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CHARTING NEW DIRECTIONS:
REFLECTIONS ON WOMEN'S POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN SUDAN

by

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**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Joint Women's Studies Program**

at

**Mount Saint Vincent University
Dalhousie University
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Dedicated to my daughters, Nabra and Amel Ali

ABSTRACT

Charting New Directions: Reflections on Women's Political Activism in Sudan

In recent years, women's lives in Sudan have been affected not only by the general political and economic decline, civil war and displacement created by years of dictatorship, but also by the violent ideological offensive directed at them by state-sponsored Islamic fundamentalism. Calls for a return to traditional Muslim and family values accompanied the seizure of power by the National Islamic Front in 1989. Northern Sudanese women were to revert to their roles as guardians of the faith, family and morality. Many of the gains of the previous years such as family benefits, labour and civil rights were revoked.

A pattern of loss of status has affected women at the same time that complex and multiple "woman" identities are emerging. It is in this context that Sudanese women are building on old and new traditions of social organisation and feminist mobilisation to protest legal and constitutional arrangements intended to control and keep them in subordinate positions, are initiating dialogue, and are developing channels that are critical to societal renewal and democratic change.

The present conjuncture in which Sudanese women's changing consciousness about their status is unfolding contrasts markedly with the decline in their confidence in the organised women's movement. The author's personal struggle with issues of women's activism in earlier days and today is reflected in this exciting and challenging "transition" where the boundaries between feminist and non-feminist groups are increasingly shifting.

Reflecting on this experience, its implications in challenging prevailing gender arrangements in Sudan, and in developing a secular democratic feminist vision is the central aim of this study. The study attempts to problematise and to identify some theoretical insights gained from Sudanese women's feminist tradition and practice, and to engage in both a personal and political inquiry into its present dynamics. Particular emphasis is devoted to aspects of feminist debates that are relevant to theorisation about Sudanese women's strategies to further their grip on agency and autonomy.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CC	Constitutional Court
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
EC	European Community
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
GUSW	General Union of Sudanese Women
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INSTRAW	International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women
MWSSA	Muslim Women of Southern Sudan
NANS	National Alliance for National Salvation
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIF	National Islamic Front
NWF/WNF	National Women's Front/Women's National Front
PC	Popular Committee

PDF	Popular Defence Force
PPF	Popular Police Force
RCC	Revolutionary Command Council
SCP	Sudanese Communist Party
SSU	Sudanese Socialist Union
SWU	Sudan Women's Union
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
WAF	Women Against Fundamentalism
WLUML	Women Living Under Muslim Laws
WU	Women's Union

Brief Chronology of Political Events

1821: Turco-Egyptian conquest of Sudan led to collapse of ancient Sudanese Sultanates and independent states.

1885: The Mahdist Revolution (an indigenous religious-political movement) brings an end to Turco-Egyptian rule.

1898: Britain and Egypt overthrow the Mahdist forces and establish an Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, a joint colonialism, over Sudan.

1920-1930: Beginnings of anti-imperialist resistance and emergence of the national liberation struggle.

1930-1940: Colonial state implements a policy of “closed districts” (known as “Southern Policy”), separating Northern and Southern Sudan.

1938: Formation of the Graduates’ General Congress. In 1942, the GGC presents memorandum to Condominium powers demanding self-determination for Sudan, abolition of divide and rule policy and “Sudanisation” of civil service and army.

1943-1945: Formation of first political parties in North Sudan.

1946: Reversal of “Southern Policy”.

1947: At “Juba Conference” convened by colonial government, Southern Sudanese leaders accept principle of unification of South and North Sudan. However, issues of power-sharing and regional development remain unresolved.

1948: Legislative Assembly elected representing North and South Sudan.

1953: Condominium powers agree on a three-year transition period from colonial rule to self-government. Elections for House of Representatives held same year. Women graduates of secondary schools obtain right to vote.

1955: Mutiny in Torit garrison in South Sudan's Equatoria Province attests to profound grievances across North-south divide, and ignites first civil war.

1956: Sudan's formal political independence is proclaimed on 1st of January.

1958: Military takeover by Army High Command ousts parliamentary democracy, dissolves political parties, institutes state of emergency, escalates civil war.

1964: Popular discontent and opposition to war leads to general strike and brings down military regime – “October Uprising”.

1965: Transitional civilian government formed, parliamentary elections held, civil liberties restored. All women granted right to vote and stand for election. “Round Table Conference” on “Southern Problem” attempted but failed to institute peace-building confidence among political elites. General elections are held in 1968.

1969-1985: Second military takeover (“May Regime”) by young army officers. Regime establishes one-party rule, promulgates “Permanent Constitution”, grants regional autonomy to Southern region. In 1983, however, the South is re-divided into three regions and its regional government abolished. In September 1983, having reconciled with the extremist Muslim Brotherhood movement, the regime imposed strict “sharia” laws throughout the country. Civil war resumes and mounting opposition in the North while the western and eastern regions are in the grips of severe famine.

1985-1989: March-April popular uprising led by a broad alliance of professional trade unions, political parties, students, youth and women's organisations leads to the overthrow of the “May Regime”. Parliamentary elections held in 1986. From 1986-1989, Trade Union Alliance pursues dialogue with Southern People's Liberation

Mouvement/Army (SPLM/A). Principles agreed upon are a “freeze” on “sharia”, a ceasefire, lifting of the state of emergency Agreements reached in 1986 and 1988 for peace and a constitutional conference are finally underway in June 1989. They are opposed by the National Islamic Front that rejects any compromise on “sharia” laws.

1989-2001: 30th June 1989, NIF-supported coup d'état ends Sudan's third parliamentary democracy, thwarts peace process. All political parties, including independent women's associations are banned. Massive human rights violations by the regime on secular-thinking citizens, displaced civilians and most of all women, continue.

An Introduction

In early 1992, I returned to Sudan after a long sojourn in France where I received my Ph.D in Language Pedagogy and Educational Linguistics. In my dissertation I urged the democratisation of the linguistic educational curriculum by introducing the vernacular languages as a choice in school programs, diversifying the foreign language content (now limited to English and French) to include the regional African languages of wider communication. The focus of my work was a concern with the linguistic identitarian problematics in our society. It was in this process of writing and reflection that I acquired the sociological tools of analysis that enabled me to utilise the parameters of interdisciplinary sources, both in relation to my field of study (language and/in education), and in relation to the broader outlook in which I view the many challenges facing us as academics and activists. While I was not specifically aware of Women's Studies during that time, the similarities between the language issue and women's status in Sudan's laws crossed my mind. In our standing Constitution then, there was a recognition of cultural-linguistic diversity and gender equality, but there was no support in practice for affirmative actions in their favour either in politics or in the larger society.

Having followed political events in Sudan from my Parisian location, I nurtured no illusions over the fact that the questions I addressed in my thesis were going to be the immediate topical issues at home. The Islamist **coup d'état** in 1989 did, however, come with a "civilisational" project. It involved, among other things, the arabicisation of the educational system that went beyond past assimilationist cultural and linguistic policies

to include the Islamicisation of the various disciplines of knowledge and, indeed, of the entire society. Identity politics, I was soon to find out, became a battlefield.

As I prepared to return home, I was, therefore, acutely aware of the very real threat to my professional “**gagne pain**” or career not only as a teacher of French as a second language but also as an advocate of the democratisation of language policies. By then, already a significant number of my colleagues in the French and other language departments had left the country.

Strangely, I was only secondarily concerned about my identity as a female academic arriving in a country now ruled by Islamic fundamentalists.

Nonetheless, before taking the plane home, I agonised for a while over the ordeal of having to cover my head in Islamic garb in order to “land peacefully” at Khartoum airport. In the end I decided to heed the advice of women friends and colleagues who suggested that I do so to avoid unnecessary questioning. All went well.

After spending two emotional days with my husband and two daughters and my extended family, all of whom I had not seen for some time, I prepared myself to recommence my work at the University. That morning, after seeing my daughters off to school, I dressed in my (usual) below the knee skirt and long sleeve blouse (I rolled them up because of the heat), flung my (usual) bag (full of papers for the administration) on my shoulder, and joined my husband (also a university professor) who was waiting for me to drive to the University together.

As I approached him, my husband put down the newspaper he was reading and asked me if I was going to work dressed like I was. I had not quite anticipated that the first requirement for me to wear the veil would confront me from my own home even before I set foot in the workplace. My discomfort at my husband's remark was slightly appeased by the fact that I was still fresh with the conciliatory spirit and, I must admit, the love and yearning which so confound us when reuniting with loved ones after a long absence. He had also been extremely generous and supportive in allowing me to pursue my post-graduate studies while he "was home with the children", an unconventional practice for men in our society. Of course, in the real world where conventions remain unchanged, our elder daughter had been living with my mother while our youngest was with her aunt, a couple of neighbourhoods apart, yet tenderly nurtured by the hands of two great women.

I was also able to control the mounting temper I felt brewing because I had more or less mentally prepared myself to observe and absorb how my close family, friends, comrades and colleagues were coping with life and work under the Islamists, and to follow our collective security precautions accordingly. I had even more reason to be cautious because my husband, a democrat and an active member of the Trade Union Alliance banned by the regime, was among the people whose activities and movements were closely monitored. In fact, shortly after, he was dismissed from his job, together with three other academic colleagues, by presidential decree, and barred from employment in other academic institutions and government departments.

It was therefore a combination of all these personal and political factors that made me willing to negotiate the “veiling” issue with my husband. He convincingly argued that the universities in particular were being scrutinised by the security forces, that circulars were being sent to faculty and departments about the dress code and public morality, and that the regime was still weeding out democratic opponents. He ventured to add that female academics were campaigning for women to wear the traditional Sudanese “tobe” to assert their opposition to the imposed Islamic dress.

So, it did not take long for me to realise that my choices were indeed limited. The only resistance I could muster was to refuse to wear the “headscarf” and opted instead to wear our customary, national dress (“tobe”), which I had been accustomed to wearing previously out of personal choice, but had never worn to work.

But it was a sentence my husband pronounced in between the rational political arguments that he evoked and which we mostly shared, that kept lingering on my mind since then and as I began to reflect on the present chapters. “We have enough worries as it is, he said, so don’t make me face another fight with these people (the Islamists) over whether you are appropriately dressed or not”. That single phrase resumes in my mind the moment I experienced the first pangs of a new feminism: a feeling of utter aloneness and incapacity. So much of what I later learned from feminist theory and analysis was contained in that one phrase: the separation of spheres, the larger (them) versus lesser (us) causes, the contradiction between doing and knowing, the separation of the personal from the political.

Later, another personal encounter, this time with my old-time women's group, produced my second "click moment". At an informal gathering with several veteran women activists, one of my colleagues recounted that as she was leaving her house to join us, her female neighbour, a supporter of the women's movement, stopped to greet her, and asked her if she had heard that "the martyr's widow had remarried". (The reference here is to the summary execution by the military junta of a group of army officers for an alleged, and never proven, coup attempt; these officers and patriots have become our Martyrs and we call their relatives the "Martyrs' Families"). Then, still addressing my friend, the neighbour added "what is the purpose of your activism now when all these women are just thinking about themselves?"

This story actually became the focus of our discussion. Almost unanimously, my assembled friends criticised the martyr's widow's "act" as being in effect rather "inappropriate", "uncalled for under the circumstances" (the circumstances being the resistance and general mobilisation against the regime), and a "deviation" from the "real issues". There we were in the Sudan of the 1990's where Islamic fundamentalism was suffocating our every individual liberty – from the imposition of a dress code to curtailment of movement and association – debating a woman's personal choice to live her life as she saw fit, and questioning that right which we so vehemently claim (or so I insisted) as indivisible from other basic freedoms! Ironically, part of the patriarchal privilege in our society's behaviour patterns is that a widower would be exempted from criticism for a similar "individual" deed, and most certainly would not be considered by his peers as "betraying the cause" in the event.

The point here is this was no trivial gossip, and the widow in question was no ordinary widow whose autonomy as a freely choosing individual we would not have discussed in the first place. But why was it that we, left-wing women activists, were still caught in this pitfall of upholding old roles and expectations and valuing the public more than the private in women's everyday lives? Was it not privileging one dimension at the expense of an equally important meaningful experience? Does personal autonomy need to be the antithesis to pursuing collective struggles?

I believe it was then that I began to sense a kind of shifting insider/outsider relationship to our women's movement and party culture that ultimately led me to listen more carefully to the wider critique being voiced by younger women activists in relation to the conservatism of the Sudanese Women's Union, its lack of empathy for subjective experience, and more generally the difficulty of addressing new understandings of oppression and liberation.

I grew up in an atmosphere of wide societal support for progressive social change. While feminism as individual liberation was not infused in us, and we were constantly reminded in our homes and families and later political parties and the women's movement, to respect custom, tradition and religion, there was no sword of Damocles pointed at our heads when we ventured to negotiate, sometimes step out of those conventions. The women's movement had paved the way for us in many areas of law reform, in public employment, in the struggle for democratic rights and values, in solidarity work, and most of all in addressing the structures of inequality that shape our wider political and

economic environment. It was a movement anchored in the times: collective and enlightened, and influenced by the political tradition of the Sudanese Left. Somewhere along the way, however, part “custom” part “revolutionary” strategy, we were taught to abstract our personal emotions and intuitions, and to remain focused on the broader national struggle. One of the impacts of that upbringing which I discovered while writing this thesis was how little accustomed I was to putting myself into the account or to using a more personalised voice.

By the late 1980's the political stage was set for one of the most repressive periods in Sudan's recent history. Women's lives were affected not only by the general political and economic decline, civil war and displacement created by years of dictatorship, but also by the violent ideological offensive directed at us by state-sponsored Islamic fundamentalism. Calls for a return to traditional Muslim and family values accompanied the seizure of power by the National Islamic Front in 1989. Northern Sudanese women were to revert to their role as guardians of the faith, family and morality. Many of the gains of the previous years such as family benefits, labour and civil rights were revoked. Whereas Islamist women activists proudly reclaimed their right to shape their lives by a return to the faith, that choice was denied for Sudanese women who “begged to differ” on the basis of a common citizenship not solely shaped by Islamic ideology.

A pattern of loss of status has affected women at the same time that complex and multiple “woman” identities have emerged. Many women are increasingly becoming a key force in resistance to the regime, at the same time that others are responding by a formidable

display of passive resistance. It is in this context that a new generation of young, urban, educated and ethnically diverse Sudanese women has come of age, whose education and professionalism (much to the dismay of the Islamists, the number of female graduates is on the rise) is injecting new challenges to our feminist theorising and praxis.

Indeed, many Sudanese women appear to be travelling the road of an emerging feminist activism. They have gone beyond waiting for the political parties to “resurface” (all, including the Women’s Union were banned in 1989), to reach out to other women and to build a grassroots social movement aimed to counter the Islamist onslaught, and to lay the ground for a broader vision of societal change. In North Sudan, they are at the helm of the popular climate against conscription and the militarisation of society. In the liberated areas of Southern Sudan, they are creating peace demonstration centres in villages, organising indigenous peace-building training and initiating small-scale local development projects. Organisational activities in urban neighbourhood networks, in the displaced camps, among refugees, are politicising the “everyday networks”. This is an arena of struggle that has brought together Northern and Southern Sudanese women, and is a highly significant development for our common and coming liberation struggle that goes far beyond the outcome of the on-going tragic civil conflict.

Many of the talents and skills of today’s women organisers and grassroots activists can be broadly traced back to a resilient culture and a tradition of pluralism in civil society, which the Islamists have effectively eroded but have failed to replace completely. Yet, Sudanese women’s present activism appears to have largely eclipsed the pattern of

traditional and revolutionary political movements with which the older generation of the organised women's movement identified or had to contend. By the 1980's, talk of the discrepancies in our older women's movement began to unfold and to occupy centre stage. As a result, not only is our once vibrant women's constituency losing its potential members and momentum, but the wake-up call for change came too late to arrest the impending advance of an Islamist backlash which, since 1989, has effectively put a halt to all previous women's gains and hard-won equality rights. It appeared as though the strategies that had enabled our earlier movement to survive were no longer adequate to build a diverse women's movement. At issue was not only the generational divide - although a strong factor - but I also sensed a deeper malaise in our feminist theorising and practice in relation to our current historical and cultural moment.

If I were to use a metaphor, Antonio Gramsci's marvelous line: "The old is dying, and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (Antonio Gramsci, 1971: 276) would probably best describe the struggle that Sudanese feminist activists are currently living. The present regime's exclusionary political system has sparked women's consciousness, but it has also heightened the contradictions in women's roles: we are empowered at the same time that we are marginalised. While we reject and oppose the Islamist predicament by our different means, women are also divided in their responses as to why our older methods are not working. Those who are inside Sudan sometimes view the now expanding diasporic women's actions and contributions from exile as "soft" compared to what they are enduring on a daily basis.

Southern women are ambivalent between joining their oppositional voices to ours and total separation.

All these difficult birth pains have in turn intensified the uneasy relationship between women's groups and the male-dominated opposition forces, who, (despite promises to the contrary), would as soon see us dissolve into oblivion rather than ensure that our voices count in the project of transforming our country's realities. Although women's groups are part of the opposition alliance (National Democratic Alliance), attempts to undervalue our experiences and aspirations have ranged from the inclusion of a "notwithstanding" clause in the opposition Charter (1995) that allows custom and religion to overrule our human rights, to the delay in endorsing our representation in the NDA leadership.

The present is, therefore, an important and challenging moment for reflection and analysis.

The reflections presented in this study are premised on my experience of activism in the women's movement in Sudan, and more recently, in the field of women's advocacy. In reflecting on this experience, I attempt to problematise and identify some theoretical feminist insights gained from Sudanese feminist/women practices, and to engage in both a personal and political inquiry into our heritage and its changing dynamics. I begin with a critical examination of some of the salient controversies and concerns surrounding the Sudanese Women's Union, the first largest democratic women's organisation that emerged with the struggle for national liberation. I will address the issues of agency and

autonomy, organisation and theorising (Chapter One). Then I explore the state and institutional interactions that occurred following a major split in the women's movement, between those who advocated autonomy from the state (a military dictatorship), and those who opted for integration. My analysis will address the entrapments of state feminism, its possibilities and potential in light of this experience (Chapter Two). Finally, I will address the realities and implications of the current fundamentalist backlash. (Chapter Three). In concluding, I shed some light on the moving boundaries of feminist grassroots resistance and I attempt to extract some lessons to take on board during the coming transition to democracy in Sudan.

My reasons for privileging the above themes are simple. They relate to the concerns most frequently raised by young women activists in regard to the inadequacies or, as many would insist, the failings of our progressive women's movement. At issue here is the circumscribed autonomy that defined the Women's Union by virtue of our affiliation to the Sudanese Communist Party. In turn, the Women's Union experience served as it were as a "blueprint" for the way other middle-class women began to organise from within their diverse political parties. Over time, traditional networks and locations for women's organising, the necessity of theory-building from our grounded feminist perspective were either neglected or came to be considered as less immediate sources for political action and struggle. Relatedly, the question as to whether women's movements should attempt to work with the state raises the ever present concern that the incorporation by the state apparatus of some gender-specific demands "can threaten to "over-absorb" the dynamism

of feminism, and women's mobilisation in general, as forces for social change in civil society" (Sonia Alvarez, 1990: 216).

As feminist politics in Sudan continues in the process of building coalitions and alliances, the bases from which we can cooperate with other movements and organisations without sacrificing our commitment to women or our resistance to the pervasive meanders of male patriarchy, are, I believe, among the issues that we need to clearly address as part of the immediate future we envision. However, I also argue that the re-vision of a more independent path for feminist mobilisation, requires alternative organisational structures and heightened collaboration, and a redefinition of politics wherein feminism can develop as a perspective on the whole society, rather than a series of positions on separate "women's issues" (A.Miles, 1996).

The ascendancy of Islamic fundamentalism in our state and society has brought the backlash era for Sudanese women and for democracy and peace in the country full circle. The pain and suffering that Islamism has inflicted on women's lives, and which continue as I write, is compounded by the fact that intellectual apologies for Islamic ideology's cultural "otherness" abound, even as it proves itself unbound by the ethics of a modern humanity, feminist ideals, and essential human rights. These complexities, and Islamist women's grave responsibility in perpetuating and maintaining the denial of Sudanese women's independent agency and citizenship rights, are uncovered and analysed in my final chapter.

The above issues and problematic are I believe highly relevant to theorisation about our Sudanese women's movement's strategies to further assert our grip in challenging prevailing power arrangements. All the chapters constitute a reflective look to the future, how we might modify past practices on the basis of further experience, a way of looking forward toward the discovery of liberating alternatives and possibilities.

I am confident, as the secondary sources that have enriched and inspired my discussion will attest, that many of the issues I raise here have been tackled in varying respects by both "confirmed" and "budding" Sudanese feminist academics, researchers and activists, as well as scholars (Sudanists) in Sudanese and Women's Studies.

My aim is to produce a politically useful feminist analysis from my location as a participant in this struggle.

The ideas of this study are drawn from years of collaborative learning with women communities, colleagues and sister travellers inside and outside Sudan. My membership in Al-Manar Consultancy Group, a feminist advocacy organisation based in Khartoum, has been an important site for my ongoing grassroots activism and scholarship. Many of the concerns of the present chapters originated as I read and edited drafts and shared suggestions with our group, an intellectually challenging work that required negotiations and rewrites of collectively analysed and collectively authored chronicles relating, among other community projects, to violations of women's human rights in Sudan.

My association with another Khartoum-based organisation, Women's Action Group for Peace and Development, whose motto is "the differences that unite us", opened my eyes

to resources for women's organising across the class, race and ethnic/cultural divide. With sisters from Southern Sudan, uprooted by war, displacement and the ruthless exclusionary practices of the regime, we practiced "listening sensitivity" sessions, healing and spirituality. We compared our forms of humiliation as women, located differently, but struggling to transform the structural realities of the African woman who is "hungry and so are her children..., who is old beyond her years, (who) is half-naked, her drooped and withered breasts well exposed, flies buzzing around the faces of her children, and (she) has a permanent begging bowl in her hand..." (Ama Ata Aidoo, 1992: 322).

My ongoing Canadian sojourn provided me with the detachment needed to write down these reflections, and with the opportunity to render accessible Sudanese women's struggles and concerns to a Canadian audience. My enrollment in the Women's Studies graduate program has been particularly influential in my developing a broader understanding of feminism, which in turn, has further enhanced my own political engagement. I have been most inspired by the way in which women can collaborate to democratise the patriarchal stronghold that is the academy, and by the transformational power of Women Studies. To indulge in a field of study in which we are at long last the subjects of history and the "everyday" was a welcome challenge to addition to my indigenous feminist tradition.

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Chapter One

Knowing Our Heritage: The Sudanese Women's Union in Feminist Retrospective

In its larger sense of embracing both a movement for equality, emancipation and struggles to reform traditional structures, feminism has been around in Sudan for some time. A social movement for the organisation of women and their social betterment was in progress since the 1940's. It sought to increase access for women to society's resources and to improve the quality of women's lives and their legal status. This involved actions for better wages, work contracts and night schools for women, as well as efforts to eradicate repugnant social practices such as female circumcision, polygamy and child marriage. While several women's forums emerged, the most important mass organisation of women was the "Sudanese Women's Union" (henceforth WU or the Union), founded in 1952. In the 1960s, the WU had an impressive 15,000 membership, with branches in major towns of the country, and was rated among the largest women's organisations in the continent. The circulation of the Union's magazine, "Voice of Women" by the late 1960's was estimated at 17,000.

As in other Third World countries of the Near East and Africa, the women's movement history and struggles were grounded in the general movement for independence from colonial rule, and formed an essential part of the democratic struggles of the period. The liberation struggle in Sudan did not entail armed resistance and was a "peaceful" transition. The emerging bourgeoisie successfully negotiated a transfer of political power

that left the existing structures of privilege unchanged. The Arab-Muslim Northern Sudanese bourgeoisie played a progressive role and the women of this class together with radical women of the urban middle and working class, joined the movement for equality and legal reforms to redress the prevailing discrimination against women. The phase can be said to have been one of concern with equal rights within the framework of the post-colonial state in which the bourgeoisie held power.

In their advocacy of women's emancipation, Sudanese Northern women's attitudes showed the influence of ideological heritages, namely socialism and an indigenous Islamic tradition, which had an impact on the position and role of women as well as on the mode and characteristics of their movement. Women who consciously strove to move beyond the charitable associations network, and to take the nationalist struggle further, became committed supporters of the Anti-Imperialist Front, precursor to the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) founded in 1946. At the time, the linkage with the SCP was significant because while the liberation struggle was fought by many, it was the Sudanese communists who sought both resistance and transformation. The SCP was, moreover, the first political party to open its membership to women, and to establish their full social and political equality as one of its goals. It was the first party to recruit members from the Southern Sudan and edited a journal, "Advance", destined to the Southern Sudanese populations. It was also the only party to call for a separation of religion from state, and for regional autonomy for the Southern Sudan.

In fact, the WU later became a democratic front associated with the SCP (1), a front that also included trade and tenants unions, youth and students. It was these "modern forces"

(2) as we called them in Sudan, a broad anti-establishment urban middle-class political coalition representing the intelligentsia, workers, women, students (and later army officers) who have invariably posed a serious challenge to the hegemonic tendencies of the ruling circles.

The Islamic Charter founded in 1953 (the Muslim Brotherhood that was to become the National Islamic Front in 1985, which rules the Sudan today), was, for the most part, a marginal actor in the nationalist politics which helped to launch the main political movements and parties. However, as the WU's call for political participation intensified, the earliest division in the women's movement came as a result of the defection by some Muslim Sisters in the 1950's over the issue of whether granting women political rights was in conformity with Islam. Indeed, among the conservative right and centre-right political parties, there was a "general disinterest in organising women and addressing their issues until after (the) success of the women's struggle to gain political rights in 1964"(3).

After independence in 1956, Sudanese women's activism for liberating the country gradually shifted to the struggle for their democratic rights to obtain the vote, education, employment and political organisation. They started to recruit from the population at large, mainly among lower level and middle-class high school female graduates. This move, begun in 1952 even before women obtained suffrage, was prompted by a concern to diversify and enlarge the membership which had until then been restricted to "literate" women (teachers, nurses, midwives), and families or female supporters of SCP members.

By opening the membership to “non-literate” women, and demanding full social, economic and political rights on behalf of women in the whole of Sudan, the WU became “the largest and most representative among the women’s organisations of the time” (4). The activities of the WU involved popular community-level politics, mass work carried out in urban neighbourhoods, such as setting up of sewing workshops, literacy classes, day-care centres, supporting traditional rotating credit associations, and creating housewives’ organisations, which all increased women’s visibility in society. The affiliation with the SCP and the other sectors of organised civil society was no doubt also an avenue for legitimating women’s participation in public life, which allowed them to enjoy public acceptance of their activities. From early on, however, the WU’s strategy was, in the words of its leaders, “to seek a balance between revolutionary insight and respect for tradition and, in this process, to win the confidence of the people” (5).

By 1955, the WU was actively mobilising for the first parliamentary elections leading to full independence, as a consequence of which women obtained the right to vote in the Graduates’ Constituencies (6). This was an important prelude to obtaining full suffrage in 1964. The WU furthermore succeeded in placing one of its members, Thoraya El Dirdeery, in the Constitutional Committee. In 1957, the WU held a major political conference to which all the political parties were invited and put forward its memorandum-programme for the improvement of the situation of women. This included demands for political rights, right to work, equality in wages, family protection. All the political parties agreed to the memorandum but rejected the demand for political rights. A notable exception was the Anti-Imperialist Front whose members fully endorsed all the

women's demands (7). It was also during this period that the WU created solidarity links with the Pan-African Women's Congress, the General Union of Arab Women and the Women's International Democratic Federation (Berlin) (8).

These eventful debuts were brought to an abrupt halt in 1958 by a military takeover led by the Army High Command (with the instigation of one of the leading conservative parties). The coup marked the beginning of the Sudanese military's history of deep involvement in politics, which continues to this day. The military banned the Constitution, dissolved all political parties, trade unions and organisations but surprisingly, did not ban the WU or suppress the smaller women's organisations. This was not to endure long, however, as the regime returned and outlawed the Union at a later period, allegedly due to "irreconcilable divisions among the various women's organisations" (9). The military government created instead a new umbrella organisation, the "All-Sudan Women's Council", which was to include all women's organisations and to be registered under the "Charity Organisations Law". This Law was intended to legally restrict women's activities to charitable and/or religious concerns, and thus to prevent them from joining or organising political associations. Between 1958 and 1962 before the Law was to be fully ratified, the WU carried on its mobilisational and henceforth oppositional work among working and unionised women, female students and particularly housewives' cooperatives. The latter were specially activated during this period as reaching female audiences through housewives' networks could not easily be framed as "subversive (political) activity" according to the emergency laws in force at the time. The WU's magazine became a vehicle for lively criticism of the military (cartoons

and humour were used to perfection), and “turned into one of the most effective weapons in the struggle for democracy in addition to the advocacy of women’s rights” (10). This led of course to the publication’s closure several times, but in the meantime, women continued to campaign and organise.

In 1962, the WU together with other women’s groups accepted an invitation by the authorities to finalise the ratification of the government Law and its state-sanctioned Women’s Organisation. Prior to that, the Steering Committee of the “All-Sudan Women’s Council” had convened a secret meeting for all women’s groups, in which the WU’s supporters won an overwhelming majority against accepting the regime’s new Law on the grounds that it would undermine the women’s movement’s autonomy and integrity. The candidate nominated by the military to head the “All-Sudan Women’s Council” (who turned out to be one of the early Muslim Sister defectors) was also rejected. The WU was promptly outlawed.

In later years, this two-pronged strategy in relation to how to deal with military regimes, -to judge them on the basis of their gender agenda, while maintaining the women’s movement’s independence from the State- was to serve as a precedent for an even larger spectrum of women supporting, and indeed holding executive office, in a military dictatorship that lasted sixteen years (1969-1985). However, the necessary autonomy of women’s organisations advocated and upheld by the WU, was sacrificed as women were lured into the autocratic State’s one-party institution, leading as we shall see to dramatic consequences for the democratic women’s movement.

The period between 1964 and 1969 in which military rule was brought down by a popular uprising with the active participation of women, brought in its wake a series of gains for the women's movement: major reforms in family laws, the vote and the election in 1965 of Fatma Ahmed Ibrahim, the WU's president, as the first woman in the Sudanese Parliament.

Nationalism, Socialism and Feminist Dilemmas.

With certain local specificities notwithstanding, the WU's gradual integration into the national political arena confirms a pattern not uncommon among Third World women's groups and organisations that joined the mixed-gender progressive struggle for national liberation and equality rights. More often than not, a major result of such alliances is that, once formal independence is obtained, they have tended to dilute the women's movement potential commitment to women's issues and autonomy over their policies, positions and development. Furthermore, the legacy of the democratic Sudanese women's movement's ideological affiliation to the SCP highlights some of the dilemmas for women's autonomous agency and activism of organisations that mobilise or are subsumed under a revolutionary vanguard (party). A similar, although qualitatively different axis of this problem also concerns women's organisations in relation to the state (which will be the focus of my discussion in the following chapter). However, while the strategic importance of safeguarding the women's movement's autonomy from the state,

particularly in its militarist-autocratic forms, has been adamantly pursued in Sudan, the alignment with political parties and trade unions has rarely been subjected to rigorous analysis. This problematic is evident today from the polarisation along party lines, which has divided the women's movement and alienated the grassroots. It is also evident from the difficulties presently encountered by women in their efforts to become full partners in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the coalition of oppositional political forces created in 1989 against the ruling Islamic fundamentalist regime in Sudan.

In recent years, a number of feminist, democratic concerns have been raised and articulated in connection with the WU's experience with the Sudanese Left (11), which can be usefully applied to a general consideration of the challenges and strategies confronting us in the present political conjuncture where male-dominated party politics is still the rule. At the same time, many previously "unorganised" women are forming women's caucuses within traditional (sectarian) parties, and as some have advanced, (12), are taking their inspiration from the experience of the WU's strong alliance with the SCP.

While arguing in favour of linking our struggle against gender subordination to that against other oppressions, my purpose in this chapter is to examine, in the light of the local socialist heritage in which our consciousness matured, (and later in relation to the state), the basis from which our women's movement in Sudan can cooperate with other movements for social change, political parties and organisations without sacrificing our commitment to women, and our resistance to patriarchal dogma. Clearly, a basic tenet of my thinking is that the issues of organisation and ideological autonomy are essential

components of a women's movement's dynamism. Rather than seeking to debate the dialogue between socialism and feminism in Sudan, my paramount concern here is to identify and problematise some aspects of this relationship as they materialised in the WU's feminist work and organising.

