

September 2024

Women from Africa and the diaspora call for action to protect women and girls in Sudan from conflict-related sexual violence

As women from Africa and the diaspora, we have signed this open letter to express our solidarity with women and girls in Sudan who are being targeted in a relentless campaign of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and to appeal for the urgent initiation of international protection measures and accountability mechanisms.

The war in Sudan began in April 2023 and has been described as a conflict fought on the bodies of women and girls. A total absence of protection for women and girls heightens the risk of sexual and gender-based violence.

Distressing reports have emerged of rape, gang rape, and forced 'marriages', with many of these violations occurring in people's homes.¹

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has reported cases involving gang rape of girls as young as nine, and of older women, including a sixty-year-old woman in Khartoum North who was raped alongside her daughter and granddaughter. Women and girls have also been raped in front of male family members.²

The Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) documented similar violations, with women and girls being abducted from their homes, held for several days in various locations and raped repeatedly by multiple perpetrators.³

In Darfur, chilling evidence is emerging of rape once again being used as a weapon of war.

Since November 2023, in El Geneina, Western State, women have reported being sexually assaulted due to their ethnicity. Many of the survivors are from the Masalit community, of African ethnic origin. However, women from Arab tribes were also targeted if they were married to darker skinned men or have children with a darker skin tone.⁴

Women and girls are also being abducted. A 23-year-old woman from North Kordofan state was taken against her will to South Darfur. She eventually escaped but returned home pregnant.⁵ A woman from Omdurman, who was kidnapped along with her three young children, was subjected to sexual violence for six months. She was later informed her children would be killed unless she became a spy. She is currently in a protection centre, haunted by fears for her children, who are still being held.⁶

¹ Human Rights Watch report, 'Khartoum is not Safe for Women! Sexual Violence against Women and Girls in Sudan's Capital' July 2024 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/07/28/khartoum-not-safe-women/sexual-violence-against-women-and-girls-sudans-capital>

² Human Rights Watch report, 'Khartoum is not Safe for Women! Sexual Violence against Women and Girls in Sudan's Capital' July 2024 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/07/28/khartoum-not-safe-women/sexual-violence-against-women-and-girls-sudans-capital>

³ Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) Press Statement: 'Gezira State and the Forgotten Atrocities: A Report on Conflict-related Sexual Violence' 22 July 2024 <https://sihanet.org/press-statement-gezira-state-and-the-forgotten-atrocities-a-report-on-conflict-related-sexual-violence/>

⁴ The Guardian, 'Darfur rape survivors gather together after ethnically targeted campaign' 14 March 2024 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/mar/14/darfur-survivors-gather-together-after-ethnically-targeted-campaign>

⁵ African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies (ACJPS), 'South Darfur: Two girls abducted and subjected to sexual slavery in Nyala' 19 August 2024 <https://www.acjps.org/publications/south-darfur-two-girls-abducted-and-subjected-to-sexual-slavery-in-nyala>

⁶ [قصّة مها تكشف الوجه الحقيقي لوحشية مليشيا الدعم السريع. اختطفها هؤلاء السفلة بعد أن فقدت زوجها وأغتصبوها SD | أنا سوداني - Ana Sudani](#) | [Instagram](#) | [وعذبوها لمدة ستة أشهر ثم](#)

There are also reports of sexual exploitation of women in Omdurman who are forced into transactional sex with soldiers to receive humanitarian aid, or access to abandoned properties where they forage for items to sell to feed their families.⁷

The targeting of hospitals, schools and medical staff has exacerbated the physical and mental anguish of survivors of CRSV.⁸ The consequent lack of access to specialist treatment and psychosocial assistance heightens the suffering of deeply traumatised survivors, causing some to commit suicide.⁹

We believe that a persistent failure to address CRSV has entrenched impunity. Leaders and soldiers from the military and armed groups are yet to face consequences at national, regional or international level for the recent brutal campaign in Ethiopia's Tigray region, where sexual violence was employed systematically as a weapon of war, bearing the genocidal hallmarks of events in Rwanda and Bosnia.¹⁰

Accountability erodes impunity, and its continuing absence emboldens perpetrators in Sudan and beyond. We, therefore, urge regional and international actors to take the following steps to assist women and girls in Sudan:

- Close the protection gap created by the premature winding down of UNAMID and UNITAMS as a matter of urgency.
- Facilitate a human rights monitoring and documentation mandate to coordinate regional and international efforts by renewing the UN Human Rights Council Fact-Finding Mission and supporting the complementary investigations of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights fact-finding mission on Sudan.
- For decades, rape has been used as a weapon of war in Sudan. Justice and accountability are vital for an enduring peace; therefore, the mandate of the International Criminal Court Prosecutor to investigate incidents of sexual violence which may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity should be extended across the whole country, and perpetrators be brought to justice, including those who hold command responsibility.
- Given the persistent failure to secure a ceasefire, it is imperative that community groups that provide humanitarian assistance, including shelter, safe havens and psychosocial therapies, are supported and resourced. Humanitarian workers must also receive adequate protection as they operate at great personal risk in challenging circumstances.

Finally, although Sudanese women were at the forefront of pro-democracy movements, they are woefully underrepresented in the ongoing peace negotiations. A concerted effort must be made to ensure women are sufficiently represented, and that all negotiations include a recognition of the appalling impact of CRSV on survivors and their families, and firm assurances that all identified perpetrators will be held accountable.

⁷ The Guardian 'Women in war-torn Sudanese city forced to have sex in exchange for food.' 22 July 2024 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/22/women-forced-to-have-sex-with-soldiers-for-food-in-sudanese-city#:~:text=More%20than%20two%20dozen%20women,money%20to%20feed%20their%20families>.

⁸ Relief Web 'Sudan: Omdurman hospital bombed, deadly violence in North Darfur and El Gezira', 12 August 2024 <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-omdurman-hospital-bombed-deadly-violence-north-darfur-and-el-gezira>

⁹ Human Rights Watch report, 'Khartoum is not Safe for Women!' Sexual Violence against Women and Girls in Sudan's Capital' July 2024 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/07/28/khartoum-not-safe-women/sexual-violence-against-women-and-girls-sudans-capital>

¹⁰ CSW 'TIGRAY: Women from Africa and diaspora call for action to end campaign of sexual violence' 18 June 2021 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2021/06/18/press/5303/article.htm>

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