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Agents of Change: Women's Leadership in Peacebuilding and Social Transformation in Abu-Shouk Camp

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**Agents of Change: Women's Leadership in Peacebuilding
and Social Transformation in Abu-Shouk Camp**

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This paper offers a comprehensive exploration of the transformative agency exercised by women in the Abu-Shouk camp, located in Darfur, western Sudan, highlighting their indispensable role in rebuilding fractured relationships and fostering social cohesion in the aftermath of conflict. Through extensive interviews with women leaders, the narrative explores the dual dimensions of women's agency: the individual, expressed through maternal roles and nurturing efforts, and the collective, embodied in women-led associations that spearhead dialogue, empowerment, and trust-building. Despite facing formidable adversity, these women defy entrenched stereotypes, establishing networks that transcend educational boundaries and reshape gender dynamics. This research significantly contributes to the literature on gender studies and peacebuilding by providing an insight into the often-overlooked grassroots efforts of women as resilient survivors of conflict. By examining the intersection of women's agency and post-conflict recovery, the paper illuminates pathways to lasting peace while challenging traditional top-down peacebuilding approaches. This study serves as a vital resource for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to understand the transformative potential of women at the community level in post-conflict settings.

Keywords: Women's Agency, Peacebuilding, Abu-Shouk Camp, Social Fabric, Grassroots Initiatives, Peace and Security, UNSCR 1325, Resilience

“We want to end the bitterness of war by opening a new page. We want to create a safe environment where people can live together in peace. We want to form a social fabric”.

(Qumra, camp leader in Abu-shouk camp)

Introduction

Conflict inherently exhibits gendered dimensions, with women's experiences and roles during and after conflict often differing markedly from those of men. While the global community has struggled to ensure women's participation in formal peace processes, their contributions at the grassroots level in peacebuilding have often been overlooked. This paper contends that the equal participation of both men and women is essential to ending violence and establishing long-term stability. Yet, there remains a substantial gap in understanding how women facilitate reconciliation and foster harmonious relationships in war-affected communities. To bridge this gap, this study examines the transformative role of women in rebuilding fractured relationships and promoting social cohesion within the Abu-Shouk camp¹, located in Darfur, western Sudan, with insights drawn from in-depth interviews conducted with women leaders in August 2020. This paper redefines the scope of women's agencies in peacebuilding by recognizing both the individual and collective facets of their efforts. In the complex landscape of post-conflict Abu-Shouk, women emerge as pivotal agents, navigating political and social challenges with a nuanced approach. The discussion begins by exploring women's essential roles in post-conflict

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scenarios, illustrating how they move beyond mere survival to actively contribute to rebuilding social bonds, fostering peace, and nurturing cohesion within their communities. The narrative extends to critical moments, particularly following the collapse of Omer Abashier's government in 2018, where women's agency became central in navigating the uncertainties of political transition.

Globally, women have seized post-conflict periods as opportunities to drive societal transformation, challenge entrenched norms, and champion women's rights (UN Women, 2021). In Abu-Shouk, women's social associations have played a crucial role in fostering peace, rebuilding social bonds, and advocating for policies that promote women's rights in the aftermath of armed conflict. These efforts have resulted in tangible policy changes, increased female participation in public life, and a redefinition of traditional gender roles. This paper underscores the pivotal role of women in peacebuilding within the Abu-Shouk community, emphasizing their unique capacity to navigate and reshape social dynamics during times of political upheaval. Abu-Shouk's women have shown extraordinary resilience and agency, not merely adapting to challenges but actively transforming them into opportunities for communal growth and harmony. They achieve this through both individual initiatives and collective efforts within grassroots organizations, addressing critical issues and empowering their peers. As the paper moves forward, it examines deeper the individual and collective dimensions of women's agency, starting with an exploration of personal narratives that highlight the resilience and adaptability of women in the Abu-Shouk camp. This is followed by an analysis of the broader social and political impacts of women's grassroots organizations, demonstrating how these efforts contribute to long-term peacebuilding strategies. By examining these layers of women's involvement, this paper aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which women in post-conflict settings like Abu-Shouk not only survive but actively shape the future of their communities.

The Limitations of Women's Participation in Peacebuilding Globally

Despite women's critical roles in conflict settings, their contributions remain underrepresented in formal peacebuilding activities. The United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 advocates for enhanced participation of women in all peace processes, yet data shows that women's involvement still needs to improve. Research by the Council on Foreign Relations (2019) reveals that between 1992 and 2019, women accounted for only about 13% of negotiators, 6% of mediators, and 6% of signatories in major peace processes. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that peace agreements involving women are significantly more likely to endure for at least 15 years and are less prone to failure.

