

## *From a Concealed Face to Parliament Member: A question into History of Gender and Meaning of Feminism in Sudan*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to historicize and contextualize the life experiences of women activists in Sudan with reference to their heterogeneity and understanding of feminism in the period of 1947–1969. This era represented the organized start of women’s activism in Sudan with the nationalists’ quest for independence. The objective of this paper is not only to track the history of the movement but also to investigate the meaning of feminism in the context of the women’s movement in Sudan within the framework of nationalism. The author concurs with Zeleza (2005) in his study of the gender biases in African historiography when he emphasizes that feminist historians are faced with two interrelated challenges which are to retrieve and to gender the history of women in Africa (208).

The author argues that these women worked together with nationalist forces to gain both independence and women’s rights to education, work, and suffrage. They have managed, through a long and difficult journey, to change the meaning of gender relations over time and to realize major changes in the lives of women. Drawing from and building on feminists’ theorizations of nationalism will help to highlight the experiences of women during this era and support their struggle and achievements.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Historians of Sudan have documented many cases of Sudanese women who struggled against colonialism even before the beginning of women’s access to formal primary education in the early 20th century. At that time, women had opportunities to receive an informal religious informal education.<sup>1</sup> Adel-Al (1997) documented the story of Mihera Bint Abood, whose father was the leader of the Al-Shaigiyya Tribe in Northern Sudan; Mihera participated with the knights of her tribe in fighting against the Turko-Egyptian invasion in 1821. However, there is a need to go beyond such historical stories to critically rethink our history to understand how Sudanese women’s activism has informed history and to advocate against the gender blindness of history. As Allman, Geiger, and Musisi point out about African chronological history, it only, signifies “definitive moments in the colonial histories of male political elites” (2002, 2).

This paper will explore the period 1947–1969. This era represented the organized start of

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<sup>1</sup> For more details on the history of Sudanese women’s struggle, refer to Abdel Al (1997), Ajouba (2008), and Al-Haj (2007).

the women's activism in Sudan with the nationalists' struggle for independence. It will address the following questions:

What was the approach adopted by the nationalist forces in Sudan toward the "women's question"?

How have women challenged and resisted structures of oppression and subordination and realized some benefits?

When the author refers to the women's movement in Sudan, the reference is not to a single homogeneous group; rather, the focus is on a multiplicity of groups that use different approaches that are sometimes complementary and sometimes antagonistic. However, they all have a shared belief and understanding of their struggles as women, and they all work together when it is necessary, as the research results demonstrate. It is in an acknowledgment of their shared beliefs as women and their ability to come together in alliances despite their differences that the author refers to them as a women's movement.

The author also refers to them as one movement in recognition of the continuity and complementary nature of their activism. Each stage was historically led by a different women's group, starting with the era of Nationalism and culminating with the current era of transnationalism, each group drew from and built on the previous groups' experiences and accomplishments. All women's groups mainly practiced their activities in Khartoum; although they regularly performed outreach to rural and regional areas. As the capital of Sudan, Khartoum represents and continues to represent a melting pot for women activists across the divides of ethnicity, religion, and region.

### **ON FEMINISM**

Myra Ferree differentiated between a "women's movement" and "Feminism." She argued that women's organizing, explicitly as women, to make social change is what makes a "women's movement." She also recognized that "many mobilizations of women as women start out with a non-gender-directed goal, such as peace, anti-racism, or social justice, and only later develop an interest in changing gender relations" (2006, 6). Ferree stated that while feminism is "activism for the purpose of challenging and changing women's subordination... it is a goal for social change, a purpose informing activism, not a constituency or a strategy" (2006, 6). This definition is, to a large extent, applicable when defining the women's movement in Sudan, which began as part of a

national liberation movement and therefore initially set independence from the British as a priority, but continued its struggle against women's subordination to achieve more of women's rights.

Also, in the context of this paper, the term "women's activism" is used rather than feminism because most of the women interviewed rejected the label of feminism. This is because it relates to ideas of global feminism and global sisterhood that focus on the sameness of oppression, on individualism, and gender as the sole reason for women's subordination. Such ideas have now been widely interrogated by "black women," "women of color," "Third World women," "African women," "Muslim women," and so forth. All these groups consider women's other experiences with racialization, colonialism, nationalism, and neocolonial structures as part and parcel of women's oppression. In other words: "the contrast between a singular focus on gender as a basis for equal rights and a focus on gender in relation to race, and/or class as part of a broader liberation struggle" (Mohanty 1991, 11).

In addition, these different groups approach women's different forms of oppression using different strategies, but all work toward challenging oppression. The definition of the boundaries of what can be considered as "feminist" is still debatable. Badri maintained that "feminism to me upholds a continuum that starts from the minimum of addressing women's basic needs to the maximum of addressing the structural causes of subordination and violence" (2008, 69). The author disagrees with Badri's use of the words of minimum and maximum, yet agrees that feminism includes all kinds of struggles against oppression in women's lives. Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim summarized what feminism means for women in Sudan; she said,

Emancipation does not mean getting rid of our national, good traditions and values, or for us Sudanese women to become another copy of the Western women—It is emancipation from illiteracy, backwardness. Disease, unemployment, poverty, and discrimination in the home and society—Equality does not mean for Sudanese women to become another copy of the man. It means that women be completely equal to men in rights and decision-making at all levels. 1996.

