

Breaking through the Silence

Women and the Media in Sudan: Testimony of Four Female Journalists

Freedom of expression is limited in Sudan. Independent journalists face many challenges, arising, in the main, from the restrictions placed on the media by the regime of President al Bashir. In March 2009, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court issued an international warrant of arrest against President al Bashir. In the immediate aftermath, three national human rights organisations were closed down and thirteen humanitarian organisations expelled from the country. In the years since the warrant, the regime's repressive tactics have intensified: the security services have instructed newspapers not to publish stories on certain topics, newspaper editions have been confiscated, journalists have been arrested and detained – in some cases for many months – and newspapers have been forcibly closed down. Both television and radio are controlled by the state leaving print and online journalism as the only vehicles for popular dissent.

In the last year, a number of independent newspapers have been shut down, including the Al Midan newspaper where 23 staff were arrested and 7 detained following closure of the newspaper in February 2011.¹ In September 2011, Human Rights Watch reported that over 100 political opponents of the government had been arrested, including well-known writer and activist Abdelmoniem Rahm, following clashes between Sudanese forces and armed opposition groups on the northern side of the border with newly-independent South Sudan and that the Al Jazeera newspaper was closed down.² More recently, in mid-January 2012, two newspapers – Alwan and Rai Al Shab, a newspaper affiliated with the Popular Congress Party – were shut down.³

At the same time, women in Sudan face severe discrimination, harassment and violence at the hands of both state and non-state actors. The regime's discrimination against women extends into all areas of state policy, from the school curriculum through to the criminal justice system, and creates an environment where women are exposed to violence, harassment and discrimination. Women are victims of a number of discriminatory legal provisions or provisions which are applied in a discriminatory manner. Article 149 of the Criminal Act 1991, for example, makes no distinction between rape and adultery and there is evidence that Articles 151 and 152, which prohibit acts of gross indecency and acts contrary to public morality, have been applied in a manner which targets women. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Social Institutions & Gender Index 2009, which measures gender inequality by examining five areas of life (Family Code, Physical Integrity, Son Preference, Civil Liberties and Ownership Rights), ranked Sudan the worst of the 102 countries assessed for gender discrimination.⁴

Thus, the situation of female journalists – particularly those who directly challenge the regime – is extremely precarious. The high-profile arrest, detention and trial of Lubna Hussein in 2008 illustrates the multiple disadvantages facing female journalists and activists. Ms Hussein was arrested under the indecency provision in Article 152 of the Criminal Act for wearing trousers. She was sentenced to a month in prison in September 2009, after refusing to pay a fine for breaking the law, but was released the next day after the Sudan Journalists Union paid the fine on her behalf.

In the context of one of its projects in Sudan, ERT met with four female journalists and interview them. Acknowledging the risks to which these women would be exposed by speaking to us, ERT asked whether the women would like us to protect their identity through the use of pseudonyms. One by one they firmly refused this offer, stating that they wanted to speak openly about their experiences of discrimination and political repression. The four courageous women journalists who spoke with ERT are: Liemia Aljaili Abubakr, Nagla Sidahmed Elsheikh Ali, Sumaya Khalid Ibrahim Elmatbagi and Fatima Sulaiman Gazali Mohamed.

Liemia Aljaili Abubakr worked for the Khartoum Centre for Human Rights before it was “de-registered” and closed down. She is a prominent freelance journalist, human rights activist and consultant on journalism, media and gender issues. She contributes to various Sudanese newspapers and also blogs.



Photo credit: The Equal Rights Trust

Fatima Sulaiman Gazali Mohamed (left) and Nagla Sidahmed Elsheikh Ali (right)

Nagla Sidahmed Elsheikh Ali is a social media activist and journalist, who is considered to be one of the most effective reporters using social media in Sudan in recent years. She maintains a blog and also uses YouTube and other websites to upload videos and other materials.

Sumaya Khalid Ibrahim Elmatbagi is a journalist with the Al-ayam newspaper, where she works on the political desk. She is also a civil society activist, specialising in gender issues.

Fatima Sulaiman Gazali Mohamed is a columnist working with the Aljareeda newspaper, where she covers both political and social issues. In May 2011, she was charged and detained by the authorities for reporting on the case of Safiya Ishaq, a youth activist who claimed in videos posted online that she was raped repeatedly by three security officers.

Liemia Aljaili Abubakr (LAA): In the past, the status of Sudanese women was very good. People used to look on women in a positive way. But this was in the past.

There used to be a very strong women's movement in Sudan. In the 1950s, women had the right to vote and there were rules on the representation of women in parliament. In 1972, a new law was passed which required that women were given equal pay for work of equal value.

When the current regime took over in 1989, it came with a specific ideology. In this ideology, women were viewed with great suspicion; women were targeted. This targeting was carried out through the law, such as the personal law, criminal law and the employment law. A specific dress code was imposed on women, in line with this ideology. The school curriculum was revised in a way which discriminated against women. This ideology and these policies created an environment where women experienced discrimination and violence. In addition, the conflicts and war which Sudan experienced in this period created an environment in which many violations of women's rights were carried out.

As a result of these policies and the discrimination which women have experienced, the women's movement has receded.

Fatima Sulaiman Gazali Mohamed (FSGM):

I think the main obstacle faced by Sudanese women is the laws which have been passed targeting women. These laws legitimise certain practices such as discrimination or even violence against women. This has created a pattern through which it becomes normal for people to discriminate against women.