Beyond formal peace processes, women make substantial contributions to peacebuilding through grassroots initiatives. For example, the Harambe Women's Forum in South Africa played a key role in community reconstruction, contributing to sustainable peace (Noma et.al2012). Similarly, in post-genocide Rwanda, women were instrumental in facilitating dialogue and reconciliation between communities and governmental bodies (Bulus et al., 2020). These examples illustrate the profound impact of women's grassroots efforts on peacebuilding.

Women's agency—the ability to make choices that influence social change—is critical in peace processes. Whether exercised individually or collectively, this agency represents a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding that enables women to drive societal transformation (Ortiz, et.al 2016). By challenging entrenched norms and values, women's agency fosters progress towards peace. This agency is particularly essential in post-conflict settings, where women often serve

as key agents of change, navigating the complex dynamics of recovery and governance (Kabeer, 1999; Mishra & Tripathi, 2011).

This overview underscores the indispensable roles that women play in both formal and informal capacities, contributing to the rebuilding of social structures and the promotion of peace. Their involvement enhances the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts, particularly in challenging environments like the Abu-Shouk camp following the collapse of the government. Their participation ensures a more sustainable and inclusive approach to rebuilding post-conflict societies.

Getting it Right: UNSCR 1325 and Women's Agency in Peacebuilding

Women's involvement in political processes is a fundamental pillar of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, which is critical to achieving and maintaining peace. Research shows that including women in peace negotiations significantly increases the likelihood of reaching a durable agreement, with peace enduring on average 15 years longer when women are involved compared to when they are excluded (Smyth et al., 2020). As one expert notes, "Women at the negotiation table bring up crucial issues for sustainable peace, broadening the scope of peace process agendas. They also tend to champion the rights of marginalized groups and address the root causes of conflict, such as development and human rights concerns" (O'Reilly, 2015).

The WPS agenda, articulated through UNSCR 1325 and 2242, provides a critical framework for amplifying gender considerations and underscores the efficacy of involving women in peace and security matters (Wilén, 2022). UNSCR 1325, passed in 2000, emphasizes the untapped potential of women's leadership in peacebuilding, advocating for the redress of gender inequalities that hinder peace and societal development (UN Women, 2021). To be effective, peacebuilding strategies must prioritize women's participation, leadership, and empowerment. UNSCR 2242 further strengthens this framework by advocating for the integration of women's agendas into broader strategies on peace, security, counterterrorism, and the prevention of violent extremism (United Nations, 2015).

Women's Peacebuilding in Abu-Shouk Camp: A Response to Conflict, A Shaper of Experiences

In times of conflict, individuals often form new group bonds, reverting to their original affiliations and polarizing along identity lines. This response deepens divisions among conflicting parties, as observed in the communities of Darfur (Belloni, 2008). Displacement has played a significant role in shaping these divisions, perpetuating stereotypes and creating fertile ground for further conflict. Within this context, women's agency emerge as a powerful force capable of reshaping negative narratives and fostering social cohesion through informal initiatives.

The ability of women to nurture social cohesion and peace in the Abu-Shouk camp is profoundly influenced by the armed conflict, which has impacted women in diverse ways. Interviews with women leaders reveal that their engagement in peace activities stems from their direct experiences during the conflict. For instance, Sheikh Amira, a camp leader, describes her transformation, stating: *"In the past, I was not brave. The war made me brave and my heart strong. I wanted to become a sheikh because I wanted to help my people, as most men died in the war. And if war breaks out again, we will fight and protect ourselves."*

Sheikh Amira's words encapsulate the transformation experienced by women in the Abu-Shouk camp. The harsh realities of conflict have forced women to respond with resilience and

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adaptability, emerging as leaders committed to their community's welfare. This resilience reflects their determination to restore peace and prevent future violence. Women like Amira have harnessed the bravery forged through adversity to become pillars of peacebuilding within their communities.

The adverse effects of armed conflict have compelled women to take on the critical role of restoring peace. Their determination is evident in their motivations to engage in peace-promoting activities. As Salwa, another camp leader, articulates: *"Persistence and determination are the main motivators for our continuity in peace work. Because if we don't help our people, they will be lost, and no one will help them. We sacrifice ourselves to help them. We have been arrested many times, but we are still working to break barriers between people."*

Salwa's words highlight the unwavering resolve of these women to promote peace, even at great personal risk. This underscores how women in the camp are not merely passive observers of the conflict's aftermath. Instead, they are actively engaging in reconciliation efforts, recognizing and addressing the divisions that exist within their communities, and dedicating themselves to bridging these gaps.