The research outcomes reveal that women in Sudan believe that their struggle and activism not only revolves around achieving equality with men, but that their activism began with their demand for rights in public life, in education, in work, and for suffrage, gradually and positively changing gender relations to their favor. This does not, however, mean that they are unaware of their difference or what they want to achieve. Grappling with the meaning of feminism is an

indicator of women's struggle and women's resilience to enact a kind of social change that enables them to attain a better life, and this is a feminist goal.

The author furthermore, emphasizes the importance of considering the local context as a site of knowledge production about women's activism against oppression and subordination. Such consideration may help to create knowledge that supports women's local struggles and is, at the same time, capable of sustaining the overall transformative feminist project.

The women of Sudan started their organized activism with the struggle for independence alongside the nationalist forces. This indicates that women's concerns were considered as part of the national concerns since the inception of the movement. The author maintains that the self in the context of the women of Sudan is not equated only with the individual self but rather with family, community, and nation. Therefore their struggle was waged and continues to be fought on all these fronts: self, family, community, and nation.

### **ON NATIONALISM**

An understanding of nationalism as a gendered phenomenon is essential to ascertain how women participate in nationalist projects. Feminist scholarship<sup>2</sup> has interrogated the gender blindness of nationalism to expose women's roles and activities in nationalist struggles and their outcomes. Anthias and Yuval-Davis identified five major ways that women participate in nationalists struggles: (a) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities; (b) as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups; (c) as central participants in the ideological reproduction of collectivity and as transmitters of its culture; (d) as symbols in the ideological discourses used in ethnic/national differences; and (e) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles (1993, 7). Anthias and Yuval Davis argued that—despite this active participation of women, especially during the anti-colonial nationalist struggles and their sincere efforts to gain independence as a necessary step to attain more rights—women's demands for equal rights after independence are usually ignored.

This research builds on and contributes to this literature, which has been informative and relevant in explaining some aspects of the evolution of the women's movement in Sudan. The goal is to make visible how women who joined the nationalists' movements as active agents “imagine

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<sup>2</sup> For more details please refer to Giles, 2004; Jacobs, 2000; McClintock, 1995; Pettman, 1996; Saigol, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 1997.

their nation.” As Sorenson and Matsuoka argued, men and women do not always share the same vision of a “nation.” Women may imagine themselves achieving more participation in decision-making and an equal division of responsibilities at home. Very few men envision new nations in which women play a major role and in which men participate equally in household tasks and child care (2001, 105). Women’s experiences as part of the nationalist forces deserve to be rethought, and the assumed oppositional relationship between nationalism and feminism needs to be revisited, especially concerning the current challenges of neo-liberalism, globalization, and transnationalism.

Jayawardena (1986) highlighted the interdependence of nationalism and feminism in Third World countries and acknowledged the gains women could achieve by participating in nationalist struggles. She contemplated the idea that nationalist projects allow women some space for resistance and strengthen both their capacity and self-assurance by enabling access to work and education. However, she maintained that in India—and other countries in which the local bourgeoisie replaced imperialist rulers through a process of negotiation and gradual reforms—the women’s struggle did not move beyond the sphere of limited reforms, i.e., equality for women within the legal process; the removal of obvious discriminatory practices; and adding the right to vote, receive an education, and own property. Such reforms did not address the basic question of women’s subordination within the family and in society (Jayawardena 1986, 10).

As Jayawardena states, these “reforms” did not directly deal with women’s subordination in society, but women did benefit from these “reforms” to strengthen their existence in public life. If gender relations are understood as a process where the meaning of gender changes over time (Blom 2000, 9), these “reforms” pave the way for transforming gender relations and enabling women to resist the patriarchy and realize some of their interests.

Susan Geiger’s essay on “Tanganyikan Nationalism as ‘women’s work’: Life Histories, Collective Biography & Changing Historiography,” is also a significant contribution regarding its highlighting the role of women in nationalist struggles. In her exploration and re-evaluation of Tanganyikan nationalism, she called for reconsidering the master narrative of nationalism in Tanzania, which glorified the contribution of men and neglected the important role played by women. The importance of Geiger’s work lies in its assertion that women’s nationalist

consciousness is rooted in their culture and their sense of belonging to their nation. This also asserts their role not only as women but as active political agents.

In another development of feminist theorization of nationalism, and in a move to assert the positive relationship between feminism and nationalism as well as to affirm women's agency in nationalist struggles, the author agrees with Ranchod-Nilsson's call for "a feminist perspective on nationalism that does not discount or overlook women's agency or women's own imagining of the Nation" (2000, 170). She further provided an example of how rural and combatant women's active participation during the liberation movement in Zimbabwe was important in envisioning the nation. Hee-Kang Kim (2009), in her study of nationalism in South Korea, confirmed that feminists there continue to hold onto their nationalist agenda while concomitantly fighting the patriarchal aspects of nationalism.

