

Sudanese Women: Victims of Rape as a Weapon of War



The war that erupted in Sudan in mid-April 2023 has unveiled horrific tragedies especially for women, who have borne the heaviest and most devastating toll. Rape is being used systematically as a weapon of war, a means of terror, subjugation, and domination over individuals, families, and entire communities. Violence against women and girls, including rape and abduction, is not new to Sudan. Civilian casualties—particularly women, children, and the elderly have long been an inevitable consequence of its recurring wars. Yet the atrocities committed during the current conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have been catastrophic in every sense.

Nimat Abubakr, coordinator of the Sudan Program at the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), revealed a sharp increase in cases of gang rape against Sudanese girls since the outbreak of the conflict.

She said SIHA documented more than 176 cases of rape, including gang rapes, noting that “some victims attempted suicide due to the severe psychological trauma and the unwanted pregnancies that followed.” Fourteen forced pregnancies have been confirmed across multiple Sudanese states.

Selima Ishaq, head of the Unit for Combating Violence Against Women and Children, reported the abduction of girls from Gezira State in central Sudan part of a wider pattern of kidnappings in Khartoum and Darfur. While some continue to deny these incidents, UN documents have verified them.

A Weapon of Intimidation

According to Ishaq, her unit recorded 191 cases of sexual violence against women during the first 14 months of the war. She said calls to stop these violations have gone unanswered, especially in RSF-controlled areas.

In an interview with Sudan Tribune, Ishaq predicted that more horrifying details would surface after the war or a ceasefire, noting, “There are hidden facts ugly truths people see and hear about but dare not speak.”

She added that sexual violence is rampant in RSF-held areas and has become a tool of intimidation. The rate of sexual assaults, she noted, drops as RSF control weakens. Ishaq accused the RSF of committing over 90% of these crimes.

She warned that the humanitarian and psychological support available to survivors does not reflect the true scope of the crisis. “Even where services exist, access is limited because many survivors are too afraid to come forward despite growing awareness of life-saving care.”

A Century Ago, Women Chose Death Over Rape

In a poignant essay titled “When Death Is the Only Escape,” Sudanese writer

Reem Abbas—nonresident fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy recalled the 1897 tragedy in the town of Metemma, where women chose to drown in the Nile rather than face the humiliation of rape. “History,” she wrote, “is repeating itself.”

That year marked a time of betrayal and despair in northern Sudan, twelve years into the rule of Khalifa Abdullahi al-Ta’aishi, successor to Mahdi leader Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi. Under al-Ta’aishi’s brutal reign, communities rebelled, leading to massacres, famine, and mass displacement.

General Mahmoud Wad Ahmed was dispatched to invade Metemma after a dispute with a local commander. Historian Ismat Zulfou wrote in his book *Karari* that Wad Ahmed’s army numbered 10,000–12,000 men, while the town’s defenders were no more than 2,500.

Knowing their fate, the women of Metemma tied themselves together with ropes, weighed their bodies down with stones, and threw themselves into the Nile drowning alongside their children. Those who remained were captured, transported to Omdurman, and enslaved by Mahdist soldiers.

Abbas drew a chilling parallel between those events and the current war: “With stories of rape spreading through Sudan’s media, it feels as if we’ve returned to 1897. Shame and stigma keep most survivors silent. Many victims are girls between 12 and 18 years old, often assaulted in their homes or abducted from them.”

Attacked on the Day She Tried to Flee Khartoum

In a report for Al Jazeera Net, journalist Dalia Abdel Moneim recounted the ordeal of “Hosna” (a pseudonym), an engineer who tried to flee her neighborhood in Khartoum North only to be captured by RSF fighters.

“Some of them wore civilian clothes, but I could tell from their speech and behavior who they were,” she said. After isolating South Sudanese women in another building, one RSF commander told Hosna she was “like a sister” then pointed his gun at her, demanding sex.

Hosna begged him to stop. “Didn’t you say I’m your sister? Would you do this to your sister?” she pleaded. He ignored her. After the soldiers left, she escaped to a friend’s home, who helped her clean up and obtain emergency medical care, including contraception from the Unit for Combating Violence Against Women.

“I keep replaying everything in my head,” Hosna said. “I can’t be alone. My husband told me, ‘You did nothing wrong. You’ll come out stronger. We both will.’”

Foreign Women Were the First Targets

Dalia noted that early reports spoke of foreign victims Ethiopian and South Sudanese women before accounts emerged of Sudanese women being attacked. Activists now believe reported cases represent only “the tip of a very large iceberg.”

Eyewitness “Sama” (a pseudonym) told Noon Post that in early May 2023, RSF fighters stormed her neighborhood in Khartoum’s Al-Sahafa district, breaking into homes and assaulting women. “We heard the victims screaming,” she said. “We couldn’t sleep all night, terrified they’d come for us next.”

Her family fled the city soon after. “For weeks I couldn’t forget those cries,” Sama said.

Mohamed El-Amin, the UN Population Fund’s representative in Sudan, said sexual violence has long been a weapon of war in Darfur and has now spread even to major cities like Khartoum and Wad Madani. “This is a means of breaking families, humiliating communities, and degrading opponents,” he said.

Eighteen Women Gang-Raped for Three Days in a Darfur Hotel

El-Amin described one harrowing case: “Eighteen women were detained in a hotel and raped continuously for three days subjected to brutal physical and psychological torture. Similar cases have been reported across the country.”

In an interview with Noon Post, writer Reem Abbas said she drew a direct link between today’s atrocities and those in Metemma 127 years ago. “Many RSF fighters idolize their leader Hemedti as a modern-day al-Ta’aishi,” she explained.

She recounted stories of women who asked clerics whether suicide was permissible to escape rape, and of fathers who took their own lives after witnessing their daughters assaulted. “One father hanged himself after all four of his daughters were raped before his eyes,” she said.

RSF Soldiers View Women as Spoils of War

Abbas told Noon Post: “This war is being fought on women’s bodies to subjugate families and displace communities. Ask anyone who fled Khartoum or Gezira, and they’ll tell you: they left to protect their daughters.”

She attributed the use of rape as a weapon to Sudan’s long-standing culture of impunity. “Some commanders see nothing shameful in it. They think soldiers, being far from home, are entitled to such acts,” she said.

Abbas noted that RSF fighters share videos online, treating women as spoils of war no different from cars, money, or gold. Some force victims into marriage to mask the crime.

She concluded, “After this war, Sudan must refuse to tolerate these atrocities.

Silence enables them. Justice and accountability are the only way forward.”

The April 15 war has displaced over 12 million Sudanese. Amid mass killings, looting, and the occupation of homes, the most horrific and least reported crimes remain the sexual enslavement of women and their sale as chattel. Wherever RSF forces advance, fear and flight follow.

In West Darfur, Human Rights Watch documented ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity against the Masalit people in its 186-page report “The Masalit Will Never Return Home.” The atrocities include mass rapes, murders, and forced expulsions evidence that rape in Sudan’s war is not collateral damage but deliberate policy.

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