Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Responses to Information Requests

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SDN105641.E

Sudan: The "Women's and Children's Rights Organization," including treatment of members, supporters, and participants in demonstrations against female genital mutilation (FGM) and marriage of minors during 2002-2006; treatment of women's rights advocates during 2014-2016, including upon entry and exit of Sudan (2014-October 2016)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. The "Women's and Children's Rights Organization" (2002-2006)

   Information on the "Women's and Children's Rights Organization" could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

   In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an independent researcher from Sudan who has a PhD in sociology and anthropology and has researched violence against women for the past twenty years, with a special focus on FGM and child marriage, stated that there are similarly named organizations to the "Women and Children's Rights Organization," such as an organization called the "women and children organization for development services," which is located in Red Sea State (Independent researcher 26 Sept. 2016). Further information on this organization could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

   Sources report that civil society groups in Sudan must register with the government (Hale 26 Apr. 2014; Human Rights Watch Mar. 2016, 48), and groups with less than 30 members require "specific ministerial approval, which is entirely discretionary" (ibid.). A 2014 conference paper summary about the status of women's NGOs in Khartoum, based on research conducted in 2011-2014 and produced by Research professor Sondra Hale, of the Faculty of Anthropology and Gender at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), who specializes in gender and social movements mainly in Sudan and Eritrea (UCLA n.d.), states the following:

   It is clear, just from my own knowledge and observation of NGOs in the capital, that there are dozens of women's NGOs registered with the government. However, there are actually thousands of NGOs in Sudan and hundreds in Greater Khartoum. ... Among the most prominent women and feminist organizations in Greater Khartoum (and in some cases, with branches outside of Khartoum) are Salmmah, Women's Resource Center; Gender Centre; Nuba Women's Education and Development Association (NuWEDA); Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA); Mutawenat (women’s legal rights center); Asmaa Society for Development; and Sudanese Women Empowerment for Peace (SuWEP), to name but a few. (Hale 26 Apr. 2014)

   In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a Professor of anthropology at Purdue University, who specializes in gender issues in Africa and conducts research on efforts promoting abandonment of FGM, including in Sudan, stated that...
there is a long history of conflict and oppression of rights organizations, particularly due to the internal wars (Darfur and the Nuba Mountains), regional uprisings (Eastern Sudan), and the civil war that was still raging then with the South (now South Sudan) during the time period [of 2002-2006]. Thus, the location of an organization's activities may well be a major consideration in determining whether bad treatment ... occurred or not, and whether people would have known about it. It may be difficult to get accurate information. (Professor 25 Sept. 2016)

Further and corroborating information about an organization called the "Women's and Children's Rights Organization" could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Treatment of Participants in 2002-2006 Demonstrations Against FGM and Marriage of Minors

Information on demonstrations during 2002-2006 against FGM and child marriage or specific instances of treatment of participants could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to sources, during 2002-2006, civil society was "active" against FGM in Sudan (Independent researcher 26 Sept. 2016; SIHA 27 Sept. 2016). Without providing further detail, the US Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2002-2006 indicate that there was "[a] local NGO ... working to eradicate FGM" (US 31 Mar. 2003; ibid. 25 Feb. 2004; ibid. 28 Feb. 2005; ibid. 8 Mar. 2006; ibid. 6 Mar. 2007). Sources report that there was a "network" formed against FGM in Sudan (Norway 10 Dec. 2008, 17; Independent researcher 26 Sept. 2016), which was created in 2000 and was "very active" prior to 2005, according to the independent researcher (Ibid.).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a doctoral student at the Georgetown University Law Center, who has worked in the Human Rights and Advocacy Unit of the Sudan Social Development Organization (SUDO), an organization established in Sudan which aims to promote human rights through training, documentation and dissemination of information (IRRI n.d.), stated that

[in Sudan, FGM is a social institution (promoted by some families and parents), and formal authorities during [2002-2006], as today, were not supporting it, nor were they against those who stood up against it, to the best of my knowledge. (Doctoral student 23 Sept. 2016)


The Professor stated the following, speaking about her own personal experience based on 5 months of work in Sudan in 2004 while affiliated with UNICEF:

[During that time, there were activists, organizations, and programs of international organizations that held events against female genital cutting. Some of these were open events that I was able to attend and there did not seem to be any difficulties—they had permits and media coverage, etc. (25 Sept. 2016)

A 2008 report by LandInfo, Norway's Country of Origin information centre, an independent body that collects and analyses information on human rights conditions, states that, according to an interview with Dr. Jabrallah, the "Coordinator for the network against genital mutilation in Sudan," regarding threats against activists,