Also, other feminist writers have reviewed the cultural aspects of nationalism<sup>3</sup> and in their reviews, have stressed the tension between modernity and tradition involved in the way nationalist projects deal with the women's question. This has provided more space to consider women's resilience in nationalist struggles, as it shows how women use the tension between tradition and modernity to extend their interests. Nationalists in India, Egypt, and other places, including Sudan, have adopted an approach in dealing with women, which is an equivocal combination of tradition and modernity. Women are "caught" between becoming "modern" and maintaining their traditional values as symbols of the nation.

In his analysis of this tension between modernity and tradition, Chatterjee argued that, by adopting this contradictory approach, Indian nationalists replaced the old or classic patriarchy—which was represented by the boundaries of the home—with a more flexible but culturally-determined domain set by the difference between socially-approved male and female conduct (1989, 248). He went on to define this new patriarchy by stating that, "the new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honor of a new social responsibility and by associating the task of "female emancipation" with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination." (1989, 248)

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<sup>3</sup> For more details, please refer to for example, Al-Ali (2000), Chatterjee (1989), Eisenstein (2004), Martyn (2004), Moghadam (1994), and Mohanty (2003).

Such a contradiction is illustrated by the simultaneous opening of spaces for women versus the constraining of women's activism by men to sustain their patriarchal interests. For women to achieve equality, there should be a "struggle against the false essentialisms of home/world propagated by nationalist ideology" (Chatterjee 1989, 253). Women may benefit from this tension between tradition and modernity and that this is the case with Sudanese women in Sudan. A "new patriarchy" and "contradictory discourse" has signaled a change in gender relations for Sudanese women, installing them in the public sphere in education, work, and participation in civic life. The inherent tension in this situation has created further fluidity in the margins between tradition and modernity and redefined the meaning of gender differences.

Women's resilience in nationalist struggles underscores both national and gender struggles. Vickers argued that the relationship between nationalism and feminism vary and may take different forms, i.e., "feminisms and nationalisms take different forms in different contexts... both isms are historically and geographically situated and shaped by a nation's location in global systems of colonialism and neocolonialism" (2002, 284). So, women may or may not realize certain benefits from joining nationalist struggles depending on the context and the timing of their participation.

Women participate in different capacities in nationalists' movements and have different experiences ranging from organizing or participating in demonstrations to active combat in national conflicts and wars. There is a need to consider each case of women's participation in nationalist struggles within its concrete context to reach more specific conclusions and avoid generalizations. So, women may join nationalist projects as active agents and as such, their goals may depart from those of the nationalist leadership at a point in time, as per the outcomes of this study. Saigol observed that women who participated in nationalist projects earlier in India tended to remain within the boundaries of the nationalist project. Only at later stages did they start to question the nationalist patriarchy itself (1999, 99).

Bernal argued that in Sudan, "nation-building efforts often entail attempts to foster or impose notions of cultural homogeneity" (2005, 173). Nationalist state projects define the boundaries of Sudan through a perception of shared language, religion, and ethnicity. However, this assumption is often based on the denial of difference and even sometimes a coercive forging of "nation" within the artificial boundaries drawn by the colonialists.

Women in the women's movement in Sudan have been aware of their differences since the inception of the movement and have struggled to negotiate these differences over time. Although the differences underlying different Sudanese nationalist projects resulted in essentializing women's differences across ethnicity, religion, and region, women challenged these divides to move on with their struggle for their rights. The author further maintains that nationalists of that time imagined women as carriers of authentic culture. Women were subjected to the nationalists' gendered ideology that could not escape the influence of the patriarchal social and religious structures. Despite this, women considered the nationalist agenda of independence as their own and simultaneously worked hard for their rights to education, employment, and suffrage.

Women at that time considered both men and women as partners who should work together to solve the problems of their society and their nation. Women's problems were seen as part of society's problems, although they had some of their specific concerns as women, but they believed that all issues should be solved within the social and political milieu of the nation (Abdel-Al 1997, 40).

It is important to acknowledge the role and resilience of women in nationalist movements. Glossing over this undermines women's struggles for an image drawn by nationalist men that frame women's participation in the nationalist struggle within certain patriarchal parameters that support the patriarchy. However, to ignore women's nationalist struggles because they are not directly responding to women's gender needs is undermining the resistance and efforts of Third World women for an image of "true" feminism that is sometimes described as Western and global.

Additionally, it is of the utmost importance not only because the current dynamics of globalization and the rising ethnic, racial, or religious fundamentalisms necessitate a new analysis of gender (Grewal and Kaplan 2008, 253), but also because the "subject woman" has changed from the "new emancipated woman" in anti-colonial nationalist struggles to the "transnational woman." This "transnational woman" can move beyond the patriarchal limits set by nationalist men and work as an active nationalist agent beyond the boundaries of the "nation" itself for women's rights.

### **THE FIRST PHASE OF WOMEN'S ACTIVISM FROM 1947–1969**

#### ***Nationalist Women and the Struggle for Independence***

Women's participation in the nationalist struggle in Sudan began as early as 1924 with the White

Flag League demonstration against the British (Hall and Ismail 1981). Ajooba wrote about Al-Aza Abdulla—the wife of Ali Abdulatif, the leader of the White League—who was the first woman to participate in the demonstrations and helped with communications among the nationalists of the League (2008, 153). Badri (1986) contended that this early participation was documented in a popular song that encouraged women to take the lead in freeing their country. This asserts the political consciousness and sense of belonging of these women. However, women were subjected to the patriarchal structures present in Sudanese society at the time.

