



EMBASSY PHOTO: BRIAN ADEBA

Asha El-Karib (left), director of the Gender Centre for Research and Training in Khartoum, and Fahima Hashim (right), director of the Khartoum-based Salmah Women's Resource Centre, want the international community to re-evaluate the way it distributes aid money in Sudan.

Two Activists Take Their Own Hard Line on Improving Women's Rights in Sudan



LUNCH WITH BRIAN

By Brian Adeba

Eight years ago, the governor of Sudan's capital Khartoum issued a decree that compelled women to adhere to a strict Islamic dress code. The decree caused an outcry because, among other things, it barred women from going out after sunset and stopped them from working in hotels, restaurants, and gas stations.

Asha El-Karib and Fahima Hashim, two well-known women activists in Sudan, remember that the decree galvanized all Sudanese women in the capital to lobby for its abolishment.

"Women spontaneously came out together and took the case to the constitutional court," Ms. El-Karib said in an interview in Ottawa.

Fortunately, the court ruled that the decree was in violation of Sudan's constitution and it was dropped. The governor was later relieved of his post.

In addition, as a result of continuously lobbying the government on women's rights, Sudanese women have now been allowed a 25-per cent representation in all government positions.

Ms. El-Karib, who is the director of the Gender Centre for Research and Training in Khartoum, said the move proved that if Sudanese women unite for common goals, they can win back some of their rights in a

country where Muslim hardliners in government have severely limited women's rights.

"The only way we can do it is to organize, strategize, build networks and solidarity among ourselves to stand up to the system because the system is so ruthless," said Ms. El-Karib.

But that, says Ms. Hashim, is easier said than done.

For 18 years now, since a hard line Islamic government led by President Omar El Bashir came to power, women's rights in Sudan have been significantly eroded. The first thing Mr. El Bashir did after grabbing power in a military coup was purge the civil service, educational institutions and the army of anyone who was not a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Ms. Hashim says women bore the brunt of the purge, with 80 per cent of them losing their jobs. As the new government pursued economic liberalization, girls' education and maternal health care were hit hard by budget cuts.

"The gains that Sudanese women had made in the 1960s and the 1970s were reduced considerably," Ms. Hashim said.

Worse, this has led to the creation of a culture where it is considered the norm not to recognize or talk about women's rights, Ms. El-Karib added.

"For instance, it doesn't raise eyebrows when you see women are not represented in student unions or even at commissions at all

levels in government," she said.

"Since 1989, not a single woman has been appointed a judge."

Fighting to regain the rights lost under Mr. El Bashir's government hasn't been without hurdles. Ms. Hashim, who is director of the Khartoum-based Salmah Women's Resource Centre, which provides information skills to women and conducts education on domestic violence and sexuality, has been interrogated several times by Sudan's feared security apparatus, known as Amni Sudan, for her work in Darfur. Ms. El-Karib has also endured a similar fate.

Harassment of staff working for women's organizations by government security agents is commonplace and so is the confiscation of their equipment, Ms. El-Karib said. The government does not allow women's organizations to register as NGOs.

But female activists have found a way

to beat the system by exploiting loopholes in the law. Most women's organizations register under business associations, but then write for themselves constitutions that allow them to carry out work as NGOs. But of late, Ms. Hashim says, the government has been "politely" requesting independent organizations, which are not under the umbrella of a state-sanctioned NGO commission, to join the government fold.

With a humanitarian disaster raging in Darfur and in the aftermath of successful

peace pacts with rebels in Sudan's south and east, the country still needs international assistance. The United Nations, the European Union and Canada have responded by pouring in aid money. In the last two years, Canada has committed \$85 million for humanitarian assistance.

While the assistance is welcome, Ms. El-Karib is critical of the way the aid money is disbursed because she says the funds have failed to materialize into tangible benefits.

"The figures, if they are really translated into humanitarian aid, people would not be dying of hunger in Darfur. There are so many displaced people's camps that are not reached," she said.

"And we are also questioning how much of this aid money has actually reached Darfur."

She suspects most of the money is used on salaries and logistics. Currently, aid organizations pay high salaries even for menial work. Ms. El-Karib says this has resulted in public servants and staff from indigenous NGOs flocking to aid organizations based in Darfur. The resulting brain drain has created a shortage of qualified staff in government departments.

"This is not adding to capacity building in the country," said Ms. El-Karib, adding the international community must re-evaluate the way it distributes aid money in Sudan, to steer it towards capacity building.

"Support civil society and encourage them to do the work. It's cheaper, they are the ones who know the context and they are the ones who can make the change," she said.

Ms. El-Karib and Ms. Hashim visited Canada two weeks ago as part of a symposium organized by Inter Pares, a Canadian social justice NGO. The symposium brought together women from conflict zones to share experiences about working on sexual violence issues.

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