Women's Dual Role in Social Transformation: Navigating Post-Conflict Realities

This section explores the dynamic of women's agency in peacebuilding, presenting a nuanced narrative of their individual and collective efforts. Amidst the challenging landscape of post-conflict in Abu-Shouk camp, women emerge as transformative agents, exercising dual agency to navigate the complexities of socio-political transitions.

Women like Sheikh Amira and Salwa exemplify this transformation, having risen to the challenges presented by conflict, assumed leadership roles, and remained steadfast in their commitment to fostering peace and unity. Their resilience, adaptability, and determination showcase the potential of individuals, particularly women, to play pivotal roles in reshaping societal narratives and laying the foundation for lasting peace in post-conflict settings.

Within the camp, women have become architects of change, forming associations that tackle critical issues, empower their peers, and weave a new social fabric based on trust and mutual respect. These efforts demonstrate a proactive approach to peacebuilding—distinct from, yet complementary to, more traditional top-down methods such as those implemented by international operations like the United Nations' African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID). While such initiatives are vital, they often fail to fully foster social cohesion due to lingering suspicions and enmity within the community.

The motivating experiences of these women during the conflict underscore the critical role they play in post-conflict settings. Their determination and resilience in the face of adversity exemplify the influential role of women's agency in reshaping narratives and building the foundations for enduring peace in conflict-affected regions.

Individual Women's Agency: Empowering Community

The profound impact of individual women leaders in the Abu-Shouk camp cannot be overstated. These leaders, resilient in the face of adversity, have become catalysts for transformative change within their communities. Demonstrating resilience, adaptability, and courage, they engage actively with their communities, fostering trust and unity. Through in-depth interviews, their personal journeys are revealed, showcasing their evolution from silent

sufferers to proactive leaders. In the wake of armed conflict, these women initiated individual efforts to support victims and contribute to peace, emphasizing the pivotal role of family in promoting harmony within the community.

- *Women's Peacebuilding: A Maternal Perspective*

The women of the camp perceive themselves as crucial contributors to peacebuilding, often emphasizing their roles as caregivers and mothers. Interviews highlight their primary responsibility to instill moral values in their children, nurturing an environment of harmony within households and the broader community. Salwa, a camp leader, stresses the reciprocal nature of love and comfort within families, underlining the foundational role of family in peacebuilding: *"If you give your children love and comfort, they will give it back to you when they grow old."*

Beyond their families, leaders like Omdaⁱⁱ Saadia, Shikaⁱⁱⁱ Amira, and Salwa extend their maternal responsibilities to the wider community. Acting as mentors, they guide and counsel young individuals, intervening to prevent acts of violence. Rooted in cultural practices, they uphold the belief that *"the community raises children,"* using their maternal roles to pacify agitated youth and teach peaceful conflict resolution.

This form of individual women's agency, rooted in their identities as mothers and nurturers, played a crucial role in setting the groundwork for peacebuilding within the community. By imparting essential values and mediating conflicts at a family level, these women have contributed to an overall atmosphere of peace and harmony within the Abu-Shouk camp. Their nurturing approach not only positively impacts their families but also resonates throughout the community, embodying the power of individual agency in promoting peace and understanding in post-conflict environments.

- *Empowering Communities through Volunteerism*

Volunteerism has also become a cornerstone of women's peacebuilding efforts in the camp. Driven by a deep desire to uplift their community, these women demonstrate their commitment to guiding their people towards a better future. Their voluntary work is grounded in the value of knowledge, drawing inspiration from the Quranic verse: *"Are those who know equal to those who do not know?" (Surat Az-Zumar. Verse 39.9).*

These women leaders view their roles as knowledge-bearers, dedicated to sharing wisdom that transcends economic and social disparities. Leaders like Zubaydah exemplify this commitment by offering essential guidance, particularly to those engaged in marginal jobs. Their efforts extend to identifying employment opportunities for their peers, always emphasizing that their motivation is not financial gain but a genuine desire to make a positive impact on the community.

This collective agency, primarily channeled through faith-based groups and women-led associations, has solidified women's role as transformative leaders in the peacebuilding fabric of Abu-Shouk camp. Their voluntary work exemplifies the selfless leadership necessary for sustaining peace and fostering community growth in the aftermath of conflict.