Sudanese society during the 1950s was highly patriarchal, and thus men enjoyed a dominant position in social life and controlled both access to resources and political decision-making. Women were confined to activities that took place within their homes, with their families. Women were rarely seen in the streets unless there was a wedding party or social event (Al-Haj 2007, 50).

As Joseph observed in her study of societies in the Middle East and North Africa, which included Sudan, the family is the “site” of tradition, religious moralities, and patriarchal rule; it is a “women’s authentic place” (2001, 19). Also, Sudanese society is characterized by collectivism, which is an inherent feature of the African value system (Mahmoud 2002).<sup>4</sup> People came together and participated in all social occasions, such as marriage, as well as in rituals about death. Kinship, extended families, and strong neighborhood bonds tied people together.

The economic conditions further consolidated this situation. Commercial capitalism began to replace feudalism in the Nile Valley around 1800 and accelerated after the Turko-Egyptian conquest of 1821 (Hale 1996, 196). However, the economy’s shift toward capitalism through the process of supplying cash crops and raw materials for British industries and serving as a market for European manufactured goods came during the period of British colonialism. The gender regime during this period was constructed on the basis of male breadwinner and female homemaker roles, an arrangement sustained by the traditional patriarchal structures of family and society. Women were also subjected to the discriminatory colonial gender ideology in education and in work, which identified men as workers and women as wives.

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<sup>4</sup> Mahmoud, in her study *African Women: Heritage & Modernity*, 2002, refers to the spirit of collectivism that exists among African women that is part of the African social value system and heritage. Women come to support each other in building houses in Kenya or assist each other financially through “rotating funds” as in Sudan.

The British colonial administration kept women in a secondary position, particularly regarding education. Also, only the girls were supposed to pay school fees to the government; the boys' education was free (Mahmoud 1984). Challenges to this colonial policy started in 1907 when Babiker Badri, himself a nationalist, established a school for his daughters and nieces in his house at his expense after receiving permission from the British authorities (Badri 1986; Hall and Ismail 1981).<sup>5</sup>

Only in 1921 did the colonial government open five schools for girls, followed by the Omdurman Girls' Training College for Teachers (Badri 1986; Hall and Ismail 1981). However, women's education at that time had consolidated women's traditional roles in society and didn't encourage women's emancipation. Historians have documented that the content of the programs for girls' education in 1920 was different from that of boys' schools; the girls' schools also had lower academic standards and included courses such as home crafts and needlework (Badri 1986; Hale 1996; Mahmoud 2002). The policies of promoting women's education were oriented toward the preservation of patriarchal norms and values and did not address the core question of women's subordination within the family and in society.

Despite this, women considered education as an important step toward achieving their rights. One of the Pioneers<sup>6</sup> responded in an interview that, "we struggled on all fronts; even the kind of education available for women was different from the education given to men. We believed that education is the main gate for women's rights and development."

The first women's organization in Sudan was the Educated Girls Association, made up of the girls (now women) educated in Omdurman in 1947 with the aim of gathering educated women to work together for the advancement of their society (Abdel-Al 1997; Badri 1986, 2002; Hall and

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<sup>5</sup> Babiker Badri requested permission from the British Minister of Education Sir James Carry in 1905 to open a school for girls in Rufaa' City, but his request was rejected. He insisted, applied again, and threatened to resign from his position as a teacher. In 1907, he was given the permission under the condition that he funded this school with his own money. He did open the school and continued to fund it up to 1918, when the British colonial government accepted the responsibility to financially support the school.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth mentioning that the pioneer women in the movement were well-known to each other because of being together in one school (Omdurman Secondary School) and through family ties. Khalda Zahir, Fatma Talib, Nafisa Ahmed El Amin, Nafisa Al Meelaik, Saud Abdel Rahman, Thorya Al Drdiri, Fatma Ahemd Ibrahim, Hajja Kashif, Aziza Mekki, Mahasin Jaylani, Thorya Ambabi, and Suad AL Fatih all participated in the first struggle against colonial authorities at the school of Omdurman and accused the head of the school of being unjust to them in 1951 (Abdel-Al, 1997; El-Amin, 1994).

Ismail 1981). In 1951, these pioneer women, who were the first students to be graduated from Omdurman High School, wrote a memorandum requesting books, educational materials, and teachers. In response to this, the head of their school expelled them all from the school. All the students then went on strike until the colonial authorities responded to their requests and the expelled students returned to school (Al-Haj 2007, 45). This was an important historical event that documents women's struggle against colonialism in support of their education rights.

Also, these pioneer women of the women's movement organized classes that went beyond home economics and childcare, where women could learn to read and write with the purpose of improving the conditions of their uneducated sisters (Badri 1986). Indeed, this spirit of collective solidarity was one of the distinguishing features of the beginning of the Sudanese women's movement (Mahmoud 2002).

