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Al Thawra Untha / The Revolution is Female: Sudanese feminists and the struggle for political participation in a militarised transition

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Master in International Studies

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Iscte – University Institute of Lisbon

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SOCIOLOGIA
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Department of History

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Acknowledgements

To the eleven-year-old girl who was told she belonged in “low” education, and who spent years believing it. There was never anything to prove: curiosity, openness, and the willingness to learn from others are their own kind of intelligence, with or without a university.

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This thesis was written while Sudan endured its third year of devastating war and continues to reshape so many lives and futures. That reality was never far from my mind, a constant reminder of the urgency of understanding how women imagine and pursue meaningful political participation even in the face of war and exclusion. In solidarity with the Sudanese people continuing to fight, document, and imagine a better future, and in the belief that justice and accountability will come.

Resumo

Esta tese examina de que forma fatores estruturais moldaram a participação política das mulheres durante o período de transição no Sudão após 2019, na sequência da revolução que derrubou o regime de trinta anos do Presidente Omar al-Bashir - uma revolução para a qual as mulheres foram indispensáveis, mas da qual foram sistematicamente excluídas nos processos de governação transitória. Com base em nove entrevistas em profundidade realizadas com ativistas sudanesas e ancorada num enquadramento analítico feminista africano, decolonial e interseccional, este estudo qualitativo identifica três mecanismos que estruturaram essa exclusão: uma governação militarizada que constrói a legitimidade política em torno da capacidade coerciva; a captura pelas elites, que marginalizou os movimentos de base; e a exclusão interseccional, através da qual a proposta de quota de 40% reproduziu hierarquias raciais, regionais e de classe. Uma contribuição teórica central desta tese reside na leitura do Political Marketplace Framework de Alex de Waal através de uma perspetiva feminista africana e decolonial, demonstrando que o mercado político militarizado do Sudão não desfavorece as mulheres apenas por circunstância, mas é constituído por hierarquias coloniais e patriarcais que historicamente definiram a autoridade política legítima como masculina e coerciva. Neste contexto, as participantes praticaram a política como transformação através da organização de base, da reapropriação cultural da memória Kandaka e da mobilização de resistência, promovendo formas de descolonização epistémica e afirmando que as próprias histórias sudanesas de liderança e resistência constituem uma base legítima para o exercício do poder político, para além dos quadros institucionais de matriz ocidental. No entanto, mesmo esta mobilização extraordinária não foi suficiente para transformar as estruturas subjacentes na ausência de mecanismos de responsabilização capazes de articular estas formas isoladas de agência política feminista. Investigações futuras deverão analisar que tipos de desenhos institucionais e mecanismos de responsabilização podem ligar estas esferas fragmentadas de ação política feminista, de modo a desafiar estruturas estatais militarizadas.

Palavras-chave: Sudão, participação política das mulheres, transição política, militarização, feminismo africano, interseccionalidade, Political Marketplace Framework, teoria decolonial.

Abstract

This dissertation examines how structural factors shaped women's political participation during Sudan's post-2019 transitional period following the revolution that overthrew President Omar al-Bashir's 30-year rule - a revolution women were indispensable to, yet from whose transitional governance they were systematically excluded. Drawing on nine in-depth interviews with Sudanese activists and grounded in an African feminist, decolonial, and intersectional framework, this qualitative study identifies three mechanisms structuring this exclusion: militarised governance constructing political legitimacy as coercive capacity; elite capture marginalising grassroots movements; and intersectional exclusion, whereby the 40% quota reproduced racial, regional, and class hierarchies. A central theoretical contribution of this dissertation lies in reading de Waal's Political Marketplace Framework through an African feminist and decolonial lens, revealing that Sudan's militarised political marketplace does not simply disadvantage women by circumstance but is constituted through colonial and patriarchal hierarchies that have always defined legitimate political authority as masculine and coercive. Against this backdrop, participants practised politics as transformation through grassroots organising, cultural reclamation of Kandaka memory, and resistance mobilisation, enacting epistemic decolonisation and asserting that Sudanese women's own histories of leadership and resistance are a legitimate basis for political power, not just Western institutional frameworks. Yet even this extraordinary mobilisation could not transform underlying structures without accountability mechanisms connecting these isolated forms of political agency. Future research should investigate what institutional designs and accountability mechanisms can bridge isolated spheres of feminist political agency to challenge militarised state structures.

Keywords: Sudan, women's political participation, political transition, militarisation, African feminism, decolonial theory, intersectionality, Political Marketplace Framework.

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Glossary of acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
FFC	Forces of Freedom and Change
IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
MNSM	Civil and Political Sudanese Coalition
PMF	Political Marketplace Framework
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SDF	Sudan Defence Force
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
SIHA	Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa
SPA	Sudanese Professionals Association
SWU	Sudanese Women's Union
TMC	Transitional Military Council
UN	United Nations

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Al Thawra Untha: The Revolution is Female

On the evening of April 8th, 2019, a photograph of a young woman standing on top of a car in Khartoum gained widespread attention online. Wearing a white tobe[1] and gold moon earrings, she led a crowd in protest chants. Her name is Alaa Salah, and she became known as the "Kandake icon," a reference to Sudan's historical warrior queens. She recited the phrase, "The bullet doesn't kill. What kills is the silence of people," expressing the protesters' call for change (Z. M. Salih, 2022). Shortly after, Omar al-Bashir's three-decade-long regime fell, and Sudanese women's participation in the revolution was widely recognised internationally. Salah's image became illustrative of Sudan's revolution and even earned her a Nobel Peace Prize nomination, symbolising the world's recognition of Sudanese women's courage. Yet, only months later, women were largely sidelined in the transitional government, despite a promised 40% quota for their inclusion (Tønnessen, 2020; Abbashar, 2025). This paradox – women at the heart of revolutionary change yet excluded from its aftermath – is not new. Across history, women's contributions to social and political transformation have been systematically overlooked or deliberately erased, including their roles in civil resistance. Patriarchal systems have filtered human achievements through male-centred perspectives, designating fields such as diplomacy, state security, and governance as masculine domains. As a result, historical recognition has often been limited to a few exceptional rulers, such as Cleopatra and Queen Elizabeth I, while women's collective and grassroots activism has gone undocumented (Codur & King, 2015). In addition, even within these selective histories of female leadership, another hierarchy persists: the exclusion of Black women's cultural and political legacies (Hobson, 2021). This layered marginalisation means that few beyond Sudanese or Egyptological circles know of the Kandake: the queens of ancient Kush, modern-day Sudan, who once ruled vast territories and led armies into battle (Ashby, 2021). Their absence from mainstream history is not accidental. The erasure of the Kandake from historical memory mirrors the contemporary silencing of Sudanese women's political leadership.

[1] The tobe is a rectangular cloth that Sudanese women wrap around their bodies. Since the late eighteenth century, it has evolved from a luxury item into an everyday symbol of femininity and modesty. Through styles named after political leaders and national events, it became a powerful canvas for women's political and social expression under Anglo-Egyptian rule (Brown, 2017).

Both phenomena reflect interlocking systems of racism, imperialism, and patriarchy, systems that determine whose contributions are remembered and whose are deemed worthy of value. As Egyptologist Hanna (2021) observes, the field of Egyptology has been shaped by Western imperialism and male-centred scholarship (Hanna, 2021). When extending this framework to Sudan, the erasure only deepens. Ashby (2021) argues that the history of the Kandake remains marginalised, as it is not incorporated into either studies of the ancient world or Africana Studies. This long history of silencing continues to echo until today. Following the revolution, a military coup in October 2021 plunged Sudan into renewed conflict – one of the world's worst humanitarian crises – yet global attention has remained strikingly minimal. As Yassmin Abdel-Magied (2025) reflects: "There is no battle of narrative. There is an utter dearth of interest in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of us… Sometimes, a dark, shameful part of me wishes there were a battle of narrative I could engage in. Maybe it would mean Sudanese lives mattered enough to fight about" (p. 91). This silence, as Salih, T (2022) argues, is not mere neglect, but a reflection of deeply ingrained anti-Black racism and the enduring legacies of colonial, imperial, and capitalist systems that have long devalued African lives and voices. The same structures that erased the Kandake from historical memory continue to shape, through their legacies, whose voices are heard in global politics today. It is within this context of erasure and resistance that Sudanese women's revolutionary leadership - and their subsequent exclusion from transitional governance - must be understood. Examining Sudanese women's roles in the revolution and the barriers that prevented their continued participation is therefore not simply a political analysis. It is an act of reclaiming narrative, agency, and memory – a refusal, inspired by Alaa Salah's words, to let silence win.

