

Gender and Sudan's 2018/2019 Uprising: Experiences of Self-Employed Women Food and Beverage Sellers in Khartoum and Port Sudan and Women Farmers in South Kordofan

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EXPERIENCES OF SELF-EMPLOYED WOMEN FOOD
AND BEVERAGE SELLERS IN KHARTOUM
AND PORT SUDAN AND WOMEN FARMERS
IN SOUTH KORDOFAN ***

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To the diverse women, men, and young people who have sought freedom, peace, justice, a new Sudan, gender equality, and an end to Sudan's history of marginalization through survival and resistance. To the memory of Mohamed Bouazizi, for he, too, was a street vendor.

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Abstract

Women's participation in Sudan's 2018/2019 uprising has shed light on the social, economic, cultural, and political roles women played and continue to play in Sudan. This participation is not unusual given that women have always been active in Sudan's politics and society and given an ancient history of women's leadership and rule.

An important outcome of the uprising is that it has (re)invigorated women's and feminist activism and theorizing. It ushered a commitment, at least at the level of discourse, among many self-identified feminists and women activists and organizations, to understanding and engaging with the theory of intersectionality. This paper, which uses an intersectional perspective, draws on interdisciplinary, collaborative field research which took place in 2021 in three states in Sudan. The paper documents and analyses the experiences of self-employed women street vendors in Khartoum and Port-Sudan, and women farmers in South Kordofan. The paper documents ways in which these groups of women contributed to sustaining protestors in Sudan during the uprising, and the ways they continue to sustain communities across Sudan, through a politics of care. The paper also analyses social protection programs that the Transitional government which assumed power in 2019 introduced, particularly the Family Support Program.

The visions and perspectives of marginalized communities, including women street vendors and farmers, should inform efforts for social change and transformation. A policy brief which is partially based on the research that informs this paper, also prepared for the Economic Research Forum, makes further assess gender-related policies during Sudan's transition and makes recommendations on ways to achieve gender equality in Sudan.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Informality, Women Farmers, Intersectionality, Sudan, the Politics of Knowledge Production.

JEL Classification: J16

ملخص

ألقت مشاركة المرأة في انتفاضة السودان 2019/2018 الضوء على الأدوار الاجتماعية والاقتصادية والثقافية والسياسية التي لعبتها المرأة وما زالت تلعبها في السودان. هذه المشاركة ليست غريبة بالنظر إلى أن النساء كن دائمًا نشطات في السياسة والمجتمع في السودان ونظرًا لتاريخ قديم لقيادة المرأة وحكمها.

هذه الورقة البحثية تعتمد المنظور النسوي التقاطعي، وهو منظور يري ان التمييز والامتيازات في تجارب النساء يشكلها تقاطع الاختلافات القائمة على النوع الاجتماعي، والعنصر، والأوضاع الاقتصادية والاجتماعية، وغيرها من أوجه الاختلاف، في علاقتها مع السلطة. والورقة هي نتاج بحث ميداني اجراه فريق متعدد التخصصات في عام ٢٠٢١، وشمل ثلاث ولايات في السودان. توثق الورقة وتحلل تجارب البائعات المتجولات في الخرطوم وبورتسودان، وتجارب المزارعات في جنوب كردفان عقب انتفاضة ٢٠١٨/٢٠١٩. ويشمل ذلك التحديات التي واجهت بائعات الشاي والأطعمة، والمزارعات، و أيضا دورهن في دعم مجتمعاتهن، ودعم الناشطين خلال الانتفاضة، من خلال ما نسميه "الرعاية كممارسة سياسية".

بالإضافة لما سبق، فإن الورقة تحلل برامج الحماية الاجتماعية التي انشأتها الحكومة الانتقالية التي تولت السلطة في السودان من أغسطس عام ٢٠١٩ إلى أكتوبر عام ٢٠٢١. ويوجد تقرير موجز يعتمد بشكل جزئي على نتائج هذا البحث، تم اعداده أيضا لمنتدى البحوث الاقتصادية، يحتوي على تحليل و تقييم اعمق للسياسات المتعلقة بالنوع الاجتماعي خلال الفترة الانتقالية، و يقدم توصيات حول تحقيق المساواة القائمة علي النوع و العدالة الاجتماعية في السودان .

يجب ان تشكل وجهات نظر المجتمعات والمجموعات المهمشة، بما في ذلك باعة وبائعات الأطعمة في القطاع غير الرسمي، والمزارعين/ات مصدرا أساسيا لصنع السياسات وفي تشكيل رؤي التغيير الاجتماعي و التحول الديمقراطي في السودان.

1. Introduction

Sudan's 2018/19 uprising, which culminated in the unseating of former president Omar Bashir and the National Congress Party (NCP) government and continues to this day, has captured the world's attention. Women's visibility and their active role in the *hirak* (mobilization/movement) have shed light on the important social, economic, cultural, and political roles women have played and continue to play in Sudan, including as self-employed street vendors and as farmers in war-affected areas and beyond. This active participation is not unusual given that women have always been active in Sudan's politics and society and due to the country's long history of women's leadership and rule.

Women resisted the rule of Bashir from the onset, given that gender and control over women's bodies and movement – especially women in socially, politically, economically, and culturally marginalized communities – were a part of the “civilization scheme” of the government of the National Islamic Front (NIF)/National Congress Party (hereinafter referred to as *Inqaz*). In Sudan's wars under Inqaz, women's bodies became an arena that Inqaz used as a battlefield to humiliate communities that resisted marginalization, domination, and control in South Sudan before its independence, the Nuba Mountains, and Darfur.⁶ Inqaz also used violence, including sexual violence, against women activists across Sudan.

Women in various marginalized parts of Sudan, including in war-affected areas such as South Kordofan, play important roles as farmers and sustainers of their communities through their production of food. In recorded interviews conducted by Khalid Kodi in 2014 (on file with the principal investigator), women farmers outlined ways in which bombings by the former regime often disrupted farming, and how they had to devise strategies to ensure that the government would not destroy at least part of their food produce.