The pioneer medical doctor said, during her interview, "we were friends, we lived in the same area, we studied together at high school, and some of us worked together. Our goal was to educate our sisters to know their rights. We started with a night school, and we opened a class for sewing to attract women and encourage their parents to send them to the school."

The pioneer women were aware that they needed to not only start with educating "their sisters"; they introduced classes for sewing to convince parents to send their daughters to school to learn how to be "good wives and take care of their homes." This was one of the strategies used by pioneer women to manipulate the patriarchal structures of society. They also had to deal with a scarcity of resources and became creative and determined about how to move on with what they wanted to achieve. Another Pioneer said, "I joined the Women's Union in the 1960s. I was so much concerned with educating women. I went to my village on vacation, and I decided to open a literacy class; we had no material; we brought the piece of flat iron used for carrying mud for buildings and used it as a board, and we used the coal as a marker. The women were so happy."

The efforts of educated Sudanese women who graduated from the Teaching and Nursing schools marked the beginning of women's activism in Sudan; these women planted the seeds that grew into the first women's associations (Badri 2008). Women joined the labor market as nurses, teachers, and clerks; they subsequently formed their own teachers' and nurses' trade unions (Badri 1986; Hall and Ismail 1981). The Teachers' Union was established in 1949, followed by the Nurses' Trade Union in 1951. The Nurses' Trade Union guided the first public women's protest

against colonialism, as confirmed by El-Amin, who wrote “on 26 August 1951, women nurses walked out in a demonstration with their colleagues the men nurses against colonial policy” (El-Amin 1994, 10). Teachers’ and nurses’ demonstrations against the colonialist policies indicated an early consciousness of their rights as they compared their status with that of their male colleagues.

In 1952, the Teacher’s Union sent a memorandum to the Director of the Department of Education, requesting rights equal to those of their male colleagues. The introduction to this memorandum stated that “As we are aware of the duties of female teachers in government schools and how these teachers face great difficulties due to the inadequacy of the government regulations, and how they are applied to them, we feel that our duties are not of less importance than those of males.” (Badri 1986, 110, Annexure 1)

It went on to list 23 requests and ended by giving 31 December 1955 as the deadline for the Department of Education to respond to these “fair demands which represent some of the rights of Sudanese women teachers” (Badri 2002, 110, Annexure 1). This was a thoughtful and well-presented means of communicating demands on the part of the Sudanese women teachers at that time and reflected a significant level of awareness of not only their rights but also of how to approach the authorities about their rights.

Although this increase in women’s numbers in education and work marked their existence in public life, it was accomplished with great difficulty. Women struggled with the patriarchal nature of society. Badri confirmed that teachers used to go to work with their faces concealed by their Thob<sup>7</sup> with only their eyes visible (2002, 88). Women workers in offices were confronted by angry male colleagues who considered the women’s presence with them in the same office as being against Islam; and many women used to go to work accompanied by a male relative or an older female relative (2002, 94). However, these incidences did not stop women from continuing their education and work. The author agrees with Badri observation that teachers and nurses traveled and worked in remote areas away from their families and that this confirms their dedication to service and to making a change in their conservative community (2002, 9).

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<sup>7</sup> Sudanese women’s national dress in the North of Sudan.

In 1952, a group of pioneering women established the Sudanese Women's Union (WU) which, from its start, was supported by the Sudanese Communist Party, trade unions, and workers (Badri 1986; Hale 1996; Hall and Ismail 1981). The interviewees confirmed the support of the Communist Party for women. One of the pioneers said, "we were part and parcel of the national movement. At that time, the world was divided into two camps: Eastern, under the leadership of the Soviet Union and Western, under the leadership of the US. The Eastern Camp was supporting liberation movements around the World; it was natural to get the support of the Communist party as a movement for the liberation of women."

Elamin described that time, "The Women's Union calls for a meeting to declare the union and explain its objectives on 31 January 1952. That day was historical because 500 women attended" (1997, 11). One of the pioneers said of this meeting,

"I was a teacher. We came together, and our first meeting was at the house of one of us, and that was the beginning of women's organizing. We believed that we should be like others who formed unions, like youth and laborers. We created a preliminary committee with ten women to establish our constitution and program; then after official registration, we did our first public assembly meeting."

The WU called for an end to traditional, "backward thinking" in society, which hindered women from attaining their rights. The WU aimed to encourage women to participate in the social life of the community, to demand equal rights for women and girls, and to promote women's lives socially, economically, and politically. Branches were established in the larger towns of Sudan.

Amna, a member of the second generation of the Women's Union, said during her interview, "we had a clear structure: Central Committee, Cities Branch Committees, and Town-Sections Branch Committees; it was a pyramid hierarchy. I was working in a section-branch because of my early political work as a member of the Sudanese Communist Party."

One of the objectives of the Union was to open its membership to all women of Sudan, regardless of their level of education, religion, ethnicity, or class. In 1954, the WU established a women's monthly journal called the *Voice of Woman* (Badri 1986, 106). The Women's Union further extended its relationship with the Arab Women's Union and the African Women's Congress and gained membership in the International Democratic Union in 1957.