1.2 Research questions and dissertation overview

This research is guided by two research questions: 1. *"What structural factors have shaped women's political participation during Sudan's post-2019 transitional period, and how have these factors operated?" 2. How do Sudanese women activists understand, experience, and pursue meaningful political participation across formal and informal political arenas?*

At the methodological level, the study adopts a qualitative research design, combining a critical literature review with semi-structured interviews conducted with eight Sudanese women and one Sudanese man. Theoretically, this dissertation develops a gendered analysis of political authority in transitional contexts by combining African feminist thought with the Political Marketplace Framework. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 presents the literature review, tracing women's political participation through global and regional frameworks,

African women's movements, and gender quotas, before examining historical and structural factors that shaped postcolonial governance in Africa. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework. Chapter 4 introduces the Sudanese case study, providing a historical overview of Sudan's postcolonial political landscape and analysing women's roles in the 2019 revolution and their subsequent exclusion from transitional governance. Chapter 5 presents the methodology, and Chapter 6 provides the analysis and discussion. The conclusion summarises the findings and reflects on pathways toward more inclusive political futures in Sudan.

1.3 Determining the topic relevance

This research is directly relevant to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality, particularly Target 5.5 on women's full and effective participation in political decision-making (UN Women, 2025). Sudan's post-2019 transition provides a critical case for examining the gap between such global commitments and the realities of women's political participation in postcolonial contexts. While international and regional frameworks emphasise formal inclusion and measurable indicators of participation, it remains an open question how these commitments translate into meaningful participation at the national level, particularly in transitional contexts. Sudan's transitional period thus offers an opportunity to interrogate what the relationship between constitutional guarantees, institutional commitments, and women's actual political experiences looks like on the ground. By centring Sudanese women activists' lived experiences and interpretations, this dissertation moves beyond technocratic approaches to gender equality and seeks to understand how women themselves define and pursue meaningful political participation across both formal and informal arenas. In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates on participation, power, and political transformation, and engages with questions about the limitations of institutional inclusion in the absence of deeper structural change. This contribution is particularly urgent considering Sudan's ongoing war and the likelihood of future transitional processes, where understanding women's visions for meaningful political participation will be essential to any genuinely transformative political settlement.

Chapter 2: Literature review

In this chapter, I situate women's political participation in Sudan within broader feminist and decolonial debates on power and representation. I review scholarship on the institutional, historical, and ideological dimensions of political participation, with particular attention to how scholars understand the gap between formal commitments to gender equality and ongoing patterns of exclusion. While global policy frameworks often present women's participation as a marker of democratic progress, feminist and decolonial scholarship examines how participation operates within unequal structures of power. In postcolonial and militarised contexts such as Sudan, political participation is therefore analysed not only in terms of institutional inclusion, but also in relation to broader historical and structural dynamics. This chapter proceeds in five parts: (1) conceptual debates on women's political participation; (2) the development of African women's movements and political representation; (3) the achievements and limitations of gender quotas; (4) the role of colonial and militarised legacies in shaping exclusion; and (5) key gaps in the literature. Together, these five areas of literature inform the dissertation's research questions: what structural factors shaped women's political participation during Sudan's post-2019 transitional period and how these factors operated; and how Sudanese women activists understood, experienced, and pursued meaningful political participation within formal and informal political arenas.

2.1 Conceptualising women's political participation

In this section, I examine how international institutions and scholarly debates have conceptualised women's political participation and the frameworks that define its meaning. Understanding these dominant narratives is crucial, as they shape global development agendas and influence national approaches to achieving gender equality in public and political life. Women's political participation has been conceptualised by international institutions through normative frameworks that recognise it as a fundamental pillar of democratic governance and sustainable development (UNITED NATIONS, 2015). This global framing of women's political participation as a development imperative is clearly articulated through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which, adopted by all UN Member States in 2015, positions gender equality as both a standalone goal and a prerequisite for sustainable development. Sustainable Development Goal 5, particularly target 5.5, calls for women's full and effective participation and equal leadership opportunities in political, economic, and public life (UNITED NATIONS, 2015; UN Women, 2022). This target institutionalises gender parity

in political decision-making as a measurable development goal, tracked through indicators such as the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments.

Before the SDGs, instruments such as CEDAW (1979), the first legally binding global treaty affirming women's equal rights to vote, stand for election, and hold public office, and the Maputo Protocol (2003) had already established the normative basis for women's political inclusion in Africa, with subsequent recommendations urging governments to adopt measures such as quotas to accelerate women's access to decision-making (UN Women, 2024a). Yet implementation continues to lag. As of 2024, women held roughly 26% of seats in African parliaments, indicating a persistent gap between normative frameworks for the advancement of women's inclusion and the lived realities of women's exclusion in political life (International IDEA 2024; IPU 2025).

This gap has long been identified by feminist scholars who critique liberal approaches for depoliticising women's participation by treating it as a matter of measurement rather than structural transformation. Lewis (2009) develops this critique by arguing that universalist, rights-based frameworks suffer from significant practical limitations. While instruments such as CEDAW articulate global commitments to gender equality, their enforcement depends largely on nation-states, resulting in weak accountability. Lewis (2009) argues that rights discourse often constructs women as passive recipients of protection rather than as political agents. Waylen (2007) and Pankhurst (2008) further caution that presenting women's inclusion as a sign of democratic progress risks obscuring the structural power relations that produce their exclusion in the first place. Bauer (2012) and Htun and Weldon (2018) similarly caution that focusing on numbers can obscure the deeper question of whose power is being transformed. Decolonial feminists extend this critique further. Ernst, Pagot, & Prá (2024) argue that the "modern-colonial gender system" prevents genuine equality, as women's participation still depends on patriarchal states acting "in their favour" (p. 3). Thus, the very structures that claim to enable participation often sustain the hierarchies that limit it. Situating political participation within relations of power shifts the analytical focus beyond formal institutions toward the collective political action through which African women's movements have historically contested exclusion and claimed political authority on their own terms.

2.2 Women's movements and representation in Africa

Contemporary women's movements in Africa emerged from complex histories of anticolonial and national liberation struggles (Ampofo et al. 2004, as cited in Yacob-Haliso & Falola, 2021). While women participated actively in liberation movements, organising mass mobilisations and sustaining resistance efforts, they faced systematic exclusion from leadership and decision-making after African states' independence (Tripp et al., 2008; Geiger, 1997). Following independence, Africa's new states often reverted to conservative patriarchal views when it came to extending freedom and equality to African women, forcing women who had joined anti-colonial freedom movements to pursue further struggles in independent nation-states (Mama, 2019). This pattern of post-independence marginalisation of women who had been central to nationalist movements manifested across the continent in concrete ways. In Tanzania, despite women's crucial role in building the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) the nationalist party that led the struggle for independence from British rule, women like Bibi Titi Mohamed lost political leadership positions after 1961, and women were relegated to creating "women's departments which had very little if anything to do with public politics," while ordinary women activists were excluded from formal political activities (Geiger, 1997). Similarly, in Algeria, despite women serving as combatants in the National Liberation Front (FLN), the armed independence movement, male leaders pushed women back into traditional domestic roles after independence in 1962 (Turshen, 2002).

These individual cases reflected a broader continental pattern: the women's movements that emerged during the early post-independence period were generally not autonomous of the ruling party and state, limiting their ability to set independent agendas and select their own leaders (Tripp et al., 2008). These experiences highlight the gendered nature of post-independence politics across Africa, where women's activism was co-opted or depoliticised by state structures (Mama, 2019, pp. 9–11). In response, African feminist thought developed as a radical intellectual and political movement that sought to confront the dual legacy of colonialism and patriarchy (Mama, 2019, p. 1). From the late 1960s, African feminist thought developed as a women-centred radical political philosophy in critical response to these exclusions, challenging both colonial legacies and the postcolonial state's failure to transform gendered power relations (Mama, 2019, p. 2). She frames African feminism not merely as participation in formal structures, but as "movement-thought" (p. 2): a process of ongoing engagement with power, shaped by women's lived realities across colonial and postcolonial contexts.