Women's Collective Agency: Bridging Divides and Fostering Harmony

The inception of the Women's Union in Abu-Shouk camp, catalyzed by Lydia's visionary proposal, marked the beginning of a transformative journey toward peace and social cohesion for the camp's residents. Initially comprised of fifty women, including the politically outspoken

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Omda Saadia, these committees have been pivotal in fostering unity and dismantling barriers among displaced residents since their formation in 2005. By organizing around shared goals and common concerns, the women of Abu-Shouk camp have not only advanced their collective agency but also laid the groundwork for sustainable peacebuilding initiatives.

These committees, supported by the construction of seven women's centers, have evolved into vibrant hubs of social and economic activity. Through various departments focused on sewing, soap production, embroidery, fruit drying, and other skill-building activities, these centers have helped transform divisive sentiments into a collective spirit of cooperation and mutual support. In so doing, the women have become central to rebuilding trust and fostering peace within the camp.

- *Promoting Dialogue and Healing: Women's Workshops for Unity*

Women's awareness workshops within Abu-Shouk camp stand as a cornerstone initiative, promoting dialogue and unity among women from diverse backgrounds. These workshops are designed to contribute to the healing process, enhance awareness, and create a safe space for open conversations. They have played a pivotal role in reshaping narratives and fostering reconciliation.

Figure 1 workshops about children's rights, organized by Omda Saadia.



Source: Own study

Omda Saadia highlights the impact of these workshops in breaking down barriers and facilitating movement within the camp, particularly in the west side^{iv}. The workshops instilled a sense of unity and acceptance among women of different ethnic groups. The knowledge gained in these sessions is then disseminated as women return to their blocks, promoting the idea of a unified nation and breaking down divisions. Omda Saadia explains: *"These committees helped break down barriers and facilitated movement within the camp, especially in the westside. Women bridged the divides, learning to accept each other. They acquired knowledge of the Arabic language, Sudanese history, and even recognized their national leaders. In the past, they were unaware of the nation's leadership, especially within*

the Fur community. These workshops instilled the concept of a unified nation and the importance of breaking down barriers. Women learned about the resilience displayed by Al-Khawaja in the face of war and the presence of tolerance among different communities... The women who gained this insight returned to their respective blocks to educate fellow women, emphasizing that 'the marketplace is one, the schools are one, and the water sources are one.' Consequently, individuals became more accepting of one another, facilitating ease of movement throughout the camp."

This powerful grassroots effort to unite the camp reflects how these workshops foster not just unity but also the building of peace through reconciliation and education. In reshaping narratives and fostering mutual understanding, the workshops act as a direct form of peacebuilding, leveraging the agency of women to bridge divides and promote social harmony.

Women's Centers: Agents of Empowerment and Unity in Abu-Shouk

Women's centers, established with the support of NGOs, play a pivotal role in empowering women within Abu-Shouk camp. These centers act as crucial infrastructure for peacebuilding by providing women with access to education, legal resources, and economic opportunities, thus strengthening their agency and capacity to lead within their communities. *Facilitating Access to Justice and Services*

Hendia, a camp leader, outlines the comprehensive role these centers play in addressing the unique challenges faced by displaced women. Educational programs covering basic rights, conflict resolution, and support for children, youth, and prisoners are central to these centers' operations. By acting as intermediaries between residents and legal authorities, these women leaders help bridge the gap created by language barriers and fears of the legal system—issues that have long marginalized women in the camp. Zubaydah emphasizes the crucial role these leaders play in advocating for women's rights and ensuring their voices are heard. The centers provide a platform for women to report instances of domestic violence, overcoming previous hesitations rooted in fear of community backlash. The leaders act as intermediaries, connecting women with lawyers and judges, and advocating for their rights. Zubaydah offers a concrete example: *"In cases of sexual assault involving a woman who did not speak Arabic, she would visit the center, where we would connect her with a lawyer. Without this assistance, she would struggle to communicate her problems effectively, potentially leading to an unfortunate miscarriage of justice. Women were also apprehensive about approaching the police to address their concerns. When a woman went to the authorities unaccompanied, it often drew unwanted attention."*

Zubaydah underscores the role of these leaders in advocating for women's rights and ensuring that women's voices are heard. These efforts extend beyond individual legal support to encompass community-wide advocacy, challenging the silencing of women and fostering a culture of accountability. In advocating for justice and providing platforms for women to voice their concerns, these centers have empowered women to take charge of their legal and social environments, further advancing the peacebuilding process.