Many other women's organizations and groups were formed during the 1940s and 1950s,<sup>8</sup> and this reflected the growing awareness among Sudanese women of the importance of organizing. Despite women's efforts, the first new constitution in Sudan in 1954 restricted a woman's right to vote to educated women, even though illiterate men had the right to vote (Badri 1986; El-Amin 1994; El-Bashier 2003; Hall and Ismail 1981). One of the pioneers recalling the restrictions on women voters said, "At the first national government, only educated women were given the right of voting, although this was not the case for men." Even though the educated women were few and only 15 women graduates participated in the first elections, this was an important first step as it established the principle of a woman's right to vote (Abdel-Al 1997).

The Sudanese nationalists restricted women's rights and "excluded [them] from formal power after the struggle" (Jacobs 2000, 225). They adopted a contradictory discourse in dealing with women. This contradiction was manifest in a particular combination of traditional and modern gendered practices and beliefs that opened opportunities, though restricted, for women to participate in public life. For example, women were able to go to school and work outside the home, as long as they adhered to spiritual and traditional practices inside and outside the home.

The author maintains that women suffered from the gendered ideology and the patriarchy of both the colonialist and the patriarchal society with its tight grip on traditions and religion, which in turn made it difficult for women to attain their rights. The pioneer women shouldered the burden and benefited from the available scarce and inadequate opportunities. They had manipulated and bargained with the existing patriarchal structures.

One of the Pioneers said, "We needed to surpass two main obstacles; the British Law clause 105, which put on trial anyone who incited hatred of the government, and we had to find a way to deal with our heritage and customs. We fought against the patriarchy under the name of religion. This required a great deal of diplomacy and wisdom from our side."

Kandiyoti employed the concept of the "patriarchal bargain" to refer to strategies and specific forms of resistance used by women in a given society to contend with oppression. These forms are "susceptible to historical transformations that open up new areas of struggle and

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<sup>8</sup> These included, the Women's Club in 1944 in Wad Madani in Central Sudan; the Association for Women's Promotion in 1949 by El-Mahadi; House in Khartoum, the Women's Revival Society, in El-Obied in Western Sudan in 1952; the Charity Society in Port Sudan in the Eastern part of Sudan in 1953; the School Mistresses Trade Union in 1949; and the Nurses Trade Union in 1950. See details in Badri (1986).

negotiation of the relations between genders” (1997, 87). In the African context, Nnaemeka called this bargaining a “balancing act” (2005, 31), which means that women try to create a balance between society’s customs and traditions and their struggle to achieve their rights.

### **WOMEN’S ACTIVISM AFTER INDEPENDENCE**

After independence, the WU sent a memorandum on 7 January 1957, to the Constitutional Committee. In it, they demanded that the Committee “give women the full right to elect and be elected; the right to work; the right to equal pay; family protection” (El-Amin 1994, 17). This was followed by an announcement of the memorandum at a public political conference, which included all political parties. It received the support of all parties except the Umma Party<sup>9</sup> and the Muslim Brothers (El-Amin 1994). Moreover, members of both the Umma Party and the Muslim Brothers used force to prevent women from attending a fundraising event organized by the WU and attended by representatives from all foreign embassies in Khartoum in 1954 (Abdel-Al 1997; Badri 2002).

The grip of the patriarchy on society and religion at that time was very tight. The establishment of the WU was against the stipulations of both the religious instructions and traditions of the Sudanese society of that time. The religious leader of the Khartoum Masjid (Arabic for “mosque”) attacked the women of the WU in Friday prayer (Badri 2002, 115) and accused them of acting against the traditions of Islam and Sudanese society. As Badri (2002) says after the founding of the WU in 1952, the opposition was divided into two groups: one based on religion (claiming that the WU contravened Islamic requirements which called for women to stay at home, wear a hijab, and not intermingle with men). The other was a traditional Islamic group which (at that time) included two Islamic sects—Al Mahadia and Al Khatmia—that believed that it was against the values of society and good manners for women to go to work (Badri 2002, 115).

Hale maintained that visions of women’s emancipation took two forms in Sudan: that of the upper and upper-middle class nationalists, who viewed gendered social changes along liberal Western lines as the key to women’s equality; and that of the lower-middle class nationalists, who opposed women’s emancipation as being shaped by Western influences, arguing that Sudanese women’s growing independence would weaken the family, considered to be the foundation of the

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<sup>9</sup> The Umma Political Party represents one of the main two religious sects in Sudan, the Mahadia, whose name refers to Mohamed Ahmed AL Mahadi, who led the Mahadia revolution against the Turko-Egyptian rule in Sudan in 1821.

Islamic nation (1996, 106). However, the author believes that the nationalist vision of women's emancipation had more to do with the Islamic, conservative, and patriarchal nature of the society.

On the other hand, the WU received support from the Communist Party, which was the first political party to open its membership to women. Traditional forces considered the Communist Party's ideology as anti-Islamic and therefore was not accepted by traditional and Islamic segments of society. This had negative implications for the WU. The Nationalists, the Communists, traditional forces, and the Muslim Brothers did not want to challenge the patriarchal structure of society at that time. The Communists did not want to provoke the traditional and religious elements of society. Indeed, the Muslim Brothers (during the 1950s) believed that women had no place in public life. The Umma Party and traditional forces had their own vision of positioning women at home. The nationalists' unwillingness to challenge the patriarchy reflected their contradictory approach to dealing with the women's question. While they were reluctant to challenge the traditional patriarchal structures of their society, which undermined women's status, some of them encouraged women's rights to education and work.