In reflecting on this ongoing experience, I have taken issue with recent and not so recent feminist insights and debates in conceptualising "feminism" and "feminists" as they are thought out by women's movements, particularly in the Third World. In her "Engendering Democracy in Brazil", Sonia Alvarez points out that "(F)eminism is itself, (...), a highly contested concept. In terms of feminist praxis, little consensus exists as to the causes and remedies for women's oppression, the relationship of women's subordination to other forms of exploitation and oppression (i.e., based on class, race, sexuality), the nature of the "enemy" (i.e., patriarchy or capitalism or imperialism or all of the above), and the appropriate arena of feminist struggle (i.e., the parliament or the bedroom). "The fact that feminism is a partial ideology that can prove compatible with liberal, conservative, radical, and socialist ideologies compounds the controversy over which strategies would be most effective in combating women's oppression"(13). Nevertheless, as noted by Gita Sen and Caren Grown, it is "this heterogeneity (that) gives feminism its dynamism and makes it the most potentially powerful challenge to the status quo" (14). This is so because feminism "allows the struggle against subordination to be waged in all arenas – from relations in the home to relations between nations – and it necessitates substantial change in cultural, economic, and political formations" (15). Indeed, the evidence suggests that "in many instances gender equality must be

accompanied by changes on these other fronts” (16). Yet, as Third World feminists meeting in Bangalore, India, in 1984 concluded in anticipation of the United Nations Decade for the Advancement of Women, “the struggle against gender subordination cannot be compromised during the struggle against other forms of oppression, or be relegated to a future when they may be wiped out” (17).

By looking into our women’s movement own trajectory my discussion will be informed by the critique and vision of Sudanese women themselves - socialist feminists, grassroots feminists and feminists “**tout court**” in which category I include “secular feminists” - who over the years have resiliently challenged the politics of expediency underlying the “woman question” approach to our subordination, as well as the version of African-elite “state feminism” that we have known.

In this context, the story of the WU’s circumscribed autonomy in relation to the SCP constitutes an illuminating point of departure.

The WU and the SCP

The democratic women’s movement in Sudan benefited from the organisational support of the SCP and its progressive outlook. The WU’s development into a democratic front, its connections with class struggle and the workers and trade unions provided it with a popular and secure support base. Marxism, with its emphasis on the “view from below” notwithstanding involved, as we now know, numerous contradictions for a full emancipatory feminist politics. However, what emerged as problematic for Sudanese

feminist activists was the near “regimentation” of social and political conduct, and the strict adherence of the democratic women’s movement to the Party line. Many of us awakened to feminism as a result of not being treated as equals within the party organisations.

The liberation of the female/woman we were told by our comrades in the struggle was not the “primary contradiction”. Relegated to the status of “second contradiction”, our concerns were not to be explored until the primary contradiction within society as a whole is resolved (18). Thus to raise specific feminist issues when the country was undergoing liberation from class-based oppression and imperialist domination, or building resistance against a dictatorial regime (a good part of our time since independence), was tantamount to committing revolutionary sacrilege. But we were also required to endure quietly and to tone down our demands (especially those pertaining to sexual-social relations) because the milieu in which we live is “predominantly Muslim and conservative” (19). This “progressive male” culture coming in the wake of the distorted impact of modernisation/Westernisation in our societies produced, as Azizah Al-Hibri argues, a “new blend of female oppression”, that was added and stirred with the pre-existing forms of male dominance (20).

The SCP’s “culture” indeed entailed “ a veil of common morality expressed through Islam” (21), a sensibility it shared with all the other parties in the Northern Sudanese political arena. As many of us agonise today over where the nationalist-secularist political formations failed us, it may not be an overstatement to view the current

enchantment/confusion of many young women in our part of the world with Islamic revival (fundamentalist discourse), as a reaction to these “double messages” that we were being given by the progressive and leftist forces. Of more concern to us here is the way in which the “religious-cum-culture” matrix in combination with the implicit orthodox left’s “woman question” came to be internalised in the WU, and in fact has since taken on a dynamic of its own. Presently, the WU’s struggles for equality within the framework of Islam have made its fundamental premises unacceptable to large sectors of ethnically diverse, disenfranchised Sudanese women and secular feminists. While the above “trend” in the WU’s present realities may be understood as indicative of a “crisis-response” attitude to the identity politics and militancy of Islamist women, my reflection leads me to believe that the seeds of the WU’s conservative penchant were sown a lot earlier and, therefore, to search in our own (women’s) heritage and in the alliances that we made, some of the fault-lines and lessons that remain pertinent and instructive as we re-envision the future.

The Circumscribed Autonomy.

One of the aspects of feminist debates concerning the dialogue between socialism and feminism focuses on the dilemmas for women’s autonomous agency and activism of women’s movements that mobilise or are subsumed under a revolutionary vanguard (party). Feminists have critiqued the fact that women’s goals are generally subordinated to the goals of the party, that women are instrumentalised by the party organisation, and that they have served as handmaidens, “greek chorus” and culture bearers (22). In Third World socialist countries, the unity of socialism and women’s emancipation was often

assumed, not incorrectly, to be a solid foundation for women's alliance with the organisation or party that advocated socialist transformation. In the Sudan, the WU's efforts to coalesce with the Party were based more on the party's progressive outlook rather than strict adherence to Marxist ideology.

As Haideh Moghissi points out, "The socialist commitment to the liberation of women has always been to educate the politically unconscious women to understand the larger, longer-range impact of the socialist revolution in their lives, to incorporate women into the economy, to protect women's labour in shops and factories, to promote maternity legislation and to end prostitution" (23). Sondra Hale further elaborates that "privileging women's interests is not an accepted maxim of most Marxist revolutionary movements: the goal of most twentieth-century vanguard parties has been to liberate societies from class-based oppression and imperialist domination, and then to protect what has been won. Consequently, while struggling to attain power, vanguard parties have mostly muted or marginalized women's strategic and practical gender interests; after seizing control of the state other priorities and tasks commonly prevail"(24).

In the case of Iran, Moghissi indeed suggests a convergence between leftist populism and Islamic populism in relation to gender ideology, which has deeply permeated the women's movement. This convergence is especially apparent in the fact that "while there were differences between the religious forces and the secular left in terms of women's rights in "public" life, their views shared surprising similarities when it came to women's roles and responsibilities in the "private" life of the family" (25). In similar fashion, the element distinguishing the SCP from other Soviet-style models was that it sought to co-

exist with Islam, a position as Hale pointed out, which was not dissimilar to “the same trepidation with regard to the relationship of revolutionary movements to the catholic Church in Central America” (26). The SCP was careful to avoid actions that might cast the Party in a role challenging culturo-religious structures such as the culturally-based sexual division of labour.

Paradoxical as it may seem, this “patriarchal culture” was to a great extent welcomed by the WU who considered “women’s position in the family and the relationship between the sexes (...) to be a reflection of women’s oppressed position in the economy and the sphere of production” (27). In a revealing statement during a televised interview in 1986, the present leader of the WU indeed highlighted this thinking by declaring that “as the attitudes of the Sudanese male were a consequence of years of conditioning, it was perhaps too early to bring up controversial issues such as women and domestic labour” (28). Such a position can only be comprehended as a reversed replica of “years of conditioning”, and a huge understatement which does not do justice to the WU’s own historic contributions in democratising social and political relations. In fact it was through the agitation of the WU that a number of reforms in family and civil law were effected during the 1960’s and 1970’s, which clearly showed that the so-called values of the milieu are not immutable and can be changed to benefit women.

The recurrent failure of the WU to confront the female-male relations, typified in the above familiar refrain (letting the men off the hook), has actually meant ignoring the extent to which the economic crisis and the feminisation of poverty have increased the burden of the extended family and its support structures to women (29). Domestic

responsibility (which even among Party members is rarely shared) has increasingly led women to shy away from formal political participation and even from local level politics (30). This is indeed a major reason for the decline in women's political participation in Sudan.

The Puritanical Progressivism.

Through a subtle slippage from religiosity-culture to "moral rectitude", the concern with "upholding female virtue and correct behaviour", not to "emulate Western women", a tune generally echoed by exploitative and conservative political leaders, found support among many WU members and SCP supporters. Indeed, the WU Constitution stipulates that "a member has to be of good moral repute". Moreover, in the WU as well as in the revolutionary SCP where the debates in all other fields of society went beyond bourgeois democracy, feminist consciousness was discouraged for its "individualism" and "divisiveness", that is to say that it is meaningless unless social changes make emancipation possible. (31). Equally harmful, as recalled elsewhere, was the political name-calling or epithet "bourgeois" which was attached to women who tried to raise women's personal issues, and was effectively used to silence them (32). It is easy to see how, in such a context, the expression of subjectivity in women's lives and women's cross-cultural solidarity were often viewed as "a retraction from class analysis" (33), and hardly ever articulated as an equally important, if not a primary goal. In this way also women's solidarity (until well into the 1980's) came to be understood in a narrow perspective, as being limited to like-minded women's mass organisations, particularly

those of the former Soviet block countries. Often it precluded any role for progressive feminist voices and civil society networks in the West who opposed their governments' policies vis-à-vis the Third World and Sudan and, in the long run "deprived the women's masses of making fruitful alliances and strengthening each others' knowledge, awareness and activities" (34).

A "stoic morality", almost akin to religious duty, was thus embedded in the organisational culture of the WU's norms, structures and practices. Until today, as El Bakri notes "issues related to marriage, sexuality, virginity-of great importance to young Sudanese women subject to far-reaching control- are not raised at all"(35). They are rarely aired in debates or discussions. Although it is true that these are sensitive issues to deal with in a culture that insists on extremes of sexual modesty, occurrences of abuse in the public sphere, sexual harassment at work, teenage pregnancies, domestic violence and mundane discriminations have become part of the lived realities of many women in Sudan. That it is mainly poor women, displaced women and, in exceedingly higher numbers, "black" women from Southern and Western Sudan who bear the brunt of today's Islamist moral guards, is in itself a disquieting testimony to the extent to which the WU has remained "frozen in time" (36), with its unmediated emphasis on (middle-class) moral virtues.

The point to stress here is that the attention to "morals" and appropriate behaviour only delays the work of challenging the public/private boundary, and the recognition that women's particular lives are significant political resources in the struggle against patriarchal cultural norms. As Angela Miles and Nancy Hartsock have pointed out, the

recognition of women's personal struggle to revalue themselves, or what Miles describes as the "personal-political strain", is "a risky but necessary political effort" to complement the collective struggle for change (37).

The Mode of Organisation and the Underground.

Although not all of the WU members or leaders were communists or members of the SCP, from early on, in the 1940's, as Haga Kashif Bedri recalls, "women communist party members held secret societies for literacy, (and) developed women cadres for public speaking and explaining and analysing (the) political situation" (38). But the WU also inherited the Party's formal structures and procedures, with decision-making concentrated in a Central Committee. This hierarchical organisational structure (described as "Stalinist" by many women Party members) precluded local flexibility and ultimately the evolution of non-orthodox socialist ideas about gender arrangements. In the long run, the rigid structures prevented women from fully assuming the task and direction of theory-building to bring it in line with women's evolving needs and aspirations. It also had the effect of isolating women who either did not wish to be politically identified with the SCP, or did not find the rigid centralised structures particularly motivating for their feminist activism. This was particularly evident in the lack of contact between activists who worked through the WU and Southern Sudanese women who, together with rural women, remained at the periphery of the women's movement (39).

In reality, the democratic women's movement was unable to effectively penetrate the rural areas and, more recently the masses of internally displaced women from the southern and western regions of the country who, for economic or war-related reasons were forced to move to the towns of North Sudan. The fact that the movement was Northern, "literate" and urban-based, features which it shared with the powerful SCP (40), was certainly as much of a prohibiting factor in reaching remote localities as was the general prevalence of customary, tribal practices in the rural areas. Initially, however, the task of creating regional branches for the Union was left to teachers, but the branches ran out of energy each time the teachers moved to join posts elsewhere. To that extent, it can be said that the WU lacked the credentials of a full-blown national women's organisation representing all the regions of Sudan, although since 1952, it called for full political and economic rights for all Sudanese women and did have branches in some major towns.

Government repression was a constant factor in the WU's work and activities. While the SCP has always thrived underground and in crises for most of its political life, this proved to be more problematic for women activists. During military dictatorships, house searches were frequent and unannounced, many women's writings and personal archives were lost or burnt by the women themselves as doing so was the only way to ensure their families' safety. But women also had to heed the SCP directives to limit their movements, to avoid being seen unaccompanied in strange neighbourhoods after dark for reasons both of security and decorum. Eventually, it was the women who, unable to thrive underground became more vulnerable to state repression. Indeed, as Hale argues,

the state “always managed to exert more control on the WU (than on the Party), infiltrating it with state supporters, trying to influence or force the WU away from the SCP” (41).

By 1971, the state (military dictatorship of Jaafar El Numeiry, 1969-1985) effectively dislodged the WU and appropriated its cause and even its name by the co-optation of many of its members to the state-run Sudan Women Union (SWU). The WU survived “underground” from 1971 to 1985, but the severe curtailment on the range of its activities and membership had taken its toll. By 1985 when a popular uprising in which the WU had actively participated restored democratic rule, “the military regime’s restrictions on political action and organisation had already forcibly removed a whole generation of women from the realm of politics.” (42). The void left by an incapacitated WU created the conditions for the Islamists to mobilise an increasing proportion of politically inexperienced secular women. Above all, the experience of surviving underground proved an inadequate substitute for the day-to-day visibility and motion that are vital for women’s organisations.

Conflict of vision, dissension, and autonomy.

In 1969, the WU supported a left-leaning military coup led by young army officers, which in its early days found large support among the general public and women. The coup had been preceded by lively debates within the left-wing forces, who by then in addition to the SCP had come to include various strands of Arab Socialism inspired by

Nasser's 1952 Free Officers Movement in Egypt (43). The debate revolved around the concept of the "New (or Revolutionary) Democracy", the question as to whether it is the people or the army who should lead the (socialist) revolution in the Arab countries and larger Third World. (44). The SCP's position in the 1960's had been swayed by the Egyptian leader's reformist and egalitarian agenda, his nationalisation of the Suez Canal which led to the "Tripartite Agression" (Britain, France and Israel) from which Egypt emerged victorious. Although the limitations ("petty-bourgeois" nature) of Nasser's experience (notably his crackdown on democratic liberties), did not escape the SCP's strategic critique, the impact of the Egyptian Free Officers Movement had left its mark on some members in the SCP Central Committee, and in the WU. This eventually led to internal dissension within the Party. The divisions arose due to the insistence by some members in the Central Committee to see the Sudanese left-wing Free Officers who carried out the coup in 1969 as a "petty-bourgeois force" which could be influenced in radical directions. The Party leadership opposed this view proposing instead a popular front government with communists participating as equal partners.

It was against the background of these tensions that the WU's support for the new regime raised the angst of the Party (45). In justifying its position, the WU argued that the new regime's declared programme was similar to, if not identical with, the socialist ideals advocated by the SCP. The new coup leader announced the establishment of a "democratic republic" committed to advancing independent "Sudanese socialism", appointed several communists in his cabinet and proceeded to hastily nationalise a number of foreign companies. Still, the WU decided to support the new officers on

condition that the regime implement the Union's demands. These were promptly presented to the new military leader in a memorandum demanding full equality in wages, pension rights, amelioration of women's working conditions, and payments up to half of a man's salary to support divorced wives and their children. The military leader pledged to fulfill all of the women's demands, in addition to abolishing the highly controversial "**bayt etta**" (house of obedience) (46). These reforms in Muslim Family Law represented the long-standing demands that Northern Sudanese women had tirelessly struggled to obtain since independence. They were therefore, popularly received by Northern Muslim Sudanese women, and the WU responded through public demonstrations in support of the regime. It was a major victory since, for the first time in the country's independent history, state government had intervened and interfered with the autonomy of the **Shari'a**" (Islamic jurisprudence) (47), to bring it in line with women's concerns.

This was to prove an ominous victory, however, as it was the same president Numeiry who was to later impose the **Shari'a** on all the Sudanese people precisely by using the coercive apparatus of the state. In fact even before the ink settled on the reformed laws, the military ruler's opening speech to the People's Assembly attacked the WU for having forced his hand on the adoption of what he referred to as "imported" laws (48). Conflicts quickly ensued between Numeiry and the WU who continued agitating for women's issues in the face of an increasingly authoritarian military ruler (49). In May 1971, Numeiry abolished the WU, but only after the later withdrew its support from the regime for failing its promises to women.

A month later 35 women representing various organisations (some of whom had been founding members of the original WU in 1952) were summoned to the presidential palace to prepare the ground for Sudan's first encounter with state feminism Arab-Socialist style.

In July of the same year, a "corrective" coup led by SCP dissenters in Numeiry's cabinet controlled state power for three days, until Numeiry's supporters with the help of Egyptian and Libyan intervention reinstated the ousted leader. The events that followed ushered in dark days for the country (50). A vicious hunt for communists and democrats that dictators manage only too well was unleashed on society. The SCP and the WU returned underground, and with them many of the unfinished yearnings, passions and debates with some of which we are here concerned.

Analysis and Discussion: Organisation and Resistance

Reflecting on, and attempting to draw some conclusions from the WU's experience from today's perspective is not a simple task. This is in part because despite the tremendous strides, the retreats have been overwhelming. Moreover, it is never easy for those of us who have survived the transition from past to continuously present challenges, to hold in constant humility and respect the everyday precepts and commitments that the early women's movement entitled us to pursue, think all over again when necessary and, in the process, to leave no stone unturned. My personal feeling, to use a popular expression, is

that as we embrace the new, we should also guard against throwing the (older) baby out with the bath water.

In many ways, the experience of the WU broadly fits the description depicted by Maxine Molyneux of the General Union of Yemeni Women in the former Popular Democratic Republic of Yemen in the 1970's: "It has above all, been a social and educational organisation of a traditional women's welfare kind, carrying out activities that were certainly important, and which could substantially improve women's position, but not mobilising women directly to confront prevailing male-female relations" (51). It was, as my colleague, Fatima Babiker Mahmoud, put it "a leadership of teachers" (52), in reference to the fact that the majority of the early WU leadership came from a background of teaching, nursing and midwifery, the earliest fields for Sudanese women's employment. Also, in the early days literacy had been a condition for membership, while teachers and nurses unionised on their own.

Recalling the WU's trajectory, an old-time veteran of those days reminds us : "(L)ooking back in anger without considering the mitigating circumstances would be unfair because sustainable participatory methods of organisation and institution building are not easy even today (...) some training was required for those would-be animators and agents of awareness and change, but at the time there were no UN agencies willing to operate through or with NGO's or any democratic organisations as they do nowadays" (53). The above words serve as a timely reminder of, on the one hand, the dependent nature of our Third World countries, and on the other, the extent to which the expansion of resources,

choices and possibilities have provided important openings for women that were unavailable to the older generation. Indeed, the comparison enables us to measure the breadth of what was achieved by the WU in those heady “Eisenhower Doctrine” days. All this changed with the declaration of the UN Decade for Women in 1975 as “funds started pouring in from international agencies to set up “women’s projects”...” (54), a story which we will pursue in the following chapter.

The WU’s struggle for reform in a milieu where religious doctrine and beliefs sustain sexual inequalities was important for women’s political education, for raising consciousness and most importantly, for demonstrating that democratic change is possible (55). In the conditions of the Sudan, the WU’s struggle for gradual, sometimes radical (by the standards of the time), improvement of the laws was a necessary move towards democracy, a means not an end. All of these gains had a measure of success in enforcing the political participation of women and meant greater civil equality for women and democratic rights. This was no small feat, as the following testimony written in 1996 recalls: “(O)f the 489 months of independence, we enjoyed democracy for 138 months only and suffered 351 months of dictatorship so far. No democratic government during the independence years lasted to complete its term and give the electorate a chance to return it to office or to change it. This lack of a recurrent democratic electoral process deprives people of the political education it generates and delays the maturation of awareness among people generally and women in particular” (56).

I shall, therefore conclude this chapter of our heritage not by glorifying the past – it speaks for itself – (57), but rather by identifying pivotal areas where the praxis of the WU’s organisational and ideological autonomy remains wanting. Because the religious issue has taken particular salience in Sudan in recent years, and is dividing the ranks of the democratic and progressive-liberal women forces in a manner that is being expediently exploited by our male partners in the “present-futurist” oppositional alliance, I shall give special attention to the WU’s positioning on this question. Before that, however, it is necessary to dwell on some key organisational fault-lines in the WU’s feminist praxis.

Remembering How Women Organise.

Since 1971, except for a brief period of multi-party democracy (1985-1989), the WU has worked in an atmosphere of illegality and consequently does not have the means to reach mass audiences. The WU’s opportunities, therefore, to develop new skills and analyses based on what Angela Miles has called the “collective renaming of realities” (58), cannot presently be fully seized to develop a new basis for feminist political action. However, it is important to recognise other “ruptures in the normalcy” rooted in the democratic WU’s enduring resistance to expressions of “the politics of the personal”, its inability to provide the genuinely participatory methods of organising and forums which a democratic membership requires, and its neglect of the cultural resources that empower women to invent and inform our strategies.

Tensions within the WU began to emerge immediately after the April 1985 popular uprising. By then, a number of WU and SCP feminist members and independent feminists had voiced their critique of the WU's hierarchical structures, its obsession with lifestyle and "moral rectitude" and its relations with the SCP. At the same time, the grassroots were pushing to convene a general congress. The last congress was held in 1970, and the incumbent WU president, Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim, has been in office for over four decades. However, the discussion forums and preparations leading to the congress kept being forestalled.

The reasons for postponing political discussion and, in many instances accountability, for top-down actions and decisions taken without consultation with the grassroots, were remarkably similar to the delaying tactics of male politics: the "time" being never "right or ripe", the women's accumulated concerns "a deviation from the burning national issues at hand", and continuously laying all the blame for feminist theorising inertia on the organisational chaos resulting from years of dictatorship. Many women who spoke out were often simply shunned as "disgruntled females" (59). Other sympathetic supporters observed that "in actual fact, the WU closed into itself and became very selective in accepting members, reducing its membership to those women who were in the Communist Party, or those who were guaranteed to be not against the party line, thus isolating once more many energetic and committed women. Publicly, the leadership of WU announced that any woman regardless of her political colouring could be a member provided she did not have a "bad reputation" and had not been involved in the previous regime" (60).

This state of affairs was a source of particular strain for the WU activists, and indeed for many distant women supporters, who had opened their homes to outlawed opposition organisers, marched in the demonstrations and participated in the civil disobedience actions leading to the popular uprising which ended the dictatorship. As none of our gender grievances were particularly voiced during that time, the hopes ignited in 1985 were that the WU would seize the opportunity of the return to democratic life to renew its strategies and vision. However, in the aftermath of the uprising when the WU, in concert with the other political and civil society formations re-emerged, the leadership was actively holding public, political rallies, media appearances and lobbying for attention from the freshly elected coalition government (a far from “woman friendly” conservative Right-Centre civilian government) (61).

Set alongside the failure to convene the congress, these efforts were pursued at the expense of community outreach activities to stimulate gender consciousness and contact with poor women in the mushrooming suburban peripheries. By 1986, the Youth and Student associations had reorganised their ranks and many women found themselves working through them in community health-care centres and neighbourhood self-help projects (62). The continuous appeals from the membership to convene a general congress, to put our long-neglected house in order went unheeded, until in 1989, the military, this time dressed in all-out fundamentalist gear, “struck” again (and as I write, they remain).

Not surprisingly, during those tenuous four years (1985-1989), the harvest was remarkably meagre for the democratic women's movement. The WU's leadership had frustrated its own membership by not providing the adequate support structures to help women make the radical transition. In the meantime, to compound it all, the WU had been unable to force our women's voice into the National Alliance for National Salvation (NANS) coalition (63). Considered as neither a political party in its own right, nor an independent trade union, women were represented in NANS "only within the existing trade union structure" (64). As a result, the question of women's representation in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the current oppositional structure, has plagued us ever since, and remains one of the complicated issues yet to be resolved.

Women activists thus lost on both accounts. As a result of being denied the method of organising and participation in which we shine most – airing our views, putting our resources together, freely naming our representatives and **enjoying** the event – (call it a "congress" if you will), we were unable to seize the opportunity of the return to democratic life to renew our strategies. We also lost the chance to present our "elected" women's agenda to civil society's democratic institutions. Of course, the occasion was not lost on the right-wing political formations that found in it a further convenient justification to brand the WU as a non-entity and a communist front.

Ultimately, the failure to convene the women's congress invites the important question as to whether it was not a fear of change, the fear, to use Mary Evans's words of "becoming the victim rather than the vanguard of history" (65) just when its second generation

leadership was rising to the new challenges, that so obscured the WU's political judgement and delayed the visionary outcome?

Revisiting the religious-cultural matrix.

In recent years, the religious issue has acquired particular salience in Sudan (I shall discuss the reasons for its upsurge and women's resistances to it in Chapter Three). It is therefore important to understand critically the WU perspective on this matter, because it is an area where the women's movement, under the leadership of the Union is acquiring a degree of independence (not surprisingly perhaps) from the "Party line".

In their approach to women's emancipation in Northern Sudan, both the WU and the SCP recognised the importance of tradition, faith and culture as unifying forces in the democratic process. In this they espoused a "secularist-universalist" position that acknowledges Islam as religious/spiritual/cultural practice, an individual freedom, as opposed to Islam as legal code or imposed from above.

For the middle-class, pious-thinking organised women's movement, the concern to relate the **Shari'a** and **'urf** (custom) in the 20th century to realities in Sudan was a vital issue. Questions of marriage, divorce, child custody and maintenance were/are real problems affecting many women. The WU thus engaged in a "patriarchal bargain" (66) to challenge the status of women in society and the female subordination associated with orthodox Islamic beliefs. It is helpful to recall here that as a result of its "double" colonial

legacy (Turco-Egyptian and British), societal structures in Sudan never completely shifted the social system to the secularised structures found in Western patriarchal systems, or even in Turkey in the early twentieth century (67). Nevertheless, the British colonisers had followed a policy of “laissez-faire” regarding religion in Northern Sudan (68), and it was Egyptian “Ulemas” or “Qadis” (jurists or Islamic scholars), espousing a relatively enlightened Islamic jurisprudence, who were charged with the administration of religious affairs. Throughout the twentieth century and until 1983, the system of law in Sudan was diverse and eclectic: modern criminal and civil and commercial law generally prevailed.

Moreover, as Lobban points out “the flavor and sub-culture of Islam in the region is of West African derivation” (69), a feature that distinguishes popular Sudanese Islam from the “patriarchal belt” or what D.Kandiyoti, calls the “classical patriarchy” of the Muslim Middle East (70). As elsewhere, Islam in Sudan “evolved over time, in rhythm with changing historical conditions and the local customs and practices with which it came into contact” (71). Polygamous tradition, for example, preceded conversion to Islam and is not uncommon among the non-arabised and non-Muslim ethnic communities of Southern Sudan, while female genital mutilation is also a pre-Islamic practice.

Institutionalised Islam and Islamic justice, which historically catered to the needs of the merchant class entered Sudan with the Turco-Egyptian occupation (1820-1884). It was during that period that “Islamic law as a personal status law was instituted” (72).

It is partly in response to these local realities, and based on an understanding of the multiple and contested orthodoxies within Islam that the WU's prevalent mode of thinking and practice in the cultural-religious complex of Sudan remains that "if Islam is reinterpreted correctly, it is compatible with social advance" (73). Furthermore, as the status of women under Islam in Africa, and indeed elsewhere where Islam is practiced, is neither uniform nor static, there is room for "modernist" interpretations as the WU demonstrated, and its struggles in this area rewarded in 1968 and in 1970 (74), (in the same way as the networks "Women Living Under Muslim Laws" (WLUML) and "Women Against Fundamentalism" (WAF), with certain qualifications between the notwithstanding, are attempting to do today).

Under the aegis of the WU, Sudanese Northern women thus waged the struggle for Muslim law reforms primarily "on their own account". Meanwhile, in the post-colonial context of "modernisation" and "enlightened Islam", their renegotiation of the relations between genders did not constitute a challenge to the patriarchal **status quo**, and was accommodated by the male social reformers. Furthermore, in the heyday of the nationalist movement, ("long before the Nairobi and Beijing Conferences", as veteran WU activists delight in recalling)(75), Sudanese women were proud of what they had achieved: "legality of abortion to save a mother's life, the possibility of a judicial ruling in the case of rape or incest, equal pay for equal work, eight weeks of maternity leave with 100 percent pay (and time off) to nurse their babies in the middle of the work day without loss of salary" (76). Furthermore, Islamic inheritance laws enabled women to

own land, and by 1964 the suffrage was extended enabling women to vote in the 1965 general elections (77).

However, and indicative perhaps of the complexity of the times, this reformist momentum eventually took on a life of its own, manifested by growing conservative tendencies within the WU. Throughout the 1980's –1990's, with the political struggle confined to pulling the carpet from under the (by then powerful) Muslim Brotherhood/Sisterhood's feet, the WU's attention had shifted to challenging the fundamentalists in their own terrain, the Islamic- identity-authenticity mantra. This development was particularly evident following the April 1985 popular uprising when the WU emerged from sixteen years of clandestinity with only Islam on its agenda. Debates on the Personal Status Law resumed, as well as those concerning the "reinterpretation" of the Qoranic texts and Sunna (78) and occupied a by far larger space during the 1986 election year than the Bill of Rights (or secular civil code) then under discussion (79).

Recently, during the latest round of NDA deliberations in September 2000, to which at long last women representatives from all the political parties in the opposition, the NGO sector and independent feminist activists were invited, the WU's president refused to endorse CEDAW's agenda as a framework around which Sudanese women's progressive organisations can take a united stand. The WU refused to endorse CEDAW on the grounds that certain of the Convention's articles, those pertaining to Reproductive Rights in particular, "deserve reservation" (80). It can be recalled here that these were the same reservations voiced by Sudanese Islamist women, Iranian clerics and the Vatican at the

UN Population Conference in Cairo in 1994 and at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (81).

The WU's almost nostalgic craving to win back what it perceives as having been "hijacked" by the Islamic fundamentalists and their women in 1989 (82), can (and did in women's struggles elsewhere), open a Pandora's box of communalist rivalries between and among women, whose racial and discriminatory undertones have sadly found their way to many ordinary Sudanese women's hearts. This is a grave error that we should not only be aware of, but should totally, consciously and continuously resist in all its forms and manifestations. As Nira Yuval-Davis has cautioned, constructing women's struggles and identities "within the boundaries of their communities' religion and culture creates racialized exclusions towards women who are not part of those collectivities, but are part of those pluralist societies" (83). It is in this spirit, for example, that Egyptian feminists in the organisation "Al-Maraa al-Jadida" ("New Woman"): "refused to formally associate themselves with the WLUML, although they generally support their policies, because they feel that association with any organization in whose title the word "Muslim" appears would have the effect of excluding Copt and other Egyptian women of non-Muslim origin from becoming full members of the organization" (84). Non-Muslim Southern Sudanese women have been formulating the same concerns.

As this chapter of our history draws to a close, the following passionate words by a Sudanese feminist communist sums up the empowered challenge to the WU's ideological and feminist shortcomings: "(W)e have begun to analyze our relationship to Islam, to

Shari'a, to family conventions, and in general, to the gender roles and ideology that the state and party expect of us – in fact, constructed for us. We need to challenge domestic violence, the division of labor, and in general, as radicals, this role of “companion” we are expected to play – whether as companion political organization to the SCP – or as wives, girlfriends, and relatives of SCP members. The SCP and the WU have been too conservative (to) undertake these tasks” (85).

The above analysis of the WU's vision and praxis on the living complexities of the Sudanese cultural domain and women's roles in it, reveals an essentialist and one-dimensional approach to “culture” that is itself a concept never facile to delineate. But women in particular are well placed to know (often violently so, as in Sudan, Iran, Algeria and Afghanistan) the ways in which culture is “a rich resource, usually full of internal contradictions, and a resource which is always used selectively in various ethnic(al) cultural and religious projects within specific power relations and political discourse” (86). At the same time, while religion bears a close relationship to culture, “religion as symbolic border guard of specific collectivity boundaries and cultural traditions”, precludes the notion that the two can be reduced to each other (87). One is tempted to ask here: could this “common sense” knowledge, based on our own experience of struggle against backwardness and old-time Mullahs, have escaped the WU's depiction of women's multiple realities? Of particular relevance to the challenge confronting the WU's in this regard, is M.-A. Helie-Lucas's argument that “(A)s the Left before them, women who try to defend their rights in Muslim contexts are generally accused of importing a foreign ideology whenever they ask for more social justice. But

while the Left's response was to point at universal values of social justice, women accept the fundamentalist premises that in matters concerning the private sphere, universal is equated to being West-dominated. Consequently, defending universal values of social justice becomes unacceptable when it comes to the woman question" (88).

