

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Statement by Ms. Alaa Salah
UN Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security
29 October 2019**

Madam President, Excellencies, my civil society colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning. I am honored to be here with you from Sudan, which is today full of hope for peace, freedom and justice.

My name is Alaa Salah. I am 22 years old and I grew up in Khartoum. Before the revolution, I was a student of architectural engineering. I did not grow up around politics, but in an ordinary middle-class family—my mother is a designer and my father owns a construction company. But, as I would walk to university every day and see my fellow citizens around me, struggling to get food and medicine, half of the country living in poverty, how could one not become political? In December last year, our fight for bread became a fight for our freedom.

Madam President, ladies and gentlemen,

I stand before you today to tell you my story, which is one shared by the thousands of ordinary women and men of Sudan who left their homes, their schools and their daily work to take to the streets, to face bullets and teargas, who risked their lives and their livelihoods to demand an end to dictatorship. My journey to you was forged by a long line of Sudanese women who have fought for peace and justice in our communities for decades, well before we arrived at this important moment in the future of Sudan. I wouldn't be here without them. I raise my voice in their honor.

I address you as a member of MANSAM, a coalition of Sudanese women's civil and political groups, and on behalf of the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security.

My statement will focus on three key issues:

- (1) Women's meaningful participation and protection of women's rights;
- (2) Accountability and disarmament; and
- (3) Sustainable and inclusive peace

Women's meaningful participation

Women have played an important role in Sudan at pivotal moments in our history—in opposing colonial rule, fighting for the right to vote, as well as in recent struggles against the dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir. As political leaders and community organizers, women from across the country, from Darfur, Nuba Mountains, and Blue Nile, from Eastern and Northern states, criticized al-Bashir's repressive regime, built peace between different tribes, and fought for a quota for women in the election law. It has also taken extraordinary courage to fight for basic rights—to wear trousers, to leave their hair uncovered, to voice their opinions on social media without fear, or to share a meal with male friends—all of which were criminalized by the former regime's public order laws. These laws were designed to quash dissent and also to target women, particularly from the most marginalized and working-class communities, such as tea and food sellers, whose working tools could be confiscated without explanation, who faced penalties, and who could be jailed.

Women and young people were at the forefront of the recent protests, often outnumbering men and accounting for 70% of protestors. I was one of many women chanting, singing and walking with my fellow citizens through the streets. Women led resistance committees and sit-ins, planned protest routes, and disobeyed curfews, even in the midst of a declared state of emergency that left them vulnerable to security forces. Many were teargassed, threatened, assaulted, and thrown in jail without any charge or due process. Both women and men also faced sexual harassment and were raped. Women also faced retaliation from their own families for participating in the protests.

Women served as key members of the Sudanese Professional Association (SPA)—the organizing arm of the uprising—as well as organized under our own coalitions, such as MANSAM and No to Women's Oppression Initiative. The latter two coalitions ultimately joined the umbrella civil society group, the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) where they helped to shape the Declaration of Freedom and Change—a roadmap for Sudan's transition from military to civilian rule.

Despite this visible role, despite their courage and their leadership, women have been side-lined in the formal political process in the months following the revolution. Even in the past, when we have achieved a seat at the table—women represented 31% of parliamentarians in 2018—they were often without real influence and left out of decision-making circles. Despite women standing ready to actively contribute to the political negotiations that began in April this year between the military council and the Forces of Freedom and Change, only one woman participated in the talks, that too, only after strong advocacy by women's groups. Now, unsurprisingly, women's representation in the current governance structure falls far below our demand of 50% parity and we are skeptical that the 40% quote of the still-to-be formed legislative council will be met.

For the last 30 years, women's bodies and our rights have been policed; backlash has been swift and violent when patriarchal norms have been challenged. Women activists, politicians, human rights defenders, and peacebuilders continue to be, systematically attacked and targeted, including through sexual violence, which has forced many out of the country entirely. Additionally, women's organizations are at the front line of meeting basic needs and protecting rights in conflict-affected areas, but security restrictions and obstructive administrative requirements prevent critical work from being carried out in areas such as Blue Nile and Nuba Mountains. In particular, humanitarian access to Jebel Marrah, a conflict area in Darfur notorious for the routine use of mass rape by security forces to terrorize women and girls, continues to be a major challenge in the provision of life-saving services for those communities.

Given women's pivotal role in working towards peace and development, in the promotion of human rights, and in providing humanitarian assistance to communities in need, there is no excuse for us not to have an equal seat at every single table. If we are not represented at the peace table, and if we don't have a meaningful voice in parliament, our rights will not be guaranteed, and discriminatory and restrictive laws will remain unchanged, continuing the cycle of instability and violence. After decades of struggle and all that we risked to peacefully end Bashir's dictatorship—gender inequality is not and will never be acceptable to the women and girls of Sudan. I hope it is equally unacceptable to the members of this Chamber.

