

Webinar Proceeding Report

Title: *Empowering Sudanese Women for Leadership in Peacebuilding and Mediation – Drawing Lessons from South Sudanese Women’s Experiences*

Date: April 30, 2025

Duration: 100 minutes

Platform: Zoom

Organized by: Horn Center for Democracy (HCD) in collaboration with Agency for Peacebuilding (AP)

1. Opening Session

Welcome and Opening Remarks

The session began with opening introductions from Rabel Desalegn, Research, Advocacy, and Communications Advisor at the HCD, who briefly introduced the session’s agenda and welcomed participants.

Following this, Frew Demeke, Founding Executive Director of HCD, officially opened the webinar. In his remarks, he introduced both HCD and AP expressing appreciation for the partnership that made the event possible. He also acknowledged the distinguished presence of His Excellency, Ambassador David Chavek, Chargé d’Affaires of the Federal Democratic Republic of Germany to Sudan.

Frew’s remarks provided a powerful context for the discussion, reflecting on the current realities in Sudan and South Sudan; marked by violence, displacement, and uncertainty. He highlighted the remarkable resilience and leadership of Sudanese women who continue to act as peacebuilders and negotiators in their communities despite adversity. He emphasized that this session aimed to celebrate and amplify this leadership by drawing practical lessons from the experience of South Sudanese women, who have made significant strides in grassroots and national peacebuilding. Frew also underscored the commitment of HCD to locally rooted and inclusive peace and democracy initiatives, where the voices of women, youth, and marginalized groups are centered.

He concluded by reaffirming the collaboration with AP; an Italian organization committed to advancing peacebuilding through dialogue, mediation, and process design; as a critical platform for promoting women-led solutions and interregional solidarity across the Horn of Africa.

Introduction of the Moderator and Objectives

The floor was then handed over to *Sarah Abeja*, the moderator of the session and a seasoned peacebuilding professional from South Sudan. Sarah expressed her gratitude for being part of the discussion and acknowledged the dedication of both the panelists and attendees.

She outlined the key objectives of the session:

- To draw practical lessons from South Sudanese women’s leadership in peacebuilding and mediation.

- To strengthen Sudanese women's capacities for local and national leadership in peace processes.
- To build and reinforce regional networks to sustain collaboration, shared learning, and advocacy among women peacebuilders.

Sarah emphasized that the discussion would highlight lived experiences rather than theoretical frameworks, providing grounded, actionable insights for Sudanese women seeking greater involvement in peacebuilding.

Panelist Introduction

Sarah introduced the two distinguished panelists:

- Minagano Kape (Lydia): A South Sudanese peacebuilder and mediation expert, who would present on the successes, strategies, and leadership roles women have taken in advancing peace and mediation efforts in South Sudan.
- Manal Taha: A Sudanese peacebuilding and mediation expert, who would offer reflections on gender-inclusive approaches in conflict settings, and draw comparative lessons from both South Sudan and other global experiences relevant to Sudanese women.

With introductions complete, Sarah Abeja invited Lydia Minagano to begin her presentation.

2. Panel Presentations

Minagano Kape: - South Sudanese Peacebuilder and Mediation Expert

Joining from Juba, South Sudan, Minagano Kape opened her presentation by expressing gratitude to the organizers, fellow panelists, and participants. She emphasized the importance of creating spaces like this webinar where women come together to share experiences, reflect on lessons, and build solidarity across borders.

South Sudan's Peacebuilding Context

Minagano grounded her remarks in the broader context of South Sudan's journey. She highlighted:

- Independence in 2011, followed by a civil war in 2013.
- Two peace agreements mediated by IGAD; the first in 2015 (which collapsed in 2016), and the second in 2018, which remains under implementation amid repeated delays.
- The ongoing uncertainty around national elections, which were initially promised within three years of the agreement, but remain in question nearly eight years later.

As a member of the Strategic Defense and Security Review Board; a body established under the peace agreement; Minagano credited the tireless advocacy of South Sudanese women for her place at that decision-making table.

Women's Response and Mobilization

Minagano recounted how South Sudanese women, shocked by the 2013 conflict, quickly organized to demand dialogue and inclusion. Initially shut out of peace talks dominated by male delegates, women responded by:

- Lobbying mediators and regional actors to pressure parties to include women.
- Forming alliances like the South Sudan Women's Bloc and Women's Coalition for Peace to strengthen advocacy efforts.
- Hosting strategy meetings, including in the diaspora, to explore scenarios and prepare coordinated responses.

This organizing led to a breakthrough: women were included in negotiations not as token figures but across sectors; as representatives of civil society, academia, business, and more. This multi-sectoral approach proved a critical strategy for advancing inclusion.