The relative autonomy of the WU's stand on the issue of religion therefore does illustrate a differential experience in the definition of culture and religiosity, one that confronts women in everyday practice, as opposed to the more instrumentalist male attitude towards the **location** and **meaning** of women's predicament. One explanation for this is offered by Maxine Molyneux who writes that "women's struggles are mediated by a complex combination of mechanisms non-economic as well as economic, and therefore, constitute a specific struggle" (89). Also, while social class remains an important indicator of differences in Sudanese women's social, economic and political experience and life style, an equally significant differential dynamic is manifest in the realm of rural-urban "being" (culture). For example, in their case study on women's participation in economic, social and political life in an urban and rural community in Sudan, El Bakri and Kameir noted: "(W)omen's status seems generally to have been higher (for example, they have a larger role in production, are socially freer, have more say in public affairs, etc.) in areas with least Arab/Islamic influence (specifically western and southern Sudan)..." (90). For her part, Janice Boddy, in her insightful study of women's prefigurative sub-cultures in a northern Sudanese village describes the essence of what she calls "vernacular as opposed to doctrinally defined knowledge" in this way :

“Hofriyati village culture has responded to external threats and influences with flexibility and resilience, protected, perhaps, by a dynamic syncretism and capacity for metamorphosis. Contemporary practice is informed by and enriched by various religious and secular traditions, but is more than the sum of these. Embedded in its surface expressions – customs (**‘adat**), beliefs, ceremonial procedures – lies a network of interlocking symbols, idioms and metaphors that provides the context in whose terms Hofriyati (women) interact and derive meaning from their experiences of the world. **This system of reference, part religious, part mundane (the two defy separation),** itself drawn from several sources, may be one of the more enduring aspects of village culture” (91). (my emphasis).

It is no doubt specific aspects of women’s culture such as these in which, in Janice Boddy’s words “the sacred and secular realms interpenetrate” (92), that also define the differential experience of women’s culture in relation to (men’s) “universalised” religious ideals (or the lack of them). “Hofriyati” women, writes Boddy, “hold Islam commensurate with vernacular knowledge, where men are more given to scrutinizing practice and the knowledge on which it is based for departures from a (locally constructed) universal ideal” (93). Boddy argues that it is on these bases that “women negotiate the gender asymmetries and constructs that shape their lives, claiming for them a significance not always concordant with men’s but nonetheless immanent and potential within the constructs themselves” (94). It is in this context also that according to Victoria Bernal, the “new Islamic sensibilities (are) calling into question the morality and

legitimacy of local practices” (95), resulting not in a return to “tradition”, but rather in “a decline of the local community as the center of moral and social power” (96).

It is this wealth of cultural resources in Sudanese women’s experience of the secular and the religious in their lives that poses crucial theoretical and political questions that the WU, in concert with others, will need to address in order to find a means whereby, in Charlotte Bunch’s words “we can keep (both) our politics and souls alive” (97), in our women’s movement. Such a perspective defies the facile assumption, reflected in the WU’s dominant middle-class model of Muslim identity, that these issues can be dealt with solely within an Islamic equality or a generic framework.

Conclusion.

In general conformity with the ideology of the nationalist movement, the issue of women’s emancipation espoused by the WU was debated within the limits laid down by Islam and Sudanese nationalism. As Kumari Jayawardena argues in her seminal book on “Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World”, the basic thrust for women’s rights based on the needs of a modernising society and its demands for women’s participation, was given legitimacy by reference to religious and nationalist traditions (98). This much has been confirmed by the WU’s general trajectory, and probably explains why the orthodox Left’s “woman question” did not (could not ?) entertain the “socialist feminist question” (99). While Islam as tradition has meant maintaining a precarious balance, the path to socialism also proved an uneasy alliance for women. While the WU’s experiences

of the nationalist-secular struggle provided, to use Angela Miles' words, a "model of female affirmation" (100), today they have less and less meaning for young women who never knew the movement or who have ceased to believe in its capacity to address their evolving realities.

In light of the WU's revolutionary power base in civil society, and most of all its affiliation with the SCP, there is no doubt that the WU, as reflected in its practice, suffered from a lack of ideological socialist innovation (101), leadership paralysis and a debilitating hierarchical set-up that were not conducive to empowering women beyond generic political objectives. The evidence does confirm, however, that the WU's coalescing with the Party was based more on the latter's progressive outlook and its organisational know-how rather than the Union's strict adherence to Marxist-Socialist ideology. The SCP's progressive outlook was itself premised not on attaining socialism as an immediate goal, but rather in realising the national democratic revolution in Sudan. This project still remains. Within this project, however, canonical interpretations of socialism are not inevitable. Indeed, Maxine Molyneux reminds us that the Bolshevik radicals in the 1920's expressed more "libertarian views" on the "institutions through which female subordination is maintained"(102) than was the practice under "really existing socialist states". They furthermore "saw in the organisational independence of women's organisations, an essential precondition for any successful women's struggle" (103), a position as Molyneux argues "which cannot be dismissed as "liberal" or "bourgeois" but has its place firmly within the socialist tradition" (104).

Recently, during a telephone conversation with Fatima A.Ibrahim, long-time president of the WU, I asked Ustaza Fatima (105) the following speculative question: if, in the coming democracy in Sudan, a political party other than the SCP were to convincingly advocate a platform for women's secular, democratic and civil human rights, would we side with it in place of our older allies ? Ustaza Fatima's lengthy pause after which she stated that "from here on we are on our own", without further elaboration, was a telling testimony that this chapter of our heritage may have reached its final rest.

What remains uncertain, however, is the extent to which the WU will be able to maintain a viable independence from the rising tide of cultural relativist schools of "Islamic feminist" activism.

Notes.

1. In the tradition of socialist countries, described by Maxine Molyneux, “women’s organisations are technically “mass organisations”, distinct from the Party but closely affiliated to it like the trade unions and the peasant, student, youth and young pioneer organisations”. See her “Women in Socialist Societies : Problems of Theory and practice”, in K.Young, C.Wolkowitz and R.McCullagh (eds.), *Of Marriage and the Market : women’s subordination in international perspective*, CSE Books, London,1981, p.195. It is in this conventional socialist understanding that authoritarian regimes in Sudan have always resorted to dissolving the WU when they dissolved the SCP. However, the SCP has consistently advocated the independence of democratic organisations, and this fact was continuously reiterated by the WU to dispel notions that it was a SCP front. In 1968, the WU joined the SCP and other secular and regional forces in a broad-based Front for the Protection of Liberties.

2. The expression is out-dated now and has been open to debate in recent years. The term originally derived from the dichotomy “modern” versus “traditional” in reference to the mode of incorporation into the colonial economy. For example, railway workers and tenant farmers (particularly in **Gezira**, Sudan’s major, cotton exporting, agricultural scheme) were the first “modern” industrial and agricultural labour forces. The expansion of the “modern” export-oriented production gave rise to new social categories: employees, technicians, professionals, students, officers and soldiers. The role of these social forces increased after independence, and assumed the form of a constituency of trade unions and professional associations that are outside partisan politics, largely

independent of loyalty to sectarian religious leaders and their parties, and committed to liberal democracy.

3. Anonymous, "Women and Political Participation: illusion and reality of women's emancipation in the Sudan", Khartoum, October 1996, p.2.

4. *ibid.*, p.4.

5. Nafissa Ahmed El Amin, "The Women's Movement in Sudan: Memorable Moments and Stands", paper presented to Al Manar Consultancy Group, Fourth Training Course on Women and Law, Khartoum, 1-11 September 1997, (in Arabic), p.7.

6. The Graduates' Constituencies are non-geographically based electoral seats (10%) in the National Assembly and in Parliament reserved for graduates of post secondary institutes and universities. In 1965, the SCP won eleven of the fifteen Graduates' Constituencies in that year's national election. Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim, the incumbent president of the WU ran as an independent candidate, was elected and became the first woman member in the Sudanese parliament, the only one among 170 MP's.

7. Nafissa Ahmed El Amin, *op.cit.*, p.8.

8. *ibid.*, p.5.

9. *ibid.*, p.8.

10. Anonymous, *op.cit.*, p.5.

11. Paramount among the published writings is Sondra Hale's seminal work on Gender Politics in Sudan: Islamism, Socialism, and the State, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1997, and her: "The Wing of the Patriarch: Sudanese Women and Revolutionary Parties", in MERIP Middle East Report, January-February 1986, pp.25-30; "Transforming Culture or Fostering Second-Hand Consciousness? Women's Front Organizations and Revolutionary Parties: The Sudan Case", in Judith Tucker (ed.), Arab Women : Old Boundaries, New Frontiers, University Press, Bloomington:Indiana, 1993, pp.149-74.

See also, Zeinab El Bakri, "The crisis in the Sudanese Women's Movement", in Saskia Wieringa (ed.), Subversive Women : Historical Experience of Gender and Resistance, Zed Books, London/N.Jersey, 1995, pp.199-211.

12. See, for example, Mahasin Abdel-Al, Sudanese Women and Political Activism: The Women's Movement as a Constitutive Component of the National Movement, Khartoum, 1999.

13. Sonia E. Alvarez, Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics, Princeton University Press, Princeton/N.Jersey, 1990, p.24.

14. Gita Sen and Caren Grown, *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1987, p.19.

15. *ibid.*, p.19.

16. *ibid.*, p.19.

17. *ibid.*, p.19.

18. Azizah Al-Hibri, “Capitalism is an Advanced Stage of Patriarchy: But Marxism is Not Feminism”, in Lydia Sargent (ed.), *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, South End Press, Boston, MA, 1981, p.190.

19. *ibid.*, p.190.

20. *ibid.*, p.187.

21. The expression is from John W. Burton, “Development and Cultural Genocide in the Sudan”, in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29, 3, 1991, p.512.

22. For an early but excellent development on this theme, see the special issue on Women and Politics, by Suad Joseph et al., in MERIP Middle East Report, January-February 1986. See also, Haideh Moghissi, "Women in the resistance Movement in Iran", in H. Afshar (ed.), Women in the Middle East, Perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation, Macmillan Press, London, 1993, pp.158-171; and Valentine M. Moghadam's "Introduction", in V.M.Moghadam (ed.), Identity Politics & Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective, Westview Press, Boulder/San Francisco/Oxford, 1994, pp.3-26.

23. Haideh Moghissi, *op. cit.*, p.163 and note 12, p.169.

24. Sondra Hale, *op.cit.*, (1997), p.154-155.

25. Haideh Moghissi, *op.cit.*, p.162.

26. Sondra Hale, *op.cit.*, (1986), p. 29.

27. Haideh Moghissi, *op.cit.*, p.166.

28. Reported in Zeinab El Bakri, *op.cit.*,1995, p.208.

29. *ibid.*, pp.204-205.

30. Zeinab B. El Bakri and El-Wathig M. Kameir, "Women's participation in economic, social and political life in Sudanese urban and rural communities: The case of Sagana in Khartoum and Wad al-'Asha Village in the Gezira area", in Seteney Shami et al., *Women in Arab society: Work patterns and gender relations in Egypt, Jordan and Sudan*, Berg/UNESCO, Paris, 1990, p.184.

31. Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, Zed Books, London/N.Jersey, 1986, p.14.

32. Julie Peteet. "Women and the Palestinian Movement: No Going Back?", in MERIP Middle East Report, January-February 1986, pp.20-24, (p.23).

33. Zeinab El Bakri, *op.cit.*, p.209.

34. Marie-Aimee Helie-Lucas, "The Preferential Symbol for Islamic Identity: Women in Muslim Personal Laws", in V.M Moghadam (ed.) *op. cit.*, p.403, note 4; see also her "Women's Struggles and Strategies in the Rise of Fundamentalism in the Muslim World: From Entryism to Internationalism", in H.Afshar, *op.cit.*, pp.206-241.

35. Zeinab El Bakri, *op.cit.*, p.209.

36. *ibid.*, p.209.

37. Angela Miles, *Integrative Feminisms : Building Global Visions, 1960's-1990's*, Routledge, New York/NY, 1996, p.24 and p.29, and Nancy Hartsock, "Feminist Theory and the Development of Revolutionary Strategy", in Zillah R. Eisenstein (ed.), *Capitalist Patriarchy And the Case for Socialist Feminism*, Monthly Review Press, New York/London, 1979, pp.56-77.

38. Haga Kashif Badri, *Women's Movement in the Sudan*, Asia News Agency, New Delhi, India, 1983, p.42.

39. According to the WU's Constitution, one seat was in principle reserved for women from Southern Sudan in the Executive Committee, while another was reserved for a trade union representative. (Fatma Ahmed Ibrahim, personal communication, October 2000).

40. Anonymous, *op.cit.*, p.2.

41. Sondra Hale, *op.cit.*, (1997), p.

42. Zeinab El Bakri, *op.cit.*, p.204.

43. The "League of Arab Nasserite Women" in Sudan was formed during this time.

44. See Mohamed Ibrahim Nogoud, General Secretary of SCP interview with "AL Nahj" journal, 1986, reproduced in M.I.Nogoud, Issues of Democracy in the Sudan, Dar Al Thaqaafa Al Jadida, Cairo, 1992, pp.11-76 (in Arabic).

45. The SCP is in principle opposed to revolutionary governments that gain access to state power by using military force.

46. "bayt etta", (literally "house of obedience"), is the institution whereby runaway wives are tracked down by the use of police force to enforce their obedience to their husbands.

47. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, Islamic Law and Society in the Sudan, Frank Cass, London, 1987, p.281.

48. Nafissa Ahmed El Amin, op.cit., p.11.

49. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, op.cit., p.50-51.

50. The communist coup leaders were executed, together with Abdel Khaleq Mahjoub, the Secretary general of the SCP, Joseph Garang, the party strategist for the Southern Question, and Al-Shafie Al-Shaikh the president of the Workers' Federation, a Lenin Medallion Laureate, spouse of Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim. .

51. Maxine Molyneux, *op.cit.*, p.196.

52. Fatima Babiker Mahmoud (personal communication, October 2000).

53. Anonymous, *op.cit.*, p.3.

54. In July 1958, the Sudanese military government ratified a United States Aid agreement, which aroused popular hostility and divided parliament.

55. Charlotte Bunch, "Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1987, pp.103-117.

56. Anonymous, *op.cit.*, p.4.

57. In 1993, the UN awarded an international Human Rights Award to the banned Women's Union.

58. Angela Miles, *op.cit.*, p.20.

59. Most of the information on this section is based on "Democratic Work Among Women" by "Marwa", in "Qaddaiya Sudaniya" (Sudanese Issues), No. 24, October 2000, pp.37-44.

60. Zeinab El Bakri, *op.cit.*, p.208.

61. "Marwa", *op.cit.*, p.41.

62. *ibid.*, p.40-41

63. The National Alliance for National Salvation (NANS) is an alliance of professional and trade unions whose nucleus was formed in 1983 as a direct protest against the drought, famine and economic collapse that befell Sudan under General Numeiry's dictatorship (1969-1985). NANS was formally created in clandestinity in 1984 when it drew up a Charter of National Salvation that called for freedom of organisation, expression and belief, and the rule of law. NANS sought to restore democracy and to remove Numeiry from power by a campaign of civil disobedience. The Charter was later endorsed by three outlawed parties (Umma, DUP,SCP), and in April 1985, a popular uprising successfully ended the military dictatorship.

64. Zeinab El Bakri, *op.cit.*, p.199.

65. Mary Evans, "In praise of theory : the case for Women's Studies", in Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli Klein (ed.), *Theories of Women's Studies*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London/Boston/Melbourne and Henley, 1983, p.224.

66. I am using the term here as defined by Deniz Kandiyoti: "it is intended to indicate the existence of set rules and scripts regulating gender relations, to which both genders acquiesce, yet which may nonetheless be contested, redefined and renegotiated", in her

“Bargaining With Patriarchy”, in Nalini Visvanathan et al., (eds), The Women, gender and Development Reader, Zed Books, London/N.Jersey, 1997, p.97, note 1.

67. Angela Miles, op.cit., p.40.

68. In 1946, the British administrators passed legislation to ban the more extreme form of female circumcision known as “Pharaonic Circumcision”, which contrary to received knowledge is not sanctioned by Islam.

69. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, op.cit, p.268.

70. Deniz Kandiyoti, op.cit., p.89.

71. Ramla Khalidi and Judith Tucker, Women’s Rights in the Arab World, Special MERIP publication, No.1, Middle East Report, 1994, p.2.

72. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, op.cit., p.268.

73. Kumari Jayawardena, op. cit., p.10.

74. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, “Islamization in Sudan : A Critical Assessment”, in Middle East Journal, Vol. 44, no. 4, Autumn 1990, p.617.

75. Mahasin Abdel-Al, op. cit., p.46-47.
76. Sondra Hale, "Gender and Economics: Islam and Polygamy. A Question of Causality", in Feminist Economics, Vol.1 (2), 1995, pp.9-10.
77. It is no doubt in relation to this impressive historical legacy (achieved in certain areas of law reform before other women living under Ottoman colonisation) that activists of the WU are still often more critical of feminists and female academics who call for autonomous liberation than of leftist-nationalist politicians.
78. The "Sunna" (or "Sunnah") is the traditions and sayings (also known as "Hadiths") associated with the Prophet.
79. During this period (1986-1989), the Sudanese Bar Association was campaigning against the Islamic code, and drew up a draft penal code, consonant with internationally recognised standards.
80. Fatma Ahmed Ibrahim, personal communication, October 2000. The Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), is a broad-ranging United Nations document and the most important international treaty specifically addressing women's human rights. It is designed to bring equality for women in all sectors of society. The Convention was initiated during the UN Decade for women,

and to date has been ratified by 166 nations. See, Center for Women's Global Leadership, Articles and Resources.

81. See Deborah Stienstra "Dancing resistance from Rio to Beijing: transnational women's organizing and United Nations conferences, 1992-6", in Marianne H. Marchand and Anne Sisson Runyan (eds.), *Gender and Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites and Resistances*, Routledge, London/New York, 2000, p.222.

82. . For this well-versed imagery of the religious frame being "hijacked" by the fundamentalists, see discussion of Marie-Aimee Helie-Lucas, *op.cit.*, 1994, p.401, and her 1993 article in *op.cit.*, p.210.

83. Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation*, Sage Publications, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi, 1997, p.124.

84. *Ibid.*, p.124.

85. Quoted in Sondra Hale, *op.cit.*, (1997), p.175.

86. Nira Yuval-Davis, *op.cit.*, p.p38-39.

87. *Ibid.*, p.42.

88. Marie-Aimee Helie-Lucas, *op.cit.*, (1994), p.399.

89. Maxine Molyneux, *op.cit.*, p.
90. Zeinab B.El Bakri and El-Wathig M.Kameir, *op.cit.*, p.163.
91. Janice Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin, 1989, p.9.
92. *ibid.*, p.9, note 12.
93. *ibid.*, p.7.
94. *ibid.*, p.7.
95. Victoria Bernal, "Migration, Modernity and Islam in Rural Sudan", in *MERIP Middle East Report*, Summer 1999, No.211, p.27.
96. *ibid.*, p.28
97. Charlotte Bunch, *op.cit.*, p.
98. Kumari Jayawardena, *op.cit.*, p.33.

99. Heidi Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards A More Progressive Union", in Lydia Sargent (ed.), *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, South End Press, Boston, 1981, p.
100. Angela Miles, *op.cit.*, p.25.
101. Sondra Hale, *op.cit.*, (1997), p.173-174
102. Maxine Molyneux, *op.cit.*, pp.179-180.
103. *ibid.*, pp.180-181.
104. *ibid.*, p.181.
105. In Sudanese culture we use the appellation "ustaza" (meaning "teacher-educator-thinker") to address respectfully our elderly (not blood relatives or peer group) sisters or mothers, who play a role in our upbringing, general education or thinking.

Chapter Two

State Feminism: the Trials and the Perspective.

In May 1971, General Numeiry abolished the WU. Following that, in June 1971, fifty-three women representing various women's organisations were summoned to the Presidential Palace to discuss the creation of a new national women's organisation. Reacting with the same rationale with which the WU had formerly accepted (at least initially) to participate in General Abboud's "All-Sudan Women's Council" (1958-1963), the assembled women leaders (many of whom had been founders and members of the original WU), accepted the launching of a new organisation (1). A notable difference this time, however, was that while the first military dictatorship led by the generals did not create a one-party system, the new women's organisation with its co-opted name Sudan Women's Union (SWU) (2) was formed in November 1971, as an arm of the Sudanese Socialist Union (SSU), henceforth the sole political party in the country. The SWU became the only legally recognised women's organisation. These developments ushered in a new and important phase in the Sudanese women's movement because the period starting from 1971 and extending to 1985 witnessed the first definition of gender ideology by a Sudanese state since independence.

As we saw earlier, tensions rose between the WU and the new military, and the democratic women's movement was under great pressure to decide on a strategy. Amidst these tensions, the WU held its general congress to discuss whether the strategy was to be

autonomy from or integration into the unfolding political process. Some women decided that integration, and moving into the state system was the best way of pursuing a united feminist agenda. These tended to be middle-class professional women, many of them civil servants with experience in the government bureaucracy, or liberal feminists, holding more moderate views than the traditional Left. Many of those who defended this view had also been long-time activists in the women's movements since the 1940's, and identified with an earlier tradition of attempts to create a united women's organisation (3). Among the immediately compelling issues they raised in support of this position was the fact that the new regime was in the process of mobilising youth, students and women in militia-like "defence of the revolution" brigades (literally, para-military units or "kattaiyeb"). These developments, therefore, reinforced the integrationist perspective that more than ever it was necessary to guide and protect the gains of the women's movement, and to work through the new political system as a single, national women's organisation.

The advocates for autonomy from, and indeed, rupture with the state warned against the spectre of co-optation, which was already demonstrated by the regime's dissolution of all political parties, and its crackdown on the democratic organisations of civil society and the trade union movement. They stressed autonomy from the state as a principle of the women's movement, and as the only guarantor for serving the aims and interests of the Women's Union's members. This independence, they argued, could not be compromised even if the state is a democratic one with a credible popular mandate, and any retreat

from this principle could only bring harm to the organised women's movement, and would alienate it from the grassroots.

In the end, the ideological differences in vision and strategies proved intractable. Those who advocated integration went ahead on their own and emigrated into the state. The split was a painful one for the WU, which decided to pursue a pressure group strategy from the outside, that is by returning to underground activity.

The nature of the shift in state power

It is necessary to consider the nature of the regime change that occurred during this period to comprehend the outcomes for Sudanese women.

The radical military regime which overthrew the constitutional government on 25 May 1969, while new to the Sudan in terms of its ideological orientation, was not unique in Africa and the Middle East where "soldier rulers" have come to power in various countries, and espoused socialism as their political creed (4). For the Sudan, as Peter Kok points out, the 1969 coup "marked a historic shift of state power from the generation of the Graduates General Congress (that led the nationalist struggle) to a generation that had not yet been born or was at school at the time the Congress was formed in February 1938" (5). The timing of the coup was also significant in that it occurred in the aftermath of the crisis that led to expelling the SCP from parliament in 1968, and the attempts to impose an Islamic Constitution on the country by a conservative parliamentary majority.

Initially, and lacking a clear political constituency, General Numeiry's Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), (a junta of ten colonels and majors), adopted the ideological perspective of the Left, but its vision of socialism was somewhat vague on specifics. In one of his early speeches in July 1970, Numeiry "gave a garbled version of "Sudanese socialism", cautioning against dogmatism and the imitation of foreign models and declared "we want to draw from all schools of socialism that which will benefit our Sudan"" (6). However, the social forces which backed the Free Officers **coup** represented an assortment of socialists, pan-Arab nationalists and communists, all of whom generally held a redistributive and restructuring vision of the state and the economy based on secularism, self-government for the Southern Sudan and respect for human rights under the rule of law (7).

As it turned out, the dominant protagonists of this radical, political coalition were inspired by "Arab Socialism", the political tendency identified with Nasser's "socialistic" orientation. The regime strengthened its relations with Egypt and other Left-inclined Arab states, and advocated patterns of political and economic development based on the Egyptian experience (8). In 1971, the regime's State Security Law was passed under which participation in strikes, street demonstrations or other "acts against the state" or threatening "national unity" were labeled subversive and carried the death penalty. The SCP's affiliated organisations were dismantled and plans to restructure the trade union movement (the SCP's stronghold) were under way. In the meantime, attempts were initiated to establish a network of associations – including town and village development committees, professional organisations, youth and women's groups – which were to form

the building blocks of the Sudanese Socialist Union (SSU), a one-party system (9). After the confrontation with the SCP in July 1971, the regime turned away from revolutionary socialism”, consolidated its grip on the state, and “quickly moved through the one-party system and the lifetime presidency to authoritarian rule, with increased reliance on force as an instrument of government” (10). In October 1971, Numeiry assumed the office of president and dissolved the RCC.

The Sudanese Socialist Union (SSU), claimed as a “revolutionary socialist vanguard” and modeled on the Egyptian system was founded in January 1972. This single mass party was conceived as ““an alliance of the working forces” that included industrial workers, farmers, youth, women, the intelligentsia, professionals, national capitalists, and, of course, the army” (11). “Its task was to mobilise these “active forces” of the nation, to fulfill the aims of the “25 May Revolution”. For that purpose, it assumed supreme political authority over all organs and activities of the state, and its structures were designed to parallel the state administration at all levels” (12).

Although intended as a participatory institution, the SSU’s internal organisations placed emphasis on centralism, “with the president of the SSU, who was also the president of the republic, enjoying wide powers, including the right to name all top SSU officials and half the members of its Central Committees” (13). Class contradictions were tackled by mobilising the bureaucracy, particularly local government officials, to act on behalf of the “active forces” (14). “By 1974 when the SSU held its first national congress, it claimed

some four million members and had evolved into a parastatal agency, whose task was to provide a façade of popular representation for the military dictatorship and an additional lever of political control” (15). In the process, the SSU rapidly turned into a means for capital accumulation by the new bourgeoisie – bureaucrats, technocrats, army officers (16).

In the annals of General Numeiry’s few “achievements”, which had an immediate bearing on Sudanese women’s experience with state feminism, two major historic and political events should be mentioned here. The first was the regime’s ability to reach a settlement of the conflict in the Southern Sudan in 1972 on the basis of a political compromise which preserved the unity of the state while granting regional autonomy to that region. This conjunctural resolution of the civil conflict was to pave the way for an encounter between Northern and Southern Sudanese women based on an official platform of action, which was not without its own internal contradictions. The regime’s second major achievement was the promulgation in 1973 of Sudan’s first “Permanent Constitution”, whose provisions and “special measures” significantly expanded certain rights for women. Moreover, the regime’s commitment to restructure power to allow women greater access to decision-making processes was an unprecedented “first” in post-colonial Sudanese politics.

Although all these realignments were later “dishonoured” by Numeiry’s “imperial presidency” (17), the Northern and Southern Sudanese women who truly believed that their exclusion from access to material and social resources, such as education,

employment, law, health and the family, could be remedied through association with the one-party organ and state institutions, hailed Numeiry as the “Guardian of the Women’s Movement”. It was thus not uncommon in those days to hear Numeiry being referred to as the “president of women and Southerners” when the remark was made lightly, and as “the president of “harem” and “slaves” when no camouflage was deemed necessary to conceal the entrenched racism and sexism of the hegemonic Arab-Muslim Northern Sudanese male elite. But it also led the women who held positions of responsibility in the regime to hastily conclude, among other things, that as discrimination had been removed from the statute books (18), they could put aside their class and identity differences and carry on with the “women in development” agenda.

It is this story of Sudanese women’s experiential departure from our traditionally held view of the (Sudanese) state as “woman’s worst enemy” (19) to a more critical understanding of the dynamics of our relationship with the state and hegemonic power that will be our focus in this chapter. Before that, however, a word on the conceptual definition of state feminism is in order.

Women and the State in Third World Feminist Debates: Some Directions

In defining state feminism, a term popularised by “students of the welfare state in Scandinavian society” (20), Mervat Hatem cautions us “not to trivialize the concept by using it to describe the formal (legal and ideological) state commitment to women’s rights” (21). She argues rather that state feminism “refers to ambitious state programs

that introduce important changes in the reproductive and productive roles of women” (22). In general, as Hatem points out, although it is inaccurate to assume that welfare states (whether in the advanced industrial capitalist world or in developing societies) are non-patriarchal, “state attention to women’s reproductive and productive concerns increases the public resources available to them and improves their options economically and politically (23). She contends, moreover, that “the social and economic retreat of the state represents a step backwards, because it leads to a return to women’s economic and social dependence on patriarchal families and the market’s fluctuating demand for women’s labor” (24). Indeed, in many Third World countries, and the Sudan is no exception, the state’s abdication of its social responsibilities has induced the feminisation of poverty, increased the burden of women and forced communities to rely on self-help.

So far, in most African and Middle Eastern “secular nationalist” states (for example, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Algeria), changes affecting women’s opportunities for education, health care, and improved access to employment have been initiated by official, state-sanctioned women’s associations. Generally, in these states, “women’s organizations have been closely linked with or are part of the ruling political party structures. Their main role has been to mobilize women around the goals and tasks set by the party and the state” (25). Although women’s presence in the state heightened demands for equality, more often than not, this experience of institutionalised state feminism strengthened the state rather than women. Nonetheless, as Suad Joseph points out “(W)hen the state intervenes actively to provide alternative arenas, at least in legal or administrative domains, for women’s participation in society, it creates space for maneuvering and

negotiation and, over the long run, for mobilization”(26). In a few cases, such as in Syria, Iraq and Tunisia, important reforms in the personal status laws enhanced women’s right to divorce, and outlawed or placed numerous restrictions on polygamy (27). In her study of state feminism in Egypt, Sudan and Tunisia, Hatem reports that this bureaucratic form of state feminism “contributed to the emergence of middle class women as active actors in their societies and enhanced their modernist credentials. Middle class women joined the state sector in large numbers and became instrumental in the successful provision of important social services like education, social work, and health care, and participated in running the systems of local and national administration” (28). In the meantime, however, “their economic dependence on the state contributed to their loss of political autonomy” as “official women’s organizations set women’s social and political agendas and subordinated them to state policies” (29).

A further common trait shared by state feminism as an ideology, a strategy and an institutional system appears to be its vulnerability during periods of economic crises which strain the state’s commitment to welfare programmes and gender equalisation policies. This is particularly the case in developing societies where the “modernisation-development” crisis reached its peak in the 1970’s, and where “aid-granting nations and international institutions” continue to dictate their conditionalities for “balanced growth”. Over the past two decades, pressures to restructure the state sector, to impose economic “open door” policies and to abide to notions of the “minimalist state” as the panacea for “good governance” have led to the erosion of the state’s commitment to securing women’s rights. When, furthermore, a conservative social climate prevails during periods

of economic downturn and social retrenchment, the state's commitment to welfare programs is severely eroded (30). In many Third World countries, these developments have posed a serious challenge to state feminism in its secular form, enabling in the process the rise of conservative social forces advocating the return of women to the home.

Importantly, as in Sudan, a major problem associated with this bureaucratic model in the African context is that it has come to mean governing without the political parties and without organised popular participation (31). Hence, these experiences raised the ever-present and continuing dilemmas surrounding the women's movement's relationship to and involvement with the state.

The experience of state feminism has also come under scrutiny, particularly in the work of Latin American feminists, as one mechanism with which to achieve women's rights in the context of "transitional politics", and the debates surrounding strategies for democratic change. In authoritarian Third World countries, where the tendency of political regimes has been to monopolise power and to deny the right of self-organisation to social groups (32), "transition is used to describe "the interval between one political regime and another whose onset is marked by a decision by incumbent leaders to "liberalize"- that is, to permit individuals or groups to exercise previously denied rights" (33). According to Jane Jaquette, "transitions are political "openings" in the broadest sense; there is a general willingness to rethink the bases of social consensus and revise the rules of the game. This gives social movements an extraordinary opportunity to raise new issues and to influence popular expectations" (34). This recent wave of transitions

from authoritarian to democratic forms of government which brushed countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern and Southern Europe between the mid 1970's and the 1990's provided political landmarks to civil society's challenge to the claims of unquestionable authority.

