

Women as Peacemakers in Sudan and South Sudan

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By Princeton Lyman

February 11, 2013 - When Sudanese President Omar Bashir and South Sudanese President Salva Kiir signed a series of agreements on September 27 in Addis Ababa, they signaled their governments' commitment to peace and cooperation between their two countries. However, since that time, implementation of these agreements sadly has been lacking.

Throughout the process of negotiation and implementation, the voices of women, who are often the ones most demonstrably affected by the conflict between the two countries, have remained in the background, only to be heard at the periphery of their countries' political spheres.

The nine agreements signed that day in Addis hold the promise of a new relationship between the two countries moving forward. While the agreements do not encapsulate specific gender provisions, they do provide an opening by which to begin a dialogue for how best to include women, and women's voices, in the advancement of bilateral relations.

There is currently a cadre of very impressive women, both in government and outside of it, in both Sudan and South Sudan, who play increasingly important roles. They are active in the country's legislatures, government departments, and civil society. One woman was recently named Chairwoman of the newly established Sudanese National Human Rights Commission in Sudan, and three other women were appointed as members. Four Darfuri women civil society leaders came to Washington last year to participate in a workshop on the Darfur peace process, hosted by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), and a Darfuri activist was recognized as a winner of the United States' 2012 International Women of Courage Award for her involvement in issues pertaining to internally displaced persons. Meanwhile, in South Sudan, the constitution mandates 25 percent of the National Assembly seats should be for women, and women in South Sudan make up the majority of university students today. Indeed, women in both Sudan and South Sudan hold important positions in mid and senior levels of the military, police, most ministries, and civil society.

However, while key women play important leadership roles in Sudan and South Sudan, barriers to women's full participation remain. Engaging women across a wide variety of spectrums is crucial to increasing their capacity to access resources and assume positions of leadership. Efforts to promote women's participation and their protection from violence align with a recently published report by USIP. The report offers recommendations for integrating women in decision-making, technical and civic roles. For example, women must be formally included in all the bodies related to implementation of the Addis Ababa agreements, so that these bodies can be representative and address the diversity of women's needs and interests. Donors can also leverage their roles to promote the meaningful inclusion of women. Moreover, USIP recommends the creation of an official mechanism to link women's civil society organizations with implementation bodies. Men too, are a necessary part of the dialogue, and must expand their understanding of why women's active engagement will support successful peace-building. As underscored in this report, women must play a strong role in the implementation of these agreements going forward.

The United States seeks to ensure that women's perspectives and considerations of gender are woven into the fabric of how Sudan and South Sudan approach peace processes, conflict prevention, the protection of civilians, state building, and humanitarian assistance. The conflicts in and between the two countries have had a disproportionate impact on the lives of women, and we believe that any resulting peace agreements need to be more inclusive of female participation and more effective in taking into account gender issues. The U.S. focus is on strengthening women's engagement and empowerment domestically in Sudan and South Sudan - to influence their own party negotiators in international negotiations and to influence the ongoing constitutional and local peace processes in both countries. We have also worked diplomatically to promote the role of women in the ongoing negotiations between the two countries. When women are equal participants in conflict resolution, their unique experiences and contributions help make peace more attainable. An enduring peace between Sudan and South Sudan will not be possible if half the population is left out of the implementation process.

The author is U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan and south Sudan