from being protectors or guardians to individuals who are no longer able to defend their families or shield them from various dangers, including sexual violence. As a result, some men may become more violent in an attempt to compensate for their failure to provide protection. Women have described how intimate spaces have progressively turned into spaces of control and orders, instead of being spaces for negotiation and mutual agreement on managing daily affairs.

*“The relationship has become one of commands and execution. This is a military behavior, and it's hard for us to deal with. It's like living with a soldier who isn't enlisted. This is militarized behavior.”<sup>106</sup>*

## WOMEN AS REFUGEES

Leaving the country is a risky adventure, as Eritrean citizens are not allowed to leave before concluding their required duration of national service. Obtaining passports and visas is another challenge. As a result, women and men fall victim to the human trafficking gangs and regional black markets that sell passports and visas.

Eritrean women found themselves refugees as a result of fleeing the country to avoid lifelong national service, only to face poverty and legal persecution. They usually engaged in the informal sector in the countries of refuge.

Many Eritrean women become refugees, only to face additional victimization in displacement camps in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya. The lack of rehabilitation services exacerbates their suffering. The psychological toll of militarization has even led to high rates of domestic violence and homicide within Eritrean refugee communities abroad.<sup>109</sup>

During the Tigray war, Eritrean refugees, and especially women, faced sexual violence and other forms of violations. The region was home to 96,000 Eritrean refugees. Eritrean armed forces see Eritrean refugees as

*“There is also a prevalent narrative that blames women for political issues, with their appearance and behavior being criticized during the crises of the transitional period. Now, similar statements are being made in the context of the war.”*

In the context of the war, hate speech targeting women is also widespread, focusing on blaming the victim and criminalizing women. A report by a female Sudanese journalist documented the stories of 15 women, aged between 18 and 70, who fled the horrors of the Rapid Support Forces, seeking refuge, only to find themselves detained in prisons and sentenced to death.

Some were later acquitted after months of suffering behind bars, while others are still awaiting their fate.<sup>107</sup>

*“Women detained in various prisons on charges of collaborating with the Rapid Support Forces face months of confinement in harsh conditions, enduring severe mistreatment and struggling to access justice. – Salma Abdelaziz's report on women who have been detained for such accusations reflected horrific realities of the everyday lives of these women.”<sup>108</sup>*

traitors to their country of origin, while some Tigrayan forces view them as an opposition to their cause.

Similarly, Sudanese and South Sudanese women are also forming a considerable number of refugees. UNHCR reports released in March 2024 indicated that 550,000 new Sudanese refugees arrived in Chad between April 2023 and February 2024, nearly matching the total from the past two decades, 90 of them arrived alone with their children, and have already experienced rape and gender based violence.<sup>110</sup> The lack of funds and limited access to food, clean water and hygiene kits, and poor infrastructure for access to health care services and psychosocial support all create a situation that leaves them facing hunger, instability, and trauma with no support.

When conflict erupted in 2013 in South Sudan, “the vast majority (over 83 percent) of those who fled South Sudan were women and children, with children making up 65 percent of the total South Sudanese refugee population. They are survivors of violent attacks, sexual assault and, in many cases, children have been separated from their parents and are traveling alone”, according to the UNHCR reports.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Focus group discussion with women from Eastern Sudan region, January 2025.

<sup>107</sup> From Under Fire to Under the Guillotine: Sudanese Women Victims of Arbitrary Death Sentences, Salma Abdel Aziz, Women Who Won the War Platform, link to the report: <https://womenwhowonthe war.net/ar/%d%85%9d%-86%9d%8aa%d%8ad%d%8aa-%d%8a%7d%84%9d%86%9d%8a%7d%8b%-1d%8a%5d%84%9d-89%9d%8aa%d%8ad%d%8aa-%d%8a%7d%84%9d%85%9d%82%9d%8b%5d%84%9d%8a%-9d%86%9d%8b%3d%8a%7d%8a%1d%8%9c-%d%8b%3d%88%9d%8af/>

<sup>108</sup> Ibid

<sup>109</sup> Interview with an Eritrean activist, January 2025.