African women activists began forming transnational organisations in the decades that followed, creating regional and continental networks. While scholarship often highlights the 1980s emergence of networks such as the African Women's Development and Communication Network, the Forum for African Women Educationalists, and Women in Law and Development in Africa (Basu, 2010), Mama (2019) shows that continental coordination began much earlier, with the Pan-African Women's Organization (PAWO) in 1962, founded by women involved in national liberation movements. These networks of activists, scholars, and policymakers became instrumental in advancing peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and women's political representation, while effectively challenging state abuses and influencing regional bodies such as the African Union and international organisations such as the United Nations (Basu, 2010).

A profound transformation occurred during the 1990s, when democratisation and the shift from authoritarian to multiparty systems opened new political spaces for women across the continent (Tripp, 2001a; Fallon, 2008). This shift was particularly visible in South Africa and Uganda, where women's movements played crucial roles in constitution-making processes. In South Africa, the Women's National Coalition mobilised diverse women's groups during the transition to democracy, successfully advocating for gender equality provisions in the new constitution (Waylen, 2007). Similarly, Ugandan women's organisations trained women to run for office and mobilised support for female candidates, resulting in significant parliamentary gains (Tripp, 2001a). The 1990s thus marked the rise of a new, independent form of women's political activism that challenged patronage politics and laid the groundwork for broader gender transformation across the continent (Tripp, 2001a; 2015).

This shift was accompanied by increasingly strategic forms of mobilisation aimed at converting feminist activism into institutional and political gains. Women's movements in Africa have campaigned for 50/50 representation, training women in leadership, advocacy, and fundraising to promote equal participation in politics (Tripp et al., 2008). Particular successes have occurred where women's movements collaborated with political women and men from political parties or parliamentary settings (Ballington, 2004). Women's coalitions in Africa, often involving alliances among women's organisations, party leaders, international donors, and UN agencies, have emerged as critical agents shaping the continent's gendered political transformation (Tripp, 2016). However, women's mobilisation alone is no guarantee of success. Waylen (2007) demonstrates through the South African case that a favourable political opportunity structure and the strategic actions and alliances of key women actors were crucial to achieving both descriptive and substantive representation, alongside broad coalition-building.

Feminist scholars widely agree that global initiatives such as the UN Decade for Women (1975–1985), the 1985 Nairobi Conference, and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) marked a turning point in global feminist politics and policy. These frameworks introduced a global 'gender lens 'and expanded space for African women's participation in international institutions. They also brought struggles central to African women's movements, including national liberation and anti-apartheid, into international focus, although these had often been marginalised in Western feminist agendas (Berger, 2014; Mama, 2017; Tripp et al., 2008). The conferences also pressured governments across Africa to adopt quotas and equality policies, helping to institutionalise gender equality (Berger, 2014). However, these institutional gains also deepened tensions between liberal institutional inclusion and locally grounded feminist agendas (Tripp et al., 2008; Mama, 2019). While African women's movements strategically engaged these international frameworks, they did so with critical awareness of their limitations. Mama (2019) identified contradictions: while the Nairobi and Beijing conferences promoted global feminist solidarity, it coincided with Africa's economic crisis of the 1980s, when IMF and World Bank policies worsened poverty and hit African women hardest. Moreover, African governments created women's departments and gender offices to meet UN requirements, but Mama (2019) argues these became 'state feminism', bureaucratic offices dependent on foreign funding that spoke the language of equality without challenging patriarchal power or transforming women's lives. This continental pattern of post-revolutionary marginalisation, and the conditions under which it has occasionally been overcome, provides the comparative framework through which Sudan's post-2019 transitional period is examined in Chapter 4, addressing how women's revolutionary contributions were or were not translated into political inclusion and decision-making power.

2.3 Gender quotas and women's representation in Africa: achievements and limitations

The adoption of gender quotas across Africa represents one of the most significant institutional reforms advancing women's political representation in recent decades (Tripp, 2016; Bauer, 2012; Ballington, 2004). Between 1990 and 2015, women's legislative representation in Africa nearly tripled, from 7.8% to 22.2%, driven primarily by electoral gender quotas introduced during post-conflict transitions and constitutional reforms (Tripp, 2016; Bauer, 2012). By the mid-2000s, countries such as Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda had reached or exceeded 30 percent women's parliamentary representation (Ballington, 2004; Tripp et al., 2008; Burnet, 2011), and by 2024, forty-one of Africa's fifty-four states had

implemented some form of gender quota (International IDEA, 2024). However, progress has since stalled: between 2021 and 2024, women's parliamentary representation increased only from 25% to 26%, suggesting gender parity may not be reached before 2100 (International IDEA, 2024). Scholars widely agree that patriarchal political culture remains the primary obstacle, as quotas operate not as neutral technical solutions but within legal, institutional, and political environments that can either enable or constrain their transformative potential (Waylen, 2007; Bauer, 2012; Tripp, 2016), raising critical questions about the extent to which formal inclusion actually transforms gendered power relations within political institutions. Okedele (2021) links women's exclusion from leadership and decision-making directly to discriminatory legal and institutional frameworks, arguing that underrepresentation is rooted not only in social norms but in state structures that fail to guarantee equal political rights. Similarly, Ernst, Pagot, and Prá (2024) contend that international and regional gender commitments, bringing up the example of those articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals, require more than formal adoption; they depend on inclusive and accountable state institutions capable of translating normative commitments into meaningful political practice.

Where women's movements are strong, quotas have been more likely to function as tools for substantive change, as sustained feminist mobilisation has pressured states to move beyond token inclusion (Tripp, 2016; Ahikire, 2014). Conversely, in contexts characterised by weak institutions, authoritarian governance, or deeply entrenched patriarchy, quotas often operate symbolically, increasing women's numerical presence without transforming decision-making power (Ballington, 2004; Bauer, 2012; Waylen, 2007; Tamale, 2020). Guerraggio et al. (2022) further argue that quotas consistently underperform when there are no adequate monitoring mechanisms and party-level accountability for non-compliance.

Political parties, which function as primary gatekeepers to political leadership, often operate through closed patronage networks that marginalise women from leadership and candidate selection (Ballington, 2004; Okoosi-Simbine & Obi, 2021). Quotas are frequently imposed through top-down party directives and weakly enforced at local levels, with women candidates placed in unelectable positions or excluded from meaningful decision-making roles (Ballington, 2004). Extending this analysis, Tripp et al. (2008) demonstrate how state and party cooptation of women's organisations has further constrained women's political participation across African contexts. Patronage-based women's organisations aligned with ruling parties have tended to marginalise independent leadership, narrow feminist agendas, and prioritise symbolic inclusion over substantive change (Tripp et al., 2008). As a result, women's organisational presence has not necessarily translated into collective political empowerment.

This insight underscores that quotas alone cannot secure substantive political influence in the absence of broader political alliances and movement–party linkages, which helps explain the uneven outcomes of quota-based reforms across African contexts. These debates also intersect with broader critiques of what Táíwò (2022) terms elite capture. Táíwò argues that political and social justice movements are often shaped by the actors who already possess the greatest social, political, or institutional power, allowing elites to redirect transformative agendas toward outcomes that preserve existing hierarchies.

While critics point to cases such as Uganda and Tanzania, where reserved seats have reinforced elite dependence and weakened accountability, evidence from countries including Rwanda, South Africa, and Uganda shows that women parliamentarians have successfully advanced legislation on gender-based violence, family law, and inheritance rights, often through women's caucuses and alliances with civil society (Bauer, 2012). Beyond policy outcomes, women's increased parliamentary presence has also reshaped public perceptions of women's leadership and encouraged shifts in gender norms, particularly where women constitute a critical mass of approximately 30 percent (Bauer, 2012).

These debates resonate strongly in the Sudanese context, where the demand for 40 percent women's representation became a central organising frame during the post-2019 transitional period. Sudanese feminists recognised the political strength of the representation demand as a unifying and internationally legible claim capable of mobilising diverse women's groups (Hassanain & Sidig, 2024). However, the 2021 military coup exposed the limits of quota-based inclusion, demonstrating that numerical representation alone was insufficient to secure women's political power or protect gains made during the transition. This outcome underscores the need to examine the deeper structural forces shaping political power across African contexts, particularly patriarchy and militarised forms of governance, which are explored in the following section.