Similarly, women who were displaced by war to large cities such as Khartoum and Port Sudan, and the urban poor who resorted to selling food and beverages to generate income, also faced harassment by the Inqaz regime, which added to their precarity as informal workers.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), informality includes a range of economic activities that do not have work-based social protections. These range from street-vending to home-based work, waste picking, domestic work, and short-term contracts. Around 61 percent (two billion) of the global employed population generate income in the informal economy (ILO, 2018). While informality is common worldwide, it is more prevalent in countries in the global south, where women constitute the majority of those who work in the informal

⁶ An elaborate discussion of the ways Inqaz oppressed women is beyond the scope of this paper. See Ali (2015), MSF (2005), and Abusharaf (2009).

sector (ILO). Such workers face many challenges as they are usually “poorer and more vulnerable” than those employed in formal sectors. In addition, they often either lack legal protection or face punitive regulations. Both the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs) and ILO Recommendation 204 on the Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy call for collecting statistical data and analyses on the informal economy to improve the lives of the working poor. In Sudan, while there is increased attention on the role of women in organizing the uprising, the experiences of self-employed women are often excluded. This warrants a rethinking at the epistemological level. In this research, we use qualitative research methods to document, analyze, and understand the experiences of women farmers and street vendors in three states in post-uprising Sudan.

As is the case in other countries in the Middle East and Africa, women street vendors in Sudan occupy paradoxical positions. On the one hand, they are key to the survival of their families and communities in the face of unemployment, lack of social services, war and displacement, and negative stereotypes that portray street vendors as faces of poverty. On the other hand, women in the informal economy, including women vendors and farmers, constitute an important political force. This is the case in several parts of Africa, especially West Africa, where women traders constitute a powerful economic and political force (Kinyanjui 2014, 63) that resists different forms of discrimination, including discrimination based on gender, social class, race, and ethnicity. During the 2018/19 uprising, women tea sellers and farmers (especially the former) became part of a historic moment of transgressive gender politics that involved further negotiations and the reappropriation of public space (Belakhdar, 2021) in a way that is reminiscent of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in 2010 and 2011, and in Algeria in 2019.

In Sudan, food and beverage sellers sit in open spaces around workplaces, buildings under construction, ministries, universities, markets, hospitals, recreational parks, and elsewhere. They use small mobile charcoal stoves to prepare coffee, tea, and other beverages to sell to customers (Azzam 2016, 77). In addition, *sit al-shai* (the tea seller) often offers a meeting space for both male and female students, political activists, intellectuals, and cultural workers who often use this space to exchange information and analyses, expand their networks, and plan activities and activism – at times *with* the support of tea sellers (Ali, forthcoming).

The overthrow of the NCP regime opens up opportunities not only for addressing gender inequality, but also for addressing *de facto* and *de jure* discrimination against women and gender-based violence, which are prevalent in Sudan. It also opens up opportunities for rethinking Sudan’s politics and governance, cultures, society, and economy from a gender and an intersectional⁷ perspective, and in a way that challenges and changes dominant patriarchal and

⁷ Intersectionality is a term that African American legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw coined in 1989 based on an analysis of the impact of the intersection of sexism and racism on African American women workers who were

racist structures within and outside the household. At the discursive level, this was evident in the slogans that protestors used:

Hai ya banat, abgu al-thabat, althawra di thawrat banat.
Girls, be steady and hang on! This revolution is a girls' revolution.

When former dictator Omar Bashir threatened protestors that if they didn't back down, he would turn Khartoum into another Darfur, protestors used the following chants in response:

Ya u'nsury wa maghroor, kul al-balad Darfur!
O'racist, arrogant [Bashir], the whole country is Darfur!

Yet, political, economic, and social challenges abound. While the uprising resulted in the unseating of former president Bashir and his top officials, “a precarious balance of power required a power sharing”⁸ between civilians and political parties that signed the Declaration of Freedom and Change (the document that governed the first two years of transition) on the one hand, and Bashir's security committee on the other. This precarious alliance collapsed when the head of Sudan's Transitional Sovereign Council staged a coup on 25 October 2021. While a detailed analysis of the coup and its impact on women farmers and street vendors is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice to say that the instability and insecurity that followed continue to affect women street vendors since they depend on their work in the streets. Similarly, women farmers in South Kordofan find themselves in a precarious security situation given the potential re-eruption of war in the area.

Adding to that, COVID-19 also affected street vendors' livelihoods. Street vendors, organized in small cooperatives in Khartoum, partnered with civil society organizations to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the major cities, especially Khartoum (interviews with Nada Ali, Khartoum, July 2021).

As discussed above, this research focuses on the experiences of self-employed women who sell food and beverages on the streets in greater Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, and Port Sudan, Sudan's only port on the Red Sea. The paper also documents the perspectives and experiences of women farmers in the Nuba Mountains, South Kordofan.

unable to rely on laws that prohibited discrimination based on sex or race against their employer. For an intersectional analysis of Sudan's politics and society, see Ali (2015).

⁸ For an elaborate discussion of the various challenges associated with the transition in Sudan, see “Sudan Country Situation,” to be published by ERF as part of the Sudan *Hirak* project.

While we focus on the roles that self-employed women played in resisting Inqaz through a politics of care that helped sustain their families and communities, we also shed light on other political roles that women street vendors played during and after the sit-in at the headquarters of Sudan's army in April-June 2019, independently and as part of the Union of Women Sellers of Food and Beverages (now *Kul al-Mihen*). In the case of women farmers in South Kordofan, we examine the politicization of their roles and contributions through their association with Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM-N), as members of cooperatives and women's organizations. We argue that these activities are part of a politics of care that is significant both politically and historically. These roles can contribute to social, economic, and political change in Sudan.

Documenting and analyzing the experiences of women farmers and street vendors before and after the uprising is important in its own right. In addition to the political factors discussed above, the experiences of women street vendors and farmers in war-affected areas resonate with policy debates about poverty eradication, food security, sustainability, peacebuilding, challenging inequalities, and gender-based discrimination – all of which are part of the commitments that the heads of state and the government made in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, the contributions of women farmers in South Kordofan contribute to building and maintaining food sovereignty, which involves enabling communities to make decisions regarding food production and agricultural policies, among other factors.

We avoid romanticizing the experiences of women farmers and street vendors in Sudan. However, we argue that addressing the immediate and long-term needs of marginalized groups contributes to achieving the vision embodied by the slogans of *hurriya, salam, wa adala* (freedom, peace, and justice), since the intersection of gender, race and ethnicity, regional location, and social class, among others, shape the experiences of women street vendors in urban areas (many of whom had been displaced by war or droughts, as discussed above). They have also shaped the experiences of farmers located in non-government-held, historically marginalized, and war-affected areas in distinct ways.