Strategic Innovations

Minagano outlined several innovative strategies used by South Sudanese women during the peace process:

- **Technical Support Team:** A group of women experts stationed in Addis Ababa who provided real-time research, proposal drafting, and policy analysis for women delegates inside negotiation rooms.
- **Gender Analysis of Peace Agreements:** Prior to renegotiations, the coalition reviewed the 2015 agreement to identify gaps and prepare proposals for gender-sensitive revisions.
- **Linking Advocacy to Global Instruments:** By referencing international frameworks like UNSCR 1325, CEDAW, and the Maputo Protocol, women grounded their demands in legal commitments South Sudan had already ratified.

One pivotal ally during this process was Dr. Rabab, a Sudanese gender advisor who supported South Sudanese women in negotiations and implementation; a key example of cross-border feminist solidarity.

Key Gains Achieved

Thanks to these efforts, significant gender provisions were incorporated into the 2018 peace agreement:

- A 35% quota for women's representation at all levels of government (up from 25% in the Constitution).
- Inclusion of a female Vice President, a first in South Sudan's history.
- Participation of women as signatories and members of key institutions tasked with implementing the peace deal.
- Appointment of women to senior government positions, including South Sudan's first female Minister of Defense.

Minagano herself joined the Strategic Defense and Security Review Board as a direct result of these achievements.

Challenges Encountered

Despite major gains, challenges persist:

1. **Resistance to Inclusion:** Cultural norms and power dynamics often block women from decision-making spaces. Negotiation and mediation are deeply political; and political actors are often reluctant to share power.
2. **Funding Gaps:** Women's participation required international travel and extended stays, especially in Addis Ababa. Unlike government and opposition delegates, women had limited financial support for their roles.
3. **Implementation Gaps:** Despite the 35% quota, compliance remains uneven. Some parties remove women from roles or fail to nominate them, citing a "lack of qualified women"; an excuse often tied to party-level exclusion.

Key Lessons and Reflections

Minagano shared powerful lessons that resonated across the region:

- Peace is a journey, not a destination. Women must remain engaged through both negotiation and implementation to safeguard hard-won gains.
- Continued support and mentorship is critical; many women faced new challenges once appointed to implementation bodies.
- Policies alone are not enough. Without accountability mechanisms, progressive gender provisions can be undermined.
- Building diverse alliances is key. Multi-sectoral organizing and cross-border solidarity improve influence and visibility.
- Use of digital tools can empower advocacy, especially among youth. Minagano praised Sudanese activists for using technology to amplify women's voices.
- Political party reform is essential. Parties often claim they “have no women,” which underscores the need to attract, support, and retain women in political spaces through internal reform and capacity-building.

In closing, Minagano affirmed her solidarity with Sudanese women. She reminded participants that even as peace remains fragile in South Sudan, the journey must continue. Women must keep showing up, advocating, strategizing, and working together; because lasting peace cannot happen without them.

Panelist 2: Manal Taha: - Sudanese Women and the Struggle for Inclusive Peace Processes

Key Themes:

- Deep structural exclusion of women in Sudan's peace processes.
- Patriarchal and militarized frameworks limiting women's participation.
- Advocacy for trauma-informed and gender-sensitive peace processes.

- Women's resilience and alternative strategies to influence negotiations.

Context of Conflict in Sudan

- Sudan has experienced over 70 years of cyclical and brutal conflict, including two genocides in under 25 years.
- Peace agreements historically failed to address root causes or involve the broader population in meaningful ways.

Gendered Exclusion from Peace Processes

- Peace negotiations, including the Juba and Jeddah processes, were dominated by male military elites.
 - ✚ Women were either tokenized or entirely excluded.
 - ✚ Technical and security-related discussions were deemed "men's domains."
- Workshops like the Framework Workshop excluded women by design, since only political and military heads were included; roles no women held.

Challenges with Mediators and International Processes

- International mediators (U.S., Saudi Arabia, IGAD, AU, etc.) often reinforced exclusion, failing to enforce gender parity or UNSCR 1325.
- Processes lacked legitimacy and transparency, undermining broader ownership, especially by women and civilians.

Personal Experiences & Case Studies

- Manal trained women in security sector reform (SSR) and peacebuilding, highlighting women's deep knowledge and ability to mediate.
- In Jeddah:
 - ✚ Women activists used soft power and informal channels (e.g., WhatsApp, personal networks) to reach military delegations.
 - ✚ Successfully delivered technical ceasefire recommendations, including accountability for sexual violence.
 - ✚ Despite setbacks, they proved that women could engage meaningfully in security dialogue.

Technical Gaps within the Women's Movement

- Acknowledged internal gaps, such as:
 - ✚ Limited access to regional and international networks (e.g., AU, IGAD).
 - ✚ Need for more technical training, scenario-building, and coordination.

