

REPORT:

NORTH SUDAN: THE LAW OF MORAL ORDER AS STATE POLICY

- Report written by WorldCom Foundation/LolaMora Productions, February 2011, after a two-week mission to North Sudan, November 2010, supported by Cordaid.

INTRODUCTION

In guide books, tourist brochures and official documents, Khartoum is listed as the capital of the Republic of Sudan, but in fact this is a country on the brink of splitting in two. The Blue Nile and the White Nile merge in the capital, where 70% of the population are Muslim, which would be a mere socio-demographic figure if not for the fact that the Sharia-based Islamic Law, Public Order Act and Family Act form the basis of the political and legal system used to govern the north of this African state.

The consequences of this have been keenly felt by both women and journalists in the region. North Sudan is an Islamic state, governed by a president who, since seizing power in 1989, has imposed law and order according to his faith: Islam. The scope of this report, which was prepared by WorldCom Foundation-LolaMora Productions (WCLM), is limited to the capital of the north of the country and to the work done by NGOs and journalists there, a fact that must be kept in mind when considering its conclusions and recommendations. It's necessary to clarify this given the vast social, economic, political and religious differences that exist between the country's four cardinal points.

Consequently, the conclusions presented here do not reflect the conditions surrounding journalistic activities in the south of the country. Neither are

those restrictions and prohibitions that are faced daily by women in the north present throughout the entire country.

On freedom of expression

Direct or partial censorship, or that which is imposed paragraph by paragraph in op-ed articles and columns; the ban on covering issues within the realm of 'national security', and consequently prohibited, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC); and threats against women campaigning for the end of harmful, traditional practices such as the genital mutilation of young girls, are a few of the coercive actions mentioned by the people that we interviewed during our 11-day visit to Khartoum.

A lack of official support for activities related to the freedom of information and expression and for the human rights defence of women is one strategy used by the government. Another is to deny requests, licences, or permission for transmissions to both community radio and television, and for all of those channels/media that do not follow government directives. In a city where more than half of the population cannot read or write (the majority of whom are women), which has a poverty rate of at least 40% (according to 2004 figures), and which is now home to thousands of people displaced by the war, the written press, whether in Arabic or English, is not a viable option for keeping informed.

The journalists interviewed during WCLM's visit work exclusively in the private written press, in both languages. The only male professional who agreed to speak (albeit briefly) with WCLM worked at a TV station with ties to the government.

On violence against women and girls

During the 11 days of work, we interviewed six women's organizations and six journalists in addition to the men and women involved in the Tutti Island project, or *Tutee* in Arabic language.

The activists expressed opinions and have action plans that are clearly critical of government policies but which entail little direct confrontation. All of the journalists interviewed rejected the restrictions and prohibitions placed on their profession and on their condition as women by the government, the parliament and other administrative bodies with censorship authority such as the National System of Intelligence.

The moralistic policies of President Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir's government are in evidence throughout regulations, laws and acts such as the Public Order Act and the Family Law. While these norms regulating behaviour obviously affect all citizens, they are particularly directed toward women. Sudan signed the African Chapter on women rights but kept out of CEDAW.

Civil Society has been too weak to force CEDAW onto the agenda of the political sphere.

Genital mutilation of girls is practised both in Southern and North Sudan. The activists and journalists versed in this subject and interviewed during our visit acknowledged that on an individual level, both men and women are increasingly rejecting this practise as dangerous. However, it is not prohibited by law. The initiative of a women's organization in the north could convert Tutti Island (Tutee in Arabic) into an FGM-free territory by 2012. Through a campaign to end genital mutilation led by the island's grandmothers and imams, Tutti Island – a little piece of land facing Khartoum and lapped by the mythical Nile River- today represents a challenge to the establishment and a test of resistance. Grandmothers or Habobat in Arabic traditionally push families to circumcise their girls, so they are the key and play a central role in this initiative. The project is a partnership between Seema Centre for Women and Child Protection along with other 42 Civil Society Organizations based in Tutti, and UNFPA supported; and is part of the campaign "Sudan FGM free 2008 – 2018": Tutee serves as a pilot project.

Sexual violence is an ignominy for the Sudanese government. But instead of recognizing, confronting and punishing it, sexual violence is silenced and ostracized, transforming it into a 'non-problem'. Consequently, cases of domestic sexual violence, child abuse, incest or sexual abuse are not covered by the press. Outside the capital, Darfur is a spectre, an unspeakable place that the majority of the women we interviewed – who work for the eradication of all types of discrimination and violence against women – have never visited.