It is impossible to achieve the slogans of the uprising without challenging all forms of marginalization, violence, and injustice, including the marginalization faced by women street vendors and women farmers in the war-affected areas of Sudan. Their perspectives are important for advancing a deeper understanding of Sudan's economic, security, and political crises. Understanding these perspectives also contributes to challenging the inequalities that the global COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered. In short, achieving freedom, peace, and justice at all levels is impossible without challenging and changing the social, economic, and political structures that shape the lives of these women, and without challenging dominant ways of knowing that exclude the voices and experiences of ordinary and unseen women or represent them as victims who lack agency (Ali, forthcoming).

While many of the women interviewed for this research did not feel like they had the luxury to participate in the uprising, such as the tea sellers who took part in the sit-in, they still engaged in daily resistance through a politics of survival. Their very presence in markets and farms challenges dominant epistemologies and perceptions of politics.

As we finalized our research paper and prepared it for publication, protests continued in Sudan, following a coup that took place on 25 October 2021. We discuss the impact of this new turn of events in the body of the paper, but we note here that protests continued into 2022 in the face of violence, repression, militarization, and economic decline in the country. On 15 March 2022, the day we were expected to submit our final draft for publication, protests were underway in several parts of Sudan, following the rape of a young woman by several members of Sudan's security forces while riding a bus on Al-Masallamia bridge in Khartoum.

The remainder of this paper is divided into three sections and a conclusion. The first section outlines the theoretical framework, methodology, and research methods used in this research. Section two provides a brief history and context, focusing on Sudan's transition and the economy and on women's participation in the 2018/19 uprising. Section three, the largest part of this paper, presents and analyzes the findings of our research. The conclusion summarizes the discussion and points to the way forward, based on the findings of this research.

2. Theoretical framework and methodology

One of the important outcomes of Sudan's 2018/19 uprising is that it has invigorated women's and feminist activism and theorizing. It ushered a commitment, at least at the level of discourse, among many self-identified feminists and women activists to understanding and engaging with feminist theory, including feminist theory that originates in the writings and experiences of Black women in the United States, such as the theory of intersectionality, and (to a lesser extent) analyses that originate in theorizing struggles in post-colonial communities in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and Latin America (Ali, forthcoming). These two bodies of theory overlap with feminist epistemological critiques of social science approaches that exclude the experiences and perspectives of women, particularly women who are marginalized socially, economically, or politically, depending on the context (cf. Beneria et. al, 2016; Enloe, 2014). They also overlap with theoretical perspectives that seek to integrate a concern with gender and other aspects of difference into social sciences and policy frameworks that focus on the "every day" (cf. Bayat, 2013; Harding, 2004; Ali, 1994; and Smith, 1987).⁹

Methodology and research methods

⁹ Our research is also informed by the literature on self and community care, including literature by women of color in and outside the United States. An elaborate discussion of this body of literature is beyond the scope of this paper.

An interdisciplinary team that consists of a principal investigator and four researchers from the three areas covered in this research (greater Khartoum, South Kordofan, and Port Sudan) carried out this research with the support of three research assistants. Researchers (including the principal investigator) drafted different sections of the report in English or in Arabic. The principal investigator synthesized the different contributions and translated text where needed.

Research in Khartoum, Port Sudan, and the Nuba Mountains took place in April and May 2021. The principal investigator carried out additional research for another project in July and August 2021, on which we draw partially. We used a community-level qualitative approach. The principal investigator trained researchers and research assistants (RAs) in qualitative research methods and research ethics. These researchers and RAs conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) in Khartoum and in the Nuba Mountains. Self-employed women in Port Sudan refused to take part in FGDs but consented to be interviewed. Reasons included difficulties in coordinating an FGD due to busy women who did not want to lose income, and women who were not organized in a cooperative or an organization and were not prepared to take part.

Researchers carried out 21 interviews with self-employed women street vendors in greater Khartoum, and 16 interviews with self-employed women street vendors in Port Sudan. Interviewees in Khartoum included the members and founders of Kul al-Mihen. However, participants in Port Sudan and the remote parts of Khartoum said they were not members of Kul al-Mihen. Researchers also interviewed selected officials in the three states, including officials in the Ministry of Social Services in Khartoum and Port Sudan and officials in the Ministry of Justice in Khartoum.

In the Nuba Mountains, research took place at a time when peace negotiations between SPLM-N and the Transitional Government of Sudan were underway. Negotiations culminated in the adoption of a Declaration of Principles signed by the head of Sudan's Sovereign Council, Abdelfattah Al-Burhan, and the president of SPLM-N, Abdelaziz Al-Hilo. The researcher met with women farmers as well as the governor of the region and officials in the Directorate of Agriculture. She also met with the heads of civil society and women's organizations. FGDs took the form of *Jabana* (coffee) gatherings.

Researchers obtained informed, verbal consent from participants prior to the interviews and FGDs. Given the timing of the research (in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic), team members observed social distancing measures and other safety precautions. Each participant partaking in the interviews and FGDs received a face mask and hand sanitizer. In the Nuba Mountains, the researcher also delivered short COVID-19 awareness sessions prior to the interviews and FGDs.

History, Context, and Sudan's Economy Under Transition

Sudan's history of colonialism and slavery and post-colonial history of socio-economic and political exclusion after the country achieved political independence in 1956 have produced hierarchies that sanctioned underdevelopment, inequality, and marginalization, especially in the remote regions of Sudan. A predominantly northern male elite sought to impose a singular identity on a diverse population, which added a cultural and ethnic dimension to marginalization and fueled civil war in the country. Inqaz constituted the peak of the crisis of the old, patriarchal Sudan (cf. Ali, 2015; El-Battahani, 2012; Harir, 1997; and T. Ali, 1989). Below, we discuss the impact of the politics and policies of the Inqaz regime on Sudan's economy.