[f]emale activists working to combat genital mutilation, sexual violence etc., are subjected to pressure by the authorities. NGOs working with similar issues have problems getting registered with the authorities. There is also a well-organised campaign in favour of genital mutilation, with apparent access to extensive resources. The pro-FGM campaigners accuse the anti-FGM activists of having a hidden agenda, of being foreign agents or for unislamic behaviour etc. Although threats, pressure and smear campaigns were common, Jabrallah was not aware of any cases of violence towards activists. (Norway 10 Dec. 2008, 12)

Further information on the treatment of FGM activists during this time could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Treatment of Women's Rights Advocates During 2002-2006

Country Reports for 2004, 2005, and 2006 state that "a number of women's groups were active, focusing on a wide range of social and economic issues" (US 28 Feb. 2005; US 8 Mar. 2006; US 6 Mar. 2007)
and various human rights groups "suffered from occasional government harassment" (ibid. 28 Feb. 2005). Freedom House's report Freedom in the World 2005 states that, in Sudan, "[e]mergency law severely restricts freedom of assembly and association" (Freedom House 2005). The same source explained that students were banned from participating in political activities following regulations that were introduced in 2002 "after several university students in Khartoum were suspended for engaging in human rights activities, including organizing symposiums on women's rights and attending a conference on democracy" (ibid.).

In April 2006, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of the World Organisation Against Torture (Organisation mondiale contre la torture, OMCT) and the International Federation for Human Rights (Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme, FIDH), stated that it had been informed by the Sudan Organisation Against Torture (SOAT) that the Sudanese government agency responsible for regulating voluntary associations decided to freeze the assets of Women Awareness Raising Group - Red Sea (AWOON - Red Sea), "a women activists' organization that provides legal assistance and legal advice for women in Port Sudan" (Observatory 19 Apr. 2006). According to the same source, the agency's decision to freeze the organization's assets was made on the grounds that it had submitted a funding proposal to the European Commission without first seeking the authorization of the Sudanese government body (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

A press release by the international human rights organization SOAT, published by the Sudan Tribune news website on 2 October 2006, reports that three female social workers were arrested and interrogated about the activities of the Amel Centre for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture, whose services include support to victims of torture and sexual violence (SOAT 2 Oct. 2006). According to SOAT, the authorities use a "strategy of repeated harassment, summoning, and interrogation" to intimidate human rights defenders such as those of the Amel Centre (ibid.).

Further information on instances of treatment of women's rights advocates during 2002-2006 could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.


In a March 2016 report entitled "Good Girls Don't Protest" Repression and Abuse of Women Human Rights Defenders, Activists, and Protesters in Sudan and based on interviews with more than 85 female activists and human rights defenders conducted between November 2014 and January 2016, Human Rights Watch "documents the patterns of abuse women experience at the hands of government security forces and the restrictive environment in which they work" (Human Rights Watch Mar. 2016, 1, 7). According to the Human Rights Watch report:

- Almost every female activist interviewed reported having experienced "some form of gender-based violence in reprisal for their activism," mainly by national security agents or police, including rape, assault, threats of rape, "attacks on their reputation and verbal harassment" (ibid., 20);
- None of the perpetrators of these crimes have been investigated or prosecuted (ibid.);
- Most of the female activists and human rights defenders interviewed reported having been victims of other types of abuse, including beatings, arrests and arbitrary detentions (ibid., 31);
- Sudanese authorities "routinely restrict" civil society organizations, including women's rights organizations, by "closures, denying or delaying registration, harassing staff, and interfering in the work" (ibid., 38);
- Activists lack protection and assistance, "especially victims of sexual violence who may be reluctant to report their experiences to others for fear of damaging consequences" and none obtained legal redress due to the lack of investigation or prosecution of crimes against them (ibid., 2).

According to the paper summary by Hale, analysis of NGOs is rife with contradictions. On the one hand, NGOs serve the government by tending to the underserved, i.e., they actually take on some of the burdens of the state. On the other hand, the government is highly suspicious of NGOs, sees them as a potential threat, and tries to keep them under tight control. For example, registration is not made easy and is not just a bureaucratic formality. With impunity, the government can either refuse a registration or drop an NGO from the rolls, and many NGOs are being constantly harassed. (26 Apr. 2014)

Sources indicate that in June 2014, Sudanese authorities shut down the Salmmah Women's Resource Center, a women's rights organization in Khartoum, without providing any reason (Middle East Online 24 June 2014).
2014; Inter Pares 25 June 2014; Radio Dabanga 1 July 2014) and that the Centre's license was revoked and property belonging to the organization and its staff was seized (ibid.).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative of SIHA, a coalition of women's rights activists in African countries, including Sudan, with the aim of “strengthening the capacities of women's rights organizations” (SIHA n.d.), stated that in Sudan, women's rights advocates are “constantly subjected to detainment, regular interrogation and harassment and their work and activities are consistently questioned and/or blocked” (ibid. 27 Sept. 2016). The Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Its Causes and Consequences on Her Mission to the Sudan, published on 18 April 2016, states that there are “alleged cases of arbitrary detention of women human rights defenders,” including students, and that “during interrogation, women [human rights defenders] are allegedly intimidated and suffer torture and other cruel inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, including being raped in some instances” (UN 18 Apr. 2016, para. 32). According to the same source, "women are allegedly threatened upon their release, and warned about reporting the violations or seeking medical care" (ibid.).