The WU members realized that confrontation with the traditional nationalist forces might threaten their struggle to achieve more rights. As Hall and Ismail argued, "Many realized the dangers of being overly hasty in demanding female emancipation and advocated a cautious approach to avoid inflaming public opinion and producing the opposite outcome" (1981, 109). Activist women were caught between the allegations of the traditional nationalists, who denied them their rights because they were deemed to be "Westernized," and their struggle to pursue their interests as both nationalists and women. Members of the Union asserted their commitment to the values and the customs of Sudanese society in the way they dressed and behaved, mainly to avoid attacks and be able to move on with their causes (Abdel-Al 1997; Badri 2002; El-Amin 1994).

The author agrees with both Badri (2002) and El-Amin (1994) that this cautious approach on the part of the WU was a strategy to allow them to continue their activities and realize rights for all women. Badri argued that "they did not want to antagonize a society which was not yet mature enough to let go of culturally accepted patterns... they may have wanted to safeguard the Union from possible attacks" (2008, 48). This was also confirmed by El-Amin, who maintained that "This [the WU strategy] was due to the proper tactics it followed in its activities while

complying with the psychological construction of Sudanese society without retreating or deflecting from its main objectives and principles” (1994, 14).

Although women started their activism as a unified body, the opposition from Islamic and traditional leaders resulted in the resignation of two of the founding members of the WU. This marked the first split in the movement along political and ideological lines. Such a split demonstrated that women might have different visions for pursuing their different goals.

The history of these early years of the women’s movement indicates that it started as an urban movement and came about through the efforts of educated women from the middle and the upper classes in society: “It was a movement of the cream who lived in the cities” (El-Amin 1997, 13). Mahmoud wrote that “the organized Sudanese women’s movement was established by the middle and higher class educated women who lived in cities” (2002, 249). Despite this fact, these pioneer women did not isolate themselves from the daily life of their uneducated counterparts. The strategic and cautious approach they used enabled them to reach out and connect with their lower-class sisters. The WU called for a unified women’s movement across the country, regardless of women’s differences, with the idea that “this would create [a] strong women’s front that could lead and channel women’s struggle” (Abdel-Al 1997, 44). However, it was also a call for a “global sisterhood” at the local and national level, the invalidity of which was soon realized.

The initial splits in the women’s movement were the result of an early consciousness of differences, religious or otherwise, in approaches to handling gender and women’s issues. A failure to create unity coincided with an assertion of the heterogeneous nature of the women’s movement in Sudan. However, as pointed out by Abdel-Al, “although the Women’s Union failed in building a unified women’s movement, it succeeded in building awareness among different women’s groups of their rights” (1997, 44).

On 17 November 1957, General Ibrahim Aboud<sup>10</sup>—who was supported by the Umma Party—assumed power in the first coup d’état in the history of Sudan. He started his rule by restricting liberties, dissolving trade unions and political parties, and subjecting the South to a

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<sup>10</sup> General Ibrahim Aboud was encouraged to assume power by the Umma Party due to the deterioration of the economy, the civil war in the South of Sudan, and the failure of the democratic government and the Political Parties to enact necessary reforms.

compulsory policy of Arabization and Islamization. In 1959, like many other associations and political parties, the WU was abolished. However, it continued its activities underground.

In 1963, the regime tried to form a women's organization under the name of "the Organization of the Sudanese Women Union." All women were invited, including members of the former WU—who insisted on electing the Executive Committee, where Union members got eight out of the ten seats on the Committee. The Aboud regime abandoned the whole idea, and the cooptation failed (El-Amin 1994, 19). After that, the WU formed the Housewives' Cooperative Society and the Traditional Collective Cooperation and shifted its tactics to a more social work orientation. The former WU members continued their political activism against the regime until the October Revolution in 1964 (Badri 2002; El-Amin 1994).

On 21 October 1964, under the leadership of the WU, women participated actively with men in political street demonstrations that came to be known as the October Revolution of 1964 against military rule<sup>11</sup> (Badri 1986, 2002; Hall and Ismail 1981). Some women were injured, and one member was killed in this action. Women also participated in a civil strike at that time and were members of the National Front, which was formed to organize activities for the success of the revolution; this put the women's case and issues on the front lines (El-Amin 1997, 20–21). Alawia, said of her experience in October 1964, "I went out on school demonstrations in October 1964 and joined the Democratic Front and the Communist Party during [my time at] University. I also worked in the community through the Association of Housewives."

This era witnessed a tremendous increase in the activities of the WU that culminated in women gaining suffrage rights in 1965 and the right to equal pay for equal work in 1968 (Hale 1996; Mahmoud 2002). Also, in the 1960s, there was competition amongst political parties looking for the female vote, causing them to embrace women's demands and make space for women. This was beneficial to women as it increased their consciousness about the importance of their participation in public life.