2.4 Structural barriers to women's political inclusion in Africa

As scholars have emphasised (Osaghae, 1995; Oyěwùmí, 1997; Waylen, 2007), understanding women's political participation requires close attention to the specific political, social, and historical contexts in which women's movements operate - a task undertaken in Chapter 2 and will continue in Chapter 4 in relation to the Sudan case. Building on this contextual approach, this section reviews the literature on structural barriers to women's political participation across African contexts. Across the literature, patriarchy is widely identified as a persistent structural barrier to African women's political participation (Tripp, 2016; Mama, 2019; Anyidoho, 2021).

Rather than referring simply to cultural norms, scholars conceptualise patriarchy as a system of political and institutional arrangements that privilege male authority within legal, economic, and governance structures (Anyidoho, 2021). In this context, women's exclusion from political leadership is embedded not only in social attitudes but also in state institutions and political organisations that systematically disadvantage women's access to power. At the same time, there is broad agreement that women in many African societies historically exercised greater autonomy than their Western counterparts, and that contemporary inequalities in access to political power reflect the imposition and hardening of gender hierarchies through colonial rule rather than pre-existing patriarchal arrangements (Dosekun, 2021).

Thus, while patriarchy is widely recognised as a persistent structural barrier, militarism represents a closely related but underexplored constraint. African feminist scholars argue that militarism constitutes an extreme and institutionalised form of patriarchy: one that not only structures military institutions but shapes political, social, and cultural life, systematically subordinating women and constraining their political agency (Mama, 2019; Mama & Okazawa-Rey, 2012). Mama and Okazawa-Rey (2012) demonstrate how modern militarism on the African continent has roots in colonial military force combined with political, economic, and cultural technologies of violence. Their analysis extends beyond the colonial period into the postcolonial period, showing how, during the first decades of independence (1950s-1990s), Africa became caught between Cold War politics, with both East and West providing massive military assistance driven by their own strategic interests. Throughout the 1990s, the US sold over $1.5 billion worth of weaponry to Africa, with Sudan among its top buyers, while Britain, France, and the US provided military support to dictatorial regimes, even providing financial loans that increased debt burdens (Mama & Okazawa-Rey, 2012). Crucially, Mama and Okazawa-Rey (2012) conceptualise militarism as an extreme form of patriarchy that reinforces gendered hierarchies, demonstrating how military institutions and militarised politics systematically exclude and subordinate women. This historical trajectory left postcolonial Africa shaped by a patriarchal militarist logic that remains inherently authoritarian and anti-democratic (Mama & Okazawa-Rey, 2012).

While African feminist scholars foreground the colonial and postcolonial specificities of militarism on the continent, their analysis resonates with broader feminist International Relations scholarship that conceptualises militarisation as a gendered process. Although these scholars do not theorise colonial African militarism, nor do they centre race and empire in the ways articulated by African feminist scholarship, their work provides conceptual tools that African feminist scholars extend and historicise within colonial and postcolonial African

contexts. Enloe conceptualises militarisation as an incremental and often normalised process through which military values come to shape everyday life and political authority (Enloe, 2000, pp. 293–294), while also demonstrating how militarised systems are sustained through women's labour even as women remain marginal to formal decision-making (Enloe, 2014, pp. 164–166). Similarly, Cockburn argues that militarisation is deeply gendered, relying on and reproducing masculinised forms of power, while emphasising that gender relations are constitutive, rather than merely affected, by militarised politics (2007, pp. 11–12; 256). She further highlights women's anti-militarist activism as a critical form of political engagement that contests militarised power beyond formal institutions (Cockburn, 2007, pp. 1–2). Focusing on African contexts, Abrahamsen (2018) demonstrates how post-Cold War development discourse has paradoxically deepened processes of militarisation through what she terms the "securitisation of underdevelopment" (p. 20), whereby poverty and state fragility are reframed as security threats requiring military intervention. Framed through the mantra "no development without security, no security without development" (Abrahamsen, 2018, p. 24), development actors and bilateral donors have increasingly worked alongside African militaries, invoking humanitarian rhetoric to justify security assistance. These dynamic risks strengthening the political influence of military and security actors while undermining civilian authority (Abrahamsen, 2018, pp. 24–28). This logic is visible in Sudan, where external military support has consistently reinforced the dominance of armed actors over civilian political processes. This resonates with Mohammed's (1980) analysis of how colonial military structures were repurposed for internal control, and reinforces Mama and Okazawa-Rey's (2012) argument that the patriarchal militarist logic shaping postcolonial Africa is not merely a product of domestic politics but of sustained external intervention, with consequences that endure beyond periods of formal conflict to constrain women's political participation and access to power (Meintjes et al., 2001 as cited in Mama & Okazawa-Rey, 2012).

2.5 Gaps in the literature

With this research, I aim to contribute to existing scholarship on women's political participation and political transitions in Africa. A substantial body of feminist and political scholarship has examined women's mobilisation during political transitions and post-conflict periods, often through analyses of representation, quotas, and institutional inclusion, and patriarchy has been widely identified as a structural barrier to women's political participation (Waylen, 2007; Tripp et al., 2008; Bauer, 2012; Tripp, 2016). However, the literature has paid limited attention to how colonial legacies and militarised forms of political power shape women's political participation during transitional periods characterised by hybrid civilian–military governance. Studies of militarism in Africa have largely focused on military regimes, armed conflict, or overt authoritarian rule, including important feminist analyses of militarism's gendered impacts on women's lives and social positions (Mohammed, 1980; Mama & Okazawa-Rey, 2012; Abrahamsen, 2018). However, while feminist scholarship has extensively examined women's political participation and feminist analyses have critically theorised militarism, these bodies of literature have not consistently been brought into dialogue in analyses of women's political participation during transitional contexts. Moreover, despite Sudan's long history of women's activism and the central role women played in the 2019 revolution, Sudan remains largely absent from comparative discussions of women's movements and political participation in Africa, which have tended to focus on cases from Southern and Eastern Africa such as South Africa, Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania (Waylen, 2007; Tripp et al., 2008; Bauer, 2012; Tripp, 2016). This dissertation seeks to address these gaps by building on African feminist, people-centred frameworks that conceptualise women's activism as movement thought, and by examining political participation as a historically and structurally embedded process shaped by intersecting patriarchal, colonial, and militarised legacies (Mama, 2019; Anyidoho, 2021). In line with African feminist scholars (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Mama, 2019; Anyidoho, 2021) the study moves beyond liberal and universal accounts of inclusion by centring Sudanese women activists 'own narratives and lived experiences, to analyse how women define and pursue meaningful political participation across both formal and informal political arenas during Sudan's post-2019 transitional period, while also bringing Sudan into wider comparative debates on women's movements and political participation in Africa.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

The central puzzle lies in the contradiction between Sudanese women's prominent role in the revolutionary mobilisation that toppled Bashir and their subsequent exclusion from formal political decision-making. Addressing this requires a framework that extends beyond institutional measures of representation to examine the historical and structural power relations that shape political authority, while centring women's own interpretations and experiences of meaningful political participation. To do so, this dissertation draws on three interconnected theoretical foundations: postcolonial and decolonial theory, African feminist scholarship, and an intersectional analytical lens, complemented by a contextually grounded analytical framework: de Waal's Political Marketplace Framework, which is subjected to feminist interrogation. Bringing these frameworks into dialogue allows this dissertation to examine what none can reveal alone: how colonial hierarchies, intersecting axes of exclusion, and militarised marketplace logics together structured women's political participation during Sudan's transitional period.