The current situation faced by women, in the absence of awareness among most women, leads women to suffer more. This climate of discrimination transforms women's behaviour. The oppression of women, and discrimination against them, causes women not to challenge, or raise awareness even among women. Any woman who tries to raise awareness among other women, she is seen to be challenging the regime. I feel, as a woman, that the regime wants people to be ignorant of their rights. They want to create an environment where discrimination is normal and where violations persist. Sometimes they use the name of religion, or the name of "preserving society" to justify their practices.

These practices are carried out while there is a silence in the society. The regime has used religion, customs and traditions to justify its position. The strength of the regime, the suppression of different views and the fear which this creates, causes people to be silent. People don't challenge discrimination against women.

There are some exceptions, where people do challenge discrimination against women, and where there have been some positive results. For example, the Governor of Khartoum state wanted to pass a decree to stop women working in petrol stations and restaurants on night shifts. Thanks to a campaign by activists, this decree was stopped.

Sumaya Khalid Ibrahim Elmatbagi (SKIE):

I am afraid that the stereotype which has been created by the government has now altered the way women are perceived within society. People now look at women from the perspective which the government adopts. This is particularly true of the generations which have grown up under this regime. Because the younger generation has been educated in a system which promotes negative stereotypes of women in society, I am worried that this may lead to further problems for women in the future.

LAA: There are many women in the media in Sudan, particularly young women working as trainees. But there is a limit to how far women can progress in the media. There is only one female Editor in Chief, for example. Even those women who do get promoted, who become heads of department or heads of section, are not given the chance to express their views clearly in writing. Women journalists do not get to play a role in setting the policies of the newspapers or broadcasters. For that reason, our media exists for men.

On radio and television, which are monopolised by the government, women are treated as objects just to be seen, to present things, not to have an effective role. For that reason, we find many good women do not have important roles. But other women, the beautiful ones, are given roles in presenting or reading the news. They just want to have women's faces there on the screen. In this way, the radio and TV contribute to the stereotyping of women.

We have a network of women journalists who monitor and record discrimination and harassment against women in the media. There are examples of women who are sexually harassed in the workplace, and when they take their case to the police, they are dismissed. No-one defends them, not even the Union of Journalists. The Union of Journalists is pro-Government, so it doesn't defend its members. Women only make up 1% of the union membership.

FSGM: Within this environment, there are exceptional cases of women, who by the strength of their personality, manage to force the newspapers or other media institutions to let them play a role in deciding policies. I have personal experience of this. In 2006, I was in charge of the political department at one newspaper, and then at another newspaper in 2010. I used to set out the pages and make proposals to the Editor in Chief. There are examples, but it depends on the strength of personality – whether you feel strong enough to challenge them – and the type of newspaper.

Female journalists are not paid the same wages as men. As Liemia said, in 1972, a law was passed requiring equal pay for men and women, but this is not the case in some newspapers. When I was head of a department, I discovered that some of the journalists working for me were paid more than I was.

SKIE: Most of the newspapers do not have specific pages for women. The exception is *Al Ayam* newspaper, which has a weekly page for women. However, this page does not tackle all issues and problems facing women – it is restricted to a selection of very specific issues.

Many newspapers distort the image of women. There was one case of a woman being mistreated, and other women demonstrated about this. The newspapers called those who protested “prostitutes” and described the men who joined them as “gay” or something like that. There are some women who are challenging section 152 of the Criminal Act which says that any woman who does not dress in an appropriate way undermines society. The newspapers describe anyone who challenges this provision as being without morals and as if she is advocating a secular society.

Nagla Sidahmed Elsheikh Ali: I want to talk about the situation of women like me who are involved in blogging. Female bloggers receive many insults – particularly sexual insults – by email and in comments on their blogs. This shows you the mentality of men in our society, under this regime. I have personally suffered very bad insults by email, because I am well-known. Now I just upload videos, photos or stories without using my real name. Many colleagues who write online are still being insulted, people questioning their reputation, their

honour or their behaviour. This is a way for men to fight what we are saying, by using lies to damage and distort our reputation. But most of us do not care what they say. It does not deter us from what we are trying to do for disadvantaged people.

The security services also target women’s rights activists. They come to our houses and confiscate equipment like cameras, laptops and even the cables and connections. In January 2012, three women and I had our equipment confiscated. This was a message from the National Security Services for women, to send the message that we should not be involved in national protest movements. There are women who have been arrested and threatened with rape. Two activists were arrested two weeks ago, and were detained for three nights by the security organs. This was the second event in recent months. Last year, one woman – Sophia – was raped by three people from the National Security Services. All women now face this threat that the security organs will rape them. They are telling women: “If you are a lady, a good woman from a good family, you should not go out on the streets.”

I want to send a message – greetings to Sudanese women. Although I have experienced these difficulties, these problems, and regardless of the worsening situation, I decided to defend the rights of women and other disadvantaged Sudanese people.

1 “Seven staff of Al Midan paper arrested in Khartoum”, Radio Dabanga, 4 February 2011, available at: <http://www.radiodabanga.org/node/9224>.

2 “Sudan: Political Repression Intensifies. Release Detainees, Uphold Freedom of Speech”, Human Rights Watch, 21 September 2011.

3 “Sudan: Security Shuts down Alwan Newspaper in Khartoum”, Radio Dabanga, 13 January 2012, available at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201201140014.html>.

4 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Social Institutions & Gender Index: Sudan*, 2009, available at: <http://genderindex.org/country/sudan>.