Human Rights Watch indicates that government and security officials use public order and morality restrictions to "punish women for behaviour linked to activism and human rights work" such as "traveling or protesting with male colleagues" (Human Rights Watch Mar. 2016, 49). The independent researcher stated that police use public order laws to arrest women for the way they dress or for what police define as "bad conduct" (26 Sept. 2016). Public morality offences can trigger punishments such as flogging (Human Rights Watch Mar. 2016, 49), lashing or fines (Independent researcher 26 Sept. 2016).

In March 2014, women's groups attempted to organize a women's day event (Inter Pares 25 June 2014; AFP 9 Mar. 2014), but state security agents denied permission to hold it (ibid.).

Sources report that in 2014, the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) arrested 16 women activists participating in a demonstration called "No to oppression of women" in front of the women's prison in Omdurman, asking for the release of a female opposition party leader (Sudan Tribune 28 Aug. 2014; Radio Tamazuj 29 Aug. 2014). Security forces used tear gas to disperse the women's demonstration (ibid; Sudan Tribune 28 Aug. 2014).

Sources report on the 2015 kidnapping of a female political activist who was reportedly traveling to an opposition sit-in (Sudan Tribune 15 Apr. 2015; ACJPS 13 Apr. 2015), and who is described as a "well-known and outspoken activist on social and political issues in Sudan" (ibid.). The Sudan Tribune reports that the NISS was alleged to have kidnapped her; she was missing for several days but was later found and had been "badly beaten" (15 Apr. 2015).

4.1 Treatment upon Entry and Exit of Sudan

For further information on incidents of persons being stopped at Khartoum International Airport upon entry and upon exit between 2014 and July 2016, see Response to information request SDN105589 of July 2016.

Without providing further detail, the doctoral student stated that women's rights advocates "have been flagged" upon entry and exit of Sudan (23 Sept. 2016). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a research fellow at the Global Migration Centre of the Graduate Institute of Geneva, who researches gender and migration in Sudan, stated that some women activists have been "arrested upon trying to exit the country" (Research fellow 28 Sept. 2016). The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women reports that she has received information on allegations that following incarceration of women human rights defenders, they are blacklisted, have restrictions placed on them, including the denial of the possibility to leave the country (UN 18 Apr. 2016, para. 32). According to Country Reports 2016, the Sudanese government observed the law against forced exile, but warned political opponents of their potential arrest if they returned ... Opposition leaders and NGO activists remained in self-imposed exile in northern Africa and Europe; other activists fled the country during the year. (US 13 Apr. 2016, 50)

The English language website of Radio Dabanga, a Darfuri radio station based in the Netherlands, reports that, in March 2016, security agents banned two women's rights activists from travelling to UN meetings in Geneva on 28 March 2016, confiscated their passports and ordered them to go to the offices of the security services (29 Mar. 2016). According to a letter published by Freedom House and signed by more than thirty other human rights organizations, four representatives of Sudanese civil society, including a female NGO director, who were traveling via different routes to Geneva to participate in a meeting of NGOs regarding Sudan's Universal Periodic Review, were stopped at the airport in Khartoum (Freedom House 1 Apr. 2016). The source stated that the representatives were "intercepted by plain clothes officers" of the NISS at
Khartoum International Airport, who "approached them after they had checked in, and before they proceeded through passport control, and confiscated their passports" (ibid.).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References


Doctoral student, Georgetown University Law Center. 23 September 2016. Correspondence with the Research Directorate.


Independent researcher. 26 September 2016. Correspondence with the Research Directorate.


Professor of anthropology, Purdue University. 25 September 2016. Correspondence with the Research Directorate.


Research fellow, Global Migration Centre, Graduate Institute of Geneva. 28 September 2016. Correspondence with the Research Directorate.

Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA). 27 September 2016. Correspondence from a representative to the Research Directorate.


Sudan Tribune. 28 August 2014. "16 Female Activists Arrested at Demonstration Calling for Release of Opposition Figure." [Accessed 3 Oct. 2016]


Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies; Arab Coalition for Sudan; Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Calgary; KAIROS; People Legal Aid Centre; Sudan Human Rights Group; UN – UN High Commissioner for Refugees Representation Office in Khartoum.

Internet sites, including: 28 Too Many; Amnesty International; ecoinet; Factiva; Frontline Defenders; IRIN; Orchid Project; Safe World for Women; Saleema; Sudan Social Development Organization (UK); UN – Refworld, UN Development Programme, UN Women; Violence Is not Our Culture; Waging Peace.

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