Sudan's economy under Inqaz

Inqaz devastated Sudan's economy through corruption and the hoarding and exploitation of the country's natural resources, including oil. The regime used these resources to fund wars against the people of Sudan. The regime further instigated dependency on fossil resources. It limited investment in other significant sectors of the economy, such as agriculture and industry. Consequently, when the country lost 75 percent of its oil resources after the secession of South Sudan, Sudan experienced an economic downfall with soaring inflation rates, shrinking GDP, and a tumbling currency.

Bashir's regime initiated economic reforms to stabilize the economy and address the widening fiscal gap at a high human cost, as these economic policies involved reduced public spending on health and education and an increase in the prices of basic commodities. The government also phased out fuel subsidies.¹⁰ The rise in prices caused public unrest inspired by the Arab Spring in 2013, which the former government suppressed ruthlessly. Although several protesters were killed or injured, the resistance continued, including in the form of country-wide civil disobedience due to the lifting of government subsidies on imported medicine in 2016 (see Ali, 2019). During this time, self-employed women used meager resources to educate their children and feed their families as food prices skyrocketed. As discussed earlier. These women faced harassment at the hands of the police as well as officials in different localities.

The economy continued to deteriorate, including during the oil boom between 1999-2011. Consequently, in 2019, the estimated number of Sudanese individuals who lived below the poverty line of one US dollar was 65 percent (Nour, 2020). Multidimensional poverty indicators also place Sudan at a low ranking. For example, Sudan's Human Development Indicators value of 0.513 is one of the lowest in the Middle East region (UNDP, 2020) as the former

¹⁰ The former regime still priced fuel below its cost according to a report published by the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning in July 2020. This, according to the report, diverted money from education, health services, and the building of infrastructure. The overuse of oil and gas also contributed to increased environmental pollution.

government's policies resulted in the inadequate and unequal provision of social services such as health and education.

The economy during Sudan's transition

As discussed earlier, economic deterioration, poverty, and inequality were key causes of the 2018/19 uprising. The government's further removal of wheat subsidies led to a sharp increase in the price of bread. This sparked demonstrations in Damazine, Atbara, Khartoum, and other parts of the country in December 2018. Opposition to austerity measures soon turned into demands to overthrow the government. Protests continued despite Bashir's threats to use force and turn Sudan into "another Syria" at a rally held in what is now Freedom Square.

On 6 April 2019, protesters, in an act of defiance and courage, decided to organize a sit-in at the headquarters of Sudan's army. Bashir was forced to step down five days later, and a series of negotiations between the military and civilian opposition ensued. These culminated in the signing of a constitutional declaration that ushered in the reign of a transitional, military-civilian government in Sudan.

The transitional government that assumed power in July 2019 chose a path of economic reform rather than transformation. The government envisioned a two-track economic strategy, which involved stabilizing the economy in the short run by controlling inflation while positioning Sudan on a sustainable development path. The government sought to secure international support to revitalize the economy by reintroducing Sudan to the international scene and seeking debt cancellation and relief, given the country's debt of over USD 50 billion. Sudan's creditors include a diverse group of countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, China, Kuwait, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in addition to multilateral institutions like the World Bank, the IMF, and the African Development Bank. The United States had also imposed economic sanctions on the country due to the politics of the Inqaz regime, which further complicated economic policymaking.¹¹

¹¹ Sudan's debt crisis dates to the early 1970s and 1980s when the country borrowed large amounts of funds from multilateral and bilateral sources. The rise in development expenditures after 1973 was financed, in large measure, by external capital. Sudan started in the mid-1970s and 1980s to face a balance of payments crisis, which was a consequence of flawed economic management policies compounded by external factors, such as the sharp increase in the cost of petroleum imports, a steep rate of international inflation, particularly in 1973-75, and the serious decline in cotton production. By 1982, external payments arrears had accumulated to above USD 2.2 billion, growing from USD 0.2 billion in November 1979. The IMF suspended lending operations to Sudan in July 1984 due to the accumulation of loan repayment arrears. The World Bank suspended its lending program in 1993 after the Sudanese government went into arrears on loan repayments. Sudan's former Minister of Finance Ibrahim El-Badawi observes that in Sudan, high indebtedness was almost always associated with authoritarian regimes. The bulk of Sudan's debt was contracted during the Numeiri regime (1969-1985). Therefore, it was a matter of necessity for the transitional government to deal with inherited debts. Avoiding future crises, according to El-Badawi, hinges on having a capable and accountable government (Email communication with El-Badawi, June 2021).

The transitional government identified the debt crisis as a priority. The government undertook various measures, including efforts to include Sudan in the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, which is an IMF and World Bank framework for debt relief. To be considered for the HIPC, a country must satisfy certain requirements. For Sudan, the HIPC process entailed the pursuance of an economic reform program to reduce inflation through budget deficit reduction. This entailed the lifting of subsidies on basic commodities and the liberalization of the Sudanese currency. It also involved producing a strategy for poverty reduction, i.e., a poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP).¹²

In June 2021, Sudan was officially recognized as eligible to join the HIPC initiative. As part of the program, 90 percent of the country's external debt was written off. The country was also promised development and technical aid. While evidence from HIPC countries indicates a considerable impact on poverty reduction, success is not always guaranteed. For example, several HIPC countries have reaccumulated debt after their debt was written off due to unsound policies and economic management. This program was suspended after the coup of 25 October 2021.

There is extensive literature on the human cost of introducing austerity measures in countries in the global south. Sudan is not an exception, given that these policies have affected the livelihoods and lives of a large segment of the population and widened inequalities within the country, which caused resentment and unrest.

When we concluded this research in July 2021, the Sudan Food Price Bulletin¹³ indicated the high prices of staple foods across Sudan, including in greater Khartoum, Eastern Sudan (Port Sudan), and Kadugli (South Kordofan).¹⁴ Price rises and consequential food insecurity continued to affect vast communities across Sudan. All self-employed food and beverage sellers interviewed for this research said that while they were pleased that the *kasha* (rounding-up and arrest of food sellers who did not have a license) had become less frequent for some after the overthrow of Inqaz, they continued to suffer because of high prices.

¹² Previous attempts before the revolution to join the HIPC were blocked, mainly because of outstanding political issues with the United States.