These political transitions (they were by no means the first, previous ones having been aborted or short-lived) brought in their wake strategic dilemmas for Third World women's movements who, after decades of repressive regimes, or confronted with the actualities of "the state as "ultimate patriarch" chose to forgo state-centred strategies for advancing the status of women (35). Indeed, in the daily life struggles of African women, as Ayesha Imam expressed it: "the category of items on which "big brother" is watching ranges from relatively trivial to vital issues of daily life. They include prohibitions on dress, on hairstyles, the imposition of state controlled funeral rights, and go on to issues about property rights, rights to organise, and popular participation in decision-making" (36). At the same time as in earlier transitions (from colonial rule to independence), women had been actors and allies with men in the liberation movements and in the struggles for democracy. From Latin America to Africa, and without overlooking the important historical and political differences between their situations, feminists in the women's movement shared the following concerns: "what possibilities exist for women's movements in their relationship to the state? How much space and manoeuvrability can exist with the state for women's movement's to achieve their aim? Or do movements simply get co-opted, lose autonomy and have to submit to the agenda of others? What happens to others which stay outside the state?"(37).

Women's ambivalence towards the state as both a catalyst for change and a site of struggle, has had mixed evaluations in feminist inquiry. The responses of feminists to the challenge of the state have ranged from "rejecting "dealing" with the state institutions entirely, to supporting an "in and against" the state approach, to examining the benefits of working with/through state institutions" (38). Shirin Rai argues that "for women the state and civil society are both complex terrains – fractured, oppressive, threatening and also providing spaces for struggles and negotiations. These struggles and negotiations are grounded in the positions of various groups of women articulating their short- and long-term interests in the context of the multiplicity of power relations that form the state in any country. In turn the state and its institutions are also "shaped" by the forms and outcomes of these struggles" (39). Thus, whereas the post-independence nationalist forces in Sudan saw in the women's movement "a means of placing pressure on the colonial state as an additional proof of their worthiness for independence"(40), by the 1960's the organised women's movement was a major constituent in the public and political arena of Northern Sudan, and a force to be reckoned with. Accordingly, the Numeiry regime was quick to "focus on what the previous governments had missed, and that included the implementation of women's rights" (41). This would also explain how the National Islamic Front (NIF) has presently found it convenient to make its women visible, although for a long time this conservative Islamist party opposed women's participation in public life.

A starting point, therefore, for feminists engaged in progressive social change would be that the nature of the state is not fixed or immutable and has no **a priori** relationship to

gender relations (42). This is so because, as Sonia Alvarez points out, although the state remains “male-dominant”, “it does not monolithically represent male interests (...) not because it is independent of those interests but because its legitimacy is partially derived from its ability to conceal the generic, racial, and class interests represented within the pact of domination by granting some concessions to the subordinate groups and classes that increasingly press their political claims upon it” (43). This perspective on the relative autonomy of the state as “a site where contradictions present in a social formation are condensed and transformed” (44), “implies that class-based, racially based **and** gender-based political struggles, led by social movements can and **must** take place both within and outside the political apparatuses of the state” (45) (author’s emphasis). Here, the specific feminist project, is not a “winner takes all” struggle, but rather as Alvarez argues, “to influence state policy “in the meantime”, while patriarchal practices and assumptions remain embedded in the structures and policies of socialist and capitalist states” (46). In terms of political strategy, therefore, and because of the often contradictory nature of the state’s response to women’s issues, women’s movements would need to work at two levels simultaneously, within and outside the state. Clearly then, in so far as the state’s relationship to gender relations is “evolving, dialectic and dynamic”, at certain historical conjunctures, state power can be swayed to favour women (47).

The question, therefore, raised among others by Georgina Waylen as to “how and under what conditions women’s movements can influence the state and policy agendas?” (48) is among the issues that will be addressed in this chapter. Sudanese women’s experience,

as we shall see, has some basic convergences with the pattern of state feminism found in much of Africa, namely: the state led by the single party co-opted, absorbed and eliminated the independent women's organisations; dictators relied on women constituencies for popular legitimacy; state sympathy to women's demands declined with the deterioration of the economy and both internal and externally-induced open-market policies. At another level, however, some early organisational strategies upheld by the Sudanese women's movement are instructive. These are namely: the unwavering adherence to the principle of autonomy, the existence of grassroots women's economic networks (credit associations, co-operatives, housewives' associations), a history of alliance with the working class and professional trade unions, and a long experience in coalescing with broad-based opposition parties. But the serious schisms that occurred in the women's movement in relation to these alliances, and particularly in relation to the state, invite new strategic thinking about the assumptions and sites of feminist politics outlined above.

Let us turn now to the experience of the SWU and explore the complex dynamics of state feminism in Sudanese women's recent history.

The SWU from Genesis to Decay

When it was created in 1971, the SWU had as its mandate the following political, social and cultural priorities: "to raise the standard of Sudanese women socially, economically and politically in order for them to participate in the process of development; to use (sic) women as the defending forces for the people's gains by executing the revolutionary

policies; to support women's issues and seek to fulfill social justice and peace in the world; to create and enforce links between Sudanese women and women of the world" (49). The above points explicitly ask women to unite and to mobilise in defence of the regime, while a monitoring role is assumed for middle-class women.

To achieve these aims, the SWU "was to adopt certain measures which were at least initially based on mass support: to show concern for family, childhood and motherhood through comprehensive child care; to preserve Sudanese heritage and values through good spiritual upbringing and education; to fight against all harmful traditions and customs; to develop and raise the standard of rural women by encouraging them to participate in national action; to fight illiteracy and, to concern itself with issues of work and female workers" (50). The emphasis here is informed by traditional patriarchal assumptions regarding women's roles in society and the policies needed to resolve them.

The SWU's "membership was officially open to all Sudanese women above 16 years of age, regardless of educational background" (51). It came, however, with a condition: every member had to commit herself in writing to supporting the "May Revolution" (52). In 1975, grandiose claims placed the membership at one million women in all provinces (53). But already by 1979, one SWU leader, Haga Kashif, noted that claims of a 20,000 SWU membership in the Red Sea Province (Eastern Sudan) exceeded the census figures for the women in that province by 2000 (54). According to SWU's own estimates in 1984, membership was "reasonably" said to have reached 750,000 throughout Sudan (55). Tomadur Ahmed Khalid explains these erratic and conflated figures by the fact that they "do not differentiate between active and inactive membership", and more

importantly, she notes that “while it appeared impressive in numbers, membership counted for no more than a signature for many of the (SWU’s) activities” (56).

Echoing similar inconsistencies in Southern Sudan, Margaret Juan Lado recalls that “women became minimally involved in the political arena where a few of them were appointed members of the Regional Assembly in Juba. Although this was called an achievement at that time one did not see much cause to celebrate ” (57).

The SWU was organised along the same lines as the ruling party (SSU). “Executive powers were vested in an Executive Bureau, composed of 21 members, supported by a Central Committee with 75 members” while “all the SWU’s activities were addressed through specialised offices of the government” (58). This institutional location, coupled with the fact that the SWU had its own constitutional rules and methods of procedure (59), theoretically meant that SWU would be at the heart of planning and policy-making. In reality, however, the SWU worked and functioned as an arm of the state party, and as such any formulation of objectives, or action to be taken, could not deviate from the general framework of SSU (60). In fact, Khalid reports “the top posts for women in the political pyramid of SSU were under the direct control of the SSU president, who was also head of state. For example, of the 20 seats on the Political Bureau, one was reserved for a SWU member, but only to those who were highly committed in their support of the “May Revolution”. During the life of SSU (13 years), only two women held the post, which meant that the job kept rotating between the two. (1975-1979, Fatma Abdel Mahmoud, while Nafissa Ahmed El Amin held the SWU leadership on a virtually permanent basis (8 years) (61) (my precision).

This system of appointing the general secretary of SWU not only ensured that women at the top remained unchallenged (62), but also allowed the president direct control over the affairs of the SWU, a control that General Numeiry was to forcefully exert in the years ahead. Thus, the façade of democracy aside, “no candidate for election could hope to win without the (P)resident’s blessing” (63). This is how one observer described the procedures of electing women to leadership positions in 1979: “A single central committee member put forward a nomination, another member seconded it and the successful candidate was announced to the assembled delegates who responded with deafening applause. The nomination was then approved by General Numeiry and thus Dr. Fatma Abdel Mahmoud who is also head of the SSU Women’s Committee, began her second three-year term of office” (64). This method of electing the SWU’s president ultimately cast the shadow of authoritarianism on the women’s organisation.

The state-party (SSU) was meant to ensure some existence of popular participation: “thus the task of organizing and representing any social group was given to SSU as its main task. In theory, the SSU directly controlled SWU through the “democratic representation of women at different levels of SSU, in villages, towns, cities and regions” (65). In other words, starting from the grassroots level, the SSU had the upper hand in choosing candidates for the elections and “(A)ny one with a political stand other than SSU’s would not be allowed to challenge an SSU member” which “effectively meant that all women would serve SSU interests first and women’s issues would take a second place” (66). This meant in effect that the SWU had no independent mechanism to influence government decisions.

Thus, although the allocation of 25% of the seats on the local government councils for women were correctly hailed “as especially important, for (the) enabled women at the grass-roots level to hold decision-making positions” (67), these seats were still controlled by the SSU, and were ineffective in serving women within their communities. In many instances, the SWU failed to find enough women to join the local councils, partly because the local government’s reputation of corruption proved a disincentive for many women, and partly because women’s concerns were not given priority in these councils. For example, as Khalid points out, “issues such as the placing of water pumps or health facilities – of vital concern to women – were decided in terms of men’s needs and all the women could do was complain among themselves” (68). Describing a similar pattern in the villages of Southern Sudan, M.J.Lado gives the following poignant testimony: “(...) a village meets to discuss the threat of cholera and decides that all the water used for human consumption must be boiled (...) but nine out of ten of those at the meeting are the men who neither collect the water, gather the firewood, nor put the pot on to boil. Not surprisingly, most of the water is not boiled – the women do not understand the need. Hence many continue to die of cholera” (69).

The creation of hierarchical structures within SWU, ultimately weakened the position of the organization itself, thus rendering it extremely vulnerable to personal or factional authoritarian whims. All this contributed to a sense of alienation on the part of many women who did not feel that their concerns were being addressed by the SWU.

Housewives and ordinary women often “voted for women whose names they did not

even know, rather than voting for a woman who might genuinely represent them” (70). It did not take long either for low-income women who were “not fully aware of the opportunities offered by the system, and underestimating their influence in the decision-making process” (71), to realise that the SWU was no more than “a middle-class organization working solely for the interests of that class”, and a body whose concerns had little relevance to their lives (72).

Whereas the job of financing the SWU fell to the SSU, assistance for women’s programmes also came from outside (foreign) funds, particularly from UN organisations. These funds which could have potentially given the SWU a measure of autonomy from the government, were in fact channeled through the state, and were more often consumed in salaries and related personnel expenses than in “sustainable” women’s projects. However, even when facilities and budgetary resources, which generally focused around narrow market-oriented economic projects, were allocated to the organization, ordinary Sudanese women did not benefit as SWU did not reach out to rural and urban women in their majority (73).

The pattern that evolved is a familiar one to many African and Third World women. Women held ministerial posts, the Social Welfare portfolio for the most part; at various times in Sudan this included State Minister of Youth, Sports and Social Affairs (1970-1972), Health and Social Care (1972-1974), chairperson of the High Council of Youth and Sports (Central Minister 1986-1987) (74). But even in the numbers of women in executive office, the progress was not overwhelming. According to Badria Sliman, in the

first People's Assembly (parliament) in 1973, of 225 (male) members, there were only 11 women deputies, between 1974-1977 there were 12 out of 250, between 1978-1980 there were 17 out of 304, in 1980-1981 there were 18 out of 368, and in the fifth Assembly there were 14 out of 153 (75). A handful of women were elected or appointed to the People's Assembly under a quota system of women-only seats; ten seats (one each) were allocated in the People's Assembly to all the mass organisations of which one went to the SWU; the provinces (a total of thirteen at the time) were each represented by one seat; hence, thirteen women represented the provinces in the People's Assembly (76). Thus, while the state encouraged a public role for women, the statutory position of women did not remarkably improve. In time also the gains women could make at the level of the state – whether for better health services, equal pay or jobs – became increasingly limited by the degenerating economic and political climate which we shall shortly discuss.

As to the “self-empowerment” that accrued to women as a result of the presence of women in Social Affairs as well as other special Women's Departments designed to improve women's lot, the following passage largely resumes how project selection, for example, was often a luxury from which the majority of poor women rarely benefited: “The departments of Social Welfare, both in the North and South, are set up mainly to plan and implement welfare programmes for the socially, economically and psychologically incapacitated. In 1979, the operation budget for Khartoum alone was 125,965 (Sudanese pounds). For the whole Southern Sudan it was 12,000 (Sudanese pounds). Yet most of the beneficiaries of the programme are the low-income people

including women and children who should actually be the target group. In 1977/78 fiscal year, \$1.5 million in hard currency and \$5 million in local currency went to the construction of Mogran Family Park in Khartoum. How many low income families would benefit from this luxury facility?" (77).

The View From Within: a Testimony and Commentary

What then did the SWU accomplish, and what conclusions can we draw from Sudanese women's experience with state-sponsored feminism which spanned a good fourteen years (1971-1985)? Was it by all accounts a failure, the result of a flawed relationship to the state, or simply the inevitable outcome of an impossible alliance in the first place (a classic case of co-optation as it were)? Given the specific historical and political conjuncture, was there a genuine opportunity or space to advance women's interests that was different from our older strategies of political action and mobilisation? What advantages, if any, did the "integrationists" within our women's movement's reap by joining a state that insulated itself from civil society, and made no effort to "consolidate and institutionalise civil and human rights codes and institutions" (78) to complement and solidify the formal political rights of women?

I would like here to give voice to the SWU leaders' own assessment of this experience. Many of these women were personally attacked and criticised for having contributed to the political legitimacy of a despotic regime (which, of course, they had). Indeed, they

included in their ranks opportunistic strands of the women's movement, and they accepted the repression of the WU with its solid historical ties to the Sudanese Left, the labour movement and the progressive forces in society. By the end of the military regime's first decade they were participating in a state organisation that had become a hotbed of corruption. (79). However, many of these women later stood their ground, did not shun the fact that they had "collaborated", neither did they retreat into exile (and later oblivion), as did some of their male colleagues who fled the country after the People's Uprising in 1985. Indicative perhaps of a change in their consciousness as women, they faced their mistakes, and indeed sought every effort to convey their experience to the younger generation of women (and men). Many of them made up with the NGO and civil society sectors, joined women's research centres to document theirs and the women's movement history and experiences, particularly in the face of the challenge from today's Islamist women and **their** version of "constructed" realities.

At the International Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1985, the former president of SWU met with the leader of the original WU and they embraced. More than a symbolic gesture of reconciliation or a "**mea culpa**" (on the part of the former), this ignited new hope in a sense of common purpose. It provided us with the need to reassess our movement, to analyse why it has been so often co-opted, and in so doing to improve our political practice.

I therefore owe the "insider" version of events and analysis which follows to Nafissa Ahmed El Amin, one of the founding members of the WU in 1952, two-term President of the SWU and known to many as having served as social critic of the one-party state (80).

In giving voice to her testimony, I am here concerned with the vision of the “femocrats” in the democratic women’s movement, those who advocated the women’s agenda from within the state structures and who were sympathetic to the aims of feminism. Ustaza Nafissa’s account reflects, in my view, the most articulate expression of these reformist voices, whose views are often missed in the haste either to indiscriminately “undo the state” in our African societies or to postpone the potentially “promissary” alliance between Sudanese liberal and socialist feminists.

The following account is from a presentation/discussion which Nafissa Ahmed El Amin gave in September 1997 (81).

Ustaza Nafissa spoke about the factors that in her view determined the success and failures of the SWU in vital areas such as employment and legal protection. She began by recalling that the SWU was dominated largely by many of the original WU leaders (this is true of the early years), who therefore continued fighting for the demands begun by WU. As a result, the following were some of the changes in the law obtained in 1973:

- women became entitled to full measure of equality with men in wages, pensionable services, inheritable pension and all back-service benefits;
- working women were entitled to a four-year leave without pay when accompanying their husbands abroad or on a national mission;
- maternity leave with full pay extending to two months was accorded to all working women;
- working women were entitled to one hour per day to nurse their infants;

- maintenance payments to divorced wives and dependent children were enforced and ameliorated;
- married men were not to dispose of or sell property without the wife's prior consent, (the first law on property favorable to women) (p.14). (82).

This progressive legislation was included in the final text of Sudan's Permanent Constitution, (an inclusion Ustaza Nafissa attributed to the lobbying efforts of the SWU). In Ustaza Nafissa's view, General Numeiry's concern with mainstreaming rural communities in development policy meant the expansion of women's activities to rural and peripheral areas.

She placed particular emphasis on the regime's granting of regional autonomy to the South Sudan, which opened inroads to Southern women. As a result, Southern Sudanese women were brought in from the margins, and were incorporated or absorbed into the state sector (p.11). For its part, the SWU participated in the rehabilitation of displaced Southern women, created structural and organisational links with Southern women while a SWU Southern Sudan branch was formed.

She added, furthermore, that the creation of a specialized Women's Department in SSU and later the Ministry of Social Welfare provided resources (funding) for the implementation of women's projects (they were created to give special attention to women's issues). She was especially keen to point out that the existence of one national women's organisation (83) facilitated women's regional and international links, strengthening bi-lateral relations. Women represented the state in the various UN agencies, the Economic Committee for North Africa, the Women's Committee in Vienna,

and had an elected member in INSTRAW (Dominican Republic) as well as the diplomatic corps. The SWU participated in the UN international conferences in Mexico and Copenhagen. The SWU Secretary General (Ustaza Nafissa) was elected deputy SG of the Arab Women's Union. She reported that her own election as president of the National Population Council made it possible to use UN funds to support SWU women's projects. She reiterated her belief that "international contacts among women significantly influence feminist movements, and as women exchange experiences and opinions, they become aware of their status" (84).

She points out that women's political participation in executive office and in decision-making increased significantly during those years. Women were nominated to the following posts: deputy minister, state minister, provincial minister, Council chair (with state minister status), head of special parliamentary committee (with state minister status) (Ustaza Nafissa herself served as Deputy Minister of Youth in the early 1970's). She stressed the point that women were allocated seats in the political bureau elections, 10% of the state-party (SSU) Central Committee seats, and eligibility for running in elections, and held 25% of local government seats (however, this percentage was annulled in 1981). She reported that new employment opportunities were opened to women that included business and private offices, the police and armed forces, prisons and diplomatic service.

Ustaza Nafissa then addressed the reasons behind the retreat. Citing evidence from her experience in the government bureaucracy she began by criticising above all the top-down approach to development that had pervaded public policy. She reported the fact that there was no provision of training for women (or men) in the bureaucracy to increase

efficiency and even less so, (gender awareness). Appointments to posts, she stated, were taken on “ad hoc” basis, often not based on merit or qualification.

“Autocratic regimes”, she argues, are generally “more concerned with quantity rather than quality, believing that inflating numbers gains the regime credibility” (p.12). Among the factors affecting the SWU’s performance among female audiences “despite the SWU’s popularity country-wide and in the international arena” (p.14), she cites the fact that the organisation was rebuffed by significant numbers of professional and academic women because of its close association with Numeiry’s rule , although, she claims, not without some bitterness, “professional women won some benefits from the SWU” (p.15). She stated that in the final analysis, its grandiose setting notwithstanding, the SWU suffered from a lack of power within government. Despite the fact that the SWU had its independent constitution and rules of procedure, the organisation’s affiliation to the state-party limited its freedom of action, influenced its choice of projects, and confined it to the “role of passive observer to positions it did not share” (p.16). She expressed her belief “that authoritarian regimes manipulate women to further their political goals, and to serve their national and international agendas” (p.18). In this regard she refers to the fact that 10% of the senior leadership cadres were appointed directly by the president as “a negative thing”. Because “appointments to these posts were not based on merit or qualification, there was often a lack of homogeneity among women leadership cadres, which sometimes led to duplication of the services offered (p.17).

In a diatribe against military dictators, she cautioned that “women will not obtain their rights by the mere generosity of a ruler” (p.14). The concentration of power in the head of

state consolidated the one-man dictatorship, left no space for initiatives that were not blessed or accepted by the president (p.15).

Her outstanding conclusion is that “autocratic regimes resort to increased centralisation and centralised decision-making at the expense of more participatory systems of rule and administration, they emphasise law and order and security hysteria (national security) as the only guarantors of development, allow freedom of expression only inside their institutions and even then, rarely accept it, in addition to restricting all forms of associational life” (p.18). All this, she concludes, reflects negatively on the women’s movement, however strong that movement may appear” (p.3). She attributes Sudanese women’s failed attempts to impact state policies, including the SWU’s experience, to the “absence of democracy”, as a result of which “women’s organisations are either outlawed or they are subsumed under the one-party system and autocratic rule. In her opinion, in both cases women are the losers, because either they become enmeshed in constant conflict with the state and are forced (to go) underground, or they become an ineffective showpiece for the regime” (p.16). Neither situation, she concludes, is “conducive to the sustainability of a strong and independent mass women’s movement”(p.19).

Finally, the admission of the failure of the SWU to break new political ground by enabling a broader representation of women is nowhere more pronounced than in Ustaza Nafissa’s final statement: “we are back to point zero” (p.20).

But her narrative does not give way to despair. She ends with a forward-looking message for our young trainees, stressing that “today the women’s movement needs to renew its strategies because of changing global and local conditions, especially as a result of the

UN's interest in and support of women's non-governmental organisations" (p.18). A strong supporter of CEDAW, she sees in its dissemination and discussion with women, "a major task ahead for the Sudanese women's movement (p.18). She particularly made the point of emphasising that "the ratification of CEDAW does not prevent members from expressing their reservations on certain of its articles" (p.18) declaring that: "the lack of commitment to this Convention constitutes a violation of women's rights as human rights" (85).

Commentary.

On the surface, Ustaza Nafissa's account can be viewed as a self-serving (liberal) odyssey that raises many areas of concerns, not least of which those that she does not mention (or evades). My feeling, however, is to view it as instructive in how the experience of power can restructure rather than demobilise women's understanding of our problematic relationship with state institutions (86).

Having said this, while the integration of women's concerns into the economic and political agenda was an important achievement, the SWU suffered from a number of predictable limitations. Three initial points can be made here.

First, the idea that the regime could be changed from within had been a colossal miscalculation whose early warning signs the women who broke up with the WU deliberately chose to ignore. The result was that after a more or less prolonged

honeymoon, the state intensified its pressures on the SWU and reduced the positive potential impact that the women reformers could have had on public gender policy.

Second, the fact that SWU accepted the repression of WU by superimposing itself as the only national women's organisation made it easier for the state to divide and rule the women's movement and to crush both of them. Moreover, it is unclear how the SWU could represent the diversity of women's interests solely within the state structures.

Ustaza Nafissa alludes to this in her obvious concern (and hardly concealed bitterness) over the fact that so many middle-class women professionals chose to stay away from the SWU. She was indeed justified in raising this point because the state's higher education policies and vocational training had significantly expanded opportunities for female students during this period. Ironically though, this upward higher educational spiral, (which of course was achieved at the expense of basic primary education for the majority), benefited the social categories which opposed the government. It was no wonder, therefore, that not only did middle-class educated women shy away from formal politics, but by the mid-1970's, highly needed female physicians, lawyers, nurses and teachers were also "voting with their feet" and joining the already massive male out-migration ranks.

Third, the rural development rhetoric notwithstanding, the SWU's activity was confined to urban settings rather than to community levels of development, and in Ustaza Nafissa's own admission, with little coordination between the two levels.

Ultimately, the one positive thing is that this experience has led to women's increasing awareness of power distribution and the role of the state. Indeed, it was when it started to pose a threat to the legitimacy of the state's Islamisation agenda that the SWU was destroyed.

Finally, a disquieting omission in Ustaza Nafissa's account concerns our women's movement's history and our ethical vision. Discussing some of the problems she encountered during her field research on the SWU between 1987-1989, Tomadur Ahmed Khalid reports the following: "It would have been useful if we had been allowed to use the official archives. We did get to see some material on the pre-independence period, that is, **before 1956**, and **after 1969**, that is, the May revolution under Numeiry. **The period between these two dates was classified information, because, according to government sources, "the files were being reviewed". The fact was that the State claimed that the women's movement began in 1969 with the May Revolution.** As women's organisations prior to 1969 had strong links with SCP, their very existence was denied by the Numeiry government..." (87) (my emphasis). It is tempting to assume the SWU femocrats' possible ignorance of these facts, or their chronic ineptitude in the face of a repressive state and its ideology. In any event in her address to our group, Ustaza Nafissa did not feel bound to tell the whole story to our young "gender conscious" trainees. But the distortion of our own history or its negligence "by omission" has permeated other writings and "accounts" by the former SWU women, particularly notorious because they were addressed to international feminist audiences, at a time when

they alone had the resources to do so (88). This does not serve our cause, but the powerful knowledge resource of our history does.

General Discussion and Analysis.

By all accounts, Sudanese women's participation in politics declined substantially during the period from 1971 to 1985, particularly in the later years, in comparison with the decades of the 1950's and 1960's (89). Summing up the legacy of the SWU in the early 1980's, C.F.Lobban notes: "It is a telling point with respect to the changed political role of the Union (SWU), that during the decade since its inauguration it has not effected change regarding the status of women in any major legislation. Individual members talk of the need for reform in the personal status law, but no programmatic statement has been forthcoming from the SWU/SSU. There is a frank admission of the decline in the strength of the women's movement during the past decade" (90). Indeed, the few gains that were made were long-standing demands politicised by the WU since independence, and were confined to working women, ("work" here being equated with waged work), that is, in the expanding state sectors. As noted by Zeinab Bashir El Bakri in 1990, "the main result of this has been significant rises in levels of women's participation in the economy, but not necessarily resulting in commensurate improvement in their overall well-being" (91).

The complex and contradictory outcomes of this experience of state-feminism must be seen in light of the fact the "May Revolution", despite the socialistic rhetoric, had no radical agenda for change. To comprehend this, it is helpful to divide the regime change

that occurred in 1969 into two phases. In its first years of existence, the regime was basically reformist in character, and advanced gender egalitarianism as a part of that agenda (92). At the beginning also, developmental goals were closely linked to the commitment to improve the lives of women, and the period was thus marked by great expectations and popular participation. This was when the state attempted to challenge the personal status laws, and won the support of significant sections of the middle and upper class women (as we saw above). It is also useful to recall here that although gross regional disparities existed, up until the late 1960's the Sudan enjoyed "a balanced and internally articulated pattern of economic development, (with) the leading sector producing food for domestic mass consumption rather than for export" (93). This was the main reason why the Sudanese people were spared the famine that struck the Sahelian region between 1968-1973 (94).

From early on, however, the regime - an alliance of the commercial and bureaucratic bourgeoisie - did little to promote development or to eliminate class and regional disparities. The national development policies "were designed to serve the interests of large-scale commercial farmers" (95). Deterioration began in the 1970's when beset by a worldwide recession and civil strife, the economy "moved gradually from an internally articulated pattern of development to a disarticulated one in which the external sector came to play an increasingly dominant role" (96). The oil shock crisis in 1973 promoted the oil-rich Gulf States who had been lured by the mirage of Sudan as the "breadbasket" of the Middle East, to play a new role in the international division of labour, a shift that had serious implications for Sudan (97). Arab capital, increasingly channeled by Islamists

living in the Gulf, in partnership with Western multinational firms providing technological and managerial expertise, boosted the expansion of the commercial agricultural sector in the late 1970's (98). Predictably, no investment was made in subsistence cultivation, self-sufficiency of subsistence production was undermined and put Sudanese peasant communities in jeopardy (99). In the meantime, capital for commercial agricultural investment was made available to Sudanese urban entrepreneurs - merchants, former state officials, retired army officers, provincial notables, SSU officials, as well as offspring of tribal chieftains and large livestock producers- by the World Bank and International Development Agency (100).

These national policy orientations were in the interests of the same social forces who were marginalising the majority of Sudanese women. Soon to follow were the cuts in real wages and government expenditure, and increased borrowing from international banks. For the majority of the population this meant growing unemployment, deteriorating social services and a drastic fall in living standards. IMF austerity measures begun in 1978 raised the price of food while cutting wages and social services still further. The result was mounting popular opposition. By the 1980's, parts of East and Western Sudan were in the grip of famine.

In the meantime, the programmes "targeting" women whose management was under the charge of the SWU: "aimed at increasing productivity by raising production, employment or income (...) either directly through skills training, group mobilization, technical assistance, credit or job creation, or indirectly through the expansion of physical infrastructure such as irrigation, roads or through other means"(101). Other projects

concerned health and literacy. Indeed, many of the projects aimed at women focused on income generation in some form or other, and witnessed the move from the broader emphasis on self-reliance to a much more narrowly defined “market empowerment”. This matched with the socio-economic policies of the government, namely, an emphasis on poverty reduction through increasing women’s individual access to the market (102).

By the late 1970’s, with increasing economic problems facing the country, the Islamists began to play a role with political significance. This second phase of the dictatorship witnessed, “a movement away from gender and other egalitarianisms and a movement toward more state control of people’s private lives” (103). The SWU began to face opposition within the state from the regime’s new allies, and Islamist-leaning women and their conservative views about the family. From then onwards the Islamists became influential in drafting legislation intended to restore the “rightful” place of the Shari’a in Sudanese society (104). Even then, the SWU never publicly challenged the regime’s “ideological somersault”. Indeed, during this period, as Sondra Hale reports, “Islamic welfare work was a dominant function listed for the women’s organisations registered under the Ministry of Social Welfare” (105).

In the wake of these changes, competition between Islamist women activists and the “May Revolution” women intensified, eventually eroding the SWU’s internal cohesion. The SWU was no longer in a position to influence the political agenda. In 1983, just as the SWU was preparing for the UN end of decade conference in Nairobi, Numeiry, pretexting a cabinet reshuffle, issued a decree dissolving the Women’s Committee of the

SSU (“amanat al-mara’a”). A process of negotiations and personal favours began, amidst mounting pressure from the Islamist women to vacate Nafissa Ahmed El Amin’s position as Secretary General of the SWU. El Amin did not resign her post, and was reinstated by executive order from the president, no doubt in a feverish last minute attempt by the latter to distance himself from the erratic turnabout that he had precipitated.

These developments eventually undermined both the secular nature of the Permanent Constitution of 1973 and the self-governing status of the Southern Sudan (106). Not surprisingly, this turned Southern Sudanese women against the regime (107), while women’s constitutional assurances of protection became irrelevant.

Over time, these events dissipated the idealistic assumption of the SWU’s leadership that it was a body representing the women’s movement, and that its relationships with the active women’s organizations who were outside the state, such as the Muslim Sisters and the WU, would be relatively unproblematic (108).

All this highlighted the SWU’s failure to break new political ground for women beyond the “tokenism” solutions. Furthermore, it confirmed the long-held democratic women’s fears of manipulation and co-optation. It also provided additional justification for those women who had resigned their posts in the SWU early on when they realised the SWU was only an arm of the government (109).

Most of all, it highlighted the fact that the state is not the “gender-neutral” tool that the SWU women had assumed it would be. Under the guise of the conservative Islamic right, the male-dominant state re-emerged stronger than ever.

Aided by Numeiry, the Islamists rise to power succeeded in destroying the potential promises of state feminism. By 1980, the regime that had challenged the autonomy of the **Shari'a** laws to accommodate a broad liberal women's constituency, had created a "Women's Travel Committee" ("**lajnat al-nissa'a**") to check and control women's travel abroad (in search of incomes) in order to "curb prostitution" (as if the humiliation at seeking livelihood across borders were not enough).

Concluding Remarks.

Sudanese women's experience with state feminism has thus been a story of paradoxes and reverses. While the SWU did have dedicated liberal women who wanted to be responsive to the demands of the women's movement, to advance women's issues within government, to help groups obtain necessary funding, they were ultimately accountable to an authoritarian bureaucracy. Within state structures, they were often isolated and underfunded, no match for the powerful alliances of forces they had to confront (110). At a time of cutbacks on state subsidies and funding, women's issues became here as elsewhere, a luxury that the state could ill-afford. The available evidence discussed here shows that many were critical of the one-party system and the SWU's subordination to it, which served as militating forces against a broader representation of women. Yet despite the serious shortcomings, the SWU never publicly challenged the legitimacy of the system. The most important area of difference between the SWU and the government was

over the issue of Islamic legislation, and it came only in 1983 when the regime had already taken a distinct theocratic shift. They had not, for example, previously “raised the point of contradiction within the Permanent Constitution which declared all citizens equal irrespective of sex (Article 9), yet allowed family matters to be resolved on the basis of the Shari’a” (111).