3.1 Postcolonial and decolonial theory

To explain the historical and structural dynamics underlying Sudan's militarised political order, this section develops a theoretical framework grounded in postcolonial and decolonial perspectives. It is important to distinguish between these related but distinct positions. Postcolonial theory analyses the enduring legacies of colonial rule on contemporary political, social, and economic structures (Loomba, 2005, pp. 7–8). Decolonial scholarship goes further, arguing that colonialism did not end with formal independence but persists as coloniality: the enduring structures of racialised domination that continue to organise political life and knowledge production in the present (Quijano, 2007, p. 168; Mignolo, 2011, p. 274). This dissertation draws on both postcolonial theory to analyse the structural legacies shaping Sudan's political institutions and decolonial theory to foreground how those structures continue to determine whose political agency is recognised as legitimate. In the Sudanese context, these dynamics are historically traceable and institutionally specific. Mamdani (1996) demonstrates how British colonial governance produced a bifurcated state structure, governing different populations through distinct legal and administrative regimes and institutionalising hierarchies that persisted into the postcolonial period. In Sudan, this bifurcation took the form of racialised territorial administration: Arab-Islamic identity was consolidated as the basis of political belonging at the centre, while peripheral regions such as Darfur, Blue Nile and the South were

governed through coercive intermediaries and systematic underdevelopment (Johnson, 2016; Madut Jok, 2007). These arrangements did not dissolve at independence; they were inherited and reproduced by successive postcolonial governments, thereby consolidating patterns of centre–periphery inequality and elite brokerage politics that directly shaped the conditions under which women activists encountered during the 2019 transition. Mbembé (2001) further shows how colonial forms of authority, violence, and governance remain embedded in contemporary political systems, producing a political order in which authority is constituted through coercive capacity rather than civic accountability: the structural inheritance that shapes Sudan's militarised political marketplace as seen in chapter 2. This is the structural condition that participants in this study identified when describing why women's non-violent forms of mobilisation could not be converted into political power during the transition. While postcolonial and decolonial theory provides this essential structural grounding, it does not, on its own, centre gender or women's agency, nor does it account for how coloniality operates through knowledge production to marginalise non-Western and non-institutional forms of political knowledge. These dimensions are addressed, respectively, by African feminist scholarship and the feminist reading of the Political Marketplace Framework developed in the sections that follow.

3.2 African Feminism as epistemological foundation

African feminist scholarship extends and historicises decolonial insights by centring gender, race, and collective resistance within African contexts. Western feminism, with its focus on liberal rights and individual empowerment, often fails to account for the ways that colonialism, slavery, and imperialism interact with patriarchy to shape distinct forms of gendered subjugation in Africa (Tamale, 2020; Nnaemeka, 2004). Oyěwùmí (1997) further challenges the universality of gender categories, showing how colonialism and the dominance of Western knowledge continue to shape gender constructions in African contemporary societies and can distort their understanding when applied uncritically. In contrast, African feminisms centre collective liberation, local knowledge, and historical and geopolitical specificity (Mama, 1995; Tamale, 2020). Mama argues that African feminism is rooted in a rich genealogy of resistance, from early anti-colonial feminists to women freedom fighters in liberation wars, conceptualising this as a "double oppression" of colonial racism and patriarchal sexism (Mama, 2019, p. 8). She critiques how African feminist engagements with development agendas and donor structures have often constrained feminist politics, channelling them into institutional and project-based forms (Mama, 2019, pp. 10–11). In response, she emphasises epistemic

decolonisation, including feminist self-definition and grounding theory and praxis in African women's own histories and struggles (Mama, 2019, pp. 3–4). Tamale (2020) develops this further, urging African feminist movements to confront colonialism as a living legacy rather than a past event, remaining explicitly anti-imperialist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-militarist while developing contextually relevant approaches to women's marginalisation rather than importing frameworks shaped by entirely different historical and political conditions. In the Sudanese context, this African feminist epistemology is essential for understanding how the 2019 revolution both challenged and reproduced historical patterns of exclusion, and for centring Sudanese women activists' own definitions of meaningful political participation rather than measuring their engagement against institutional frameworks that do not reflect the realities of political participation in militarised postcolonial contexts.

3.3 Intersectionality: From Black America to Sudan

Audre Lorde's reminder that "there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle" (1984, p. 183) encapsulates the principle of intersectionality: women's experiences are shaped by overlapping systems of power. Coined by Crenshaw (1998), intersectionality was originally developed to address how race, gender, and class compound and mutually constitute each other in shaping discrimination, revealing how single-axis frameworks fail to capture the complexity of overlapping oppressions. While rooted in the US context, the concept has since been widely adopted to analyse how multiple axes of power intersect to shape exclusion across diverse social contexts.

In the African context, intersectionality is closely linked to decolonisation. As Tamale (2020) notes, colonialism sought to suppress social and cultural heterogeneity, imposing uniform categories on diverse populations. Consequently, analysing how multiple systems of oppression intersect and interact requires a decolonial lens that recognises the colonial origins of these categorisations and their ongoing legacies. While Crenshaw's framework arose from Black women's struggles in the U.S., applying it to Sudan requires adaptation: intersectionality must consider colonial racial categories, militarised state power, contested religious identities, and the regional marginalisation produced by systematic underdevelopment.

In Sudan, intersectionality is key to understanding how women's lives are structured. Madut Jok (2007) shows how Sudanese state elites promoted an Arab-Islamic identity as the basis of national belonging, while many Sudanese claim African, Black, or ethnic and tribal identities. Unlike Western notions of race as fixed and phenotype-based, Sudanese identities are fluid and relational, shaped by religion, language, culture, and class, yet Blackness often

remains a marker of exclusion even for those adopting Arabic or Islam as markers of belonging. He argues that Sudan's long history of conflict is rooted in these contested intersections of race and religion.

Sudanese feminist Balghis Badri (2006) further demonstrates that women's opportunities for political inclusion are not determined by gender alone but are mediated by shifting hierarchies of race, religion, class, ethnicity, and region. Badri categorises Sudanese feminists into overlapping groups: academic, civil society, institutional, and personal actors, each navigating these intersecting structures differently. She further highlights the ideological polarisation between Islamist feminists, who argue women's rights can be realised within Islam, and secular feminists, who ground their claims in universal rights frameworks. Both are largely urban and middle-class, revealing how region, ethnicity, and class continue to mediate access to feminist participation (Badri, 2006).

In this dissertation, intersectionality therefore functions as the analytical lens through which women's differentiated experiences of political exclusion are examined. This goes beyond simply asking whether women were included or excluded. Instead, it asks which women, on whose terms, and how regional, ethnic, class, and religious hierarchies shaped who could translate political participation into institutional power during Sudan's transitional period. In the Sudanese context, this means examining how colonialism, capitalism, militarisation, racism, and patriarchy intersect in historically specific ways to shape women's social positions. These intersecting structures, formed through Turkish-Egyptian rule, British colonialism, post-independence authoritarianism, and ongoing imperial and neoliberal interventions, have shaped deeply uneven forms of inclusion and exclusion. It also means recognising how Sudanese women's intersectional identities, as Muslim, Christian or practitioners of indigenous traditions, as Arab, African, Nubian, Fur, or other ethic tribes; as urban or rural; as educated professionals or informal workers, shape distinct but interconnected experiences of political exclusion and resistance.

3.4 Analytical framework: The Political Marketplace Framework (PMF)

While the preceding sections established the theoretical and epistemological foundations of this study, this section introduces the primary analytical framework through which Sudan's specific governance structures are examined. De Waal's Political Marketplace Framework (PMF) does not function as a theoretical lens in the same sense as African feminist thought or decolonial theory, but rather as a contextually grounded analytical tool for understanding how political authority operates in Sudan, one that this dissertation subjects to feminist interrogation. The

PMF conceptualises political authority not as institutionally grounded or ideologically driven, but as produced through transactional exchanges of political loyalties, appointments, and resource access, in which political survival depends on maintaining patronage rather than building legitimate governance (de Waal, 2015; 2019). While valuable for analysing Sudan's elite political dynamics, the PMF has remained largely gender-blind. This dissertation makes an original contribution by reading it through an African feminist lens, asking not only how the marketplace operates but whose forms of political capital it recognises and whose it systematically devalues. This gendered reading exposes that militarised political marketplaces are not merely male-dominated by circumstance but are constituted through gendered hierarchies that actively exclude women's forms of political agency, a dimension the framework has not previously examined. A feminist PMF reading further illuminates how elite capture, theorised by Táíwò (2022) as a predictable structural outcome of unequal power relations, operated in Sudan's transitional context not by excluding all women but by selectively co-opting those willing to align with patriarchal structures while marginalising feminist grassroots actors. Reading through an intersectional lens, this reveals how elite capture did not operate through gender alone but through overlapping hierarchies of class, region, and ethnicity that determined which women could access the marketplace and on whose terms.