¹³ United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2021, May). Sudan Food Price Bulletin. https://fews.net/sites/default/files/documents/reports/PB_SD_202105.pdf

¹⁴ The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) monitors changes and trends associated with staple food prices in settings affected by food insecurity through providing charts that show up-to-date monthly prices compared to trends in the previous year and to a five-year average price. Wheat, sorghum, and millet constitute the main staples for low-income households and communities in Sudan. Communities mainly consume wheat in Northern Sudan, while sorghum is the common staple food in central and eastern Sudan. Food insecurity is chronic in the latter. Millet is the main staple food in Darfur and in parts of Kordofan (FEWS NET, 2021, pp. 1-5).

The transitional government introduced policies and measures to address the impact of structural adjustment on low-income families and communities. These included raising the salaries of government employees, including teachers and nurses. Employees in different ministries, such as the federal ministries of justice and social affairs, started cooperatives to ease the impact of price increases. The government also introduced programs such as *Sila'ati* (my commodity/subsidized food), and *Thamarat* (fruits)/Sudan's National Family Support Program (suspended after the coup of 25 October), to address the impact of austerity measures on the population. Those were creative short-term interventions that the government did not roll out universally due to political instability and minister shuffles, among other factors. Below we discuss one of these programs.

Sudan's Family Support Program

The Sudan Family Support Program (SFSP) is a quasi-universal basic income scheme intended to provide financial assistance to low-income families. It involves paying eligible families the equivalent of five US dollars per person per month. The plan was for the SFSP to cover 80 percent of Sudan's over 47 million population, implement the program in phases, starting with Khartoum, South Darfur, Kassala, and the Red Sea, and eventually expand to cover all of Sudan.

The program received much support from the donor community, which pledged more than two billion dollars to finance it. The SFSP is considered a remarkable intervention given its innovative design and wide coverage. It is considered an improvement on what is considered “dysfunctional commodity subsidies” as it “empowers Sudanese people” economically by using technology to directly deliver the money to eligible individuals and families.

Despite the program's potential to provide a shield of protection for the poor in Sudan against economic hardship, several factors undermined its success. Challenges included difficulties in identifying and registering beneficiaries and the involvement of intermediaries who charged a high markup to transfer money to recipients.

There are mixed views on the effectiveness of direct financial assistance to communities. On the one hand, some argue that, if implemented efficiently, cash transfers hold better promise for marginalized communities compared to commodity subsidies. This includes the informal sector, which is dominated by women and often the most affected by the lack of social security protections (Nour, 2012).¹⁵ Others believe that while financial assistance may have a positive income effect in the short term, it does not address the root causes of precarious work. Moreover, the ILO (2019) maintains that money transfers are not sufficient in improving the work conditions and prospects of informal laborers. The ILO (2019) proposes a two-tier policy where financial assistance is accompanied by active labor market policies (ALMPs). ALMPs involve

¹⁵ According to ANND (2016), 56 percent of women in the labor market in Sudan are in the informal economy.

interventions to improve work prospects, such as training, public employment programs, and labor market services.

The HIPIC process stopped after the coup of 25 October 2021. The IMF, World Bank, and other international parties suspended funding that was earmarked to finance economic policies such as the social protection program of Thamarat (World Bank, 2021). The fate of these policies is a source of concern for the people who accessed them. Jawhara Kanu, a young Khartoum-based economist and a founding member of the Sudanese Women Economists Association, wrote in November 2021: “During a weekly coffee ceremony, the ladies in my block... strongly debated the legitimacy of the coup, but they seem to have agreed on one thing – a mutual concern for losing their Thamarat stipend and a complaint about not having Sila’ty initiated in the block yet” (Kanu, 2021).

These developments compound the economic crisis in Sudan. As of March 2022, the exchange rate has passed the 500 mark. Prices, including the price of bread and fuel, have increased as a result. Because of the suspension of international programs, the Ministry of Finance has announced that the 2022 budget will rely instead on domestic sources, which implies increasing the taxes on the private sector and lifting subsidies off the remaining goods to compensate for the loss of funds. In 2022, the Ministry of Finance increased the electricity tariff for the residential sector. The implication of these hard adjustments will impact marginalized populations in Sudan, including women street vendors.

In the next section, we discuss the experiences of women street vendors and farmers during the 2018/19 uprising, and during Sudan’s transition.

4. Self-employed women street vendors in Khartoum and Port Sudan

Sudan’s uprising was the culmination of concerted activism by different political movements and activists that started on 30 June 1989. Sudanese research academics and journalists, among others, have delivered numerous lectures and written articles, books, dissertations, and book chapters in Arabic, English, and French, about the different aspects of Sudan’s 2018/19 uprising, noting the key role that women activists, organizations, professional associations, youth groups, neighborhood committees, and others played. In this section, we give a brief account of this uprising from a gender perspective, touching briefly on the history of women’s organizing in Sudan.

While the uprising started in several cities outside Khartoum in early December 2018, as discussed above, the organizing and planned daily protests that followed and culminated in a sit-in at the army headquarters, which was described as a utopia, was characterized by high communal solidarity and harmony, collective food-making, free medical assistance, and cultural and civic engagement. In other words, the uprising was not a spontaneous expression of

immediate discontent with an increase in prices. Instead, it was rooted in a collective desire for freedom, peace, and justice, *and* in ending an economic crisis. Marginalized communities, including self-employed women street vendors and their children, took an active part in the uprising. As Ali (2020) has argued:

It was not an accident that one of the key social groups that participated in the sit-in were women street vendors, many of whom are members of a 27,000-member association. The government of Bashir had targeted these women since the early 1990s and up to 2018 when the local government of Khartoum state harassed petty traders selling tibish (cucumber and peanut sauce) for not paying dues to local authorities. These practices stood in striking contrast to the billions of Sudanese pounds and the hundreds of thousands of Euros found in the basement of Bashir's residence alone. The transitional government has repealed the laws that the previous regime used to restrict the freedom of movement of these women, and which exposed them to violence and discrimination. Yet, it is not clear whether regime change would also change the economic and social conditions of ...women [street vendors].

It is important to note that during one of these kashas, where police officers chase street vendors, confiscate their meager capital, and fine them, a tea seller who was pregnant fell down while trying to escape police brutality and eventually died (cf. Fagiri 2009).

The story of Awadia Mahmoud Kuku, founder of Kul al-Mihen, and the stories of women farmers and street vendors interviewed for this research, indicate that the overthrow of the Bashir regime has reduced the scale of kasha activities, but that changes in their daily lives are much slower.