While some no doubt fought to protect their class interests and stood to benefit from the system, the evidence generally does not indicate that these femocrats’ positions led to “embourgeoisement” or personal enrichment. The opposite was certainly true of other male SSU cadres or senior army officers who “established their own corporate trading, transport and industrial ventures, providing them with their own independent revenues, as well as with opportunities for corruption” (112). Although un-lured by the corruptive practices of hegemonic male politics, however, like their counterparts in Egypt, the SWU feminists were not entirely devoid of political opportunism: “they did not mind the costs involved (...) in the identification of women’s equality with an unpopular government or in the regime’s exploitation of the cause to project a progressive image” (113). Through this participation and their acceptance of arbitrary state power and controlled elections, they thus inadvertently contributed in projecting the shadow of authoritarianism on the women’s movement.

These setbacks obviously call into question the perspective of the state as a site of liberation, and the opportunities for women’s advancement within its structures. More generally, the radical expectations we entertained in the 1960’s-1970’s on the state as a

principal agent of development, an arena of popular political agency and national aspirations have been frustrated and disrupted. However, our continuing and legitimate feminist claims on the state to provide full citizenship, human, equality and social rights for women should be enough to inspire caution on the part of those of us who would make hasty predictions in favour of the neo-liberal alternative now in vogue: the minimalist state as opposed to the public state (114).

What is worth noting here is that when the state's effectiveness is measured by its commitment to pluralism and constitutionalism, and where the state and civil society are mutually reinforcing as was the case in Sudan's 1964 and 1986 democratic (but unfortunately short-lived) transitions, the avenues available for the women's movement to influence state policy are greater. Struggling for gender equality as a part of national development and within state structures also means that women's struggles do not remain isolated from the state. During the early "socialist" phase of Numeiry's military regime, the spaces that opened for women were far from inconsequential. Differences between Northern and Southern Sudan were acknowledged and consciously addressed, constitutional assurances of gender protection were enshrined in the Constitution, and a quota for women in local government and the legislature were instituted. These were important breakthroughs for compensatory justice that is also a part of our feminist politics and ethics. It was the nature of the "aggressive competitive dog-eat-dog" hegemonic state practices that aborted the opportunities for meaningful social change, and ultimately led the liberal experience of state feminism astray.

While women's political participation in formal politics declined as a result, independent women's groups expanded and developed new strategies of resistance and activism.

Indeed, those who remained outside, that is, the overwhelming majority, made it difficult for the dictatorial regime to win legitimacy. While the SWU struggled with the state's formal structures, those outside were in the words of Jo Fisher "challenging the authoritarianism embedded in everyday life" (115), continuing a tradition of resilience and activism that was never entirely extinguished. The WU and other women's groups outside were agitating, joining the opposition, coalescing with human rights groups and developing stronger links with civil society networks.

The Sudanese femocrats' gravest transgression lay no doubt in their underestimation of the importance of the political base of support provided by the women's movement, forgetting that "women's state organisations need women's backing from outside the state to give them greater strength within the state" (116). Even "in the best of times", as women's experiences elsewhere have shown: to champion our cause successfully, we need to coordinate simultaneously at two levels, that is, to support policy measures that are "woman friendly" and to oppose those that are not. This "common ground" for a broader representation of women could only have been possible if the autonomous women's movement and other independent sectors of civil and political society had been allowed to function normally, and under the conditions of a democratic contestation of power.

With Numeiry's downfall in 1985, the SWU likewise fell from grace. The political space for democratisation and the avenues for women to influence state policies opened once again. But as R.Luckham stated in a critique that rings true today, "departing authoritarian regimes bequeath a poisoned chalice to their successors" (117). After a brief democratic transition, (1985-1989), it was yet another government of military origin but with Islamic fundamentalist credentials that presided over the passage of state gender concerns into the hands of individual patriarchs and the family.

Notes

1. Naffisa Ahmed El Amin, "The Women's Movement in Sudan: Memorable Moments and Stands", paper presented at Al-Manar Consultancy Group, Fourth Training Course on Women and Law, Khartoum, 1-11 September, 1997, p.12.
2. According to El Amin (op.cit.,) "the word "socialist" was removed from the name of the organisation to avoid unnecessary confusion with the SSU", p.12.
3. In the 1950's, women activists had attempted but failed to coordinate the activities of the various women's associations to build a unified women's movement. Thus, in 1971, a legalised status appeared to many as a way of uniting women. See Haga Kashif Badri, Women's Movement in the Sudan, Asia News Agency, New Delhi, 1987, p.95.
4. J.Markakis and M.Waller (eds.), Military Marxist Regimes in Africa, Frank Cass, London, 1986, p.202.
5. Peter Nyot Kok, Governance and Conflict in the Sudan, 1985-1995: Analysis, Evaluation and Documentation, Deutsches Orient-Institut, Hamburg, 1996, p.125.

6. Quoted in J.Markakis and M.Waller, op.cit., p.203.
7. Peter Nyot Kok, op.cit., p.127.
8. J.Markakis and M.Waller, op.cit., p.204. Interestingly, this experience ended in Egypt in 1976 when a multiparty system was instated. See on this Mervat F.Hatem, "The Paradoxes of State Feminism in Egypt", in Barbara Nelson and Najma Chowdhury (eds.), *Women and Politics Worldwide*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1994, p.227.
9. J.Markakis and M.Waller, op.cit., p.206.
10. John Markakis, "Ethnic Conflict & the State in the Horn of Africa", in K.Fukui and J.Markakis (eds.), *Ethnicity and Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, James Curry/Ohio University Press, London/Athena, 1994, p.223.
11. Francis Deng, "The Identity Factor in the Sudanese Conflict", in Joseph V.Montville (ed.), *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies*, Lexington Books, Lexington, 1990, p.350.
12. J.Markakis and M.Waller, op.cit., p.206.

13. Ibid., p.206.
14. Ibid., p.206.
15. Ibid., p.206-7.
16. See Yoshiko Kurita. "The Social Bases of Regional Movements in Sudan 1960's-1980's", in K.Fukui and J.Markakis (eds.), *op.cit.*, p.211.
17. I am borrowing here the term used by Peter Nyot Kok, *op.cit.*, p.127. See also on how the Numeiry regime reneged on its commitments to the Southern region: Abel Alier, *Southern Sudan: Too Many Agreements Dishonoured*, Ithaca Press, Exeter, 1990.
18. See Tomadur Ahmed Khalid's valuable study: "The State and the Sudanese Women's Union, 1971-1983: A Case Study", in S.Wieringa (ed.), *Subversive Women: Historical Experiences of Gender and Resistance*, Zed Books, London/N.Jersey, 1995, p.189.
19. The expression is from Sonia E.Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton/N.Jersey, 1990, p.12.

20. Mervat F. Hatem, "Economic and Political Liberalization in Egypt and the Demise of State Feminism", in S.Sabbagh (ed.), Arab women: Between Defiance and Restraint, Olive Branch Press New York, 1996, p.172.
21. Ibid., p.172.
22. Ibid., p.172.
23. Ibid., p.172.
24. Ibid., p.172.
25. Sarah Graham-Brown, "Women and Politics in the Middle East", in S.Sabbagh, op.cit., p.4.
26. Joe Stork, "Gender and Civil Society: An Interview with Suad Joseph", in S.Sabbagh, op.cit., p.209.
27. Mervat F.Hatem, "Political Liberalization, Gender, and the State", in R.Brynen, B.Korany, P.Noble (eds.), Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World, Vol.1, Theoretical Perspectives, Boulder, Colorado, 1995, p.187.
28. Ibid., p.187.

29. Ibid., p.187.

30. Ibid., p. 188.

31. Peter Nyot Kok, op.cit., p.123.

32. See M.Mamdani, "The Social basis of Constitutionalism in Africa", in The Journal of Modern African Studies, 28, 3, 1990, p.370.

33. See Michael Bretton, "Civil Society and Political Transitions in Africa", in J. W. Wittarbeson, D.Rothchild, N.Chazan (eds.), *Civil Society and the State in Africa*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder/London, 1994, p.79 (note 38)

34. Jane Jaquette, (ed.), *The Women's Movement in Latin America: Feminism and the Transition to Democracy*. Unwin, Boston, 1989, quoted in S.Alvarez, op.cit., p.35.

35. Sonia Alvarez, op.cit., p.33.

36. Ayesha Imam, "Democratization Processes in Africa: Problems and Prospects", in *Review of African Political Economy*, No.54: 3-10, 1992, p.102.

37. Georgina Waylen, "Women's Movements, the State and Democratization in Chile: The Establishment of SERNAM", in A.Goetz (ed.), *Getting Institutions Right for Women in Development*, Zed Books, London/New York, 1997, p.90.
38. Shirin M.Rai, "Gender and Representation: Women MP's in the Indian Parliament, 1991-96", in A. Goetz (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.119, and Sonia Alvarez, *op.cit.*, p.22.
39. *Ibid.*, p.119.
40. Zeinab Bashir El Bakri, "The Crisis in the Sudanese Women's Movement", in S.Wieringa (ed.), *op.cit*, p.205.
41. Tomadur Ahmed Khalid, *op.cit.*, p.190.
42. Georgina Waylen, *op.cit.*, p.91.
43. Sonia Alvarez, *op.cit.*, p.31.
44. Nicos Poulantzas's view of the state, (1973), *Political Power and Social Classes*, New Left Books, London, reviewed in Robin Luckham "The Military, Militarization and Democratization in Africa: A Survey of Literature and Issues", in *African Studies Review*, Vol.37, No.2, September 1994, p.45.

45. Sonia Alvarez, *op.cit.*, p.31.

46. *Ibid.*, p.273.

47. Georgina Waylen, *op.cit.*, p.91; see also Virginia O.del Rosario, "Mainstreaming Gender Concerns: Aspects of Compliance, Resistance and Negotiation", in A.Goetz (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp.77-89.

48. Georgina Waylen, *op.cit.*, p.92.

49. Tomadur Ahmed Khalid, *op.cit.*, p.185. I owe the information developed in this section to Khalid's 1995 path-breaking "Case Study" of the SWU for the period from 1971 to 1983.

50. *Ibid.*, p.185.

51. *Ibid.*, p.185.

52. *Ibid.*, p.188.

53. Reported in Carolyn F-Lobban, *Islamic Law and Society in the Sudan*, Frank Cass, London, 1987, p.268.

54. Ibid., pp.268-269.

55. Tomadur Ahmed Khalid, op.cit., p.185.

56. Ibid., p.185 and p.188.

57. Margaret Juan Lado, "The Role of Women in Development and Social Transformation in the Sudan", paper presented at Seminar on Development as an Instrument of Peace, Sudan Council of Churches, Khartoum, Sudan, 1989, p.7.

58. Tomadur Ahmed Khalid, op.cit., p.185 and p.184, and Carolyn F-Lobban op.cit., p.268-269.

59. Nafissa Ahmed El Amin, op.cit., p.15.

60. Tomadur Ahmed Khalid, op.cit., p.185.

61. Ibid., p.187.

62. Ibid., p.187.

63. Ibid., p.185.

64. **Sudanow** 1979, reported in Tomadur Ahmed Khalid, op.cit., p.188.
65. Tomadur Ahmed Khalid, op.cit., p.186.
66. Ibid., p.187
67. See Magda M.El-Sanousi and Nafissa Ahmed El-Amin, "The Women's Movement, Displaced Women, and Rural Women in Sudan", in B.Nelson and N.Chowdhury (eds.), op.cit., p.681, and for a similar assessment, Badria Sliman Abbas, "Status of Women in Sudanese Laws", Republic of Sudan, The Advisory Council for human Rights, Khartoum State Committee for Human Rights Education, (no date), p.6.
68. Tomadur Ahmed Khalid, op.cit., p.190.
69. Margaret Juan Lado, op.cit., p.9.
70. Tomadur Ahmed Khalid, op.cit, p.187.
71. Ibid., pp.189-190.
72. Ibid., p.192.
73. Ibid., p.192.

74. Badria Sliman Abbas, *op.cit.*, p.7. See also Magda M.El-Sanousi and Nafissa Ahmed El-Amin, *op.cit.*, pp.680-681.
75. Badria Sliman Abbas, *op.cit.*, p.6.
76. See Mahasin Abdel-Al, *Sudanese Women and Political Participation: The Women's Movement as a Constitutive Component of the National Movement*, Khartoum, (1999), p.80.
77. Margaret Juan Lado, *op.cit.*, p.10.
78. See Leah Leatherbee and Dale Bricker, *Consensus and Dissent: Prospects for Human Rights and Democracy in the Horn of Africa*, (section on Sudan), The Fund for Peace, Horn of Africa Program, New York, 1994.
79. Zeinab Bashir El Bakri, "The Crisis in the Sudanese Women's Movement", *op.cit.*, p.207.
80. See for example Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, *op.cit.*, p.268, and Sondra Hale, *Gender Politics in Sudan: Islamism, Socialism and the State*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1997, p.173.

81. The facts concerning the subject of this section are not reconstructed from official records, but from lectures and discussions which Ustaza Nafissa presented at the Legal Aid training workshops for young women held annually by our consultancy group “Al-Manar” in Khartoum. I am here using in particular the presentation/discussion she gave in September 1997 (see note 1 above). I should mention also that Ustaza Nafissa was generally persistently questioned by our young trainees on her role in Numeiry’s defunct regime, but that did not deter her from responding positively to every invitation to attend and participate in our training courses. Ustaza Nafissa is currently associated with the Babiker Badri Scientific Association for Women’s Studies of Ahfad University, a woman-only university in (Omdurman) Sudan. The segments between inverted comas are direct citations from Ustaza Nafissa’s presentation, and are followed by the page number in which they appear in the original text. The paper was presented and written in Arabic, which I here translate. The remarks contained between brackets are my emphasis.
82. Tomadur Ahmed Khalid, op.cit., p.191. For detailed documentation and analysis on Employment and Labour Legislation concerning Sudanese women see Buthaiyna Al-Kharasani, “Women, Labour Legislation and International Conventions” paper presented at the Gender Center for Research and Training, Paper No.6, October 1998 (in Arabic), and her “Women’s Labour Rights”, presented at Al-Manar Consultancy Group Training Seminar, September 1999 (in Arabic). See also Amna Dirar, “Women and Work”, paper presented at Al-Manar Consultancy Group Training Seminar, August 1998 (in Arabic).

83. This consideration has been a constant concern among the “femocrats”. It has been voiced, for example, by Haga Kashif Badri, and recently Mahasin Abdel-AI in her book, *op.cit.*, p. 36. See note 3 above on earlier debate on this issue.
84. See Magda M.El-sanousi and Nafissa Ahmed El-Amin, *op. cit.*, p.682.
85. This fact was little known or discussed then, and undoubtedly reflects Ustaza Nafissa’s experience in government bureaucracy and the international arena. Note that her position is significantly different from that of the WU’s president discussed in Chapter one, as well as from the fundamentalist viewpoint which opposes CEDAW. A useful source on the legal procedures involved in raising reservations to international conventions and to CEDAW in particular can be found in a recent article by Sudanese feminist lawyer Fatima Abul Qassim entitled “Paper on Reservation Mechanism Concerning the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)”, Al-Manar Consultancy Group, April 2000 (in Arabic). In it, Abul Qassim raises the point of contradiction in the Sudanese government’s refusal to ratify CEDAW instead of “endorsing it with reservations” as other “Islamic” countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Libya have done.
86. In September 1984, Ustaza Nafissa, then Chair of the SWU, experienced a personal-public humiliation when she was: “barred from chairing a session in Khartoum on “Women’s Rights under Islam” at the First International Conference on the Implementation of Shari’a . The Saudi delegation protested that it was not Islamic to

permit a woman to chair a meeting where men were present”, reported in Sondra Hale, op.cit., (1997), p.209 and p.223, note 72. The debate over power is an under-researched area in Sudanese women’s studies, and according to political scientist Mahmood Mamdani remains unresolved in our contemporary African societies. See his “The Social Basis of Constitutionalism in Africa”, in The Journal of Modern African Studies, 28, 3, 1990, pp.359-374.

87. Tomadur Ahmed Khalid, op.cit, p.196.

88. For example, this is how in another context, Magda El- Sanousi and Nafissa Ahmed El-Amin report the historic election of our first ever woman to parliament in 1965: **“When women were nominated for election to the Parliament in 1965, Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim was the first Sudanese woman to be elected and the only woman elected from the Graduates’ Constituency. Although a leading member of the Communist Party, she ran as an independent candidate because the party was not generally popular”** (in op.cit, p.679) (my emphasis). El- Sanousi and El- Amin apparently find it irrelevant for women “worldwide” to know that Ibrahim was also the Women’s Union president (nowhere is it mentioned in their article), which explains why she ran as an “independent candidate”, that she was the only woman elected among 170 MP’s, and that she won the highest number of votes (5918) in advance (by 508 votes), of the 5510 votes obtained by the leading male SCP candidate (Hassan El-Tahir Zaroug). The second part of their claim is simply a distortion of the historic facts. The exceptional popularity of the Sudanese

Communist Party in those years has been widely acknowledged by foes and friends alike, and there is no objective reason for giving women a truncated impression of the first political party in Sudan that endorsed their full rights. Writing in the still recent 1980's Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban indeed maintains that "it is almost a cliché in Sudanese politics to say that events are triggered either by the Muslim Brothers or the Communists...", (op.cit., p.269), thereby placing in context at least, the formidable ideological weight that the SCP had in countering the ultra-conservative political forces in Northern Sudanese political society. In fact in the 1965 elections, the SCP won 11 out of the 15 Graduates' Constituencies, and obtained 34,7% of the vote (by comparison, the Islamic Charter Front obtained 27,1% and the National Unionist Party obtained 25%). In the geographic constituencies the SCP won 20,1% of the votes in the major cities of Atbara, Wad Medani, Port Sudan, El Obeid, Kassala and Kosti, while it came second in the capital city (the agglomeration consisting of Khartoum, Omdurman and Khartoum North). Moreover, the only Southern Sudanese who won in the Graduates' Constituencies, the late Joseph Garang, "did so because he was a candidate of the SCP". See among many others, Peter Nyot Kok, op.cit., (1996), p.42 and p.51, note 40, and "**Qaddaiya Sudaniya**" (Sudanese Issues), No.23, July 2000, p.40.

89. See Zeinab Bashir El Bakri, op.cit., p.204 and Tomadur Ahmed Khalid, op.cit., p.193.

90. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, op.cit., p.269.

91. Zeinab B El Bakri and El-Wathig M.Kameir, "Women's Participation in economic, social and political life in Sudanese urban and rural communities: the case of Saganna

in Khartoum and Wad al-“Asha Village in the Gezira Area”, in S.Shami et al.,
Women in Arab Society: Work patterns and gender relations in Egypt, Jordan and
Sudan, Berg/UNESCO, Paris, 1990, p.196.

92. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

93. Atta El-Battahani, *Economic Transformation and Political Islam in Sudan: 1975-1989*, Working Paper 5/96, Institute of Development Studies, University of Helsinki, 1996, p.5.

94. *Ibid.*, p.5.

95. See Abdel-Galil El Mekki, “Food Crises: Their Roots in a Country’s Political and Developmental Crises”, in Mohamed Suliman (ed.), *Ecology, Politics & Violent Conflict*. Zed Books, London/New York, p.228.

96. Atta El-battahani, *op.cit.*, p. 8-9.

97. *ibid.*, p.11.

98. See J.Markakis and M.Waller, *op.cit.*, p.210.

99. *Ibid.*, p.210-211.

100. Ibid., p.210.
101. Margaret Juan Lado, *op.cit.*, p.8.
102. See Georgina Waylen, *op.cit.*, p.100.
103. Sondra Hale, "Gender Politics and Islamization in the Sudan", in South Asia Bulletin, Vol.XIV, No.2, 1994, p.60.
104. C.F.-Lobban, *op.cit.*, p.269.
105. Sondra Hale, *op.cit.* (1997), p.208 and p.223, note 67.
106. See Peter Nyot Kok, "The Ties That Will Not Bind: Conflict and Racial Cleavage in Sudan", in P. Anyang' N'yong'o (ed.), *Arms and Daggers in the Heart of Africa: Studies on Internal Conflicts*, Academy of Science Publishers, Nairobi, Kenya, 1993, p.41.
107. By then, and against the backdrop of so many broken promises, armed resurrection had already resumed in Southern Sudan.
108. See Mahasin Abdel-Al, *op.cit.*, p. 42.

109. In 1984, as popular opposition pressures mounted, the regime charged Fatma Ahmed Ibrahim with treason. The judge refrained from jailing her, and ruled instead that she was “insane” and should be referred to a medical board. This ruling which in effect saved her life, was brought to bear on the court by the mobilisation of democratic physicians in the clandestine opposition rather than by the women in power in the SWU.
110. Jo Fisher, *Out of the Shadows: Women, Resistance and Politics in South America*, Latin American Bureau, London, 1993, p.207.
111. Lawyer Dina Sheik Al Din, reported in Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, *op.cit.*, p.273-274.
112. Robin Luckham, *op.cit.*, p.39.
113. Mervat F.Hatem, *op.cit.*, (1994), p.237.
114. “The elements of civil society neoliberals wish to privilege over the state are precisely those which will broaden and deepen relations of domination in the absence of any recourse to democratic governance at local, national or global levels”. See the “Introduction”, in Marianne H.Marchand and Anne Sisson Runyan (eds.), *Gender and*

Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites and Resistances, Routledge, London/New York, 2000, pp.1-22 (quotation p.20).

115. Jo Fisher, *op.cit.*, p.209.

116. Georgina Waylen, *op.cit.*, p.103.

117. Robin Luckham, *op.cit.*, p.50.

Chapter Three

Fundamentalism and its Female Apologists: the Realities Behind the Veil

By the 1980's life in Sudan became a struggle for basic services and commodities.

Women's lives were affected not only by the general political and economic decline, civil war and displacement created by years of dictatorship and squandered opportunities, but also by the rising tide of state-sponsored Islamic fundamentalism. Calls for a return to traditional Muslim and family values accompanied the seizure of power by the National Islamic Front (NIF) in 1989. Women were to revert to their traditional roles as guardians of the faith, the family and morality. Many of the gains of the previous years in family benefits, labour and civil rights were revoked. Discrimination on the grounds of gender and religion has become the norm. While Islamist women activists are rightfully reclaiming their right to shape their lives by a return to the faith, they are, however, denying that same choice for other women and non-Muslims in Sudan who "beg to differ" on the basis of a common citizenship.

There are some anomalies to this dramatic turn of events. As waves of democracy swept a number of sub-Saharan countries in the 1980's-1990's, Islamic ideology, with its appeal to nationalist and religious sentiments was quick to pose itself as an alternative in Sudan, a country, ironically, with considerable resources in democratic experience. While women's organisations around the world (and Sudanese among them) were campaigning for justice, for equal treatment and against violence and poverty, Sudanese women were

being subjected to a repression of the most brutal order: flogging, detention, torture and other horrific traumas. The Sudan, Africa's largest country, became the only country after Iran where Islamic fundamentalists are in state power.

Moreover, unlike in other Afro-Arab Islamic countries such as Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, where the Islamists are persecuted for their challenge to the state, the Sudanese Islamists had been since 1977 partners in Numeiry's authoritarian regime rather than in opposition to it. In the country's last free elections for almost twenty years (1986), the Islamic party won less than 20% of the vote (18.4%), but it was enough to force the Islamists' inclusion in the governing coalition. Among the five women candidates for those elections, only two entered parliament. Both were NIF members. (1). Indeed, when they ousted the democratically elected government in June 1989, it was the first time in the country's history that a political party with representation in parliament, and not the army, had staged a **coup d'état** (2). More importantly and contrary to the situation in the above- mentioned countries, the Sudan is characterised by marked ethnic, religious and linguistic tensions, and for all but a few years since independence has been in the grips of a devastating civil war. No consensus on national fundamentals has yet been reached (3). In fact, the NIF coup came to forestall the project for peace and a Constitutional Conference whose date had been set for the following September, to resolve the political crisis of the country.

Since the 1940's when the Islamic movement in Sudan was a fringe group and a marginal actor in the political scene to the moment of its newly acquired ascendancy in the 1970's,

it has been known for its contempt of democracy. The movement has also been known for its mistrust of the peaceful mechanisms of parliamentary democracy as a means of gaining access to power (4). The Islamists' defining agenda has always been to curtail women's rights, and the secular liberal nationalist and socialist projects. It appears as though in the words of Fatima Mernissi, the movement's "social fabric seems to have trouble absorbing anything having to do with changing authority thresholds: freely competing unveiled women, freely competing political parties, freely elected parliaments and, of course, freely elected heads of state who do not necessarily get 99 percent of the vote" (5). When it overthrew the democratically elected government, the Islamic junta's first action was thus to suppress the forces of Sudan's vibrant civil society.

All political parties, trade unions and professional organisations including women's were banned. The new regime also dismantled the judiciary, banned the Constitution and purged the civil service of tens of thousands of qualified people whom it accused of holding secularist ideas. Women were thrown out of their jobs in purges of government offices, while a countless number were forced to leave the country in the plight of members of their families. Only religious institutions and students' unions were permitted to function, but in time, restrictions were placed on them also. The regime withheld permits to build churches and declared some areas out of bounds for Christians. The student unions (an early niche of the Islamists) were allowed to function only as long as they supported the National Islamic Front (NIF) government.

Although all previous military and single-party dictatorships and even civilian governments in Sudan have had unenviable records of civil and human rights abuses, none, as we shall shortly discuss, had come anywhere near the level of brutality and atrocities inflicted by the present Islamist regime. Under all the previous regimes, the army remained a secular institution, whereas today, after having infiltrated it with their supporters, the Islamists created parallel forces and militias to serve and protect the “Islamic Revolution”. While the current regime shares with some of its predecessors the aggressive hegemonic attempt to assimilate the non-Arab and non-Muslim African Sudanese communities, and to impose a national Arab-Islamic identity on the country, it is distinguished by its resolve to build “an Islamic nation and society linked to God almighty”. Gender subordination is part of this agenda. While under previous military and civilian regimes, Shari’a rulings continued to define many aspects of women’s legal status, the Islamists’ politics now invokes divine law to deny women their human rights. Although the Islamists’ exclusivist ideology and the denial of basic freedoms have affected the entire population, women became the object of particular controls and restrictions.

Women Assaulted

From the start, it was evident that the regime’s policies towards women were to undergo blatant changes. One of the first official statements of the junta’s leader was to declare that the ideal Sudanese woman’s place is in the home, taking care of her children, her reputation and her husband (6). A presidential decree in 1991 ordered female students

and civil servants to adopt the Islamic dress code, with the punishment of flogging for violating the code. Additional restrictions in November 1992 limited women's travel abroad and attempted to institute gender segregation in public offices. Middle-class professional women, the privileged group with access to education and jobs, those who, as recalled in our previous chapters, were in a position to work for change within society appeared to be the first victims (in the public domain). In due course, as the neutrality of the civil service was increasingly eroded, certain institutions such as the Judiciary, the Universities and the Foreign Affairs ministry were restricting the employment of women.

To these public domain purges was added a web of administrative decrees previously unknown in the Sudanese legal tradition which have the power of Laws. The source of these laws is the head of state and the "walis" (state governors) of the different provinces. One such law, the Public Order Law, introduced as part of the Penal Code in 1991 (a revitalized Shari'a), was introduced to storm against society's "immorality", and has invariably been aimed at women on the grounds of their sex, class and ethnic origin. The Penal Code (7) includes the notorious Evidence Act in which a woman's testimony is not admissible at all in crimes such as theft, fornication and adultery. Furthermore, the Personal Status Law for Muslims reinforced the "house of obedience" ("bevt etta'a") to which a woman is doomed if she disobeys her spouse, while polygamy leaves unrestricted the number of wives a man can take in marriage. Also under this Act, all women, regardless of their age are considered as legal minors and as such, all their actions – marriage, movement, employment – are subjected to the approval of their guardian, that is, a sane, mature male. Moreover, the Penal Code contains 18 sections

defining a wide variety of offences which are punishable by flogging: prostitution is punishable by up to 100 lashes, wearing clothing contrary to public decency is punishable by up to 40 lashes and causing a breach of the peace is punishable by up to 20 lashes.

But the regime's attacks on the less powerful, poorer and needy women translated into haunting encounters with brutal violence. Rampant xenophobia and police torture that can only be interpreted as "Islamic" in the most restricted sense, were unleashed on women engaged in the "informal" economy, displaced women and women in the war zones of Southern and Western Sudan. They include: dress regulations, sweep campaigns ("kasha"), collective weddings, forced labour without compensation and forced concubinage. This has meant stripping women (many of them non-Muslim) of control over personal and fundamental freedoms through the imposition of the fundamentalist dress code. Collective weddings enforced on women in desperate economic conditions further demonstrated the regime's invasion of private space. In the towns captured by the army from the Southern and Nuba Mountains insurgents, women and children are forced to perform labour without compensation. Women are furthermore forced to become concubines or wives to Northern Sudanese soldiers, the latter being encouraged to impregnate Southern women to produce a Muslim generation (8).

Women whose only means of survival is the sale of tea or home-brewed beer are accused of breeding vice in society. They are denied access to credit on the grounds that their businesses are not being run in accordance with Islamic principles. Moreover, they receive severe punishments for these economic activities: floggings of between twenty-

five and forty lashes, jailing for one to six months, and fines. Flogging is done with a whip and usually leaves deep and even permanent welts on the skin (9). I should, perhaps, mention here that the cane is not unknown to us in Sudan as a decadent form of school punishment, while riot police would use whips to disperse hooligans during soccer matches. However, the flogging of elderly people and women is tantamount to the highest form of humiliation in Northern and Southern Sudanese communities (10).

As the regulation of female sexuality became policy, so also the manipulation of women's needs by the use of intimidation and terror became a tool for men with grudges against individual women (to make) allegations against them if their own sexual advances are frustrated (11). Often also, it is the same men who drink tea regularly from a particular tea vendor who are the ones to arrest and beat her. One of the remarkable legal provisions is the definition of prostitution. Under Article 154 of the 1991 Penal Code, "They shall be deemed to commit the offence of prostitution whoever is found in a place of prostitution so that it is likely that they may exercise sexual acts or earn therefrom" The act describes a place of prostitution as "a place designed for the meeting of men and women between whom there are no marital relationships or kinship, in circumstances in which the exercise of sexual acts is likely to occur". "This provision gives such leeway for interpretation to a judge that is extremely easy to convict women on the slenderest evidence, or no evidence at all" (12).

"Male law enforcers have been given a free hand to exercise prejudice against women and minority groups" (13). In fact **four** law enforcement bodies, enjoying extensive

powers, were created and directed towards the persecution of women in public: the Popular Defence Force (PDF), the Popular Police Force (PPF), the Popular Committees (PC) and the vigilante Islamic guards for the “Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue”. The PDF, modeled on the Iranian Republican Guards (“**komitehs**”), were later mobilised to the war front alongside regular forces (14). The PPF is a supplementary police force that patrols residential neighbourhoods and markets to implement immediate punishment by flogging offenders on the streets. The PC’s were dedicated to the “defence of the nation”, and served as a means for monitoring households’ activities and movements. These committees caused many citizens to be wary of neighbours who could report them for “suspicious” activities including “excessive contact” with foreign visitors. (15). Another of their tasks is to oversee the distribution of food rations (sugar, tea, oil and soap). The group charged with overseeing the “Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue” (known to those familiar with events in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan) are self-appointed (all male) vigilantes whose task is the guardianship of the moral purity of society. Their **raison d’etre** is based on the Islamic principle “**alamr bil marouf wal nahy ‘an almunkar**” (to prescribe what is right and to forbid what is wrong), which effectively “rules out any recognition and respect for the concept of individual right to choice and equal protection under the law” (16).