Skill Acquisition Programs and Economic Empowerment

The collaboration between women's centers and NGOs also includes skill acquisition programs that contribute to economic empowerment. These programs offer women the tools they need to establish financial independence and support their families, which, in turn, reduces economic tensions that could exacerbate conflict. Salwa reflects on this shift from skepticism to active participation:

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"Initially, it was challenging to persuade women of the value of the women's centers and clarify that these centers were humanitarian organizations, not affiliated with the government, but rather there to support us. We needed to convey that their input was crucial to shaping projects that represented their needs. Gradually, women recognized that these organizations were there to help them, and they began to share their ideas."

Sara underscores the positive impact of these programs, particularly on women's enthusiasm for learning skills like sewing. The skills they acquired empowered them individually and also served communal purposes, such as crafting clothing for the elderly, underprivileged individuals, and widows, distributing clothes at no cost each week. Sara explains: *"We began with simple tasks and gradually progressed. Women's enthusiasm for learning additional skills, such as sewing, was apparent. We trained a significant number of women in sewing and created clothing for the elderly, underprivileged individuals, and widows, distributing clothes at no cost each week. Organizations provided sewing machines and initiated training programs. They also offered resources and markets for the women, indirectly assisting the displaced population."*

Sara highlights the role of skill acquisition programs in cultivating women's enthusiasm for learning and self-sufficiency. Through activities such as sewing, women have been empowered not only to improve their own livelihoods but also to contribute to the broader community by providing essential services such as clothing for the elderly and underprivileged. This economic empowerment directly contributes to the camp's stability, reducing the potential for conflict by addressing underlying economic grievances.

However, the expulsion of NGOs by the government in 2008, due to accusations of providing false reports about sexual assaults in the region, posed a significant challenge to sustaining these empowerment initiatives. This disruption highlights the vulnerability of external interventions in supporting local peacebuilding efforts, and underscores the importance of ensuring that women's agency within the camp remains robust and self-sustaining, regardless of outside support.

Building Social Bonds and Harmonious Relationships

Engagement with these centers enabled women to develop personal connections and networks, transforming hostility into friendship and initiating forgiveness. Salwa reflects on how this involvement strengthened her social bonds with fellow camp residents: *"All these activities fostered close social connections between me and the women in the camp. We served women with sincerity and provided them with essential services. If a woman encountered an issue, we made every effort to assist her, communicating with empathy and reinforcing the message that we were there to support her in resolving her problems. This interaction further strengthened my relationship with the women in the camp."*

The reestablishment of dialogues, bonds, and harmonious relationships among women has played a pivotal role in rebuilding the damaged social fabric of the community. Women who once faced adversity during the armed conflict evolved into a close-knit community of friends and supporters. Through collaborative efforts, the women's centers became vital agents in transforming hostility into friendship and significantly contributed to rebuilding trust within the Abu-Shouk camp.

Building Financial Empowerment: The Savings Cooperative in Abu-Shouk

Another impactful avenue through which women in the Abu-Shouk camp have empowered themselves is through their active participation in savings group associations. Established in 2015 by Salwa, a prominent camp leader, these associations comprise more than 180 women. Operating as a contributory savings scheme, commonly known as 'savings and credits,' the associations involve weekly contributions from members. Each woman contributes a percentage of her money to a designated collector or coordinator responsible for managing the pooled funds. The primary objectives of this association include empowering women to initiate new businesses and providing financial assistance for medical expenses in case of illness among members' children.

Salwa describes the inclusivity of the initiative, noting that weekly contributions range from 10 to 50 pounds, ensuring accessibility for all women in the association. The pooled funds are periodically distributed among the members, fostering a continuous circulation of resources. This system enables women to access funds for various purposes, such as starting businesses or covering medical expenses, creating a robust support network within the camp.

Beyond its financial objectives, the cooperative system has significantly contributed to trust-building among women from diverse backgrounds. Weekly gatherings of the cooperative have provided a forum for women to connect, share ideas, and strengthen their relationships across ethnic and tribal lines. This sense of unity and cooperation reflects how financial empowerment can be a foundation for peacebuilding by fostering mutual support and reducing economic disparities that often fuel conflict.

Salwa emphasizes the cooperative's transformative role: *"The savings cooperative not only addresses financial needs but also serves as a catalyst for social cohesion and harmony among the women of Abu-Shouk."*

By facilitating economic independence and fostering social connections, the cooperative has helped transform the lives of women in the camp, turning financial empowerment into a tool for peace and reconciliation.