Accountability and disarmament

Sudan is one of the most heavily militarized countries in the world. We do not need more firearms, yet many governments, continue to sell weapons that directly contribute to and perpetuate conflict, ongoing violations of human rights and forced displacement. The widespread availability of weapons in my country is one of the factors fueling violence and insecurity for all people, including women and girls.

As this body well knows, accountability and access to justice have been all but absent in my country. The existing discrimination and inequality women face, coupled with conflict and violence over decades, has resulted in women being subjected to a wide range of human rights violations, including sexual and gender-based violence on an epic scale. These crimes contributed to the indictment of our ousted President for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. But violence against women did not end with the end of Al-Bashir's reign. As recent as early September, seven women living in the Shangil Tobaya displaced persons camp in Darfur were raped by armed men. These women join the thousands of women and girls who have borne the brunt of the violence carried out across the country.

Now women are saying "enough". It is time for accountability and justice for all crimes committed before, during, and after the revolution. This is the least that can be done to honor those who have been killed or who suffered atrocities.

Sustaining peace and inclusive development

All Sudanese men, women and children deserve the opportunity to live in peace, with dignity and full enjoyment of their human rights. The strength of the revolution came from the representation of diverse voices from across the country—this inclusion is now integral to the legitimacy of the transition process. Unless the political process reflects and embraces the diversity of our society, women groups, civil society, resistance groups, ethnic and religious minorities, those who have been displaced, and people with disabilities—no agreement will reflect our collective aspirations.

The current processes must also be centered around gender equality and women's rights. Women and girls, especially in rural, poor and conflict-affected communities and displaced camps, have had limited access to education, health, and livelihoods for generations. In East Sudan and many other states, many girls are forced to drop out of school to be married at the age of 9. Women and girls lack access to adequate, high-quality health care, as illustrated by high rates of maternal mortality. This is all made worse by a lack of sexual and reproductive rights, which undermines bodily autonomy and women's right to choose when and how many children to have; women in Sudan have an average of 4 children, many having their first child before the age of 18—when they are still children themselves.

In conclusion, we urge the Security Council and the international community to:

- Ensure women's full, equal and meaningful participation. Press the transitional government, Forces of Freedom and Change, and armed groups to meet their obligations to support the full, equal and meaningful participation of women, including young women, in all their diversity, in all aspects of the current peace process, including in the democratic transition. We call for at

The NGOWG on Women, Peace and Security advocates for the equal and full participation of women in all efforts to create and maintain international peace and security. Formed in 2000 following the adoption of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), the NGOWG now focuses on implementation of all Security Council resolutions that address this issue. The NGOWG serves as a bridge between women's human rights defenders working in conflict-affected situations and policymakers at UN Headquarters. NGOWG members include: Amnesty International; CARE International; Center for Reproductive Rights; Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights; Cordaid; Global Justice Center; Global Network of Women Peacebuilders; Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict; Human Rights Watch; International Alert; MADRE; Nobel Women's Initiative; OutRight Action International; Oxfam; Plan International; Refugees International; Saferworld; Women's Refugee Commission; and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. The NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security is a project of Tides Center

least 50% representation of Sudanese women across all peace processes, in the current negotiations, and at all levels of the government and decision-making positions and urge you, the international community, to support our demand in all your engagement with the transitional government.

- Fully implement all women, peace and security obligations. Support the transitional government's implementation of the 1325 National Action Plan through allocation of sufficient funds, technical support and ongoing political support. Actively monitor the situation in Darfur and halt the drawdown of the peacekeeping mission until the security situation stabilizes; protection of civilians, including those in internally displaced camps, can be ensured; and conditions for safe and voluntary returns are met.
- Support accountability and end impunity. The entire legal and justice system must be transformed to be in line with accepted legal norms, and there must be accountability for all crimes committed before, during, and after the revolution. The transitional government must fully support the necessary mechanisms, including an independent, international fact-finding mission, to investigate and hold all perpetrators of human rights violations, including sexual and gender-based violence, accountable. Omar al-Bashir must immediately be transferred to the International Criminal Court to be held accountable for the atrocities committed during his three decades in power. The transitional government must ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women without any reservations.
- Support civil society and ensure women human rights defenders are able to carry out their work unhindered and without fear of reprisals. End the use of lethal and excessive force against protestors. Ensure women-led civil society organizations, including those operating in humanitarian contexts and those addressing the prevention of gender-based violence, are supported financially and administratively and can meet the demands of their communities across the country for gender-responsive services.
- Stop fueling conflict. Finally, we implore all countries to stop the export of arms to my country when there is a risk that they will be used in violation of international humanitarian and human rights law, including to perpetrate sexual and gender-based violence, in line with the Arms Trade Treaty.

In conclusion, I would like to leave you with a slogan that grew loud with our recent protests—freedom, peace and justice, revolution is the people's choice.

Thank you.