Kuku founded a cooperative that aimed to protect women street vendors from kasha, and to support them in other ways. The Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), a regional women's organization, helped the cooperative create safe spaces inside one of the large markets in Khartoum, with support from the Dutch. The cooperative eventually developed into a large union that supported women street vendors in different ways, including through the provision of training as well as help with school fees for the children of self-employed vendors. The union also challenged the stigma against tea sellers by communities and by the former regime. Strategies to do so included actions of solidarity by women's organizations, including No to Women Oppression, during which middle-class women activists took the *banbar* (stool) of the tea seller and sold tea.

Mahmoud and many members of the cooperative union were an integral part of the sit-in between April and June 2020. They displayed a politics of care that sustained activists and other participants in the protests. She told members of the research team:

I went to Alqiyada for the sit-in and stayed there until it was disbursed in June. The first day I went there, I addressed the protesters. I asked for support from a civil society organization, and they donated food ingredients. I started cooking and preparing food for protesters during the sit-in. We made and distributed 10,000 meals per day!

Awadia expressed support for the transitional government and met former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamduk when he first assumed responsibility. She shared some of the aspirations of members of her union. She had wanted to join the Legislative Council which, until the collapse of the transitional government, never materialized.

Initially, women participated as Sudanese citizens in neighborhood-resistance committees, as spokespersons for the Sudanese Professionals Association, and as bloggers on Twitter and Facebook, chanting that this was a girls' revolution. Many young women took part in the protests behind the backs of their family members, given that many families prevented young women from taking part in the protests out of fear and because of dominant patriarchal beliefs.

In the early days of the uprising, protestors did not advance a vision of gender equality or women's participation in a post-Inqaz Sudan. Women activists started to pay attention later when they found out that despite women's critical role during the uprising, women were virtually absent in the committees that decided on a post-Bashir order. Consequently, women's groups organized two protests at the sit-in, demanding women's participation at all levels and a commitment to equality between women and men (Ali, 2020).

Protestors also revived the figure of the Kandace/Kandaka (queen mothers/warrior queens) from Sudan's ancient civilizations. The photo of Alaa Salah, standing on the roof of a car, dressed in a white gown, and chanting "my grandfather is Taharqa and my grandmother was a Kandace," captured the attention of global media and drew attention to Sudan's uprising beyond usual activist solidarities. Almost overnight, women became "icons of the revolution" (Ali, 2020).

As discussed above, during the 30-year rule of Inqaz, women were at the receiving end of much of the regime's oppression through discriminatory laws, restriction of public spaces, and violence. Discrimination and violence particularly affected women in the marginalized areas of Sudan, especially war-affected areas such as Darfur, where government soldiers used rape as a weapon of war. This is evident in the testimonies of victims and survivors of rape who shared precarious, racist narratives of the soldiers who raped them. When Bashir threatened protestors that they should "learn a lesson" from what had happened in Darfur and not "force" him to use violence, protestors across Sudan started describing him as *unsuri* (racist) and *maghrur* (arrogant), informing him that they believed the whole country was Darfur. This was evident in the art, murals, and graffiti that protestors made during the sit-in and afterward.

The uprising reached each part of Sudan, including non-government-held areas in the Nuba Mountains. Women farmers and representatives of women's organizations in Kauda, South Kordofan, told a member of the research team that they took part in demonstrations in solidarity with women and communities in government-held areas during the uprising. The transitional government prioritized peacebuilding and signed peace agreements with several armed movements that have been integrated into the council of ministers and the Sovereign Council as of this writing. The SPLM-N had declared a unilateral ceasefire after the overthrow of Bashir, but made demands related to governance, the relationship between religion and the state, and security sector reform, which some parts of the government disagreed with. Women's participation in peace negotiations and issues around gender equality (as it relates to separation between the state and religion) constitutes an important element of Sudan's peace negotiations. A thorough discussion of these themes is beyond the scope of this paper.

Women street vendors and farmers interviewed for this research participated in and/or reflected on the uprising. Street vendors who live and work in the outskirts of the city and those in Port Sudan said they followed the uprising on the news or by following customer conversations. Street vendors whose stations were near the area of the sit-in, or who worked in nearby areas, such as the Nile Avenue or the University of Khartoum, said they participated in the uprising despite potential risks. As Cornwall has argued, "The risks that [workers in the informal economy] may face in engaging in activism of any kind may be so substantial as to threaten their very existence." (Cornwall, 2013, ix). The same applies to workers "at the margins of agricultural and waste industries" (Cornwall, 2013, ix). Yet, in Sudan, women street vendors participated in the uprising as part of "ordinary people" whom Bayat (2013) argued have changed Middle Eastern politics.

As discussed earlier, COVID-19 exposed and widened inequality between different social groups in Sudan, especially self-employed street vendors, who were already stigmatized and at times seen as vectors of disease. COVID-19 has also led to a soar in gender-based violence.¹⁶ The majority of women interviewed for this research, particularly self-employed street vendors, said they were out of work for several months during the lockdown. Others said they continued to work, exposing themselves and others to COVID-19. While some of the interviewees said they wore masks, many did not. For example, none of the women interviewed in Port Sudan, Eastern Sudan, wore masks. Similarly, women farmers who participated in this research did not wear masks. Some said they thought COVID-19 had ended.

¹⁶ A review of the literature on the topic by Mittal and Singh (2020) showed that, as was the case with previous pandemics, "there has been an alarming rise in the incidents of gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic." The authors found that factors contributing to the surge in gender-based violence included economic insecurity and the consumption of alcohol. The authors argue that the limited services and redress available for those affected by gender-based violence often worsen their situation.

Regarding gender-based violence, it is not clear whether women participants in this study have faced gender-based violence due to the lockdown. In South Kordofan, women farmers said they did not experience violence in the household. Nonetheless, gender-based violence currently constitutes an important concern of women's organizations that have organized several campaigns following high-profile cases of violence against women, including murder.

Space is gendered (Massey 1994, 2005), racialized, and embedded in class hierarchies. The women we interviewed relate to Sudan's geographic and political spaces in diverse and distinct ways. Some of the interviewees moved from war-affected South Kordofan and Darfur to Khartoum. Kuku, for example, was displaced to Khartoum by the war in the Nuba Mountains. Her experience of war and displacement shaped her ideas and narrative about Khartoum.