The promulgation and enforcement of Islamic legal and behavioural codes, as practiced by the Sudanese Islamists since 1989 has been felt in every aspect of people’s lives. The inhuman practice of flogging described above has affected both women and men. A lesser known reality perhaps is that in a society where toughness and virility in men is

highly prized, Sudanese males also suffered rape at the hands of their Islamist torturers (17). Creating a climate of fear is an important component of the Islamists' norms and of the techniques necessary to maintain power. There is, therefore, a most abiding truth in the statement that "by most measures-and especially by the measures of political repression-Sudan is worse off as an Islamic state than it was before" (18).

But Muslim males have been given the power to discipline female sexual and moral conduct, and to be brutal with vulnerable groups of women as a matter of religious duty. The guidelines on dress regulation were issued by an all-male committee. Those who enforce the laws are in majority all men. However, as beatings and overnight detention of women increased, NIF women were specially trained to torture female detainees. In government departments women were verbally harassed or threatened by their male colleagues for not wearing the proper Islamic attire. Increasingly, as more women have been trained in the PDF militias, it has become the task of Islamist women to attend to that, particularly at the entrance gates to universities. Also, although all non-NIF Sudanese men have to obtain security clearance in order to travel, women have to obtain the approval of a male guardian. In sum, no woman in Sudan has been left unscathed by these humiliations. Because the legal system is no longer independent of the government, and the judges are hostile prosecutors, few women are able to appeal against violence and maltreatment.

In a study of the Public Order Act for Khartoum state, economist and feminist activist, Suad Ibrahim Issa, underlines the extent to which this exceptional legislation is aimed

primarily at women. The Public Order Act contains 6 sections, 4 of which regulate the conduct of both men and women. They concern the prohibition of mixed dancing and the regulation of vagrancy. However 80% of the regulations in section 3 concerning public transport are targeted at women, while section 5 is entirely aimed at hair saloons where women congregate. Issa points out that the Law is a misnomer because public morality should in essence concern the collective role of citizens to protect the environment, to avoid littering neighbourhoods, to care for domestic animals and to properly dispense with sewage water. In fact, she notes, while the law primarily targets women, it is silent on the common sight of men urinating at the entrance to public buildings such as hospitals and even outside mosques, and swimming sometimes completely naked in the river... (19).

“Where did they come from?”

For Sudanese women activists accustomed to the struggle against backwardness and old-time Mullahs, it was clear that the Islamists who seized power in 1989 were no post-colonial reformers or seeking a liberal Islamic “revival” based on social justice and less stringent control of women’s rights. Ironically, as the “enlightened” Islamic tradition of the 1950’s to 1970’s with its local roots and popular traditions rescinded under the violent impact of political Islam, the women’s movement’s own conservative efforts to protect the violation of women’s “private” space paled in comparison to the Islamist’s invasion of that space. Our sexuality, our bodies, became public more than they have ever been before, not for the purpose of creating a more humane or egalitarian picture of our place

in society, but for consolidating the rule of fear and intimidation. Indeed, the Women's Union's pursuit of religious reforms (within the boundaries of Islamic liberalism) can, in retrospect, be seen as having been motivated by a concern for the faith, a motivation that is far removed from the actual practice of today's extremist Islamist rulers.

In 1992, the renowned Sudanese novelist and essayist, Al-Tayib Salih, published an article in a widely-read Arab journal in which he denounced the intolerance of Sudan's Islamist rulers and the way their acts contradicted the nation's conventional values. The enigmatic question-title of Salih's article: "Where have these people come from?" (i.e. the Islamists) captured the imagination of many disenchanted liberal Muslim intellectuals (20). However, for most astute observers of the Sudanese political scene and women in particular, Numeiry's 1983 Islamisation policies, supervised and inspired by none other than the architect of Sudan's National Islamic Front, Hassan El-Turabi, who served as the former dictator's Attorney General and Political Advisor in the early 1980's, were a prelude of things to come. By then, the knowledge that "the political use of Islamic ideology in the Sudan has outgrown humanism and subjected it to the most Godless taste in (the) perpetuation of violence, perilous attitudes and an unparalleled devastation of human lives" (21), was a view shared by many both within and outside Sudan.

Sondra Hale further reports that in an interview she conducted with Sudanese Islamic "gender activists" during the democratic period in 1988, she asked Wissal al-Mahdi, wife of El-Turabi, how the NIF planned to resolve the contradictions between Sudan's Permanent Constitution and Shari'a in respect to the status of women. Hale recalls that

“(A)fter conferring with her colleagues, Wissal al-Mahdi responded, almost off-handedly “Oh, we will simply ban the Constitution””(22). Hale comments that “this chilling and arrogant response presaged what was to come” (23). In effect, a few months later the NIF-supported coup did exactly that. In her presentation to our women’s group in 1997, Ustaza Nafissa Ahmed El Amin, delved even further into the undemocratic history of the Islamic movement’s female supporters by revealing that Suad El Fatih, an NIF leader and today a Cabinet member, personally played a prominent role in fomenting the unconstitutional 1968 incident of the Higher Education Institute which led to expelling the SCP from parliament (24).

In Sudan, as Riad Ibrahim argues, “orthodox and fundamentalist Islamic doctrines have historically played a limited role as sources of “nativist” or indigenous ideological inspiration” (25). It should be noted also that in Sudan, the colonial encounter “did not engender recourse to fundamentalist feeling on the part of the people who, while clearly conscious of the harmful effects left by the British, sought refuge within their respectively varied identities vis-à-vis the different **turuq**” (**sufi** orders) (26).

Popular opinion was largely unsympathetic to the ideological agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood. This is not surprising given the movement’s conspiratorial history.

In a series of interviews conducted by Sondra Hale in 1988 (months before the NIF coup) with professional middle-class women, working class women and housewives whose views spanned the political spectrum, the author reports: “(W)ith the exception of the elite or activist women of the NIF, none of the religious women interviewed (...) saw

Islam as the **deus ex machina** that would save Sudan in its time of “crisis”. Nor (she continues) did I hear women talking about Shari’a in any way that revealed an interest in the intricacies of jurisprudence, nor about the formation of an Islamic state. For many of those who were observant, Islam was private, personal and simple” (27). Hale furthermore reports that women “seemed disinterested in the political aspects of religion, displayed a low level of participation in organised politico-religious activity and were even sometimes chagrined that Islam was being used for political purposes” (28). Indeed, at least since the 1960’s when the movement was renamed the Islamic Charter Front, the Islamists have been blamed for the defeat of the efforts to institute modern social values, for stifling all thought outside the prescription of Shari’a, and for their support of Numeiry’s dictatorship. In the past, the Islamist movement, like its counterparts in other countries, gained adherents among students in secondary schools and universities. With rising rates of female educational opportunities, this is where many of its female recruits originated. Increasingly, however, breeding on the contradictions of the traditional bourgeoisie, its social base expanded to include the urban professional middle-class.

The movement’s political fortunes came in 1977 after Numeiry’s formal reconciliation with the conservative parties in the opposition. This enabled the Islamists to participate more publicly in the political domain, as noted in the previous chapter. They took advantage of this opening and gained influential positions in the executive and legislative as well as in professional unions, the new Islamic banking movement initiated by the dictator, and in relief agencies. The latter (particularly important as will be discussed below), “were part of the wider strategy of Islamising all aspects of society and

entrenching the NIF so that it could withstand purges and changes in government” (29). By then Numeiry had promulgated an Islamic Penal Code and abolished the existing forms of secular taxation in favour of an Islamic system. The actual draft for an Islamic Constitution, however, was defeated in the National Assembly in 1984 by an alliance of secular groups in the SSU with Southerners. (After Numeiry’s downfall, the Shari’a punishments were suspended, but Shari’a laws were not revoked). But it was in 1985, when Numeiry executed the elderly and respected Sudanese Islamic scholar Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, for apostasy, that it became clear that steps towards an Islamic state were fast approaching.

In the meantime, a substantial number of Islamists had joined the civil service, often accepting minor posts in remote districts in recognition that they could gradually work their way up the hierarchy until they reached policy-making positions. By 1989, with a dozen years of growing influence in the bureaucracy behind them, and operating as cell-like organisations underground, the Islamists were ready to purge their secular opponents. Their long-prepared plan, nurtured by years of embittered frustration over the stigma of not being part of the real elite in society, had finally materialised. By 1993, using the methods of repression outlined above, “the regime had closed down all open channels of dissent and placed NIF loyalists in all key positions” (30).

Political Islam as political scientist Atta El-Battahani explains, “is better understood in the context of the response of small, median urban entrepreneurs and middle classes to a crisis of their class position in a particular ethno-cultural milieu. Feeling the brunt of cultural inferiority vis-à-vis the imperial West, and facing the prospects of downward

mobility amidst economic crisis, middle class intellectuals turn to political action. While their education and professional experience gave them a somewhat broader vision of the operation of the political and economic system, and the means for changing it, religion provided them with the armoury for mobilization and manipulation of the masses” (31).

The Islamists’ backlash on women should be seen in this light. Islamic fundamentalists are not (only) old men in gray beards who want to return women to pre-modern times, but in fact they are young (usually described as “aggressive” and “business-minded”) educated men, often groomed in the universities of the Western world which they so love to hate. According to one estimation, in the early 1970’s to 1980’s about 300 young Sudanese Islamist graduates were studying in the universities of Western Europe and America, significantly in the areas of information, communications and the media (32). In the late 1980’s, 80% of the country newspapers were owned by the Islamists (33), while “at least one third of the 4000 firms and commercial establishments registered during 1989-1994 were owned by Islamists and their supporters” (34).

Beneath the Islamic guise of Sudan’s present rulers lies a story of modern horrors that is of particular concern to our feminist vision and democratic struggle. Episodes of technological terror merge with superstition, the cult of martyrdom and supremacist vindictiveness. “The Islamist hegemonic project was introduced as a panacea to cure the malaise of (the) Sudanese society” (35). Instead, the period has witnessed a continuing decline in living standards and an unsurpassed devastation of human lives: ethnic cleansing, abduction, rape, murder of innocents including women and children,

resurgence of slavery (abolished incidentally by the British in 1898) and war-induced famine.

Whatever they have done, the Sudanese fundamentalists have not salvaged the disinherited. If anything, Northern Sudanese society, already Muslim and conformist, and with a mountain of other basic survival woes, was not in need for “re-Islamisation”. “We know the Koran. Give us Gas!” was the slogan shouted during student demonstrations in 1995, in reference to the economic crisis and an acute fuel shortage. In the historically neglected regions of Southern and Western Sudan, the Islamists wasted no time in escalating the civil war, orchestrated under the slogan of “**jihad**” (holy war), bringing to an end the hopes for peace and reconciliation that were finally in the making by the first half of 1989.

The Islamists’ ability to expand and personally prosper amid crisis and economic hardship have earned them the title of “**tujar al-azamat**” (merchants of crisis), and their Islamic banking movement, with its monopoly over the sorghum (or “**dura**”, the staple food of the poor) market, “**bunouk al-‘aish**” (cereal banks) (36). In 1991, following a severe drought, the country faced a cereal deficit in the range of 1.2 million tons. Prior to that, “500,000 tons were sold to the EC and Saudi Arabia for animal feed” (37). While the regime continued to deny the reality of an impending famine, a Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) investigation revealed that the Islamic government had furthermore sold more than 300,000 tons of the country’s strategic sorghum reserve in exchange for war materials from Irak and Libya (38).

After having wrested the monopoly of the vital financial sector (commerce and services) from large sections of the commercial bourgeoisie, the Islamists “invented new avenues and expanded into new areas for money-making (...), including speculation and black-marketeering” (39). The result was a “fierce struggle over access to credit and the search for easy and quick profits, thereby swelling the ranks of urban middlemen, blackmarketeers, smugglers and speculators in areas of food stuffs, medicine, relief supplies, real estate and currency” (40). Dealing in foreign currency was initially renounced as contradictory to Islam, and under this interdiction, two citizens, a businessman and an air pilot, were hanged. This decree was later abolished to benefit Islamist middlemen, but only after Sudan gained the dubious reputation of being the only country in the world that executes its citizens on these grounds (41).

Thus, as Haideh Moghissi point out “claims to construct a just society prove themselves farcical and, except in their determination to curtail women’s rights, fundamentalist regimes are seen to do no more than preserve the status quo, only putting a Shari’a hat (...) on it” (42).

Yet it is no less true, as Moghissi points out, that “the more unreformed and more unevenly developed and more traditional a society, the more fundamentalists can speedily put into practice the backward, religiously conformist notions which they preach. This applies particularly to those notions that punish women” (43). That is also the reason, I would add, why fundamentalism constitutes a powerful challenge to the women’s movement in developing countries, and its implications in the short- and long-term should be taken extremely seriously.

Why do women support such movements?

One of the daunting paradoxes associated with fundamentalist politics is women's susceptibility to the discourse of Islamist movements. These movements' emphasis on identity, difference, subjectivity, the reaction against the "imperial certainties of the Enlightenment", Western modernity and modernisation are among the salient issues in feminist theory and politics (44). These shared issues, however, as Nancy Hartsock has argued, have sometimes resulted in "theorising that can lead to a disabling of political action and a thoroughgoing relativism"(45). bell hooks indeed reminds us to beware of "words like **other** and **difference** (that are) taking the place of commonly known words deemed uncool or too simplistic, words like **oppression, exploitation, and domination**" (46). For these, and complex reasons related to the negative imagery of Islam in today's headlines, feminists, and especially those engaged with women's active lives in Middle Eastern and North African societies, have sometimes (perhaps understandably) been slow to jump on the bandwagon to call Islamic fundamentalism by its name. It is important to pay attention to the existential inventiveness and creative resistance with which women are responding to the iron rule of fundamentalist Islam at home, as well as to the rampant Islamophobia abroad (in the West). This should not be done, however, in any way that compromises our common feminist struggle for a shared humanity of equity, justice, and democracy. If those who practice or tolerate women's oppression are excluded from this common struggle, as indeed they should be always, then we also have to question the "agency" of those women who, for reasons whose secret they alone hold (but whose duty is ours to inform) stand on the side of the oppressors.

My concern in this section, therefore, is with the female apologists of Islamic fundamentalism, those in whose lives (political and ideological practices) we do not recognise ourselves and our common experience of struggle, but whose politics needs to be clearly exposed for its tragic consequences and serious implications for women and ethnic nationalities.

Nira Yuval-Davis gives the following definition of fundamentalism in general:

“Fundamentalist movements all over the world, with all their heterogeneity, are basically political movements which have a religious or ethnic imperative and seek in various ways in widely differing circumstances to harness modern state and media powers to the service of their gospel. This gospel, (which can be based on certain sacred texts or evangelical experiential moments linked to a charismatic leader), is presented as the only valid form of the religion, the ethnic culture, the truth” (47). The reification and essentialization of identities is, therefore, a component of fundamentalist politics. As such, fundamentalism cannot be compared to a simple “back to the roots” or cultural reaffirmation movement wherein people congregate around a common identity to empower themselves without resorting to political power, and without harming other people (48) (although the NIF in Sudan has used the slogan of “returning to the roots”). Religious fundamentalist movements also “need to be differentiated from liberation theologies which, while deeply religious and political, co-operate with, rather than subjugate, non-religious political struggles” (49). A further point that I would stress is that Islamic fundamentalism in particular is an extremist reaction to the inherent contradictions, difficulties and challenges of modernisation. Nevertheless, while the

disillusionment with capitalist modernisation is a factor, in the case of the Sudanese Islamists' "orthopraxy" (50), it should not be exaggerated. What is not contested here is the triumph of fundamentalist Islam over the more democratic interpretations and practices of Sudanese Islam's sufi traditions.

Women's concern with fundamentalism, be it Islamic, Christian, Jewish, or Hindu, derives from the latter's "attempt to circumscribe women's freedom and identity" (51). Fundamentalism seeks to establish an appropriate role for women, a role ordained by nature, providence or divine will. As Valentine Moghadam points out, this "patriarchal religious ideal emphasizes complementary gender roles based on innate differences; the family as the unity of these complementary roles and as keeper and practitioner of tradition, and the good wife upholding familial ideas. It is also centered on an implicit or explicit regulation of female sexuality" (52). But why in the first place do women find such movements appealing?

According to V.Moghadam, religious "ideals" have an effect on insecure women (traditional families, lower-middle class) who "fear the loss of boundaries" and, therefore, (they) "celebrate gender differences and extol separatism" (53). Nira Yuval-Davis has also suggested that women's voluntary faith may be understood as part of what she called "the emotional division of labour between the genders", which leads women to "collude, seek comfort and even gain at times a sense of empowerment within the spaces allocated to them by fundamentalist movements" (54). On the other hand, "being active in a religious movement allows women a legitimate place in a public sphere which

otherwise might be blocked to them, and which in certain circumstances they might be able to subvert for their purpose (as in, for example, the relationship between young girls and their parents). It can be also, at the same time, less threatening but still a challenge and a space for personal accomplishments to which unskilled working class women and frustrated middle class women might be attracted. (55).

It is no doubt in relation to the above trade-offs which women face in their daily lives that emancipatory accounts of Muslim women's traditional modesty markers such as the veil (**hejab**) have proliferated. The donning of **hejab** is described as self-empowering by many urban middle-class and working class women. "Far from being a symbol of repression, the veil, (these women argue) is liberating and empowering", (they) "stress the advantages gained by covering the body of women and thus preventing them from becoming objectified and sex symbols (...); the veil bestows honour, dignity and respect to women, eradicates pornography and blatant violence directed at women and offers them protection" (56). In terms of the spatial segregation of genders, **hejab** is also viewed as empowering. After all, argues Haleh Afshar, women in all-women environments do better, learn more and succeed. "Where there are no men, the competitive dimensions become weaker and the cooperative elements stronger" (57).

However, as our account of Sudanese women's realities has demonstrated, and as Haideh Moghissi writing of the situation in Iran argues, the above "are privileged snapshots for the much larger, often troubled, and, undoubtedly, multi-dimensional life drama of women in Islamic societies (...), where fundamentalism is not only an ideology urged in

opposition but a clearly declared and forcefully implemented policy of the state” (58). In this context, and it is by far the most problematic, “women who are persecuted, jailed and whipped for their non-compliance with **hejab** find the dress code anything but empowering” (...) “for them, the veil is “a garment which controls and confines women’s space” (59). In Sudan, moreover, the policy of veiling, which is carried out through coercion, is directed against poor non-Muslim women and ethnic nationalities.

“Restrictions on women’s dress, specifically the requirement that women wear the veil, ensure that the poorest displaced women are unable to travel freely and hence cannot conduct trade” (60). Professional women’s opportunities to work in government departments are also conditioned by this religious identity marker. In a typical civil service job interview “Southern women soliciting for jobs in the north invariably fail to get them, because they appear before the board of interviews, dominated by northerners, with inappropriate clothing (meaning not completely wrapped up as northern women)”. Moreover, “they are asked to explain the meaning of certain expressions used in conversation which are directly quoted from the Koran...” (61).

That is why younger women and girls adopt the veil not because they believe in its inherent “propriety”, but because “the restriction imposed on them by an Islamic order was a small price to be paid in exchange for the security, stability and presumed respect this order promised them” (62).

What needs to be stressed here is that in Sudan “unveiling” or the abolition of the veil was never an issue of concern for the women’s movement as Northern Sudanese women traditionally wear a sari-like garment, “**tobe**”, which covers the head and body. As a

national dress, the “tobe” is also an urban phenomenon. Until the 1980’s, it was not uncommon for village women in Northern Sudan to wear “short, sleeveless smocks (“showal”) (63). Unlike in Egypt or in Algeria, colonialism, which introduced modern education, did not interfere with women’s dress, nor did it make a crusade of “unveiling”. How women dressed was never state policy. It became so only in 1983 under Numeiry’s erratic Islamisation phase. It is also important to note that even prior to that women who “veiled” as a part of their Muslim identity were never subjected to harassment, unlike in Egypt where Islamist women report being victimised for wearing the hejab (64).

It can also be mentioned here that female seclusion is a recent phenomenon in the architectural landscape of Sudanese villages. It is a result of the combined effects of migration patterns, the incorporation of villagers into the global economy mediated by Saudi Arabia and the new fundamentalist orthodoxy (65). “Until the early 1980’s, writes Victoria Bernal, few village houses were enclosed by courtyard walls. Compounds were demarcated by low mud walls or thornbrush fences, if at all. By the late 1980’s, well-to-do villagers were building high brick or cement walls around their homes, definitively separating domestic and public space. Less fortunate villagers strove to achieve similar effects by placing burlap screens over their mud walls” (66).

In reality, the Islamists’ campaigns to enforce the veil (they are sporadically announced, then denied under international pressure, then resumed) are used as “a vehicle for weeding out the troublemakers who resist the policy from the loyal, devout or compliant who submit” (67). Basically, these campaigns provide the opportunity to harass those women who refuse, and many have done so, to show allegiance to the fundamentalist

rulers. Clearly the Islamists' attempts to enforce religious identity markers on women must be understood as part of a broader policy to counter the force of the contemporary women's rights movement (68).

No doubt also, the emphasis on veiling, seclusion and segregation has a great deal to do with what Nader Saiedi has called the Islamic fundamentalists' "obsession with superstructural issues" and "visible symbols of religiosity", while the "virtual preservation of the **status quo** with regard to matters of ownership and economic relations" continues undisturbed (69). This attempt to "dilute class consciousness (and I would add gender consciousness) and replace it with a popular religious identity" (70) fits perfectly with the fundamentalist project.

Who they are

In an encounter that Sondra Hale describes as contradictory given her discomfort with the then "Islamic Trend government (and Islamism in general)", and her "respect for the decisions and activities of the women I interviewed", Hale gives us an illuminating journey into the minds of those women who have "found satisfaction in their lives since becoming active in the Islamic movement" (71). Although the Islamists were not in power then (72), two among the women interviewed by Hale were the only female elected MP's in the National Assembly (1986-1989), and are again in those (appointed) positions today. These women's views are highly significant in that they provide a rationale for the extremely patriarchal form of traditional Muslim discourse on gender and sexuality.

Several verbatim quotations from Sondra Hale's interviews can be cited here. One of them voiced by Wissal el-Mahdi concerns the issue of women's testimony in Islamic law is: "... a **woman is weaker than a man** and all her **nervous system** is made different (from a man's) ... so she may say something that she believes ... happened, not what she saw happen. ... Women are more **sentimental**, because they are the mothers who breed children. ... That is why, in Shari'a law we guard against the sentimentality ("**aatifiyya**'), "empathy", compassion, "sympathy") of **womankind**" (author's (S.H) emphasis) (73). This thinking was echoed by one of the NIF MP's, Hikmat Sid Ahmed, who said: "We know that women are different from men ... women, by their **nature**, sometimes forget. Sometimes they sympathize with somebody. Perhaps he may be a criminal ... when one of them (woman witness) forgets, the other will remind her, and if one of them sympathized with the criminal, the other could correct her ... I don't think it is a problem for women to find themselves treated differently in the court ... because it is **natural** ... the entire principle (in Shari'a) is in accord with the way women are **created**, since women are **naturally empathetic**" (author's (S.H) emphasis. (74). Obviously, these women accepted the "naturalist" conception of women as weak in moral judgment and deficient in cognitive capacity. Although "the fact that a woman's evidence in Islamic law is worth half that of the man would appear to be paradoxical in a situation where, as often happens, a woman judge dispenses justice" (75), this does not appear to derail them. Paradoxically also, such arguments lend credibility to the notion that "a woman's nature (biological and psychological), social conditions, and her role in life precludes her

running for office” (76), even though, in theory, there is no religious obstacle to women’s participation in politics.

A female Shari’a judge, Nagwa Kamal Farid, considered that polygamy is commendable because it shields men from promiscuity and adultery, and that men’s desires cannot be satisfied with only one woman at a time. She justified polygamous marriage (men being allowed to have four wives) on the grounds that “for some men one wife is not enough. Instead of playing around with other women, he should get married. ... If the first wife does not have kids, this gives him a better excuse. But even if there is not an excuse, he has the right for another wife – just because we want him to be a good Muslim. ... Maybe the first wife was not one he wanted, (or) maybe his first wife got old, and men do not get old as quickly as women, so he thinks of having another wife. Why not? It is better than having him look around outside of marriage” (77).

Men, moreover, are understood as victims of female seductive power: “There is one condition in Islam (in allowing a woman to go out to work). It says that the first ... message for the woman ... is to raise her children and take care of her house. So, if she wants to go to work she should be well-dressed, not too much perfume so as not to attract attention. ... She has to go out respectably ... and to cover her hair, all of her face and hands should be inside, not too colorful. ... When a man stands beside her, he should remember work and nothing else” (78). “Feminist” Muslim scholars would almost certainly disagree that in the Koran women are perceived as the source of all evil. But here is, almost to the letter, the view expressed by an Islamist man, also quoted by Hale,

on the same subject: “It is not that we forbid women to work. If she must work, then perhaps it is to the husband or to other male members of her family where we should look for any criticism, We only blame her if she goes to work as a frivolous act and does not behave appropriately in the workplace. For example, she must dress according to the respect she wants. We **want** to respect her” (author’s, S.H. emphasis) (79).

Not surprisingly, the Islamist women interviewed accepted the Koranic injunction that “men are the custodians of women” (“qwamuun ‘ala nissaa’”, Surat 4:34). The **Shari’a** judge clarifies this point beyond doubt: “... People keep asking why in Shari’a women get less (inheritance) than men. But the situation is that she is not supposed to support herself; that burden falls on men, so they need more inheritance” (80).

How can you have equal citizenship status, let alone “common values”, with arguments like these? The answer is that you can not. Therein lies the explanation for the fact that the Sudanese Islamists, with women’s support unfortunately, have had to destroy in order to build their reactionary theocratic state. “The mission of Islam is defined primarily in terms of destruction of a vast multitude of evils rather than the development of positive programs of reconstruction” (81). Islamist Sudan fully illustrates this tendency.

The above quoted “gender philosophies” are not ivory tower reflections or reminiscent of bygone days, they have been put into practice by Islamist women. These reactionary views are used to promote and propagate the religious determinism and political aims of the NIF Islamist regime. During a Women’s Conference held in Khartoum in 1992,

Lubaba El Fadl, a leading NIF functionary and SG of the World Association of Muslim Women, stated that she endorsed the marriage schemes run by Islamic agencies to bring together non-Muslim Southern women and Muslim men with a view to creating a Muslim generation. She added furthermore that “she would allow her husband to marry even two from the region” (82). Clearly, the “eugenicist” discourse is not an invention of the “imperialist” Western world alone. Moreover, Wisal el-Mahdi, president of the Islamic Women’s Organisation “extolled the virtues of the speed of Shari’a in removing resistance groups, e.g., squatters: “(English common law) takes a long time. I don’t want to wait all my life to get my land from somebody who is a squatter on it!” (83).

Fundamentalist women do not live their fundamentalism quietly in a self-contained niche. In fact Sondra Hale, following Margot Badran, generously describes them as “gender activists” (84). Islamist women espouse and achieve measures that make other women’s lives harder. They exercise power (with attached privileges) for domination, and not as the enabling force emphasising energy, capacity and potential which feminists advocate. Ironically, in the patriarchal society they inhabit (apparently with satisfaction), there is no structural basis for female power as Ghada Karmi reminds us, as “whatever power they are able to achieve by manipulating the system can be taken away from them at any time” (85). With the implementation of Shar’ia, the “quamma” (superiority) of men is enhanced, and women must always have a lower status (86).

In Sudan, Islamist women are presently the voice of by far the most repressive state in our country’s independent history and are, sadly, in the service of destruction. They are participating in the xenophobic practices of the Islamists that claim the superiority of

Muslims over other citizens and religious groups. Indeed, our experience in Sudan has demonstrated that the line is very thin between fundamentalism, militarism and racism.

Sudanese Islamist women activists are therefore the least qualified to criticise and reject Western “Orientalist” misconceptions of the Muslim world when they are participating in the mechanisms of power and related violence which condone the subjugation and rape of other (“ethnic”) women in the name of an Islamic “Civilisational Project”. Choosing as they often do “an enemy from without” is, as Danielle Haase-Dubosc has pointed out, “a classic tactic for attacking the “enemy within”, that is those (...) who are working for change at home” (87) such as the homegrown secular women’s movement and today’s energetic grassroots women.

This is not, however, to deny that the anti-imperialist slogan of Islamic fundamentalism is without progressive implications, which in large part explains why so many ordinary women (and men) are attracted to its discourse. But as I shall shortly discuss and as N.Saiedi argues, “the general structure and mentality of Islamic fundamentalism turns even this potentially progressive slogan into mostly reactionary and suppressive measures” (88).

Let us now turn to a closer examination of what these women do.

What they do

Public visibility, employment and activism

From the above discussion, it will have become clear that the Sudanese Islamists are not advocating female domesticity, but have drawn women to public life. The capacities of educated, urban, middle class women are needed in all the public institutions to indoctrinate the populace in the strict moral codes of Islam. They are needed in the coercive apparatuses designed to control and police other women, such as the PDF and in the various Islamic agencies, schools and kindergartens. On the surface of things, of course, women's visibility in Islamist Sudan serves a double purpose. On the one hand, it serves the Islamists' strategy of reducing the cost of repression (89), and on the other, it serves to silence or at least attenuate the scale of local and international criticism of the regime's violation of women's rights (90).

But equally present are the very structural realities of a country characterised by "a disarticulated pattern of economic development with no role for industrialisation and where the economy is dominated by commerce and speculation" (91). Also present are the realities of a country at war with itself, and the "classic" consequences of such a situation for women, families and entire communities. Women's employment means freeing the men to go to the war front, at the same time that it opens new, yet problematic, challenges for women's sense of autonomy and equality. Moreover, in a country whose every household practically, (in many cases female headed), either lives

on migrants' remittances, or as is the case for the 4 million war-displaced families, survives on relief aid in transit zones, (of whom 2 million in squatter dwellings in the capital city alone), it should not be surprising that women are indeed everywhere, and I would add, from dawn to dusk. The informal sector, which requires no formal skills or training, has become the only means of survival for the majority of women. No longer a "hidden economy" as it used to be called, 65% of Khartoum's workforce, (where all the services are concentrated), is employed in the informal sector (92). Indeed, it is the women and men in the informal sector who are providing cheap labour to the city's middle classes in their houses, offices and markets (93).

In the beginning, the regime tried to use Islamic ideology to limit the participation of women in politics and the work place. Political purges, "streaming", imprisonment and forced exile of democratic activists took care of the first preoccupation, but the government was unable to force women to abandon work in the public domain and to earn their own living. For one thing the regime's initial position, based on Islamic teachings which discourage women's work "except under exceptional circumstances", came into contradiction with the 1989 population census figures in which women constituted 57% of the population. At the same time, the regime's own development plan aimed to mobilise "all the "idle" labour force of women, youth, and the rural people" (94). Women's labour force was furthermore increasingly needed due to the massive purges and male exile. Indeed, according to a 1990 Africa Watch report, "(I)f the systematic dismissal of women had gone ahead, the government would have found itself without enough trained staff to run its ministries" (95). A wholesale dismissal of women,

however, affected the Foreign Ministry (the accusation was that women diplomats had developed “a taste for wine”...), the judiciary, the police and the army headquarters (dismissals from the latter were attributed to leakage of information). Another drastic measure was the decision to dismiss all female workers servicing the army. The decision was reprieved at the last minute due to the “realisation that the medical corps could simply not function without the female trained personnel” (96).

By 1998, the government not only claimed it supported women’s basic rights to work and education, but also found in those hard won women’s rights an occasion to distance itself from other “zealous brothers” such as the Taleban of Afghanistan. The head of state, Omar El-Beshir expressed to a daily newspaper, (Al-Ray al-‘Aam), “his displeasure at the “distorted image which the Taleban movement has presented of Islam”. He was particularly critical of the Taleban for “preventing women from their right to work and o education, expressing her opinion and in preventing women from photography and keeping them away from television and encouraging them to cultivate drugs”... (97).

The government’s pragmatic retreat can no doubt partly be explained by the truism that “Islamic fundamentalism, in the face of hard realities has no alternative but to compromise its utopia” (98). After all, Sudan lacks the resources of Saudi Arabia or Iran. That is one of the major reasons why the Islamists have been unable to implement a policy of complete segregation in the civil service or in the institutions of higher education. The three women only universities presently existing predate the Islamist coup, although at least one, Omdurman Islamic University created in 1975, (formerly an

Institute of Islamic Theology), was a child of their inspiration. Their avowed policy to enforce sex-segregated public transport has also failed to deliver the necessary vehicles to do so. Women have been allocated only “separate seats” (1/4 of the space reserved for men in public transport). The Islamists’ interests are directed rather towards the lucrative haulage firms. In the meantime, “harassment takes place in the street, at the market-place and at transport centres and in vehicles, where the turbulence and cacophony make it easy for men to harass women sexually (and) with impunity” (99).