Advocacy for a New Peace Paradigm

- Manal called for a trauma-informed, justice-centered peace process:
 - ✚ Must address psychological wounds, loss, and local reconciliation.
 - ✚ Recognizes that every Sudanese now carries trauma; sleep disorders, displacement, grief.
 - ✚ Emphasized women's roles in managing displacement camps, local peace, and community resilience; critical but often ignored contributions.

Key Recommendations

- Reform peace processes to be trauma-informed and inclusive.
- Ensure technical and decision-making roles for women, especially in SSR and ceasefire monitoring.
- Engage women's networks early and consistently in all tracks of negotiations.
- Avoid symbolic inclusion; women must be seen as core actors, not accessories to the process.

In conclusion, Manal said *“Don't tell us you respect us. Respect is not inclusion. Inclusion is power.”* Manal concluded by urging international actors, mediators, and local stakeholders to recognize women as indispensable peacebuilders, not symbolic figures; and to design peace processes that reflect the real, lived pain and contributions of women and civilians.

Panel Dialogue and Reflection Session on Women, Peace, and Security in Sudan and South Sudan

Key Themes Discussed:

Trauma-Informed Peace Process:

- ✚ Manal emphasized the need for a peace process centered around trauma and healing, not just elite negotiations over power and resources.
- ✚ Minaganokape resonated with this, stating that past peace processes in South Sudan and Sudan have excluded ordinary citizens and women, focusing narrowly on power-sharing among elites, particularly men in uniform.

Exclusion of Women:

- ✚ Both panelists criticized the design of peace processes that exclude women.
- ✚ Minaganokape reflected on the 2015 IGAD-led process where only male delegates were included, questioning the role of mediators in enforcing inclusivity.
- ✚ Manal echoed the problem of processes dominated by military perspectives, lacking a human security lens.

Redefining Security:

- ✚ Discussions highlighted that security needs to be redefined beyond military hardware and positions to focus on human security.

- ✚ Examples from South Sudan included the Strategic Defense Board chaired by a woman, which shifted the conversation toward community-centered security.
- ✚ Manal criticized the vague and militaristic language used in Sudan's security sector and emphasized the need for technical and inclusive transformation rooted in citizen protection and gender sensitivity.

Summary of Questions & Answers Session

Q1: Impact of UNSCR 1325 and the National Action Plan (NAP) in South Sudan?

- **Minaganokape** explained that South Sudan's NAP has been used as an advocacy tool, helping to justify and secure women's participation in peace talks, as it is a government-recognized policy.

Q2: Is there a peace architecture in Sudan that women can currently engage with?

- **Manal** explained that no formal peace process or inclusive architecture exists at the moment. What does happen is often behind closed doors, non-transparent, and elite-driven.
- She called for a new path, where Sudanese women initiate their own trauma-informed peace proposal and push for transparency, inclusion, and accountability.

Q3: Why do peace agreements fail to deliver lasting peace?

- Both panelists agreed that agreements have been overly focused on power-sharing among elites, with poor implementation, lack of political will, and no accountability mechanisms.
- There's a disconnect between the agreements and citizens' everyday concerns, including service delivery and justice.

Q4: How are women organizing in the current political climate?

- **Minaganokape** noted that South Sudanese women are meeting regularly and lobbying behind the scenes to prevent a return to war.
- Manal emphasized the need for grassroots mobilization, collective advocacy, and political education, stressing that women must invest in their own knowledge and resources, and not rely solely on international aid.

Q5: How can Sudanese women rebuild their voice and movement?

- Manal encouraged women to reclaim their leadership roles, citing past movements where women were central.
- She criticized the current culture of glorifying violence and called for a pivot to unity, learning from African peacebuilding models (e.g., Rwanda, South Africa, Liberia).

Closing Reflections

Horn Center for Democracy:

- The session emphasized that peace is a continuous process that extends into implementation and requires persistent civic engagement.
- The importance of solidarity, cross-sector alliances, and women's leadership in political spaces was underscored.
- Investing in women doesn't always require money; time, skills, and human resources matter just as much.

Frew Demeke (Executive Director, HCD):

- Called for sustained engagement and network-building across Africa.
- Reaffirmed the center's commitment to supporting women-led peacebuilding in Sudan and South Sudan.
- Announced that the session is part of an ongoing initiative with future engagements planned.
- Recognized the urgent need for women to influence and "cool down" violent political temperatures.

Key Takeaways:

- Women must be central to peace processes; not an afterthought.
- Human security should replace militarized, elite-centric models.
- Trauma-informed approaches are crucial to sustainable peace.
- Grassroots organizing and peer learning from African experiences can guide new pathways.
- Ownership of peacebuilding must shift to local women and civil society, reducing dependency on international donors.