

“I’m against all of the laws of this regime”: What Sudan’s women want

Saturday 3 August 2019, by [AL-NAGAR Samia](#), [TØNNESSEN Liv](#) (Date first published: 2 July 2019).

We interviewed 64 female protesters about why they are demonstrating. Here’s what they said.

Throughout [Sudan](#)’s ongoing revolution, women have led the chants for freedom, justice and peace. From the December 2018 protests to enormous marches just a few days ago, female demonstrators have led the way in [occupying](#) the streets in the face of arrest, torture, sexual assault, teargas and live bullets. Even after security forces killed 118 people and raped dozens on 3 June, women from a diversity of classes, generations, religions, educational levels and ethnicities have continued to stand together to [demand change](#) as opposition talks with the Transitional Military Council have stalled.

In order to understand women’s motivations, we interviewed 64 female protesters. Interestingly, some spoke directly of gender, with one saying: “There is no equality and that is why I went out and participated in the demonstrations...I believe in gender equality”. Meanwhile, others directly contradicted this framing. Another protester explained: “We’re protesting for a better life, not for equality between genders, because at the end of the day we are Muslims. We are asking for our rights, but not in all aspects”.

While all those interviewed said the primary goal was to overthrow the regime, the women also associated a range of meanings to the movement’s demands for “Freedom, Peace and Justice”.

Justice and accountability for sexual violence

Many female protesters said that the state must be held accountable for injustices committed during their 30 years in power. Some, especially those from war zones, talked specifically of sexual violence. “Women have demands to hold accountable and punish the perpetrators of sexual abuse in Darfur and other parts of the country,” said one.

Several women, particularly younger ones, expressed fears that the security forces would use sexual violence against the protests today. These fears came true on 3 June as the Rapid Support Forces – a paramilitary unit that grew out of the *Janjaweed* militia responsible for atrocities in Darfur – allegedly committed dozens of rapes. “Although women wear proper clothes, they are exposed to verbal abuse and physical violence, and this they [the abusers] do with Islam as their cover,” said one university graduate.

Women’s rights activists have focused on sexual violence since long before the revolution. The issue came to particular prominence in the 2000s when the International Criminal Court indicted former President Omar al-Bashir and several of his cronies for the systematic and widespread use of sexual abuse in Darfur. Today, the belief that state officials must be brought to justice is widespread among the protesters.

“Justice to me is that all of the parties in the previous regime should pay for what they put our

nation through,” said a woman from South Kordofan, where accusations of sexual violence are also coming to the surface. “They should be held accountable and punished for the sexual abuse in Darfur and other parts of the country.”

Freedom to make life choices

Many protesters, especially younger ones, said that the freedom to make both big and small life choices was an important demand. “I want to be free to decide what I wear and where to go out and when to come back home,” said a 28-year-old university graduate. She and others explicitly talked about certain restrictions in Sudan’s Muslim family law such as those that regulate a woman’s right to choose her husband, work outside the marital home, and have custody of children. One interviewee declared: “I demonstrate against the family law that will take my children away from me if I divorce my husband.”

Many women also talked of the freedom to move in public spaces and dress as they wish free of state regulation. These issues were raised by protesters of different class backgrounds, from university students to tea sellers. At the moment, a range of public order laws and presidential decrees – purportedly based on Islam – govern women’s ability to work during the evenings and effectively require them to wear the hijab in public. Public order police are empowered to make arrests under these laws without charge and imprison alleged offenders without trial.

Many protesters see these regulations as oppressive and contrary to the dignity of women. “I’m against all of the laws of this regime...especially the public order law which has tortured the Sudanese woman and limited her thinking, freedom and movement,” said one interviewee. “The most annoying thing for me is the forced hijab,” said another. Some protesters objected in particular to the use of religion to justify these repressive state measures. “I think religion is about your relationship with God... My relation[ship] with God might be better than theirs and it is not important to show that through the hijab,” said one protester.

Women’s rights activists have long argued for abolishing these laws, calling them unconstitutional and un-Islamic. Now, the revolution in Sudan is doing the same and demanding freedom for women.

Legal reform and gender equality

For some protesters, a key demand of the revolution is gender equality. They want to see equality of rights in Sudan and – learning from the 1964 and 1985 [popular uprisings](#) after which women revolutionaries were sidelined – know they will have to fight for it.

One interviewee put it simply and directly: “We have a clarity of who we are and what we want: namely, gender equality”. She is a member of the coalition known as MANSAM, which consists of 8 political women’s groups, 18 civil society organisations, several youth groups, and various activists and academics.

MANSAM was one of the signatories of 1 January [Declaration of Freedom and Change](#), which called for the end of al-Bashir’s rule, but has not been represented in any of the negotiations with Sudan’s Transitional Military Council. The exclusion of women in talks has prompted calls for equal gender representation in all official interim bodies. MANSAM has even put together a list of professional women who can participate in a transitional civilian government. Other groups such as the [Strategic Initiative in the Horn of Africa](#) (SIHA) and [No to Women’s Oppression](#), have made similar demands for female inclusion.

MANSAM has also developed a draft bill of rights that it wants to see included in a new Sudanese constitution. Many interviewed support equal gender rights and, if adopted, the draft bill would

rectify gender discrimination in many areas, including family and public order law. It would also codify rights to sexual orientation and gender identity, a radical position in Sudan's context.

Women's revolution

Despite being at the forefront of protests, women in Sudan have typically been excluded from negotiations. They were side-lined in the discussions ending the conflict between Sudan and South Sudan in 2005, and have had only marginal representation in the Darfur peace talks.

Now, once again, women are being overlooked in the negotiations between the Transitional Military Council and the opposition Declaration of Freedom and Change. However, this time around female protesters and women's rights activists are more prepared to make their demands heard than ever. Since 3 June, the talks have been suspended, but when they restart, women will be ready to act. Our interviewees explained that Sudan's women have been waiting for this moment for 30 years and that if they are excluded from future negotiations, they will surround the negotiation table to push for their demands around justice, freedom and equality.

In the words of one female protester: "This revolution is women's revolution".

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