Building Social Fabric Amidst Political Shifts

In the aftermath of the collapse of the previous government in 2018, women in the Abu-Shouk camp assumed a critical role in rebuilding the social fabric and preventing a resurgence of violence. The disintegration of the former regime led to a breakdown of community cohesion, fostering mistrust and the formation of factions within the camp. Hindia, a camp leader, described this splintering effect: *"The disintegration of the former regime led to the breakdown of the community and marginalization of some people inside the camp, creating parties and sects aligning with various political entities."* Similarly, Salwa, another camp leader, emphasized the resulting erosion of trust within the community: *"People stopped accepting and trusting each other."*

In response to the dangers posed by political affiliations, women initiated the '*Aleahduh*' movement, actively working to mend the fractured social fabric. This collective endeavor mirrors the overarching theme of women's collective agency, underscoring their commitment to unity and harmony in the camp.

Qumra, another camp leader, articulated their mission: *"We are currently working on forming a social fabric... Abu-Shouk camp is one of the first camps affected by the Freedom and Change movement. Now we want to reunite the women so that they become one united group."* Qumra

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recognized the pivotal role of women in reshaping the community narrative, stating: *"Women lost a lot in the war, so they are the losers in all cases. A woman can solve a lot of problems."* Despite initial resistance to this empowering message, women leaders persisted in their efforts. Qumra highlighted their determination: *"We imposed ourselves because we want to get our rights. Our rights are lost, and we want to bring them back so men can accept us... any woman can be a president."* This assertion of individual agency within a collective effort illustrates the dual nature of women's roles in post-conflict social reconstruction.

However, Qumra also shed light on a pervasive challenge—many women's lack of awareness of their rights due to male dominance: *"Women do not know their rights, so the elders and men interfere in women's lives."* An important outcome of the 'Aleahduh' movement has been the increased empowerment of women within the camp. Salwa reflected on their achievements: *"Now, everyone accepts our words. We also sat with the head of the local administrative and the Omdas, and they accepted our words."*

During a visit to Zubaydah, Hindia, Salwa, and Asia at Hindia's home, the women eagerly awaited a call to convene with 27 Omdas. The agenda was to strategize how to bring the community together once again and actively contribute to the creation of a new social fabric.

Changing Reality: Transformative Shifts in Gender Roles and Women's Agency

Amidst the tumultuous aftermath of conflict, the Abu-Shouk camp has witnessed a profound transformation in gender roles. Women, once confined to traditional roles, have emerged as empowered leaders, orchestrating change and guiding their community towards reconciliation. This shift is not merely symbolic; it represents a substantive alteration in the dynamics of power. Women who were previously marginalized and overlooked have evolved into catalysts for social change. Their empowerment is evident not only in their initiatives but also in their ability to break traditional barriers, engage with local administrators, challenge stereotypes, and foster collaboration.

In this evolving landscape, women in Abu-Shouk have transcended their former roles as contributors to become architects of peace and social cohesion. Their journey—from silent sufferers to active leaders—showcases the profound impact of their resilience and determination. This narrative is no longer one of victimhood; it is the story of women taking charge, rebuilding trust, and shaping the future of their community.

Yet, this narrative is complex. Women's leadership within Abu-Shouk camp is a nuanced tapestry, where not every woman embraces a leadership role, and not every leader possesses the capacity to act effectively. During our interactions within the camp, we encountered a woman who had previously held a leadership position but chose to step back, citing a reluctance to invite trouble. She succinctly declared: *"I don't want any problems."* Conversely, a young woman expressed a desire to instigate positive change but lacked the necessary motivation.

Being a woman leader in a post-conflict community is an arduous journey. The challenges intensify, particularly after the departure of NGOs in 2008 and the collapse of the previous regime. Women who continue their work in building peace and social cohesion often face severe consequences—arrests, physical assaults, and threats that cast a shadow of danger over their commitment. The closure of centers during Al-Bashir's era, justified by accusations of political affiliations, serves as a stark reminder of the external pressures imposed on these initiatives.

Salwa vividly recalls the accusations leveled during Al-Bashir's era when women's associations were deemed political entities reporting to opposition figures. The consequences were dire: arrests, threats, and fear pervaded the camp. Hawa, a former director, became a victim of this oppressive environment, enduring arrest and torture until the intervention of the UN.

The Resilience of Women in Abu-Shouk

The resilience of women in Abu-Shouk is emblematic of their capacity to act as transformative agents, navigating complex socio-political transitions in a post-conflict environment. Women like Sheikh Amira and Salwa have risen to the challenges posed by conflict, assuming leadership roles and remaining steadfast in their commitment to fostering peace and unity within their community. Their resilience, adaptability, and determination illustrate the potential of individuals—particularly women—to reshape societal narratives and contribute to lasting peace.