3.5 Integrating these frameworks

Together, these theoretical foundations and analytical framework form an integrated approach for examining Sudanese women's political participation during the transitional period. Crucially, these levels are mutually constitutive rather than parallel or additive. African feminist scholarship is itself inherently decolonial; intersectionality cannot be separated from decolonial analysis since the axes shaping Sudanese women's exclusion are products of colonial categorisation, and the feminist PMF reading is only possible because African feminist thought exposes that political capital is constituted through patriarchal and colonial hierarchies. Together, the frameworks work across both research questions simultaneously, analysing how structural factors: colonial legacies, patriarchy, and militarism shaped Sudan's political institutions and operated to exclude women from the transitional process, and how women themselves understood, experienced, and pursued meaningful political participation within these constraints. It is precisely this combination: structural analysis, epistemological decolonisation, intersectional differentiation, and feminist marketplace critique, that makes visible the paradox at the heart of this dissertation: namely, that women who built the revolution were structurally prevented from governing its aftermath.

Chapter 4: Sudan's post-2019 transition: structural dynamics shaping women's political participation

This chapter examines how structural factors shaping women's political participation manifest in Sudan's post-2019 transitional period, situating these dynamics within Sudan's longer historical trajectory and drawing on existing literature and Sudan-specific scholarship. It traces how these structures have shaped women's political participation, their role in the 2018–2019 revolution, and their subsequent exclusion from transitional governance. In doing so, it establishes the empirical and contextual foundation for the interview-based analysis presented in Chapter 6.

4.1 The Sudan Syndrome: colonial legacies, military rule and the cycle of uprisings

Since gaining independence in 1956, Sudan has experienced three autocratic military regimes (1958–64, 1969–85, and 1989–2019), each overthrown by popular uprisings but followed by renewed authoritarian rule. Elbadawi and Alhelo (2023) describe this recurring cycle as the "Sudan Syndrome": a structural pattern in which military intervention consistently forecloses civilian democratic governance. Over these decades, Sudan has experienced authoritarian rule for more than 52 of its postcolonial years (Hassan, 2022). This pattern is not unique to Sudan. Bratton and Van De Walle (1994) demonstrate that across postcolonial Africa political authority is sustained through personal patronage, clientelist networks, and control over resources rather than institutional accountability. They refer to this form of governance as neopatrimonial and argue that it consistently undermines democratic transitions by producing cycles of reform and reversion that structurally advantage those who control coercive and economic power. This logic helps explain why, although Sudan is often characterized as a failing state, Stavrianakis and Selby (2012) caution against this framing: Sudan's political violence is not the product of chaos or breakdown but of a deliberately constructed and maintained political order, in which paramilitary groups and militias function as state proxies rather than independent actors, and in which violence has consistently revolved around attempts to extend or resist centralized power. Mbembé (2001) deepens this analysis, arguing that postcolonial sovereignty in Africa is constituted not through democratic legitimacy but through the capacity to exercise violence and control. He traces this logic directly to colonial governance, which reduced the colonised to objects of power rather than political subjects. For Mbembé, there is no clean break between colonial and postcolonial political orders. He argues

that the techniques and procedures of the postcolonial state are entangled with and reproduce those of its colonial predecessor, establishing violence as the foundational currency of political authority (Mbembé, 2001).

This analysis connects directly to de Waal's Political Marketplace Framework (PMF), introduced in Chapter 3, in which political authority is produced through transactional exchanges of loyalties and resources rather than institutional accountability. De Waal (2019) further argues that Sudan's ruling elites no longer have the financial means to sustain these exchanges, making the marketplace increasingly volatile and prone to violent competition among former allies. As Chapter 3 outlined, this dissertation subjects the PMF to feminist interrogation to reveal how these marketplace logics have shaped women's political exclusion. As Mbembé (2001) argues, understanding the postcolonial political order requires tracing its colonial roots, and in Sudan, those roots are distinctly militarised. Mohammed (1980) traces these roots precisely, demonstrating how colonial militarism laid the structural foundations for postcolonial authoritarianism in Sudan. Following the Anglo-Egyptian conquest of 1898, the British repurposed earlier Egyptian military formations into a new administrative apparatus loyal to the colonial state rather than to any Sudanese constituency. After the 1924 anti-colonial revolt, the British established the Sudan Defence Force (SDF) as a paramilitary body answerable directly to the colonial Governor-General. Crucially, recruitment was designed to reinforce ethnic and regional fragmentation: troops were drawn largely from peripheral and minority groups, while northern Arabs were systematically excluded. Mohammed (1980) demonstrates that this was a deliberate strategy that embedded ethnic and regional division into Sudan's military and political culture and later shaped the country's recurring civil conflicts. These colonial legacies shaped the governance structures inherited at independence.

As Mamdani (1996) demonstrates across postcolonial Africa, colonial governance created a bifurcated state that distinguished citizens from subjects along racial and ethnic lines, concentrating civic rights among a privileged minority while subjecting peripheral populations to customary and coercive authority. Young (2012) demonstrates how Sudan inherited and reproduced this structure, as conflict is deeply rooted in the uneven development and administrative divisions imposed under Anglo-Egyptian rule, which entrenched regional inequalities and fragmented political authority. The colonial policy of "closed areas" administratively separated Sudan's Arab-identified northern regions from the African ethnic communities of the south and periphery, restricting movement, economic development, and political access (Young, 2012). British administrators further consolidated this divide by

systematically favouring Arab northern elites in education and political appointments, laying the groundwork for their postcolonial dominance (Johnson, 2016). This mirrors the broader pattern Mamdani (1996) identifies across postcolonial Africa, where inherited colonial hierarchies were reproduced and intensified rather than dismantled after independence. Rather than building an inclusive national identity, successive Sudanese governments pursued a deliberate process of Arabization, promoting Arab culture, language, and Islam as the sole basis of national belonging while systematically excluding non-Arab and non-Muslim populations from political, economic, and cultural life (Madut Jok, 2007). Musa (2010) and Madut Jok (2007) demonstrate this concretely in Sudan as they argue that since independence, three northern tribes: the Shaigiyya, Danagla, and Ja'aliyyin, have been represented in every Sudanese government, collectively dominating ministerial appointments while regions such as Darfur, Blue Nile, and Kordofan received only marginal portfolios.

This pattern continued under Sudan's most recent and longest authoritarian ruler, Omar al-Bashir, who ruled Sudan for thirty years until the December 2018 revolution. Hassan (2022) demonstrates how Bashir maintained power through a combination of torture, targeted killings, censorship, digital surveillance, repressive security laws, ethno-political manipulation, foreign alliances, and paramilitary militias. The most structurally consequential of these strategies was Tamkeen (empowerment): the systematic dismantling of Sudan's public institutions through the mass purging of the army, police, and career bureaucrats and their replacement with regime loyalists. An estimated 73,600 civil service employees were dismissed during 1989–99 alone (Sudan Democracy First Group, 2014, as cited in Elbadawi & Alhelo, 2023), leaving Sudan with a fragmented political opposition, a powerful coercive apparatus, and a severely weakened civil society (Hassan, 2022). The December 2018 uprising that eventually toppled Bashir stemmed from decades of accumulated frustration with corruption, economic decline, and state repression, exacerbated by neoliberal structural adjustment policies imposed since the 1980s (Hassanain & Sidig, 2024). Scholars link these crises to the colonial legacies described above: extractive governance, regional inequality, and exclusionary politics that concentrated power and resources in the centre while systematically underdeveloping the periphery (Elbadawi & Alhelo, 2023; Zambakari, 2023). Building on the structural dynamics outlined above, the following section examines the historical development of Sudanese women's political mobilisation, exploring how women's participation has been shaped by these broader political and historical conditions.

4.2 A history of Sudanese women's resistance

Sudanese women's political participation did not begin with the 2019 revolution. It has a history stretching back centuries, shaped by the same colonial and authoritarian forces that defined Sudan's broader political trajectory, and by women's persistent, often clandestine, resistance to them. In ancient Nubia, queens known as Kandaka ruled kingdoms, and this term continues to embody female strength and cultural pride in Sudanese society today (Karamalla-Gaiballa, 2024). This historical legacy of women's leadership is not merely symbolic: during the 2019 revolution, protester Alaa Salah's iconic image wearing the traditional thobe while leading chants deliberately invoked the Kandaka legacy, asserting that women's political authority has deep indigenous roots in Sudanese history (Ashby, 2021). As Mama (2017) argues, such acts of cultural self-definition are central to African feminist thought, challenging the colonial and patriarchal claim that women's leadership is foreign to African political life. The roots of modern Sudanese women's organised activism can be traced to early twentieth-century educational and labour mobilisation under colonial rule. In 1947, pioneering students in Omdurman founded the Educated Girls Association, and in 1951, nurses organised Sudan's first women-led public protest to challenge colonial labour laws (SIHA Network, 2021). These early mobilisations normalised women's presence and leadership in public and political spaces, laying the organisational foundations for a nationwide movement. Founded in 1952, the Sudanese Women's Union (SWU) emerged as the first mass women's organisation to articulate an explicitly feminist and anti-colonial agenda. Drawing its membership from teachers, nurses, and clerks, the SWU campaigned for universal suffrage, equal pay, and the right to hold public office, establishing branches from Port Sudan to Juba (Osman, 2014; Tønnessen & Kjøstvedt, 2010). Leaders such as Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim translated grassroots activism into formal political representation, winning a parliamentary seat in 1965 and embedding women's demands within the post-independence national charter (Tønnessen & Kjøstvedt, 2010).