Nonetheless, the Muslim Brotherhood/Sisterhood movement in Sudan has developed, since the 1960’s, a pragmatic and modernist discourse on women, which does not exclude women’s participation in the workforce. “Modern Islamization, writes Sondra Hale, concerns itself with “secular” matters, such as Islamic banking, Islamic insurance companies, appeals to potential constituencies through the media, use of television for proselytizing, and recruiting women-if donned in hijab, Islamic dress-for political organizing” (100). Raised in a secular culture, the Islamists are not against women’s labour, and as an urban middle-class movement they need university-educated women. Part of the reason why the purges of women from the civil service in the early days of the coup were eventually relaxed, was the fear that they would endanger the interests of the regime’s women supporters. The majority of committed NIF female supporters are either students in higher education or well established professional who are occupying prominent position in the public domain. The fact is the Islamists “selectively control women’s access to private and public power and privilege” (101). Their objective is rather to ensure that the jobs women have do not threaten the power structures (102).

This was highlighted recently (September 2000) when the governor of the state of Khartoum (formerly minister of Social Planning) issued a decree banning women from working in restaurants, hotels, cafeterias, gas stations, at cash registers or anywhere in the service sector. The decree generated a strong reaction within women's groups who called for its immediate repeal. Employers threatened that they would have to shut down if women employees were not allowed to work. The decree, which violated Article 21 of the regime's own Constitution (1998) guaranteeing equality in work to all citizens, was quickly suspended by the Constitutional Court "until further notice". Well-informed independent women activists were already making the connections between the timing of the governor's backlash and the "sweep campaigns" carried out in the local market. For some time preceding the announcement of the decree, women who owned modest restaurants in "Sug al-Naga", one of the biggest local markets in Omdurman, were being harassed and their properties confiscated. They reported that the government was planning to sell the shops to Islamist Syrian merchants residing in Khartoum. The local market was to be sold and modern cafeterias built in its place. This was not uncommon, as many Islamists from other countries have been given residency status in Sudan since 1989 and are investing in such activities.

A few weeks after the government's **volte face**, however, the Ministry of Labour drafted a federal law restricting women from working in what it described as "dangerous occupations or those that require heavy manual effort such as lifting of heavy weights". Women were also not to be employed in "underground or underwater occupations" or in

“occupations where they can be subjected to poisonous or harmful (organic or non-organic) substances like lead, benzine (and its constituents), mercury, calcium or substances that would expose them to excessive cold or heat” (103). This new amendment in the labour laws was justified as intended to protect women from occupations where “their chastity or pride is likely to be harmed” (104). This morally impeccable sounding stipulation did not really have the safety of women in mind. The reference to the highly toxic nature of certain substances in work environments is related to the Islamists newly found “bonanza”, (oil extraction), a highly contested terrain where the government is making huge profits that it uses to finance the war. Certain companies such as Shell Oil had recently started employing women in service stations (105). The intent of the message was thus aimed to remind foreign companies that the state’s “Islamic project” as far as women are concerned was still there. By wording the decree in a manner that no “patent-minded” transnational corporation can reasonably object to without appearing insensitive to female employees, the government succeeded in diverting attention from the broader implications of the decree, a tactic known as “tagiya” to which I shall shortly return.

What is interesting to note in this latest incident is that following the governor’s decree, the General Union of Sudanese Women (GUSW), the official women’s organisation did not immediately react to the women workers’ and women’s associations’ protests. The only statement that it made was its “intention to examine the implications of the decree with the women affected by the new measures”. In the meantime, 32 independent women’s groups and NGO’s who had demonstrated against the decree (3 women were

injured, 26 arrested), submitted a petition to the Constitutional Court denouncing the new measures. The GUSW was finally moved to protest, and submitted a memorandum to the same effect. Typically, the CC then announced the suspension of the decree “in accordance with the petition received from the GUSW and others”. Nonetheless, this was the first time since the Islamists came to power that women opponents of the regime as well as its supporters came close to a common action in defence of our secular-democratic right to work.

I will come back to this point later. Two remarks can be made here. There is no doubt that the new labour amendment demonstrates yet again how competition from men generally increases in the context of crisis. “Women with lucrative jobs are no longer seen by state and individual Islamists as making a major contribution to society, but are seen as competitors” (106). More generally, “(a) lot of this scenario has to do with men’s fear of feminism, of losing control over their women and of generally having less collective power in the society where women would gain access to positions and roles which were previously the exclusive domain of men” (107). At the same time, there is a clear message behind this latest backlash on women’s right to work for Islamist women themselves who “have tried to allay the fears of non-Islamist women by presenting themselves as active and successful, not suffering any losses due to the formation of the Islamic state” (108). The message is that in spite of their tremendous work for the NIF, they ultimately have few rights and guaranteed security. The struggle of Kuwaiti women serves as a useful reminder here. Despite the role Kuwaiti women played in the resistance to Iraqi occupation, their Islamic rulers still refuse to extend the franchise to women.

Grassroots Political Activism?

During the time when their “jihadist” men were plotting to capture state power, Islamist women had not remained idle or relying, in the words of Valentine Moghadam, on “the home and family as refuge for assaulted identity” (109). They were busy setting up their own women’s organisations “based on a fundamentalist reading of women’s position, emphasizing and reinforcing women’s familial and household roles” (110). Some of these organisations can be mentioned here. The National Women’s Front (NWF), the women’s branch of the Islamic Charter Front, emerged in the open after the 1985 Popular Uprising, and is part of the numerous “satellite” organisations affiliated to the NIF, many of which were established in the late 1970’s. The earliest and most important among these organisations, registered as a charity, was “**rai’dat al-nahda**” (Vanguard of Renaissance) which sought, and succeeded, to attract many girls in secondary schools and universities. Not surprisingly, with the ban on the WU and the unpopularity of the SWU, these young female recruits “had no experience of the pre-1969 women’s movement” (111). The financial strength of the Islamic movement made the WNF extremely influential. (112).

A significant point to note here is that, “the principal strategy which NWF (together with other organisations of the Muslim Brothers) utilizes is to reach different groups of women by **fair means or foul**, even if this necessitates the **use of slogans generally raised by non-traditional organizations such as WU**” (113) (my emphasis). Thus, in

1987 “after the government came to an agreement with the IMF and carried out some harsh economic measures, NWF was the only women’s organization to head a women’s demonstration to the Prime Minister’s office, where a statement protesting the IMF agreement was handed in” (114). “Needless to say, continues Zeinab El Bakri. “the demonstration received a lot of media coverage” (115).

The NWF also “created a voluntary organization, the League of Working Women. Recommendations passed at the first meeting included: **working to fight sex discrimination in employment, calling for the extension of maternity leave to six months with full pay, urging employees to provide transport for female employees, organizing women in the informal sector of employment, etc.**” (116) (my emphasis).

Another early NIF affiliate, the Muslim Women of Southern Sudan was eventually registered as an association (MWSSA) in 1992. Based in Khartoum, the MWSSA has branches in Southern Sudan. A major objective of the association is the adoption of **hijab** by Southern Sudanese women living in the displaced camps around Khartoum. At one time, the association used a donation of 5 million (Sudanese pounds) from government ministers to distribute subsidised Islamic dresses among Southern Sudanese women, allegedly “without discrimination between Christians and Moslems” (117).

Now in power, the Islamist junta has given its female constituencies considerable leverage, while it maintains a plethora of constraints and control on the ensemble of the grassroots and democratic-secular women’s forces. As part of this agenda, Islamist women’s organisations provide services to urban migrants and rural communities in

exchange for modest fees, conversion to orthodox conformity and political support.

Female supporters of the NIF are targeting women as beneficiaries of commodity goods (tea, sugar, oil, soap), and are concerned with easing life for vulnerable people. It can be argued, of course that they are relying on indigenous roots in this activity, as historically, as we have seen, Sudanese women have always played an active role in community and social solidarity networks (more than in formal politics). Rotating credit associations (“sandug”) and neighbourhood cooperatives are typically women’s domains up until today. The country’s modern grassroots and humanitarian organisations originated in these practices and became Community Based Organisations (CBO’s) or NGO’s (118). However, these talents and local skills primarily emerged from a tradition of pluralism in civil society and within an ethics of democratic accountability.

It is in this context that the tradition of Islamic philanthropy deserves our attention, because it is the sector where Islamist women are relatively active and visible.

Traditionally in Sudan the duty to care for the disabled and the poor is rooted in indigenous practices and religious teaching. The Islamic principle of zakat (Islamic tithe) donation is moreover one of the five pillars of Islam: “it is envisaged as a religious and civic duty rather than a discretionary gift” (119). The Islamists reinforced these traditions of Islamic charitable action, as a result of which Islamic relief agencies today “have succeeded in channeling the energies of many committed people and reaching the poor” (120). According to Islamic laws, the distribution of zakat funds is not a discriminatory institution: whoever is poor and needy, irrespective of religion or race, qualifies to receive zakat funds. However, “the interpretation of the Islamist state in Sudan regards

only Muslims as entitled to these funds. Christian women are asked to convert to Islam in order to qualify for assistance” (121).

Islamic humanitarianism is today a component of the Islamists’ strategy of state and society. It operates within the framework of “al-da’wa al shamila” or the “Comprehensive Call to God”, that is, that Islam should be a guiding element in all aspects of every citizen’s life” (122). The concepts of Comprehensive “da’wa” and Islamic “inqilab” (revolution or total social transformation) were developed and propagated in the Ministry of Social Planning in accordance with the NIF’s interpretation of Shari’a”, and Islamic social planning. (123).

Another important principle in this all-encompassing strategy of Islamic social planning as interpreted by the NIF is “tamkin” which “means empowering Moslems who form a weak minority and enabling them to take a dominant position in their society” (124). Although the notion of self-empowerment here evidently, “serves to mask the cynical pursuit of power” (namely the proselytisation of those areas that are on the frontiers between Islam, Christianity and African religions) (125), the appeal which many ordinary women find in this language cannot be underestimated. This “enabling” project is, moreover, implemented through a decentralised network of operational autonomy, reminiscent of the Islamists’ earlier “underground” organisations, (or “patriotic unions”), that is highly effective “so long as all its parts act in accordance with (this) basic set of principles” (126). In this way, the Islamists expanded their social support base, among women, youth and urban migrants. Islamist women’s groups were given the status of

charitable organisations, often by financing from citizen's zakat contributions. The system thus gives legitimacy to female religious officials, among whom many NIF activists and organisers, provided they act in accordance with the basic Islamic principles. Clearly, in such a context, the distinction between "governmental" and "non-governmental" organisations is blurred since "all are together in the collective enterprise of establishing a truly Islamic community and state" (127). The problem, however, is that these so-called Islamic charities "are often linked to government, the army, commerce and religious proselytisation" (128).

The concept of micro-credit as a potentially successful development model for the rural poor and women also requires to be seen in the light of the Islamic social planning vision outlined above. Small-scale loans proved a success when they started with the Islamic banking movement in the 1970's. They were designed to encourage small farmers and artisans. Development-oriented international NGO's were as we know, keen advocates of this "grassroots" development or appropriate technology model as a solution to poor peoples', and particularly women's demand for credit. Having entrenched the relief agencies since the 1970's, the Islamists learned the managerial expertise of their international NGO counterparts, and then proceeded to reduce the latter's operations by invoking Islamic principles (129).

In this way and "(i)n line with the economic self-sufficiency and anti-Western-imports vision of the National Islamic front, women were also urged to re-learn crafts and domestic skills so that the family can become an important productive unit again,

minimizing dependence on imports” (130). However, the investment patterns of the Sudanese Islamists “have always carried their political agenda with them: they are selective in deciding who they will support. NIF supporters are prime recipients of the banks’ services, and they can also recommend and guarantee new applicants through a process known as “el tazkya” (a reliable reference). Bank loans are also offered to new converts” (131). The reality so far, is that these investment patterns have not led, for example, to the creation of “women’s banks” (similar to the Grameen Bank (model) in Bangladesh).

The whole concept of community development around which women’s activist groups formerly organised to enable women to achieve self-reliance has thus not only been completely altered but also significantly retarded and debased. For instance, the neighbourhood cooperative movement previously counted on tax and custom exemptions and discount on purchases from the state sector. Today most of these advantages have been suppressed as the state has taken over authority for dispensing Islamic charity (132) in the manner of a “privatised state”. Cooperatives in particular suffer from a lack of financial assistance especially from banks (133). To quote a recent CIDA-Alternative assessment mission of the Greater Khartoum agglomeration, “the state sub-contracts the social sector only to “friendly” Islamic NGO’s” (134).

The fundamentalist-military mix

A new and related development in Islamist Sudan is the integration of women in the wider state policy of militarisation (and) as supporters of national security, meaning the government's war effort. Islamist women's support to the war effort originally came from two key institutions: the General Union of Sudanese Women and the Working Women's League (135). Both of these institutions regard war as giving new roles to women, perceived as mythic heroines – courageous Muslim women warriors of the early Islamic period – and as post-modernist Florence Nightingales caring for and nurturing the "mujahidin" (holy warriors) and their families. One of these organisations, "salaam al-izzah" (Peace with Pride), headed by a female engineer, and supported by state funds, concerns itself with providing food for the "mujahidin". "In common with other NIF-associated women's organisations, PWP is intended to provide Islamist women with a role in the "jihad" comparable to that of the male fighters in the front line" (136). The **leitmotiv** of the PWP is the Prophet Muhammed's "hadith"(saying): "those who cater for the needs of a conqueror are conquerors themselves" (137).

But here, it is important to keep in mind that the "Comprehensive Call" and military mobilisation against the "enemies of Shari'a" are inextricably linked. Yet the real issues underlying the conflict are those which the Southern Sudanese populations (where the conflict originated in 1955) share with a sizeable majority of now almost every region of East-West and North-Central Sudan. They concern the transformation of power relations within society: questions of identity, state and religion, power-sharing, uneven

development and economic imbalance. Fundamental issues such as these require durable democratic institutions with a grassroots mandate if they are to be seriously attended to, not further military might, and least of all, not jihad.

The war areas of Sudan have been described as “ethics-free” zones where any abuses are permitted (138). Islamist women who have cast their lot with the regime are actually party to a war of genocidal proportions and incalculable destruction of human lives and property. Islamic women NGO’s in the war zones of Southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains are reliably reported to withhold food, clothing and other services from the needy unless they convert to Islam. They maintain a vigilant presence in the “peace camps” of the Nuba Mountains, a euphemism for human rights abuses reminiscent of a darker age. Unlike the women of Belgrade, they cannot say “we know nothing; it was they (the men) who fought the war” (Win Magazine). They may perhaps find solace in the words of the woman director of the Popular Defence Forces: “(B)eing involved in the PDF made responsible people in the country realise that women are capable of carrying arms, just like men” (139). But as Hala Maksoud in her poignant reflection on the Lebanese civil war argues, “(w)omen who participate in wars show that they can be as aggressive as men –perhaps securing male respect but also raising the question whether it ought to be the concern of women to become “like men””. (140). Clearly, under the conditions of Sudan’s internal conflict described above, our commitment should be to find a just solution to the war.

Which Way Political Solidarity?

The realities of Sudanese women's lives under Islamist rule tragically demonstrate how far we have regressed from the indigenously-rooted framework for women's liberation. From the forward-looking visions of the 1985 Nairobi Conference to the 1995 Beijing Conference, the road traveled has been anything but easy. In the words of Nira Yuval-Davis, "(I)t seems that the category "woman" which used to signify emancipation and progress, first by modernising national liberation movements and then specifically by feminists, is now being (re)claimed by fundamentalists and other anti-modernist agencies whose version of the "equality versus difference" debate is very far from even the most essentialist versions of feminist positions" (141). "What we are witnessing, continues Haideh Moghissi in an expressive analogy, is not the "mult-lingualism" of feminism but the transformation and absorption of its secular "language" into a religious one, which, through discriminatory practices, is sanitized and renamed as empowerment" (142). That women claimed as born again "Islamic feminists" or "gender activists" are assisting "dictators who claim to speak for, act for and decide for the whole society" (143), means, in no ambiguous terms, that we have a conflict of interest, indeed of values and goals, not simply with fundamentalist men (the original patriarchs), but also with fundamentalist women (their militant apologists). As the day to day resistance of multiple communities of Sudanese women, many of who may not label themselves as "feminists" continues, it is important that we keep the future in critical focus.

The resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism has created a defensive oppositional discourse whose objective is to implement a more “ethical”, “democratic” post –fundamentalist Islam. Some Third World feminists have suggested that since Islam has lately radicalised women, we should try to build a common ground around the Islamic framework from a feminist perspective. For example, some are attempting a feminist exegesis of the Koran. Still others, often working within a post-modern perspective, find inspiration in the fact that Egyptian “Islamist feminists, Muslims feminists and secular feminists” can on occasion put aside their differences and act together, for example, in “appealing to the ruling party to lobby for the lifting of sanctions against Iraq” (145). My sentiment, however, is that tactical cooperation around single issues, such as the one proposed here, have to begin from what I will call “the premise of all being equal”. For example, let us consider the humane and necessary campaign for lifting the sanctions against the Iraqi people. Presently, in the context in which this campaign is proposed in the Middle East and North Africa, such actions often lead to reducing opposition only to the level of the Islamist’s rejection of the Western world’s project, and in the end play into the hands of those who are determined to make us believe that even in our diversity, Islam is the answer. We need to oppose **both** the imperialist interventions and unjust economic sanctions against our societies, as well as the Islamists’ anti-democratic and anti-feminist alternative.

The propagation of Islam’s present-day “feminist” promise tends to obliterate the fact that the women’s movement’s long history of struggle and solidarity did not begin today. I should recall here that in 1951, a Sudanese teacher, Nafissa Ahmed ElMileik, who later

became a founding member and president of the WU (1953-1955) published an article in a Sudanese newspaper (El-Saraha) entitled: "Shouldn't we awake now?" In it she denounced Britain's nationalisation of Iran's oil and the imperialist designs against the popular government of Mossadegh (146). At that time, the Muslim Brotherhood's women in Sudan were being told that women's participation in "politics" was against Islam. Islamic women were not with other women fighting colonialism in its darkest hours, so claims that they are fighting the "imperialist" super powers today have to be taken with the greatest caution given their movement's historic and continuing tendency to manipulate the legitimate aspirations of the masses (147).

Since Islam itself has not changed since then, clearly other developments, such as those discussed in this chapter, have occurred to initiate the reversal of that policy, and Islamist women's present activism. While we can rejoice over the fact that Islamist women may (appear to) have finally "seen the light" and joined other women's forces to denounce injustices, this by no means implies that we should succumb to the "unproven" view of Islamism as **the** promising ideological alternative for women. In the situation of Sudan that we are now living, "there is little reason to believe that the Brethren's fundamentalist ideas have somehow proved more politically relevant or more spiritually potent than those of the more traditional (Liberal Islamic) movements" (148). More specifically, "(s)ocial ills have not disappeared because the sharia is being implemented and the utopian Islamist conviction that the introduction of the sharia would shower the Sudanese with Divine favor and turn the country into a model paradise has not been borne out" (149).

This leads me to my conclusion on the problematics of feminist solidarity within an Islamic framework.

Religion and State

The realities of Sudanese women's lives and, indeed, the whole nation, discussed in this chapter can be broadly described in the words of N.Saeidi as "a tragic expression of the anti-democratic consequences of the unity of polity and Islam" (150). Religion itself, as many learned sages of civilisations have echoed before us, is corrupted by its association with government. Women also know that religion and spiritual beliefs can be, and often are, the driving force behind moral and social renewal. Indeed, a deeper understanding of one's faith ushers in insights into the faith of others. Women who indulge in the Islamic path, or who find meaning in their everyday lives through the pursuit of its teachings and practices, know that there is more to Islam than Shari'a and its corporal punishments.

But "in theory, Islam is an inherently political religion" (151), or "din wa dawla", so women who observe it are also engaged in the everyday world as personally and politically problematic. There is, however, a problem as Ramla Khalidi and Judith Tucker remind us: "(a)s a basic document, the Quran, (the uncontested bedrock of Islam), contains material that can be used to support the arguments both of those who wish to argue for the equality of women under Islam as well as the arguments of those who wish to restrict women's rights" (152). That is no doubt why, as Judith Miller has noted, "in the house of Islamic militancy, there are many mansions, and undoubtedly many potential

conflicts” (153). Presently in Sudan, there is a split and feuding among the same Islamist military-ideologues who, twelve years ago, interrupted democracy in order to “salvage” the country. Part of this split was manifest in the recent government decree restricting women’s labour mentioned above. NIF “hardliners” sensing a challenge from NIF “moderates” who are pursuing a “charm offensive” aimed at winning over the international community, resorted to the familiar technique of scapegoating women to make the point that regardless of international pressures (and, of course, regardless of women themselves), they are still the masters of their Islamic Civilisational Project.

Islamist movements then, tend to subscribe to a restrictive view of women’s rights and activities (154). They also, as we have discussed, place unacceptable limitations on the status of non-Muslims who are reduced to second class citizens (155). Both of these injunctions which constitute a negation of citizenship are sanctioned by Islamic Sharia. Hence, “(t)he sharia cannot be at the heart of national consensus because of the discriminatory measures it establishes and because it is subject to conflicting interpretations by forces and individuals who claim to be equally committed to Islam” (156).

Religion must, therefore, be separated from the state in order that women and men can live their faith as a choice and not as an imposed destiny. A positive step in this direction has been taken by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 1995: no political party based on religion will be allowed to compete in the coming (post-NIF) democratic Sudanese system of rule. In relation to women, however, the NDA advocates a **status**

quo ante position which reads: “(T)he NDA undertakes to preserve and promote the dignity of the Sudanese woman, and affirms her role in the Sudanese national movement and her rights and duties as enshrined in international instruments and covenants **without prejudice to the tenets of prevailing religious and noble spiritual beliefs**” (157) (my emphasis).

The initiated among us will realise why the above wording has not given us sufficient reason to celebrate, let alone disband.. A major contradiction in the democratic project proposed for the “New Sudan” still leaves us dependent on religious traditions and customs.

A diverse array of political groupings in Northern Sudan is vying for the “true” commitment to the Islamic banner. In one form or another, these movements – Ba’thists, Nasserists (or pan-Arab Nationalists), Republicans - are part of the political spectrum which endorses an Islamic, albeit “liberal” or “progressive” agenda in the domain of women’s “rights and duties”. At the same time, there is a general concern among Sudanese feminists and democrats that the traditional sectarian parties (Umma, DUP), whose masses were not immune to co-optation by the NIF, may well be nurturing the hope of retrieving their local roots among women and the rural populations by means of a reformist Islamic agenda rather than by means of expanding the democratic agenda. All the above political formations are represented in the present oppositional alliance (NDA).

In the meantime, the stories reaching us from Egyptian and Jordanian women tell us that the Islamists have a way of re-emerging in the most unexpected coalitions. Presently,

they are allied to the Labour Party in Egypt and to the Wafd, and have apparently even infiltrated the government party (158). In Pakistan we are told, their “political setting” lies in the privately owned mosques that are becoming “avenues for anti-establishment expressions of Islam, as well as staging grounds for the mobilization of political protest” (159). Those of us who attended the UN Women’s Conference in Beijing will recall the numerous Islamist workshops that were held during the Conference, and the presence of the PDF militia women among the Sudanese government’s official delegation. This leads me to my conclusion on the problematics of feminist solidarity within an Islamic framework.

Demystifying Some Core Principles

No critical analysis of the Islamist “feminist” project would be complete without dissecting some core elements in its discourse. I will briefly discuss a few concepts here based on their relevance to feminist coalition building and political solidarity (160).

the “double language” syndrome

The concept of “**taqiyya**”, originated in the **Shi’a** community in Iran It “is a religiously sanctioned form of pretence in which, in the name of a “higher” or more authentic vision, one says something at the level of “discourse” while doing (or being) something else in practice” (161). It has to do with the manipulation of language and texts, gives legitimacy to the use of “double language” and obfuscation, and can take precedence over stated

religious scruples such as “to legitimize an illegitimate action” (162). “In essence, as Peter Kok argues, “**taqiyya**” is an Islamic or Shiite rendition of “the end justifies the means” (163). For example, in the first months after it seized power, the regime took great pains to couch the justification for the coup in anti-corruption and development rhetoric in an attempt to hide its Islamist colours.

The practice of “**taqiyya**” “has to taken seriously by feminists”, as Moghissi has argued, because the Islamists have used it to invade the agenda of secular intellectuals and to infuse their reactionary praxis with “modernist” rhetoric (164). For instance, Sudanese fundamentalist women (and their men folk) do on occasion concede to inter-religious or inter-faith dialogue for very pragmatic reasons of international concern and self-image. At the community level, they are both charity givers to the poor and with-holders of charity if conversion (to Islam) is not guaranteed. They are on the one hand pro-peace, and on the other working towards a military victory over the “infidels”, that is, the Southern Christian Sudanese, the believers in traditional African religions and the Northern Sudanese secular Muslims. In the context of recent oil production and revenues, “their” government called the event “a sacred gift to the faithful” (165). Meanwhile the head of parliament announced to a public rally that the state will use its earnings on oil exports to build “factories to produce tanks and missiles (and) to defend ourselves against conspirators” (166). Even their partner in oil investment, the Canadian firm Talisman, has not been spared from these techniques of obfuscation. A medical dispensary built by Talisman as a humanitarian contribution to the local populations was attributed by the

regime to a previous oil investor from Pakistan and “claimed... as a Muslim good deed” (167).

It is this “double message” of “proclaiming to adhere to some values in one setting and behaving according to other values in another setting” that in the words of Brigit Brock-Utne is so “contrary to feminist ideology” (168). The “double message” syndrome in any context, whether transpiring from political leaders or “aspiring feminists” needs to be categorically and unequivocally denounced wherever it occurs. Relying on our experience in Sudan as well as on the experience of other women living under fundamentalist rule, we know that this is not a “difference” that can be accommodated in the feminist network (unless of course one wants to rekindle the somewhat *dépassé* debate over “false consciousness”). Rather, it is an irreconcilable “divergence” between words and deeds that places tactics before ethics, and brings in its trail unfathomable suffering and human calamities for our women and children.

the notion of “difference”

Islamist women generally use the notion of “difference” to accentuate the dissimilarities between “Muslim” and “Western” ways and views. This serves on the one hand to obscure and deny the nearer to home shifting boundaries of identities and the power differences as well as political and ideological conflicts of interest which separate women. On the other hand, this essentialised notion of difference stands in the way of recognising the relevance of other women’s experiences to our own. At the same time,

however, a “new trend” Islamist discourse on women’s oppression appears to be in the making. In Sudan, NIF activists are using the differentiation of “Arab” versus “Muslim” as new analytic categories in which to define their resistance to patriarchal customs. As Sondra Hale explains, “(A) strategy had to be worked out whereby Islam could be the method of rescuing women from oppression. To do that, it would be more effective to demonize some aspect of the population: not necessarily **men**, but a **category** of men” (169). Islamist women can then be seen as “liberating” women from patriarchal Arab rather than Muslim institutions by appealing to Sudanese “native” values (170). As Hale correctly notes “(T)his movement away from Arab patriarchy toward a purer Islam that would liberate women was the core of the NIF’s ideology and one of the bases of its success among women” (171). Hale further elaborates that such a position, “is an astute strategy for northern Sudanese whose Arab pedigrees/genealogies were often said by outsiders to be putative. In the 1960’s one could even hear other Arabs challenge the legitimacy of Sudanese Islam. Some of this was racism toward the darker-skinned Sudanese, but there was a feeling that the Sudanese were “further away” from orthodox Sunni Islam and were merely “syncretistic Africans”. Sudanese Sufism and sectarianism often fueled these challenges. Now there is far less room to repudiate them as “authentic” Muslims: Sudan is an Islamic state; the legal system is based on sharia (...). Northern Sudanese are engaging in a second cultural invention – first as Arabs and now as avant-garde figures in a world Islamic revolution” (172).

Placing “difference” in this framework, however, serves as Haideh Moghissi points out “to soften the harsh edges of fundamentalism (and helps) to validate the image that

fundamentalists transmit of women as emblematic of cultural revival, integrity and authenticity in Islamic societies” (173). But I also want to argue that even this “trendy” identification on the part of Sudanese Islamist women with the need to liberate ourselves from Arab as opposed to Muslim patriarchy needs to be taken with the greatest caution. The issue here again may well be one of tactics rather than “reformed” feminist insight. The following lines by a male colleague, and a strong supporter of our women’s rights, Atta El-Battahani, will help clarify my point. El-Battahani writes: “Depending on the balance of forces, Islamists (could) fuel the aspirations and mobilize the Northern bourgeoisie to expand in the interior regions of Sudan, (...), or else play on the fears of (the) Arab-Muslim from the danger posed by a “Black peril”. The dynamics of economic transformation and pursuance of the interests of Islamist social strata have rendered expansionism southward, and thereby mobilization of a northern constituency on religious grounds, almost an imperative” (174). This would corroborate my inclination to think that Islamist women’s newly found “cause célèbre” may not be women’s liberation after all, but a new form of Islamist expansionism, in which they will continue to have an important function.

post-modern Islamists?

In her remarkable book “Feminsm and Islamic Fundamentalism, and the Limits of postmodern analysis”, Haideh Moghissi critiques what she has referred to as “the marriage of pre-modern and post-modern outlooks” (175). Although the convergence of post-modernism with fundamentalism would appear hard-fetched, the two share as

Moghissi argues some common ground. “(A)n unwitting hostility to the social, cultural and political processes of change and knowledge and rationality originating in the West, known as modernity” (176). Similar to the Islamists who have made it their rallying cry, intellectuals committed to an anti-representational scholarship are fascinated by anti-universalism (177). Moghissi maintains that “(a)s a response to the West’s “crisis of identity”, postmodernism presents itself as a seductive alternative, a “local” escape” (178). As such, “postmodernism remains a privilege for those who have enjoyed the benefits of modernity” (179). In the societies where the Islamists are preaching their gospel and indeed, in Third World countries generally, social justice, political democracy, secularism, state accountability and the rule of law are rarely, if at all, institutionalised practice. Indeed, it is in the midst of the multiple crises of “modernisation”, not of “modernity” that fundamentalists in Sudan, as elsewhere in the region emerged.

The curious affinity between post-modernism and fundamentalism - the rejection of universalism, the celebration of culturally specific morals and manners of society - has implications for feminist political solidarity. In an article in which she discusses some postmodernist theories as resources for thinking about theoretical bases for coalition, N.Harstock delineated some of the concerns that feminism shares with postmodernist theories. They are, “(the) emphasis on difference and heterogeneity, (the) stress on the multiple possibilities of understanding the world and the importance of multiple points of view” (180). However, Harstock stresses that feminism goes beyond the terrain defined by the Enlightenment as well as the theoretical reaction to it by addressing the urgent issues

of social change and justice (181). In contrast, postmodernist approaches, attempt, at best, “to come to terms with the voices of others” (182), and risk what Nira Yuval-Davis called “uncritical solidarity” (183). Judging by my own experience, this sensitivity to difference and to the voice of others seems to have reached hegemonic position in academic institutions. During student discussions in a course on Women and Development that I taught last year in Halifax, I was struck by the number of female students who would argue “why not?” or “who are we (Western or “First World” students) to judge?” in response to practices such as child marriage and honour killings. No doubt this can be seen as a reaction to the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes and the absence of positive images of Muslim women in the media. But the reverse attitude of nuancing these images can also lead to taking narrow “cultural relativist” positions which tend to ignore contradictions. It becomes as though, in the words of Haideh Moghissi, the suffering and pain linked to such practices as honour killing, child marriage, and stoning for adultery, “have to be culturally defined before any global response can legitimately be offered” (184). It is in the name of cultural relativism that Sudan’s Islamists are attacking the human universals (human rights, women’s rights) which transcend cultural boundaries as being of Western origin.

The political risks entailed by postmodernism’s anti-universalist stand as Haideh Moghissi has argued, means considering concepts such as self-determination, individual rights and liberties, national identity and cultural authenticity are not appropriate for all countries and peoples (185). In Sudan, “Islamists have defended the implementation of

sharia as a matter of religious or cultural self-determination (...), a self-determination that is violating the self-determination of others such as women and non-Muslims (186).

“For Islamism sees history in terms of salvation, as an opposition between the sacred and the anti-sacred, as a ceaseless battle between God and Satan. This imagery has to be taken extremely seriously for it is at the ideological root of very serious acts such as the genocidal war waged by Sudan’s Islamists, the hideous crimes perpetrated by Algeria’s Islamists, or the banishing of women from public space decreed by Afghanistan’s Islamists” (187).