In the post-conflict landscape, the resilience and capacity for change among women shine prominently. Abu-Shouk camp serves as a vivid example of how women have not only endured adversities such as domestic violence and human trafficking but have also harnessed these challenges to become pivotal agents of societal transformation. They have become architects of change, forming associations that tackle critical issues, empower their peers, and weave a new social fabric based on trust and mutual respect.

These grassroots efforts are not isolated but interact with broader peacebuilding frameworks, such as national peace agreements and international interventions like the United Nations' African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID). However, while these external initiatives are crucial, they often fail to fully foster social cohesion due to lingering suspicions and hostility within the community. For grassroots initiatives to reach their full potential, they must be supported by institutional structures that align local peacebuilding efforts with national and international frameworks.

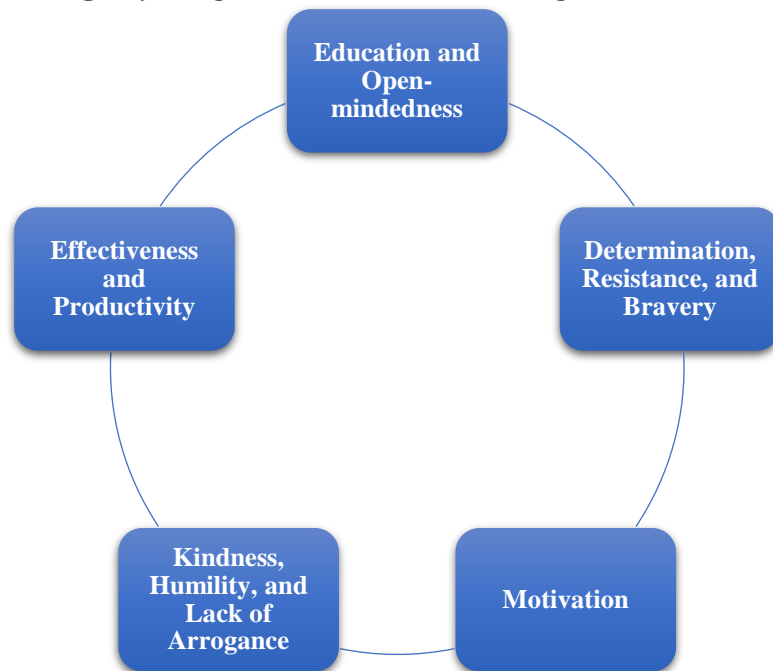
The experiences of women in Abu-Shouk also offer valuable insights into the potential of grassroots-led peacebuilding initiatives globally. Their success demonstrates how empowering women at the community level can serve as a powerful model for other conflict-affected regions around the world, where similar dynamics of exclusion, displacement, and marginalization persist.

Despite these challenges, the women's resolve remains unshaken. Perseverance, determination, and a genuine motivation to uplift their community form the bedrock of their commitment. Looking ahead, the sustainability of these efforts remains a critical concern. With external pressures such as political instability, limited resources, and the withdrawal of international NGOs, the women of Abu-Shouk will continue to face challenges in their peacebuilding work. Ensuring continued support from local and international actors will be essential to maintaining the momentum of these initiatives and securing a lasting peace.

Based on extensive interviews with women leaders inside the Abu-Shouk camp, several characteristics emerge as pivotal for women to possess the ability to act and foster peace:

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Figure 2 Women's Agency components in Abu-Shouk camp



1. **Education and Open-mindedness:** A foundational level of education and an open mind are essential. These involve accepting other people's opinions even if they don't align with one's own.
2. **Determination, Resistance, and Bravery:** These are imperative for sustaining efforts amid threats of arrest and physical harm.
3. **Motivation:** A genuine desire to help the community and resolve its issues fuels sustained action.
4. **Kindness, Humility, and Lack of Arrogance:** The commitment to non-discrimination among tribes is crucial—helping everyone impartially.
5. **Effectiveness and Productivity:** A proactive approach to achieving tangible results.

Asia encapsulates this notion of capability as being productive and effective. To her, it involves utilizing one's intellect and resources to guarantee a future free from dependency on external factors. Her example of cultivating wheat, seeking opportunities with organizations, and securing her destiny resonates as a testament to the multifaceted nature of women's agency within the Abu-Shouk camp.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the pivotal role of women in Abu-Shouk camp, emphasizing their indispensable contributions to peacebuilding and social cohesion. Through the firsthand narratives of women leaders, it becomes clear that women are the heart of mending the social fabric of their community, despite the ongoing challenges they face.