Women's engagement extended beyond electoral politics into moments of revolutionary change. During the 1964 October Revolution, SWU members organised community kitchens, provided first aid, and coordinated communications within the University of Khartoum sit-in (Ahmed, 2014; SIHA Network, 2021). Similar roles re-emerged during the April 1985 uprising, when market women and student organisers sustained protests through neighbourhood networks (Marovic & Hayder, 2022). This pattern, women at the forefront of popular resistance, then marginalised in the formal political settlements that followed, would repeat itself most acutely after 2019.

Under Bashir's Islamist[2] military regime (1989–2019), formal women's organisations were banned, yet organising persisted and adapted. Feminists founded the No to Oppression Against Women Initiative in 2009. This initiative documented the public order lashings and provided legal aid, transforming rights defence into a form of political leadership (SIHA Network, 2021). Grassroots economic groups such as the Tea Sellers and Food Vendors Union reframed informal street trade into an arena for collective bargaining, expanding the women's movement beyond urban elites to include working-class women (SIHA Network, 2021). The public order laws themselves, introduced under colonial rule and later expanded by the Islamist regime to criminalise women's dress, mobility, and public presence, positioned women as a primary target of state repression and, consequently, at the forefront of organised resistance. By the time the 2019 revolution began, Sudanese women had accumulated generations of political experience, organisational knowledge, and grassroots networks built under conditions of authoritarian rule, legal repression, and ongoing conflict. What happened to this political momentum after the revolution, and why women's participation did or did not translate into formal political power, is the central question this dissertation sets out to answer. This historical trajectory demonstrates that Sudanese women's political participation is deeply rooted in long-standing practices of resistance and mobilisation. Building on this foundation, the following sections examine how these forms of political agency were expressed during the 2018–2019 revolution and how they were subsequently constrained during the transitional period.

[2] Islamism refers to the use of Islam as a source of political legitimacy and mobilisation by actors seeking to shape political and social order, rather than Islam as a religion itself (Esposito & Shahin, 2013, p. 1).

4.3 Sudanese women's role in the 2018-2019 revolution

Understanding women's central role in the December 2018 revolution requires situating it against the backdrop of three decades of Islamist military rule under Omar al-Bashir (1989–2019). As detailed in Chapter 2, Bashir's regime was characterised by systematic state repression, ethnic manipulation, the mass dismissal of civil servants through the Tamkeen policy, and the consolidation of power through paramilitary militias (Hassan, 2022; Elbadawi & Alhelo, 2023). This authoritarian order was sustained through the mechanisms identified by de Waal's (2015) Political Marketplace Framework: transactional exchanges of cash, appointments, and resource access that bound elite networks to the regime while excluding civil society from meaningful political participation. For women specifically, Bashir's regime enacted an extreme form of the patriarchal-militarist dynamic theorised by Mama and Okazawa-Rey (2012): the Public Order Law of 1996 criminalised women's dress, mobility, and presence in public space, positioning women as the regime's most visible and systematically oppressed targets. As Nugdalla (2020) demonstrates, the Islamisation of public conduct under Bashir institutionalised a particular set of values designed to control gender relations within society, using state violence as an instrument of political discipline against women, including public flogging, imprisonment, and sexual harassment. It was precisely this structural targeting that made women simultaneously the most consistently disadvantaged group under Bashir and the most organisationally prepared to resist. As Al-Nagar and Tønnessen (2020) argue, women's activism against discrimination and inequality had a long trajectory before the revolution: higher levels of gender discrimination, combined with the presence of pre-existing women's organisations, significantly increased the likelihood of women's collective protest. As the literature on African women's movements outlined in Section 3.2 confirms, political repression consistently produces organised feminist resistance, and Sudan's December revolution was no exception.

Women's participation in the revolution was central and deliberate, rooted in generations of political experience. They played a key role in mobilising and sustaining the mass protests that ultimately toppled Omar al-Bashir's thirty-year regime, and their contributions were widely recognised as essential to the revolution's success (George et al., 2019; Badri, 2020; Mohamed et al., 2023). Reports indicate that women comprised as many as 70 percent of protesters at key moments, despite facing threats, violence, and rape (George et al., 2019). More importantly, women did not participate merely as numbers. As Mama (2019) argues, African feminist movements consistently demonstrate that women are not simply 'incorporated' into political transitions; they are architects of them. In Sudan's revolution, this

architecture was concrete and organisationally specific. Women occupied leadership positions at every level of the revolutionary movement: as spokeswomen within the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), the coordinating body that planned and sustained mass protests from January 2019 onward; as founders and leaders of neighbourhood resistance committees, the decentralised groups that first formed after the 2013 uprising and by 2018 had become a strong revolutionary network, able to turn national protest calls into local action across Khartoum and beyond (Abdalla et al., 2023; Kadoda & Hale, 2020; Zunes, 2021); and as members of civil society organisations such as the No to Oppression Against Women Initiative, which ensured that feminist demands were integrated into the revolution's political platform from the outset (Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2020). The grassroots networks of working-class women, including the Tea Sellers and Food Vendors Union, were also essential: they provided the decentralised organisational infrastructure through which revolutionary mobilisation could sustain itself under conditions of state surveillance and repression (SIHA Network, 2021). The revolution was defined by its principled commitment to non-violence, known as 'Silmiya', a concept combining the Arabic words for peace, safety, and integrity, which became the movement's defining political philosophy (Awad, 2022). Silmiya was not merely a tactical choice but a political claim: it asserted that peaceful, collective mobilisation constituted a legitimate and powerful form of political agency. As the chapters that follow will examine, this principled commitment to non-violence carried profound implications for how women's political contributions were recognised once the revolution ended. As Enloe (2010) and Waylen (2007) both demonstrate, women's revolutionary labour is frequently mobilised instrumentally during upheaval while remaining structurally disconnected from post-revolutionary decision-making. Sudan's transitional period exposed precisely this dynamic.

4.4 From Revolution to exclusion: a transition without transformation

The 2019 revolution marked a critical juncture for Sudanese women's political participation, creating unprecedented space for women to contest societal norms and discrimination (Mohamed et al., 2023). The revolutionary movement was led by the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), a broad civilian coalition formed around the central goal of ending Bashir's rule, bringing together the largest political parties, professional associations, and civil society movements under a unified front (Hassanain & Sidig, 2024). Yet as protests intensified, the revolutionary agenda became a site of internal struggle: initial demands for democratic transformation were increasingly overshadowed by the national political elite within the FFC pursuing goals such as reintegration into the international economy following years of

economic sanctions (El-Gizouli, 2019). In April 2019, key figures within Bashir's own security apparatus, including Abdelfattah Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Hemeti, head of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), formed the Transitional Military Council (TMC) and ousted Bashir under mounting pressure from protesters. Rather than representing a democratic breakthrough, Bashir's fall marked the beginning of a 52-day sit-in in front of the military headquarters in Khartoum and a five-month negotiation process between the FFC and the TMC (Hassanain & Sidig, 2024). The TMC continued violent repression throughout this period, culminating in the June 3, 2019 massacre in which over 112 protesters were killed, and more than seventy cases of rape were reported (BBC News, 2019; Hassan, 2022). Despite a 36-day internet blackout and systematic intimidation, the movement staged massive demonstrations, with the historic June 30 protests, organised entirely offline, forcing the TMC back to negotiations (Hassan, 2022). A power-sharing agreement was finally reached in July 2019, mediated by the African Union, establishing a joint Sovereignty Council to govern the transitional period (Hassan, 2022).