Women's associations affiliated with different parties were formed, including the first Islamic women's organization, al-Akhwat al-Muslimat (which translates as "the Muslim Sisters"), the women's branch of the Muslim Brothers. Also, at this time, the Organization of Rural Women

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<sup>11</sup> The October Revolution was based on a peaceful civil strike that obliged the first military regime in Sudan to resign.

was formed (Abel-Al 1997, 69). In 1966, women from Southern Sudan established the Southern Women's League; they played influential roles in resettling refugees and those displaced by the civil war (Badri 2002, 132). The increase in women's activism revealed the contrasting differences among women across the lines of ethnicity, region, and religion. Although the WU opened branches in the different regions, its work was mainly handled by the teachers and nurses who were mostly from the North. Besides,

The Union was trying to lay down the same program for the women from the North on the [women from the] South regardless of the actual needs of [the women of] the South; that is why its work in the South did not have much success, in addition to the other political and economic conditions of the South (Badri 2002, 131).

However, Badri also confirmed that the leaders of Southern women's associations that were formed after the October Revolution were from the South and were conscious of the problems facing women in the South (2002, 131). Also, the election of a democratic government in 1965 confirmed the split in the women's movement along secular and religious lines. The head of the WU Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim entered the elections supported by the Communist Party, the trade unions, and the worker's unions, while another female candidate—Thouria Umbabi—entered the elections supported by the League of Islamic Convention, the Umma Party, and the National Unionist Party. Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim won one of the ten seats designated for “the Graduates” (Badri 1986, Badri 2002; El Amin 1994; El-Bashier 2003; Hale 1996; Hall and Ismail 1981; Ismail and Makki 1981). Asma, from the second generation, attended this event. She said, “That was a time of great development for women. Fatima Ahmad Ibrahim was nominated, won, and joined Parliament as the first woman—that was an unprecedented achievement, especially in that she was a very convincing character who could represent and defend women bravely.”

This was the culmination of all women's efforts from restricted access to political representation in 1956 to parliamentary representation in 1965, the outcome of 11 years of struggle post-independence. Abdel-Al confirmed that the report of the 1965 elections indicated that the highest percentage of women's voting was in Khartoum, where it reached 83%, while the percentage of men's participation was 72% there; in all other provinces of Sudan, it was 72% for women and 74% for men (1979, 76). Also, there was an increase in women's participation in political parties, but not in leadership positions.

This political success coincided with increasing the numbers of women in schools. The percentage of illiterate women in 1956, with independence, was 96% (Al-Haj 2007, 41). The number of girls' schools increased from 370 in 1965 and to 1,149 in 1970 (Badri 2002, 42). Also, the number of teachers increased from six in 1923 to 3,716 in 1970 (89). The number of women in the medical field was 151 in 1965; it increased to 8,486 in 1970 (92). Women were also represented on the Constitutional Committee, which was formed in 1968 to draft the country's permanent constitution.

Women's presence in the public sphere was mounting; however, they got less salary—four-fifths—of their male colleagues', and they were not entitled to pensions. Badri confirmed that the labor laws at that time were still the ones that were installed by the British (2002, 100). Women managed to challenge these laws and enacted some changes in the socially-constructed gender hierarchy; this resulted in a "new flexible patriarchy" that allowed them some spaces. However, women were overburdened; on the one hand, they had to prove themselves at their newly accomplished work opportunities and on the other hand, they had to keep their image at home as good housewives and comply with the rules of the patriarchal society, or they would lose both being workers and being housewives.

The author concurs with Mahmoud that the rights of women in public life—like the rights to education, work, and equal payment—were difficult for society to accept (2002, 264). Within the social and patriarchal context described by the pioneers and imposed by the nationalists, the simple fact of the existence of women's organizations in public life and what this presence enabled women to do was indeed an accomplishment.

### CONCLUSION

The women of Sudan started their organized activism with the struggle for independence alongside the nationalist forces. However, the achievement of independence in January 1956 was not enough for women to gain their rights. Women's activism has been subjected to a contradictory nationalist discourse that forms part of the patriarchy of the Sudanese state and society. Women have supported each other's and strategically moved on with their rights in education, work, and suffrage as a preliminary step toward positive changes in gender relations to finally enter Parliament in 1965. They have also used bargaining, balancing acts, and cautious approaches; they benefit from the tension between tradition and modernity, which gives them some space to struggle

against oppression and to sustain their activism.

Women's resilience in nationalist struggles underscores both national and gender struggles. In the context of the women of Sudan, the self is not equated only with the individual self but rather with family, community, and nation. Therefore their struggle is waged on all these fronts: self, family, community, and nation. Their ultimate cause is prioritized, maneuvered, and bargained according to the complexity of this self-positionality and the complexity of power relations that exist at a point in time. Therefore it is important to consider the local context as a site of knowledge production.

It is also important to acknowledge the role and resilience of women in nationalist movements to avoid both a passive image for women sustained by the patriarchy of nationalist men on one hand and a degrading image for women's nationalist struggle as being a non-feminist goal. If feminism is conceptualized as a political project for social change that respects and recognizes different women's experiences, then those differences among women become building blocks for this project.

Now the struggle for women's rights is led by the "transnational women" who extends her struggle beyond the boundaries of the nation itself in support of the overall feminist project sustaining and fighting for women's rights locally and internationally.

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