The agency of these women is multifaceted, with both individual and collective dimensions. On an individual level, women act as catalysts for change by nurturing their families, instilling values of peace, and shaping the younger generation with non-violent virtues. As caregivers and mothers, their influence extends far beyond the home, helping prevent relapses into conflict and fostering a culture of peace. This nurturing role, as Mbabazi et al. (2020) assert, provides women with a unique advantage in the realm of peacebuilding, allowing them to transform their community from within.

Collectively, women-led associations serve as vital platforms for empowerment, economic advancement, skill acquisition, and intergroup dialogue. These spaces foster trust, cooperation, and unity within the community, all of which are essential for long-term peacebuilding. The transformative impact of these associations reflects the significance of cooperatives in post-crisis situations, as Birchall (2003) notes, by empowering individuals, meeting their specific needs, and alleviating poverty.

The experiences of women in Abu-Shouk also highlight the important role of these associations in bridging divides created by political affiliations, particularly following the collapse of the Omer Al-Bashir government. By promoting cooperation, these women are not only rebuilding trust within the community but also acting as the linchpin for fostering unity and togetherness. Empowering women, therefore, emerges as a critical strategy for addressing the underlying social fractures left by political conflict, creating a more cohesive and tolerant society.

However, the situation in Sudan remains volatile. The recent resurgence of conflict, particularly the outbreak of violence in Al-Fashir city, has intensified the already precarious conditions in Abu-Shouk camp. As the camp faces collapse and further displacement of its people, women continue to play a critical role in maintaining what remains of the community. Amidst the chaos and upheaval, they work tirelessly to keep the community connected, supporting their displaced neighbors and ensuring that the bonds forged through years of peacebuilding are not entirely eroded.

Despite these immense challenges, women in Abu-Shouk remain steadfast in their resolve. Their determination, perseverance, and commitment to uplifting their community persist as they adapt to new realities. Even in the face of renewed conflict and displacement, these women continue to embody resilience, utilizing their agency to empower those around them and to keep hope alive for a more peaceful future.

Ultimately, the story of the women in Abu-Shouk camp illuminates not only the profound challenges posed by conflict but also the remarkable resilience and transformative power of women's agency. Their efforts—both individual and collective—serve as a blueprint for rewriting the narrative of conflict-affected regions, demonstrating that women's leadership is key to creating a legacy of lasting peace and community strength.

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to the resilient and courageous women of Abu-Shouk camp in Darfur, western Sudan. Their unwavering strength, determination, and commitment to peace and community in the face of unimaginable adversity continue to inspire and shape the path toward a more just and harmonious future. This work seeks to honor their contributions and amplify their voices as they rebuild their lives and their community.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Also known as Nifasha camp, Abu-Shouk camp was established in April 2004 to accommodate a massive influx of 30,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Korma, Jebel Si, and Tawilla. Following the attacks on Korma and Tawilla in November 2004, an additional 30,000 IDPs arrived. The camp is divided into two parts: the West section, which is organized into 11 blocks, each containing 8 squares, and the East section, which comprises 28 blocks. Each block in the East is divided into 15 squares, with approximately 25 homesteads per square. Shared latrines and showers are available, and each homestead occupies an area of 10 square meters. Health centers, water pumps, and schools are distributed throughout the camp (Mohamed et.al).

ⁱⁱ The term "Omda" refers to camp leaders who are integral to the camp's administration. Appointed by local administrators at the Al-Fasher Administrative Unit, Omdas help manage the camp by ensuring order and facilitating relations with individual IDPs. The camp's administration works directly with the Omdas, who in turn coordinate with Sheikhs and the residents, following the traditional native administrative system. Native administrators play a crucial role in communicating with and managing their followers. They assist in the registration and enumeration of IDPs, mediate issues between different ethnic groups, represent the camp's residents, and coordinate with the camp's administration, government, aid organizations, and other relevant bodies. Additionally, they are responsible for distributing relief supplies and providing various services. Although native administrators serve as an important link between IDPs and authorities, they do not participate in programming or planning activities within the camp.

ⁱⁱⁱ A person who assists people in reading the Quran.

^{iv} The Fur ethnic group, having been exposed to severe violence, harbors significant resentment and anger, particularly against those who speak Arabic or have lighter skin tones. This has led to heightened ethnic tensions within the camp (Mohamed et.al).