<sup>110</sup> UNHCR, 2024. Chad fears the ‘very real’ prospect of more Sudanese refugee arrivals, needs support. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/unhcr-chad-fears-very-real-prospect-more-sudanese-refugee-arrivals-needs>

<sup>111</sup> <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/south-sudan-refugee-crisis-explained/>

Those who fled to Sudan experienced constant conflicts and tensions with hosting communities, in addition to the poor refugee camps conditions. Women who engaged with local markets and worked in the informal sector to secure basic needs experienced racism, police brutality, and sexual harassment.<sup>112</sup>



112 Interview with a South Sudanese activist, January 2025.

# CONCLUSION

The gendered impact of militarization, as evidenced by the experiences of women and girls in Sudan, South Sudan and Eritrea, reveals a deeply troubling pattern where women's roles in conflict are both empowering and exploitative. In Eritrea, while the participation of women in the liberation struggle challenged traditional gender norms and offered a space for empowerment, these wartime gains were not sustained in the post-conflict period. Instead, women combatants faced renewed marginalization, stigma, and gender-based violence, underscoring the limitations of militarization as a path to genuine gender emancipation.

The gendered impact of militarization, as seen in the experiences of women in Sudan, South Sudan, and Eritrea, reveals a troubling pattern of both empowerment and exploitation. In Eritrea, although women's participation in the liberation struggle challenged traditional gender norms, these advancements were not maintained post-conflict. Women combatants faced renewed marginalization, stigma, and gender-based violence, illustrating the limitations of militarization as a pathway to true gender emancipation.

In Sudan, the ongoing conflict has disproportionately harmed women and girls, increasing their vulnerabilities through displacement, sexual violence, and economic hardship. The rise in child marriage and sexual exploitation signifies a significant regression in women's rights during militarized conflict. These cases demonstrate that militarization, often framed as a necessary means of national defense, has enduring consequences for women and girls that extend beyond the battlefield.

Addressing these issues requires dismantling the militarized structures affecting both genders and implementing long-term policies to combat gender-based violence. The political economy of violence in these regions indicates a consolidation of the political marketplace, where violence is invested in as a means of negotiating power. All three cases demonstrate that militarization, while often framed as a necessary means of national struggle or defence, carries profound and lasting consequences for women and girls – consequences that extend far beyond the battlefield and into the social, psychological, and economic fabric of society.

Addressing these issues requires deconstructing the masculine and militarized patterns that impacted both men and women, and requires long-term policies to tackle gender based violence.

The political economy of violence in Sudan, South Sudan and Eritrea indicates the consolidation of the political marketplace and the investment in violence as a mechanism for holding and bargaining over power.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Tackling the entrenched cycles of militarization, patriarchy, and social inequality demands transformative approaches rooted in feminist principles, historical accountability, and the lived experiences of communities most affected. The following recommendations are

offered as pathways to reimagine policy, advocacy, research, and cultural work—placing gender justice, intersectionality, and collective wellbeing at the center of efforts to build more peaceful and equitable societies in the East and Horn of Africa regions.

## INTEGRATION OF GENDER AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN POLICY MAKING PROCESS

- The impact of militarization on women and girls, and underrepresented groups should be addressed through well-designed policies that look at their social and economic rights, and into their access to justice and to promote their political participation and political agency.
- Policy interventions on securitization and social crises should address the social and economic roots of these social crises and rebellions rather than criminalization and state violence.
- Feminist foreign policy should be adopted as a lens for criticizing the current foreign policies among the east African countries, and to imagine a feminist foreign policy established based on collaboration, mutual benefit, and solidarity, rather than competition and proxy wars.
- Approaches on addressing peace and designing peace and political processes should take into consideration the gendered impact of militarization on communities and on their access to social, political and economic rights, and to address the historical grievances through building institutions, policies, and legislation that centers justice.
- Understanding and politicizing the thinking of/about mental health and trauma as elements motivated and highly impacted by politics, state policies, and social suffering. More research and studies are much needed in this field to capture the impact of history, political instability and state violence on the wellbeing of the communities impacted by militarization.

## CHALLENGE MILITARIZED NORMS AND PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES

- Civil society and media groups should enhance their work to address the gendered impact of militarization on women, girls, and marginalized groups in the East African region.
- Media and artists should work towards building the counter-narrative to dismantle the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity that lead to militarized masculinities and the violation of women's bodies as weapons in conflicts and militarized settings.
- Women and feminist groups' efforts should be directed towards community engagement to address the impact of patriarchal systems on women and girls, men's safety, and communities' peaceful coexistence.

## KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION GAPS

- In-depth studies on the impact of militarization on marginalized communities and sexuality, as this theme is understudied and overlooked.
- More work is needed on feminist imagination for peace in the post-colonial settings, to counter the status quo and liberal understanding of peace as power, and wealth sharing as a shallow process for political arrangements. Instead, imaging a feminist peace that looks at colonialism, capitalism, dictatorships, extractive economies as key factors contributing to the rise of militarization in the region.
- The impact of militarization on the social construction of femininity and masculinity as social expectations and forms of performances, is needed to be studied in light of the current rise of militarization in the region.

ANBARİYA