We saw in this chapter how the Sudanese Islamists and their female apologists are celebrating their own version of the end of history.

Notes

1. They were “free” but not entirely “fair” elections: 30 constituencies in the three Southern provinces did not participate because of the continuation of the civil war. The results were not a measure of the NIF’s popularity as much as a result of the manoeuvring of the electoral laws and procedures to make it difficult for progressive forces to enter Parliament.
2. Peter Kok, “Sudan: Between Radical Restructuring and Deconstruction of State Systems”, in Review of African Political Economy, No.70, 1996, p.557.
3. “A national consensus on the fundamentals of governance such as the nature of the state, the functions of government, the role of culture in nation-building, the criteria of resource and power sharing, and the centrality of human rights” see Peter Kok, *op.cit.*, p.556.
4. Consider this anecdotal but real rendition of the Islamists’ mockery of parliamentary democracy and why it does not serve their purpose: “In general, where Islamists have been exposed to parliamentary disciplines, the poverty of their politics and lack of coherent economic policies has had the effect of turning informed opinion against them, not least because of the triviality of some of their demands. A Muslim Brotherhood deputy in the Egyptian People’s Assembly who demanded that Egypt declare war on Spain, in order to recover Al-Andalus, lost to Islam in the fifteenth century, is one case in point. Another who demanded that the country suspend its payments to the IMF on the ground that Islam forbids the payment of interest was given a brief lesson in political realities by his colleagues. In Jordan a deputy who

demanded that fathers be banned from attending their daughters' sports days at school lest they be tempted by the sight of forbidden female flesh was laughed out of court. As the experience of Iran shows, very few Islamic policies will survive the cut and thrust of open discussion". Malise Ruthven, "The Islamist Movement in the Middle East and North Africa", in The Middle East and North Africa, 1996, p.14.

5. Fatima Mernissi, "Muslim Women and Fundamentalism", in S.Sabbagh (ed.), Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint, Olive Branch Press, New York, 1996, p.165.
6. Omar El-Bashir addressing the Women's Conference in Khartoum, January 1990.
7. The Penal Code is based on Shari'a. It was introduced in March 1991.
8. This "policy" was reported by defectors from government militias who said that they were given orders by their superiors to rape and impregnate Southern non-Muslim women in order to create Arab fighters for the " Jihad ". Moreover incentives ranging from grants of land to sums of money were offered to those who could prove that they have impregnated four women within a year's time. See the report by Leah Leatherbee and Dale Bricker, Consensus and Dissent: Prospects for Human Rights and Democracy in the Horn of Africa, The Fund for Peace, New York, January 1994 (Section on Sudan).
9. See Sudan: "In The Name of God", Human Rights Watch/Africa, Vol.6, No.9, November 1994, p.20.
10. See A.Agaw Jok, Nur Tawir Kafi and Eltigani Seissi, "Human Rights Abuses in Sudan", in Review of African Political Economy, No.58, November 1993, p.112.

11. Peter Verney et al., Sudan: Conflict and Minorities, Minority Rights Group, No.3, 1995, p.22.
12. See the African Rights report: Food and Power in Sudan: A Critique of Humanitarianism, May 1997, p.165.
13. Peter Verney et al., op.cit., p.21.
14. Dan Connell, "Political Islam Under Attack in Sudan", in Middle East Report, Winter 1996, p.34.
15. See: Sudan Country report on Human Rights Practices for 1996, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, January 30, 1997.
16. Haideh Moghissi, Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis, Zed Books, London/New York, 1999, p.27-28.
17. See among others, Sudan, The Tears of Orphans: No Future Without Human Rights, Amnesty International, January 1995, p.31.
18. William Langewiesche, "Turabi's Law", in The Atlantic Monthly, August 1994, p.29.
19. Suad Ibrahim Issa, "The Public Order Law and the Discrimination Against Women", paper presented at the Workshop on Women and Labour Laws held by Women's Initiative Group, Al-Sharqa Hall, Khartoum, 11-18 April 2000, p.14-15.
20. "Al-Majala", August 1992....(note incomplete).
21. Mohamed M.A.Salih, "Concluding Remarks-Reflections on the Bergen Conference", in A.M.Ahmed and G.Sorbo (eds.), Management of the Crisis in Sudan. Proceedings of the Bergen Forum 23-24 February, 1989, Centre for Development Studies, University of Bergen, p.124.

22. Sondra Hale, "The Rise of Islam and Women of the National Islamic Front in Sudan", in Review of African Political Economy, No.54, 1992, p.40 (Epilogue).
23. Ibid., p.40.
24. Nafissa Ahmed El Amin, "The Women's Movement in Sudan: Memorable Moments and Stands", paper presented at Al-Manar Consultancy Group, Fourth Training Course on Women and Law, Khartoum, 1-11 September, 1997, p.10-11.
25. Riad Ibrahim, "Factors Contributing to the Political Ascendancy of the Muslim Brethren in Sudan", in Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol.12, Nos.3 & 4, Summer/Fall 1990, p.35.
26. Ibid., p.40.
27. Sondra Hale, op.cit., p.34-35.
28. Ibid., p.35.
29. African Rights "Food and Power...", op.cit., p.196.
30. Leah Leatherbee and Dale Bricker, op.cit.
31. Atta El-Battahani, "Economic Transformation and Political Islam in Sudan: 1975-1989, Working Paper 5/96, Institute of Development Studies, University of Helsinki, 1996. p.24-25.
32. Ibid., p.18, note 43.
33. Bona Malwal, "The Unreported War", in War Wounds: Development Costs of Conflict in Southern Sudan, The Panos Institute, London/Paris/Washington, 1988, p.106. See also. Roland Marchal "Le Soudan entre islamisme et dictature militaire", in Maghreb Machrek, No.137, juillet-septembre, 1992, p.66.
34. Atta El-Battahani, op.cit., p.17.

35. Ibid., p.26.
36. Ibid., p.15.
37. African Rights, “Food and Power...”, op.cit., p.135. Moreover, the authors’ report:
“One rationale for this was the need to normalise relations with the IMF and the Paris Club, so as to break the intimate dependence on them that had bedevilled previous regimes” (p.206). Ironically, (although perhaps not surprisingly) these measures, and the regime’s liberalising of foreign exchange dealings “gained some sympathy in the IMF and among other western financiers” (p.206).
38. See Roland Marchal, op.cit., p.77 and note 65. See also Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, Richard A.Lobban, Jr. and John Obert Voll, Historical Dictionary of The Sudan, Second Edition, African Historical Dictionaries, No.53, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, N.J., & London, 1992 (Chronology 1991, p.Ixvii).
39. Atta El-Battahani, op.cit., p.16.
40. Ibid., p.17.
41. Riad Ibrahim, op.cit., p.49.
42. Haideh Moghissi, op.cit., p.1.
43. Ibid., p.10-11.
44. Nancy C.M.Hartsock, “Theoretical Bases for Coalition Building: An Assessment of Postmodernism”, in Heidi Gottfried (ed.), Feminism and Social Change: Bridging Theory and Practice, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1996, p.257.
45. Ibid., p.265.
46. bell hooks, Yearning: Race, gender, and Cultural Politics, South End Press, Boston, 1990, quoted in Nancy C.M.Hartsock, op.cit., p.266.

47. Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation*, Sage Publications, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi, 1997, p.61-62.
48. Valentine M.Moghadam, "Introduction: Women and Identity Politics in Theoretical and Comparative Perspective", in Valentine M.Moghadam (ed.), *Identity Politics & Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective*, Westview Press, Boulder/San Francisco/Oxford, 1994, p.17.
49. Nira Yuval-Davis, *op.cit.*, p.62. Further elaborating on this point Nader Saiedi explains: "... Islamic fundamentalism cannot be likened to the Protestant Reformation against the papal authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The Reformation emphasized the reason of individuals and undermined the authority of the priesthood. Such a tension is also present in lesser degrees in Islamic liberalism". Nader Saiedi "What is Islamic Fundamentalism?" in J.K.Hadden and A.Shupe (eds.), *Prophetic Religions and Politics, (Vol.1, Religion and Political Order)*, Paragon House Publishers, New York, 1986, p.186.
50. Malise Ruthven's, *op.cit.* p. 11.
51. Valentine M.Moghadam, *op.cit.*, p.18.
52. *Ibid.*, p.19
53. *Ibid.*, p.20
54. Nira Yuval-Davis, *op.cit.*, p.63.
55. Ibid., p.63.
56. Haleh Afshar, "Development Studies and Women in the Middle East: The Dilemmas of Research and Development", in Haleh Afshar (ed.), *Women in the Middle East:*

Perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation, Macmillan Press, London, 1993, p.12.

57. Ibid., p.12.

58. Haideh Moghissi, op.cit., p.42.

59. Ibid., p.5.

60. African Rights, "Food and Power...", op.cit, p.164.

61. Mary Awate Timon and Dorothy Maika Wosa, "Southern Sudanese Women and Children Experiences of Oppression", in Magda M.Elsanousi (ed.), *The Tragedy of Reality: The Southern Sudanese Women Appeal for Peace*, Sudanese Women's Network Group for Research and Documentation, SOLO, Khartoum, May 1999, p.45-46.

62. F. Azari, "Islam's appeal to Women in Iran: Illusion and Reality", in F.Azari (ed.), *Women of Iran: The Conflict with Fundamentalist Islam*, Ithaca Press, London, quoted in Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining With Patriarchy", in Nalini Visvanathan et al., (eds.), *The Women, gender and Development Reader*, Zed Books, London, 1997, p.91.

63. Victoria Bernal, "Migration, Modernity and Islam in Rural Sudan", in Middle East Report, Summer 1999, p.27.

64. See, for example, the narrative of "Abeyya" an Islamist journalist, in Azza Karam, "Feminisms and Islamisms in Egypt: Between globalisation and postmodernism", in Marianne H.Marchand and Anne Sisson Runyan (eds.), *Gender and Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites and Resistances*, Routledge, London/New York, 2000, p.201-202.

65. Victoria Bernal, op.cit., p.26.
66. Ibid., p.27.
67. Leah Leatherbee and Dale Bricker, op.cit.
68. Haideh Moghissi, op.cit., p.132-133.
69. Nader Saiedi, op.cit., p186.
70. Ibid., p.186.
71. Sondra Hale, *Gender Politics in Sudan: Islamism, Socialism, and the State*, Westview Press, Boulder/Colorado, 1997, p.18.
72. Between 1986-1988, the NIF was the opposition in Parliament.
73. Sondra Hale, op.cit., (1997), p.215-216.
74. Ibid., p.215.
75. Marjorie Hall and Bakhita Amin Ismail, *Sisters Under the Sun: The Story of Sudanese Women*, Longman, London, 1981, p.48.
76. Abla Amawi, "Women and Property Rights in Islam", in S.Sabbagh (ed.), op.cit., p.155.
77. Sondra Hale, op.cit., (1997), p.214.
78. Ibid., p.215.
79. Ibid., p.199.
80. Ibid., p.214.
81. Nader Saiedi, op.cit., p.184.
82. Reported in *African Rights*, "Food and Power..." , p.247.
83. Reported in Sondra Hale, op.cit., (1997), p.253, note 43.

84. Sondra Hale, *op.cit.*,(1997), p.217. See also Margot Badran, "Gender Activism: Feminists and Islamists in Egypt, in V.M.Moghadam, 9ed.), *op.cit.*, pp.202-227.
85. Ghada Karmi, "The Saddam Hussein Phenomenon and Male-Female Relations in the Arab World", in Haleh Afshar (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.152.
86. See Magda M.El-Sanousi and Nafissa Ahmed El-Amin, "The Women's Movement, Displaced Women and Rural Women in Sudan", in B.Nelson and N.Chowdhury (eds.), *Women and Politics Worldwide*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1994, p.683.
87. Danielle Haase-Dubosc, "Sexual Difference and Politics in France Today", in *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 25, No.1, Spring 1999, p.197.
88. Nader Saiedi, *op.cit.*, p.189.
89. *Ibid.*, p.189.
90. See Leah Leatherbee and Dale Bricker, *op.cit.*
91. This explains, for example, why the regime failed to issue (or denies the existence of) a clear directive on women's dress that could be seized upon by local and international human rights groups. In 1991, the daily "Al-Sudan al-hadith" published the decree on the dress code issued by the governor of Khartoum state which defined the guidelines for proper dress : a loose, opaque garment covering the entire body (only the face can be exposed), having no identifiable contours (i.e. not showing a woman's "silhouette"), and avoiding fancy shades of colour. Copies of this decree and the Public Order Law for Khartoum State were smuggled out of Sudan by women activists.
92. Atta El-Battahani, *op.cit.*, p.19.

93. African Rights, "Food and Power...", p.168, note 33.
94. Ibid., p.168, note 33.
95. The Final report and Recommendations of the "Economic Conference", Friendship Hall, Khartoum, 30 October-21 November, 1989, p.6.
96. Denying "The Honour of Living". Sudan: A Human Rights Disaster, An Africa Watch Report, March 1990, p.58.
97. (Anonymous), Human Rights Violations in Sudan, p.4.
98. Reported in The Horn of Africa Bulletin, Vol. 10, No.5, Sept-Oct 1998, p.27.
99. Haideh Moghissi, op.cit., p.99.
100. Fatima Babiker Mahmoud, "The Gender Impact of War. Environmental Disruption and Displacement", in Mohamed Suliman (ed.), Ecology, Politics & Violent Conflict, Zed Books, London/New York, 1999, p.54-55.
101. Sondra Hale, "Gender, Religious Identity, and Political Mobilization in Sudan", in V.M.Moghadam (ed.), op.cit., p.150.
102. Sondra Hale, op.cit., (1997), p.218.
103. Sondra Hale, op.cit., (1994), p.153.
104. PANA, January 4, 2001.
105. Ibid.
106. This is among the messages received via the internet following the decree: Nejla Abdul-Rahman, 24, went to work as usual at a gas station. "My boss came in and told me I no longer have a job", said Nejla, who is single and helps support her family with her 25 dollars monthly check. "I am angry. The governor should give us logical logical justifications", added Nejla, who graduated from law school in June. "I have

to work as an attendant here because I cannot find work in my field. What more do they want?" ...

107. Sondra Hale, *op.cit.*, (1997), p.199.
108. Nira Yuval-Davis, *op.cit.*, p.122.
109. Sondra Hale, *op.cit.*, (1997), p.199.
110. Valentine M.Moghadam, *op.cit.*, p.16.
111. Zeinab Bashir El Bakri, "The Crisis in the Sudanese Women's Movement", in Saskia Wieringa (ed.), *Subversive Women: Historical Experiences of Gender and Resistance*, Zed Books, London/New Jersey, 1995, p.207.
112. *Ibid.*, p.207.
113. *Ibid.*, p.207.
114. *Ibid.*, p.210.
115. *ibid.*, p.210.
116. *ibid.*,p.210.
117. *ibid.*,p.210.
118. African Rights, "Food and Power...", p.227.
119. See Strengthening Canadian Peacebuilding Initiatives in Sudan, Interim Report presented to the Peacebuilding Unit of CIDA by Alternatives, May 2000.
120. African Rights, "Food and Power...", p.187.
121. *Ibid.*, p.6.
122. Reported in Anne Mary Habib, "Northern and Southern Women Solidarity", in Magda M.Elsanousi (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.70.
123. African Rights, "Food and Power...", p.190.

124. Ibid., p.192.
125. Ibid., p.194.
126. Ibid., p.194.
127. Ibid., p.191.
128. Ibid., p.188.
129. Ibid., p.189.
130. Ibid., p.199-200. Here are some examples of the means they employed taken from the African Rights report: Plan Sudan Kassala, a child sponsorship programme was halted on the grounds that its methods of fundraising (child sponsorship) are humiliating and create a dependency link between Muslim children and western Christian sponsors (p.200). Another NGO, Christian Outreach that was attempting to implement an income-generating programme was accused of charging usury (**riba**) on Muslims, and was ultimately forced to consider using an Islamic model of credit (p.200).
131. Sondra Hale, "Gender Politics and Islamization in Sudan", in South Asia Bulletin, Vol.XIV, No.2, 1994, p.61.
132. African Rights, "Food and Power...", p.204.
133. Ibid., p.205.
134. CIDA-Alternatives Interim Report, op.cit.
135. Ibid.
136. Amna E.Badri and Intisar I.Abdel Sadig, Sudan between peace and war: internally displaced women in Khartoum and South and West Kordofan, UNIFEM, African Women for Peace Series, 1998, p.26.

137. African Rights, “Food and Power...”, op.cit., p.221.
138. Ibid., p.221.
139. Ibid., p.195. See also Mohamed Mahmoud, “Islam and Islamization in Sudan: The Islamic National Front”, in ASSAHIFFA, Issue No.0001, Vol. 0001, Feb. 1 1998, p.30. (ASSAHIFFA is a journal for Sudanese diasporic voices published in the USA).
140. Ms Sumia ElFaki, former coordinator of the women’s sector of the PDF, cited in Amna E.Badri and Intisar I.Abdel Sadig, op.cit., p.26.
141. Hala Maksoud, “The Case of Lebanon”, in S.Sabbagh (ed.), op.cit., p.91.
142. Nira Yuval-Davis, op.cit., p.122.
143. Haideh Moghissi, op.cit., p.146.
144. Ibid., p.137.
145. Azza Karam, op.cit., p.200.
146. This article, according to Haga Kashif Badri, “stimulated the formation of the Women’s Union”. See her Women’s Movement in the Sudan, Asia News Agency, New Delhi, India, 1983, p.88 and p.122.
147. Indeed, in our still very present “post-colonial” era, the ideologue of Sudan’s Islamist movement, Hassan El-Turabi, stated in an interview with Raymond Bonner, a journalist in The New Yorker that “he had once been part of the CIA’s covert actions against Qaddafi” (the Libyan leader). See “Letter from Sudan”, by Raymond Bonner in The New Yorker, July 13, 1992, p.73. Libya, it can be recalled, is an Afro-Arab Islamic country where international sanctions were in force until very recently. In 1991, in response to relief agency appeals for emergency aid to avert a threat of famine, the Islamist leader is on record as saying that “tens of thousands of deaths

from starvation would be a small price to pay for upholding the Islamic revolution in Sudan. Reported in Benaiah Yongo-Bure, "Sudan's Deepening Crisis", in Middle East Report, September-October 1991, p.11.

148. Riad Ibrahim, op.cit., p.50.
149. Mohamed Mahmoud, op.cit., p.30.
150. Nader Saiedi, op.cit., p.188.
151. Malise Ruthven, op.cit., p.11.
152. Ramla Khalidi and Judith Tucker, "Women's Rights in the Arab World", in S.Sabbagh (ed.), op.cit., p.10-11.
153. Judith Miller, "Faces of Fundamentalism: Hassan al-Turabi and Muhammed Fadlallah", in Foreign Affairs, November/December 1994, p.139.
154. Ramla Khalidi and Judith Tucker, op.cit., p.12.
155. Mohamed Mahmoud, op.cit., p.30.
156. Ibid., p.29.
157. National Democratic Alliance Conference on Fundamental Issues, Asmara, June 1995. Reference here is to Article 5 under the heading: "Resolution on the Issue of Religion and Politics in the Sudan".
158. See for example Azza Karam, op.cit., p.
159. Anne-Marie Cwikowski, "The Mosque as a Political Space in Pakistan", in Jonathan Barker et al., Street-Level Democracy: Political Settings at the Margins of Global Power, Between the Lines/Kumarin Press, Toronto/West Hartford, 1999, p.213.

160. For an excellent analysis of the fundamentalist discourse and the speech act see the article by Nader Saiedi, *op.cit.*, particularly pages 190-191.
161. Haideh Moghissi, *op.cit.*, p.74.
162. *Ibid.*, p.11. The Persian term used by H.Moghissi is “**kolah-e Sharii**” which she renders as “Shari’a hat”. “**taqiyya**” is the local Sudanese term for “hat”.
163. Peter Nyot Kok, *Government and Conflict in the Sudan, 1985-1995: Analysis, Evaluation and Documentation*, Deutsches Orient-Institut, Hamburg, 1996, p.113, note 67 and p.101.
164. Haideh Moghissi, *op.cit.*, p.1 and p.75.
165. Reported in Peter Verney, *Raising the Stakes: Oil and Conflict in Sudan*, Sudan Update publication, West Yorkshire, England,1999, p.4.
166. Hassan al-Turabi, NIF leader, and until December 1999 head of parliament, speaking at a public rally in the town of El-Damer (North-Eastern Sudan), in April 1999.
167. Sudanow magazine, July 1999, p.13.
168. Birgit Brock-Utne, “The Distinction Between Education About Peace and Development and Value Centered Education Intended to Promote Them”, in Douglas Ray et al., *Education for Human Rights: An International Perspective*, International Bureau of Education/UNESCO, Paris, 1994, p.69.
169. Sondra Hale, *op.cit.*, (1997), p.246.
170. *Ibid.*, *op.cit.*, (1994), p.51, 61.
171. *Ibid.*, p.61.
172. *Ibid.*, p.62.

173. Haideh Moghissi, *op.cit.*, p.46.
174. Atta El-Battahani, *op.cit.*, p.19.
175. Haideh Moghissi, *op.cit.*, p.68.
176. *Ibid.*, p.52.
177. *Ibid.*, p.54.
178. *Ibid.*, p.55.
179. Nancy.C.M.Hartsock, *op.cit.*, p.256.
180. *Ibid.*, p.261.
181. *Ibid.*, p.257, p.262.
182. Nira Yuval-Davis, *op.cit.*, p.130.
183. Haideh Moghissi, *op.cit.*, p.62.
184. *Ibid.*, p.61, 62.
185. Mohamed Mahmoud, *op.cit.*, p.30.
186. *Ibid.*, p.31.

Conclusion

Presently in Sudan, a new generation of ethnically diverse and self-assertive young women has emerged whose activism is grounded in independence as much from the state as from political parties. The boundaries between the organised (now underground) Women's Union and the new women's groups are shifting. While direct political action remains severely curtailed, activist networks – community collectives, advocacy groups, NGO's – are quietly breaking new ground by initiating decentralised forms of organising. In this process, they are politicising the everyday networks. They are articulating an empowerment perspective based on self-reliance and inner strength from which to influence the direction of change in our women's lives. Their ideas are clearly part of a continuum from a resilient culture and a tradition of pluralism in Sudanese society, traditional community-oriented activities, exchanging research and information, to efforts to coalesce and develop connections across borders.

This momentum has been building up in the face of severe repression, and against the backdrop of chronic poverty and civil war affecting ever larger numbers of women and their communities.

Networks and coalitions have been formed around women's role in peace-building and conflict resolution which stand out in comparison to the Islamist government's failure to end the war and come up with innovative proposals concerning the country's political crisis. Forums of discussion on women's human rights, gender and development, peace-building and conflict resolution have been initiated locally and outside Sudan. These encounters have stimulated and brought together generations of Sudanese women who for a long while were separated by boundaries beyond our making.

Advocating the power of dialogue and joint programmes, Sudanese Northern and Southern women together with others from the marginalised communities of the country are quietly building mutual respect and trust in each other's intentions.

Women's advocacy groups and grassroots feminists, with no government support (and certainly without its blessing), and increasingly diminishing assistance from donors are working in partnership with other local NGO's and women's groups, oftentimes at tremendous risk and pacts of anonymity to enable women to cope with local power structures, to articulate their demands, and to use organisational strength to counter government bureaucracy. In this process, they are providing strategic points of encounter between rural and urban women, informal sector female entrepreneurs and war-displaced women and health providers, and between legal professionals and female prison inmates.

Sudanese women's academic scholarship during the past years has provided informed opinion on the challenge of developing a vision of society based on the diverse customs, traditions and lived realities of Sudanese women. In this domain in particular, women are linking research with constructive debate on issues of equality, development and peace building. A number of research institutes and gender programmes have been created in three of Sudan's leading universities (University of Khartoum, Ahfad Women's University, Ahlia University), and have made significant contributions in filling the gap in research in the area of Women's Studies. Although not all seek to convert the established structures, talented and critical female academics and students within them are ensuring that they do not remain entirely insulated from women's activism. At the same time, a new generation of Left feminists are questioning the very core of patriarchal knowledge norms and practices, and what they see as the social conservatism of the older generation of the women's movement.

An important development in Sudanese feminist politics in the 1990's has been the growth of Southern Sudanese women's organisations inside and outside Sudan. Space limitation prohibits me from presenting a more complete chronicle of this new development, which I am addressing in a forthcoming study. However, I should mention that the vantage point of Southern, particularly the young gender-conscious women, is injecting new vitality into our women's organising and expanding the scope of feminist struggle. Whereas in many ways, the state of political repression in the country has propelled older women activists to see the need to support rather than to criticise each

other, Southern Sudanese women's voices have confronted the racial-ethnic divisions among women. They are contesting the "unitary" view of feminism promoted by the Northern "mainstream" women's movement (WU and SWU) which, they maintain, has resulted in the invisibility of "black" women. The willingness to own up to some difficult truths and the effort to correct the residues of ethnocentric biases among and between Northern and Southern Sudanese women are no doubt opening important inroads to reflect on our theorising. While these stirrings may in the short-term inhibit the continuity of the organised women's movement's work across generations, activists working among Southern women in their communities, have "come of age" and are developing a sensitive understanding of the multiplicity of women's lives. I see these developments not only as a step in the right direction, but as proof that, in the words of Dorothy Smith, there is no "settled position" in the women's movement and that we are always subjected to challenges (Dorothy Smith, 1996: 48). It is equally important, however, as we redefine our praxis and continue to re-envision our feminist future from the perspective of the powerless, not to lose sight of past trails and trials. The earlier feminist efforts of maintaining linkages with trade union activism and the peace movement were lessons of positive alliance. These and other issues concerning social and economic justice are important for critical political organising, and require long-term collaborative engagement.

One of my objectives throughout this study was to examine the bases from which we can cooperate with other movements and organisations as well as the state without sacrificing our commitment to specific women's issues. I explored these concerns with reference to

the Women's Union relationship to the Sudanese Communist Party, and to the movement's feminist praxis more broadly. A major legacy of the organised women's movement has been its uncompromising stand on autonomy from the state (and its all too familiar one-party system) as opposed to control of women's organisations by the state. It has consistently upheld this principle by standing against state policies that neglect women's issues or that are harmful to women. However, the need to go beyond autonomy to independence, such as to confront prevailing male-female power relations was reinforced in subsequent years. The brief return to democratic rule in 1985 led by the trade unions and political parties with women's full participation meant the return of "politics as usual" with men reclaiming positions of power and the relegation of women to the sidelines. Some recent acts within the oppositional alliance, such as Article 5 of the Asmara Declaration, which still leaves us dependent on religious traditions and customs, made many of us rethink our positions and begin to re-vision the terms of engagement with political parties. Because of our decisive role in the struggle against dictatorships and fundamentalist politics, the political parties are not going to ignore us. But we must guard against being relegated to second position, or adopted as a token gesture by union leaders or political leaders more concerned with winning our votes or increasing their membership. The question of how to ensure a place for our selves in any future democracy will therefore depend on how to introduce our own demands into the struggle for democracy.

The relationship of gender to the state is complex and contradictory. Controversies and debates over the character of the state in Sudan, the boundaries and limits of state control

will in all likelihood continue to plague us long after the demise of the Islamist regime and the transition to democracy. Nonetheless, we need to re-envision today rather than later strategies of negotiation and compromise that do not sabotage the efforts of women outside the state working to establish a broader political constituency. For women working within the state's hierarchical structures, complicity with the **status quo** and co-optation need not be inevitable outcomes. The challenge remains, however, to translate our interactions with the state and other institutional arrangements that disguise oppressive patterns, into transformational political action. Having women in ministries, the judiciary and in political structures will remain essential to counter state disinvestment in women's reproductive health and rights, in education and in family and community welfare. Despite our recognition of the limits of liberal state reforms, one of our primary goals should continue to be that of ensuring that as many women as possible, specially those who promote feminist-informed public policies are involved in official government. Concomitantly, it is necessary to recognise women's grassroots activism outside the state as a necessary component of democratic feminist politics.

To recognise as I have done here, the myriad ways in which Sudanese women are struggling to hold on to the rights that we have painfully gained through endless struggles, and to transform our lives in these turbulent times, should not deter us from recalling the fact that threats against women and citizens who believe in democracy continue. I have often heard the argument, voiced particularly by foreign NGO personnel and some "gender specialists" among them, that it is in times such as these (war, displacement and fundamentalist backlash) that women become more autonomous,

stronger and self-reliant. I have discovered no visible indications in the everyday lives of most women in Islamist Sudan to support such arguments. The vast majority of women in our society have been rendered powerless and disoriented. They are fighting back from a weakened position, exile and the dislocation of families and relationships, and are losing energy by the day. If not defeated, they are deeply injured, dispersed and exhausted. Hope survives because of the contradictions in the system, and because although the Islamists have destroyed the institutions of civil society, they have been unable to completely extinguish them.

The proliferation in recent years of women's local NGO's has no doubt fulfilled a much needed service to supplement the government's dire response to women's community-based and development-related problems. With the restrictions imposed by the Islamist government – ranging from prohibition and censorship to bureaucratic hurdles – most NGO's are not (openly) concerned with civic political action. (or do so with extreme caution) (Michael Lund and Wendy Betts, 1999: 123-124). Those that advocate civil responsibility and political awareness are immediately equated with the opposition, their activists detained or harassed, and their offices sacked by security. Presently, women's NGO's are to a large extent displacing the earlier more sustained political organising efforts and community-based networks. Through cooperation and coordination into larger national coalitions, NGO's may collectively become a powerful force that can affect public policy and force the government to come to terms with women's demands and, indeed perhaps, with some democratic concessions. The potency of feminist NGO mobilisation was put to the test recently when 32 women's groups protested the

government's decree restricting women's employment, and succeeded to a great extent in imposing retreats on the regime.

However, NGO initiative alone may not be enough to replace the influential social power base of trade unions, professional organisations and the women's movement as vehicles for democratisation. Presently, the regime is searching for a new legitimacy formula which involves negotiating with elite sectors of the opposition and the NGO's, seen as less threatening than the democratic forces in the National Democratic Alliance. There is a need for circumspection in considering the role in particular of international NGO's and international donors that perpetuate dependency and the perspective of immediacy with gender agendas different from ours. A further concern is the use of NGO's as a means for career enhancement and social mobility, which, as we have seen, has been promoted by the Islamists to destroy the democratic roots of civil society and to impose their theocratic military agenda. This is, therefore, another sector where our feminist "vigilance for traces of the untold story" (Lorraine Code, 1995: 32) needs to be constantly recalled, because the corruptive and divisive practices of authoritarian Sudanese states have deformed the ethos and independence of voluntary associations and citizens' groups.

My final chapter illustrated the tragic consequences of fundamentalist female activism. Fundamentalist women can be activists, but if we are to maintain that term, I see us as joined only in opposition. Because they selectively disregard aspects of the ideologies and agendas of groups that are at variance with their goals and allegiances, they cannot struggle for progressive social change. (Kathleen Blee (1996), in Nancy A. Naples (1998:

346-347). In the end, theirs is a resigned acceptance and lack of agency. Fundamentalist thinking and ideologies and their interrelation with racism and militarism are present among women and are a continuing menace. We may fear the worst. Last year, we followed with deep consternation the rise of the extreme Right in Austria and the attempts by the “Freedom Party” to dismantle the Women’s Ministry. A recent article in the Guardian Weekly (April 19-25, 2001) reported that women are swelling the ranks of Germany’s extreme neo-Nazi organisations. It is reported that young women are attracted by turning the traditional Hitler-era approach of “home and hearth” on its head with the slogan: “Nationalism is also a girl’s concern”. In Sudan, the discriminatory and exclusionary practices of the Islamist state and the religious construction of citizenship have widened the schism between Christians, Believers in indigenous religions and Muslim Sudanese nationals and, thus, exacerbated the cleavage between the peoples of North and South Sudan. The fear, therefore, of a reverse “evangelical fundamentalism” and the manipulation of religion, ethnicity and culture for political purposes may yet surface in the distance.

To end on a note that raises the daunting spectres and latent tensions of the darker challenges that lie ahead, should not detract us from the recognition of the continued significance of the road travelled, and Sudanese women’s diverse and multiple everyday **Uprising**. However, it is also a reminder that our struggle against inequalities and social injustices must continue to be waged on many arenas.

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