Khartoum is composed of seven localities. Around 13.5 percent of Sudan's population lives in Khartoum (Bakhtin, 2015). Relatively luxurious buildings, hotels, and malls co-exist with shanty towns in this city of socio-economic and political contradictions, where thousands of marginalized city dwellers struggle to make ends meet. The same applies to Port Sudan and its surrounding areas,¹⁷ where "economic marginalization and food insecurity have pushed people...into towns in and outside Eastern Sudan." While some tribes in Eastern Sudan have strict gender roles that sanction segregation between women and men, women still engage in multiple activities, "including in the informal economy, and as farmers. They also take up menial, low-paid jobs such as cleaning. Those who have received education work as teachers and healthcare workers" (Small Arms Survey, 2015, 40).

It is thus impossible to understand the experiences and contributions of women, including self-employed food and beverage sellers in cities like Khartoum and Port Sudan and women farmers whose work is semi-regulated and supported by a political administration outside the control of the transitional government, without paying attention to power and politics.

The tea seller constitutes a political institution in her own right (Ali, Forthcoming). Some ventured into the informal sector when their husbands or other members of their households lost their jobs for political reasons when Inqaz assumed power in 1989 (Ali, 1994). Others moved to main cities because of droughts that resulted from failure of governance, or to escape conflict in their areas.

Importantly, many food sellers, especially tea sellers, built close relations with and supported activists, including during various demonstrations that took place in and after 2013 when

¹⁷ For an elaborate background about Eastern Sudan, including gender relations in Port Sudan, see the Small Arms Survey (2015).

Sudanese demonstrators took to the streets following the 2010/11 uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and beyond. As discussed above, food sellers played key roles in preparing and distributing food for protestors during the sit-in at the headquarters of Sudan's army. The offspring of tea sellers were active in the uprising, and some were killed.

5. Experiences of women farmers in the Nuba Mountains, South Kordofan

Women play important roles. They are the backbone of the community.

Salih El-Badel, Governor of the Nuba Mountains, South Kordofan.

We cultivate in Jabarik (sing. Jubraka: small farms near their homes). We cultivate broad beans, sorghum, okra, tomatoes, and more. We start by clearing the area and by making sure animals are locked...insects and pests affect farming, but we use ashes to control them. When we harvest what we cultivated we become self-sufficient. We also make dried tomatoes, pumpkins, eggplant, and zucchini and use it during the dry season.

FGD, Nuba Mountains, April 2021.

Women across South Kordofan, especially in the Nuba Mountains, are known for their contributions to the economy, politics, and society. The main source of livelihood in the area is seasonal rain-irrigated agriculture. The rainy season continues for more than six months of the year. It often yields good produce if farmers put in good effort. Insufficient rain and floods often impact the produce and limit access to food. Interviewees relayed that during Bashir's era, the area was isolated from the rest of the country, with limited access to commodities. After the uprising, markets increased on the border with government-affected areas. This has impacted food security given that communities at times sell their nutritious produce, such as baobab, tamarind, broad beans, sesame, and sorghum, and in return, they buy sugar and tea. This creates food scarcity. However, the Directorate of Agriculture monitors and addresses food scarcity.¹⁸ Communities and officials in South Kordofan articulate a view of agriculture and the cultivation of food that is synonymous with the concept of *food sovereignty*. Interviewees did not use the term "food sovereignty," but they said that agriculture and food production ensured dignity, life, and freedom.

For example, the head of the Agricultural Directorate in South Kordofan told a member of the research team: "We put so much effort into ensuring there is enough food and nutrition. This is important for our very existence because food is connected to life and freedom. Without it, we become vulnerable to exploitation. That is why we seek self-sufficiency" (Interview, April 2021). This official said that she valued the role of women farmers in ensuring that indigenous communities survive and thrive. Given that the majority of men are involved in the army, women

¹⁸ There are different perspectives regarding the cross-border movement of individuals and communities in the non-government-held areas. A discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

shoulder farming responsibilities alongside other roles such as cooking, caring for children, and fetching water. In the absence of healthcare facilities, women often use local herbs and plants to meet the healthcare needs of their community. While farming is defined in political terms by community leaders, the majority of women in the area are organized in a women's union or are otherwise members of the SPLM-N or farmer cooperatives.

A participant in an FGD told a member of our team: "During the war, we learned how to hide and how to protect and care for children. We work hard to make sure we have enough food. For us, food is connected to life and to freedom."

The experiences of women farmers in Kauda and in the Nuba Mountains are different from the experiences of agricultural laborers who reside in some of the big cities, such as Khartoum. We discuss the experiences of these women briefly below.

Our research team interviewed women who live in one of the remote areas north of Khartoum and work as agricultural wage laborers on farms outside the city. These women usually clean and prepare land for cultivation. They also harvest produce. Women gather before sunrise each day and wait for recruiters. Their wages are low. At the time of the interviews, women earned SDG 500 (just over one US dollar in May 2021) per day. Working without contracts or benefits such as health insurance, women experience harsh precarity. If one becomes sick or is injured at work, landlords do not bear responsibility. As participants in an FGD put it: "This work is not safe for us, if one needed to pee, she will ask her friends to go with her." They face harassment from landlords, but they cannot speak: "the landlord can touch you, but you cannot say anything. Otherwise, he will stop you from work."

The area where the women live lacks basic infrastructure and services such as water. They get water from a well, using an electric pump.

Participants of the FGDs told researchers that they do not access the services provided by neighborhood committees intended to ease the burden of the economic crisis on citizens. These include access to bakeries for bread or getting gas for cooking. These are facilitations normally carried out in neighborhoods to ease the burden of scarce goods on people. These women said they continued to work during the uprising as they could not afford to lose their daily wages. They have also continued to work through the COVID-19 lockdown. They said they did not access any of the social services launched by the transitional government, which were discussed earlier in this research.

