

## **Conservative Social and Political Systems As Major Impediments to SRHR and Economic Development: The Case of Sudan**

Sudan is located between the Arab and African regions, a unique location that explains its diverse ethnic, cultural and religious realities. Such diversity accompanied with economic inequalities and political instability.

Like many African states, Sudan suffers challenges of poverty, social unrest and civil-wars hampering its social and economic development. Despite rich natural resources including oil production, which raised its GDP to a low-mid income county, Sudan has one of the highest levels of poverty in the world, with 60-75% of the population in the North and 90 per cent in the South live below the poverty line of less than US \$ 1 a day.

Women are the hardest hit by poverty despite the fact that they constitute 49% of the population, and their literacy rate is 51 % which is higher than men which is 49% . Lack of adequate schooling and high levels of youth unemployment is turning the potential of the young generation from an asset into a challenge for the future

Politically, the Sudanese people have experienced periods of vibrant civil and political activism during the democratic periods, alternating with periods of severe repression, one party rule and enforcement of strict social and cultural codes of dress and conduct on the population and in particular women.

The current government of the National Islamic Front (NIF) is promotes one of the most conservative interpretations of Islam with polices blurring the boundaries between religion and politics and a social agenda which puts it in the same international classification as Hama and the Taliban.

Sudanese women suffer from these newly imposed fundamentalist rules, as well as the historical deeply rooted traditionalist culture of Sudanese Society with it restrictive gender norms. Together they impose restrictions on women's movements and choices and promote the supremacy of men with strong emphasis on the notions of "chastity", "honor" and "morality". This means that sexuality is taboo subject let alone any notion of sexual rights. It also explains the persistence of harmful traditions such as female genital mutilation (FGM) which in Sudan is found among 90% of women in the North and of the severest form "infibulations".

While more women are becoming educated and working as doctors, lawyers, Judges and other professionals, they are still excluded from top jobs and decision making positions. Historically, the Sudanese women's movement, secured labour rights for women such as maternity leaves and equal pay for equal work; however Sudanese women autonomy and right to bodily and sexual integrity are denied and violated by the strong alliance of conservative

political forces of the INF and the male dominated social norms and traditions, attacking women's sexual and reproductive rights and health

These violations are manifested by resistance to laws reforms demanded by civil society. The government refuses to sign CEDAW, and other laws international and regional human rights law based on an interpretations of Islam and Sharia'a biased against women. For example the article of the penal code on adultery penalizes only women, the children's law states the minimum age of marriage for girls as 10 years old. As recent as January 2009, the Child Bill annulled the article which prohibited FGM.

Girls and women enrolled in many educational institutions are formally subject to an "Islamic" dress code. Many of you may have heard of the recent case of the woman journalist who is charged with indecency or wearing pants. Her case is based on a morality law that mandates up to 40 lashes for 'inappropriate dress'.

Uneducated and poor women such as maids, tea sellers and street vendors are even more vulnerable. Southern Sudanese women living in the north, while mostly non-Muslims are subjected to morality laws lashed and imprisoned for their dress or for home alcohol brewing which is one of the few skills they can use to support themselves and their children

Today, Sudanese women have no rights over their own bodies, their sexuality or their fertility. As a result the number of births per 1000 population (37.8) is more than four times the rate in Germany, and the current fertility rate is estimated at about six children for every woman. The Population of Sudan is around 38.6 million and grows annually by 2.5 per cent. This is one of the highest population growth rates growth rates in Africa, the Middle East and Muslim countries.

Access to sexual and reproductive health care is almost non-existent and is not considered a basic human and civil right. Maternal mortality ratio is 1,107 per 100,000 for the whole country and over 2000 in the South, the highest in the world. Only 69% of pregnant women receive antenatal care and the contraceptive prevalence is 7.6% nationally and only 1% in the south.

The effects of the conservative social and political systems over the years on Sudanese women's sexual and reproductive health and rights constitute major impediments to the country's development. They obstruct access to economic and political opportunities for half of the citizens and cause a rapid increase in population that leads to even higher rates of poverty.