The press and women's organizations

The written press only deals with policy in terms of the more visible issues: the referendum, negotiations between the North and Southern governments to ensure results and thus avoid a return to war, census figures for refugees and displaced persons, negotiations with foreign ambassadors, etc. However, reports do not include any concrete figures, research or first-hand testimonies on the quality of life in the refugee camps – the lack of water and electricity, violence in the houses, the lack of medical and sanitary facilities, or the lack of access to justice experienced by the majority of the population.

One of the journalists interviewed in Khartoum described the current state of the city as such: Poverty in the capital has increased in recent years, and services have collapsed following the arrival of thousands of families displaced by the violence in the south and in Darfur. In the middle of this poverty, women suffer twice as badly. "The feminization of poverty is a fact in this country but journalists do not bother visiting the neighbourhoods to see if what I'm saying is true."

In spite of the predominant news agenda, there are women journalists who struggle to publish a weekly page or a daily opinion editorial column

dedicated exclusively to the rights of women and their needs. These spaces are used to urge the government to sign CEDAW, in order to remember the atrocious crimes committed against women in Darfur, and to demand the abolition of articles in the penal code that are degrading to women...

These journalists have created individual and collective strategies to evade censorship, to publicly express their solidarity with those things officially frowned upon (not covering their heads on TV, for example) and to create a fund for the financial support of a colleague removed from her position after censorship. They are colleagues helping each other but they are also professionals truly committed to provoke changes for women in the country; *No to women repression* is an initiative started during Lubna case* by some journalist but extended to have a lot of members in NGOs and other political parties.

WCLM interviewed a small group of around 5 or 6 female journalists –mainly working on Arabic language newspaper and TV– a strongly and closed between each other although not financially supported by women at Seema and Salmmah. This is a quite creative group trying to set up a magazine produced and conducted by and for women in North Sudan.

In addition, there have been and are joint campaigns and projects between journalists and women’s organizations. However, strategies using the media for demanding rights are few. None of the organizations that we visited had a permanent journalist or a communication department. However, all of them are becoming increasingly aware that in order to bring about political and legal reform an alliance with the media is necessary so that directors and editors – all men – include women in their agenda of priority issues.

The interviewed journalists and NGO activists all share a genuine subjective commitment to human rights in general and women’s rights in particular. They are agents, what lacks is the institutional component. Each and every journalist was struggling with the Media as a whole but within their own Medium as well: apart from the sensitive issues – dealt with by way of self-censorship – they have to deal with a conservative environment as well. To get the institutions on board directors and editors have to be involved so that individual journalists are able to set the agenda not only on a societal level but also within their Medium.

INTERVIEWS:

ALAGE: MEDIA AND GENDER CENTRE. TRAINING OF YOUNG JOURNALISTS IN GENDER AND JOURNALISM

UNIVERSITY OF KHARTOUM/DEVELOPMENT STUDIES AND RESEARCH INSTITUTE
THE GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT UNIT

SEEMA CENTRE FOR TRAINING AND PROTECTION OF
WOMEN AND CHILD'S RIGHTS

GENDER CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND TRAINING (GCRT)

ROUND TABLE INTERVIEW WITH JOURNALISTS FROM:
ALJAREEDA NEWSPAPER, AJRASS ALHURRIA, ALAHDATH
NEWSPAPERS, BLUE NILE TV. KHARTOUM RADIO

SALMMAH WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTER- SUDANESE
WOMEN EMPOWERMENT FOR PEACE (SUWEP)

ASMAA SOCIETY FOR DEVELOPMENT

NOTES:

The **National Intelligence and Security Services**, NISS, entered the offices on 20 October 2010 of the Human Rights and Democracy Network and arrested 13 activists accused of crimes against the state.

The newspaper **Al Sahafa** was occupied by the NISS on November 4 2010 because of reporting on Darfur according to Reporters without Borders.

The **journalist's code of honour** that journalists have to sign, oblige the journalists to practice self-censorship in reporting on Darfur and the ICC. With this code it's no longer necessary for the NISS to present themselves at the media and apply the late night censorship on articles.

***Lubna Ahmed al-Hussein** is a Sudanese media worker and activist who came to international attention in July 2009 when she and other twelve women were prosecuted for wearing trousers. Her case has become a *cause célèbre*, with organisations such as the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information and Amnesty International issuing statements in support. On 3 July 2009, the Public Order Police entered the Kawkab Elsharq Hall, looking for any women and girls wearing trousers. Lubna publicize her case by printing 500 invitation cards and sending emails with the subject line "Sudanese journalist Lubna invites you again to her flogging tomorrow". More on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lubna_al-Hussein

For Further Information, please write to info@lolamora.net or see <http://www.lolamora.net>