The story of one of the women that the research team interviewed illustrates and reflects the experiences of many others. Nasra (not her real name) is a woman in her 50s who insisted that one of the researchers feels her hands before interviewing her, stating that "these are not a

woman's hands. [My hands] are ruined because of farming." Her hands were rough and had small scratches. Nasra told interviewees:

I came from Darfur 17 years ago, my husband left me with seven children, I do not know anything about him. Children need food and clothes. I have been sick for more than three years now, but I cannot afford to see a doctor. I wake up before sunrise and I go immediately to wait for the cars [agents who recruit daily wage farm laborers] to come. If I were late, they would leave without me. We sit on the floor. [We are] many women, and when a car approaches, we all rush to it so we could get a spot. [We board the car] and then we work from sunrise until sunset for little money. I tried to find other work. I used to make and sell hats in the market, but this did not [guarantee] money every day, so I went back to the farms. Landlords do not care about us. They only want us to work. They do not care if we were injured or sick. We do not even have breaks for prayers. Sometimes we must walk back home, and this is a long distance to walk. Then the next morning we go back to the farms.

Interview in North Khartoum, April 2021.

While women friends, neighbors, and relatives look out for each other in this community, at times, meager resources and exploitation by farm owners render solidarity almost impossible. Nasra told researchers: "When it is a harvesting season, some women become competitive. They start calling their friends and relatives and exclude others. For example, if I got sick or missed a day, I might not find my spot on the next day. Women themselves sometimes exclude one another."

This attitude is not common among self-employed women. There are abundant narratives of solidarity, such as women who encourage customers who ask for large amounts of *kisra* (sour flat bread) to split their orders with other street vendors so they can finish their stock at the same time.

5. Conclusions

Since decent work deficits are often traceable to good governance deficits, the government has a primary role to play. Political will and commitment and the structures and mechanisms for proper governance are essential. Specific laws, policies, and programmes to deal with the factors responsible for informality, to extend protection to all workers and to remove the barriers to entry into the mainstream economy will vary by country and circumstance. Their formulation and implementation should involve the social partners and the intended beneficiaries in the informal economy. Especially in countries struggling with abject poverty and with a large and rapidly growing labor force, measures should not restrict opportunities for those who have no other means of livelihood. However, it should not be a job at any price or under any circumstances.

ILO (2002), Resolution Concerning Decent Work in the Informal Economy, Para. 21.

Sudan's uprising and protests have involved wide citizen participation across sex and gender, race and ethnicity, age, different abilities, class and socio-economic background, and region. Through the slogans of *hurriya, salam, wa adala* (freedom, peace, and justice) and *madaniya* (civilian governance), protestors and political bodies, such as professional associations, initiatives of university professors, political parties, and women and youth organizations and movements, articulated the dreams of generations of Sudanese individuals who sought and continue to seek freedom from fear, freedom from want, and social justice. Women, including women street vendors and farmers across Sudan, either took part in the uprising or otherwise followed it on the news and via conversations on the streets.

Women's wide participation in the uprising has shed light on women's roles in Sudan's history. Their organizing and resistance to successive military governments, as well as the ways in which they organized in and outside Sudan (including in areas not under the direct control of the government) sought to challenge the patriarchy as it manifested in different parts of Sudan. We argue that the unseating of Bashir has opened up a space for women's organizations committed to gender equality to debate and address some of the structural factors that obstruct achieving gender equality. However, hurdles abound.

For women in the informal economy, including self-employed women street vendors, for example, while harassment by police and other officials has declined, they are yet to witness and benefit from the fruits of the uprising. We argue that even if the uprising had achieved its promises of freedom, peace, and justice, achieving social change and gender equality (especially for women who have been historically marginalized) would not be achieved, as this is a long-term process that requires concerted effort over decades. The fact that women street vendors and women farmers are now part of or are forming political and social networks, however, promises long-term social change and transformation. This does not mean romanticizing the roles of self-employed women.

Women street vendors took to the streets in the face of the NCP's economic and political policies. Their very presence on the streets despite harassment and exploitation has challenged the NCP regime. Similarly, women farmers in war-affected areas in South Kordofan continued to work to feed their families and communities at a time when the NCP government challenged the very existence of these communities. Both groups, in solidarity, play key roles in ensuring food security. Farmers in the Nuba Mountains contribute to sustainability. The tea seller, on the other hand, constitutes a political institution that carries out a politics of care. Both groups can play important roles in challenging deeper structures that obstruct freedom, peace, justice, and gender inequality. Their perspectives should inform policy and politics in Sudan, as well as knowledge production efforts.

Experiences from other parts of the world, such as South Asia, offer insights into ways women's organizing in self-employed women's networks may amplify and strengthen their voices, so they can contribute to social change and transformation in meaningful ways, including through "challenging the oppressive features of globalization."

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Annex

To the memory of Mohamed Bouazizi, for he, too, was a street vendor.
Nada, Sawsan, Naglaa, Mai, Asjad, Hafsa, Sittana, and Ibrahim.



Photo Credits:

Cover, left: Focus group discussion, Kauda, South Kordofan, April 2021 ©Naglaa Abdulwahid
Cover, right: President of the Union of Women Food and Beverage Sellers (now *Kul al-Mihen*) Awadia Mahmoud at a meeting organized by MANSAM in Khartoum, July 2019 ©Nada Mustafa Ali
This page: Focus group discussion in greater Khartoum, April 2021 ©Mai Azzam



Young people from the 'A&E street' built a children's intensive care unit in *Gaafar Ibnaouf* hospital in 2015. They invited Um Gisma, a displaced tea seller whose stall was their meeting point, to cut the ribbon, amidst critiques by Inqaz officials



Even though some of the tea sellers interviewed for this research said the overthrow of Inqaz has eased restrictions on their work in the street; some continue to face harassment at the hand of officials in Khartoum's locality. Hadia (pictured above) was born in 1997 and is responsible for her three children and for her sister's three children. She sells tea in *Alsug al-Arabi* in Khartoum. After facing several kashas and accumulating debt because of her loss of capital, she protested and insisted to meet with government officials to seek assistance. At the time of interview, she had not received any financial support from the government. She is not a member of the Cooperative Union of Teasellers (Interview, 7 July 2021).



Left: Figure 1: In-depth interview, Kauda. April 2021. Photo by Naglaa Abdulwahid.

Right: Figure 2: "Rights are not given but taken," woman farmer in Kauda. April 2021. Photo by Naglaa Abdulwahid.

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¹⁹ Team members participate in this research in their personal capacity. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the position of any institution.