

PEACEBUILDING AND ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

# EMPOWERING THE WOMEN OF SOUTH & WEST KORDOFAN

Since its independence, Sudan has experienced protracted internal conflicts that led to the secession of South Sudan in 2011. Since then, clashes between Sudanese government forces and armed rebel forces in bordering states, including South and West Kordofan, have resulted in massive population displacement, devastation, and loss of life.

Search has worked in Sudan since 2009, strengthening local capacity in conflict transformation and supporting community action for peace and reconciliation, working in collaboration with the Badya Center for Integrated Development Services (Badya), a leading Sudanese organization. Search has centered the majority of its work in Sudan on advancing the social, economic and political empowerment of women in at-risk communities of South and West Kordofan, by equipping them with the leadership tools, conflict transformation and business skills necessary to enact inclusive change, improve their own self-reliance and contribute to the overall stability and development of the community.

## THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT ON DEVELOPMENT: WOMEN BEARING THE BURDEN

Globally, under 25% of households are headed by women.<sup>1</sup> Because of armed conflict, Sudan's South and West Kordofan states are marked exceptions: high rates of death, disability, and/or migration of male family members have made the majority of women the main breadwinners for their families. However, despite their growing economic responsibilities, women lack skills in key areas such as agriculture, finance, marketing and business management. These challenges make it difficult to generate sufficient income, entrenching whole communities in poverty.

Yet, as women residing in the peripheries of Sudan, they have few opportunities to develop these important skills. Systematic gender-based discrimination prevents women from actively participating in public spaces. Further cultural barriers keep women from supporting each other across socio-economic and ethnic or tribal lines. In addition, women's challenges are compounded by other factors that contribute to their marginalization, such as being in a situation of displacement (internally displaced, migrants traveling through Sudan, South Sudanese refugees). In sum, even when they are leaders in their own homes, women still struggle to be leaders in their communities.

<sup>1</sup> Demographic and Health Surveys "Female Headed Households (% of households with female head)." The World Bank. 2017.

60%

of households surveyed in areas where we work in South and West Kordofan are led by women as the sole or primary income earners.

74%

of households either totally rely or partly rely on women for income.

## EMPOWERING WOMEN AS PEACEBUILDERS FIRST

To address barriers to development and support a return to security and stability, Search and Badya brought women together to collectively learn and exchange around key skills and competencies. Women were trained on conflict transformation skills and leadership to allow them to tackle the community-level conflicts that drive insecurity and poverty. To date, Search and Badya have **trained over 500 women** in community leadership and conflict transformation in South Kordofan.

Following the trainings, **70% of these women used their new skills to transform conflict in their community and advocate for positive changes** at the national level. According to the project's final evaluation, women now have stronger influence and participation in decision-making and peace processes, legitimizing their role in the community as leaders. Some have started actively participating in *godias* (traditional, male-dominated conflict resolution sessions), intervening to mitigate conflict between tribes in their locality –whereas women's role in these had thus far been

limited to bringing food and drinks for the men. Others have undertaken to solve conflicts independently, away from the customary courts, which was a rare occurrence before the project. Realizing that they are stronger together, once-divided women have even gone on to organize initiatives to involve women in communities in rebel-controlled areas (which was outside the original scope of this project), to the extent that two communities that were hostile to each other are now friendly and exchanging visits.

Women have also gone on to create small associations and **four women's networks** in Al-Fula, Dilling, Kadogli and Khartoum, each of which provided instrumental support to the ratification of a **Sudan Women's Charter**. Through formal advocacy and collective leadership, women have also started raising awareness about their shared concerns, including efforts to combat female circumcision and forced marriage.

*At the outset of our work, 68% of people surveyed in the region felt that involving women in community-level decisions was important, yet only 24% said that women play an active role in community peacebuilding efforts.*

*Only 39% felt that women leaders are empowering other women to become more engaged in community decision making and peacebuilding.*

## LEVERAGING CULTURAL TRADITIONS TO UNITE WOMEN ACROSS DIVIDING LINES

To strengthen women's mutual support and give them more chances to succeed, the team facilitated informal exchanges between women across dividing lines. Coffee ceremonies remain a strong cultural tradition in Sudan. Leveraging this, Search conducted "Coffee for Peace" ceremonies, where facilitators invited women from diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds to share their concerns and priorities for peace, security and local economic development. Through these discussions, women supported each other to overcome trauma and built their self-confidence as they embarked on the journey of becoming local change-makers. Reflecting on one of the ceremonies, one participant said **"today our women have got a new experience in how to benefit from coffee sessions, and this will be a new culture."** Coffee for Peace ceremonies have become so popular that communities not targeted by the project have begun organizing their own. The success of other project activities, such as community dialogues and participatory theater, have also prompted local NGO Al Manar to adopt similar activities, attesting to the multiplier effects of Search and Badya's intervention.

## WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Evidence suggests that the lack of opportunities for women to support themselves financially makes them more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence and other abuses, undermines their confidence, and becomes an additional obstacle to their involvement in community decision-making. Equipped with their newfound conflict transformation and leadership skills, and experiences leading within their communities, Search and Badya trained and coached women participants in financial literacy and business development. Small grants were provided following the training to implement economic initiatives, supported by the technical expertise of the Sudanese Women's Union and Al-Jandoul Association. The grants helped to seed and grow women's small businesses, thereby capitalizing on these opportunities to support their families and contribute to the economic resilience of the whole community, while becoming less vulnerable to violence and abuse. As a result of the latest phase of the project, **284 vulnerable women-led households** were able to launch their own micro-businesses. Search's efforts were "appreciated at all levels", including by local government and native administration, and as a result of the economic initiatives "mothers were able to afford new furniture and improve housing conditions, and children resumed education."

## TRANSLATING SUCCESS FROM THE COMMUNITY LEVEL TO THE NATIONAL LEVEL

To ensure that the evolving challenges women are facing, particularly at the local level, feed into national advocacy and strategies for development and conflict mitigation, Search's Country Director is a member of the National Action Plan Taskforce supporting implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325 in Sudan. Through our participation in the task force, we ensure that the perspectives, concerns and hopes of the women in the vulnerable states of South and West Kordofan are shared with women leaders in Khartoum, as well as with policy makers, to help influence policies that are truly inclusive and reflective of the needs of Sudanese women across the whole country.

### Promoting South-South Learning

*In addition to the activities within Sudan, Search and Badya brought women in leadership positions from South and West Kordofan, Khartoum, and Darfur on an exchange visit to Rwanda in order to explore the role that women have played in driving the country's reconstruction and reconciliation since the 1994 genocide. The visit was transformational for many of the participants - and the lessons they learned are still being applied and cited three years on.*