However, despite women's visible leadership throughout the revolution, they were systematically sidelined during the negotiation process that followed Bashir's fall (Hassanain & Sidig, 2024). As Osaghae (1995) argues, democratic transitions in Africa are frequently shaped by Western liberal frameworks that obscure the structural realities of postcolonial power, and Sudan's transition was no exception: rather than a genuine democratic rupture, it was a negotiated reshuffling of elite authority in which established patriarchal networks determined who was granted access to the negotiating table (Hassanain & Sidig, 2024; Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2020). Only two women participated in the August 2019 negotiations that produced the Constitutional Declaration: Miriam Sadiq al-Mahdi, who was replaced by a man during the first month, and Mervat Hamadaneel, who struggled alone until the negotiations concluded (Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2020). This exclusion occurred even though several women's groups, including the Civil and Political Sudanese Coalition (MNSM) and the No to Oppression Against Women Initiative, were recognised signatories of the Declaration of Freedom and Change and therefore legitimate members of the FFC alliance (Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2020). As R. Abbas (2020) and Tønnessen (2020) document, women were equally excluded from the Juba Peace negotiations, with the pre-negotiation process beginning in September 2019 without women being invited at all. The justification that women lacked sufficient experience in formal political activism obscured the organisational depth they had demonstrated throughout the revolution, reproducing the patriarchal logic that had always structured Sudanese politics (Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2020). As Molyneux (1998) established,

this is a structural pattern rather than an exceptional one: women have consistently been excluded from political decision-making following protest movements in which they were prominent actors.

Although the Constitutional Declaration promised that women would comprise at least 40 percent of the transitional legislative assembly and prioritised the repeal of discriminatory laws, these commitments were not realised in practice: women held only 12 percent of cabinet seats in 2020 and a mere 3 percent of FFC central council seats (SIHA Network, 2023; Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2020). The paradox was captured in the slogans women protesters circulated widely: "You thank us in demonstrations and forget about us in negotiations" (Tønnessen, 2020). As Bauer (2012) and Waylen (2007) caution, concentrating on numerical targets obscures the deeper question of whose power is actually being transformed. Johnson (2016) shows how clientelist networks that overlap with patriarchal and ethnic politics structurally disadvantage women regardless of formal commitments. In response to this marginalisation, women's groups mobilised collectively to demand 50 percent representation in decision-making structures, with organisations across political divides, including MNSM, the Women's Union, and No to Women's Oppression, uniting behind calls for gender parity (Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2020). This mobilisation exemplifies the kind of sustained feminist pressure Section 3.3 identifies as necessary for quotas to produce substantive change. Yet it encountered precisely the conditions under which quotas most consistently fail: weak civilian institutions and deeply entrenched patriarchal networks (Ballington, 2004; Tamale, 2020), compounded in Sudan's case by the persistent dominance of military actors over the transitional process, a dynamic the existing literature has not sufficiently addressed.

Hopes for a democratic Sudan quickly faded when the military partners of the transitional government overthrew its civilian leadership in a coup in October 2021 (Nashed, 2022). As Cockburn (2010) theorises, militarisation is constitutively gendered: masculinised norms of power are embedded in military institutions as a structural logic rather than an incidental feature, and patriarchal gender relations are intersectional with political and economic power in sustaining militarised orders. Applying this framework to Sudan's transitional period reveals how militarised governance functioned not merely as a security arrangement but as a structure that defined political legitimacy itself in ways that systematically displaced women's civic authority, a dimension the existing literature has not sufficiently examined. The coup represented the full expression of what Elbadawi and Alhelo (2023) describe as the Sudan Syndrome. The failure to establish civilian governance after the 2019

revolution created a political vacuum, intensifying rivalries among military factions and ultimately leading to the ongoing counter-revolutionary war (Abbashar, 2025).

The empirical dynamics outlined in this chapter, the structural targeting of women under Bashir's militarised patriarchal regime, their central yet unacknowledged role in the revolution, and their systematic exclusion from the transitional political order, highlight the need for an analytical approach capable of holding together the colonial, patriarchal, and militarised dimensions of Sudanese women's political exclusion. Crucially, understanding how women themselves experienced and interpreted these barriers requires grounding the analysis in the epistemologies of those most affected. The chapters that follow take up this task, first outlining the methodological approach and subsequently analysing how Sudanese women activists experienced, interpreted, and navigated these structures.

Chapter 5: Methodology

5.1 Why Feminist research?

This study employs an intersectional, decolonial feminist methodology that centres Sudanese women's lived experiences, political knowledge, and critiques as vital to understanding exclusion, grounded in African feminist calls for context-specific and African-centred approaches to knowledge production (Steady, 2005, pp. 313–314). The decolonial dimension of this methodology challenges colonial power structures in knowledge production (Quijano, 2007, p. 168) by creating space for Sudanese women to define themselves and describe their own realities, rather than being represented by external researchers (Smith, 1999). As Smith (1999, p. 1) notes, research is never neutral but shaped by power, history, and representation. I therefore approach this work as a deliberate, situated, and accountable practice, grounded in the understanding that how knowledge is produced is as politically significant as what that knowledge claims.

Many Sudanese women who participated in the revolution identify as feminists, and all individuals interviewed also identified as such. Choosing a theoretical framework and methodological approach that aligns with their self-identification was essential to honour their political identities and affirm their agency as knowledge producers.

Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002, p. 9) argue that "decisions about methodology are particularly powerful in the politics and practices of knowledge production," and that feminist research has a responsibility to make those politics visible rather than obscure them. Following

Hesse-Biber & Clarke (2007) this means prioritising the insights and lived experiences of participants over those of the researcher, and treating knowledge as something co-produced through the research relationship rather than extracted from it. In the context of this study, that commitment shaped not only who was interviewed and how, but what counts as political knowledge in the first place; a question that sits at the heart of this dissertation.

5.2 Research design, data collection and analysis

I employed qualitative research methods, specifically in-depth, semi-structured, and open-ended interviews within a feminist framework to gather data. These tools were chosen for their ability to capture the complexity of Sudanese women activists' lived realities and reflections (Hesse-Biber, 2014). The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed me to respond dynamically to participants 'insights, opening space for co-created conversations. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to speak on their experiences of inclusion and exclusion, tensions within the women's movement, and their feminist visions for Sudan's future. This approach aligns with Alexander and Mohanty's (2010) call for feminist praxis grounded in relational and dialogical knowledge-making. In this sense, each interview became a space of mutual reflection and meaning-making, rather than solely data extraction. To ensure accuracy, reliability, and uphold ethical transparency, all interviews were audio-recorded with participants 'explicit verbal consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis. To ensure the credibility of findings, I draw on several strategies: checking patterns across participants with diverse backgrounds, regions, and positionalities; situating their accounts within broader political contexts; and continuously reflecting on how my own position shaped my interpretation (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Where possible, I shared early interpretations with colleagues at SIHA and PAX who are part of or work closely with Sudanese civil society, to check whether my reading of the data felt accurate to people closer to the context than I am.

This research draws on one-on-one interviews with nine Sudanese activists, all of whom were engaged, each in their own way, in Sudan's 2018–2019 revolution and/or the subsequent political transition. The sample was deliberately composed of Sudanese feminists, reflecting a commitment to centring those most often excluded from dominant political and academic narratives. Interviewees included activists, NGO staff, independent feminists, grassroots organisers, academics, former UN staff, and peacebuilders, and identified themselves variously as feminist, afro-feminist, pro-feminist, or active citizens. The study included participants of diverse ages, regions, and religious backgrounds, representing areas such as Khartoum, Darfur,

Kassala, Blue Nile, Omdurman, as well as members of the Sudanese diaspora. One male participant was included, recognising the importance of male allies in feminist struggles while ensuring that most of the space remained centred on women's voices. Two participants were based in Sudan, two lived in the diaspora, and five were currently displaced in other East African countries due to the ongoing war.

Most interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours and were conducted online between May and August 2025, while two participants responded asynchronously via WhatsApp voice notes. An overview of the participants is provided in Table 1. Some identifying details, such as precise locations and affiliations, have been generalised or omitted to protect participants ' anonymity.

Name	Age	Region of origin	Current location/status	Education	Self-identification
Abeer	Not disclosed	Blue Nile	Blue Nile	Not disclosed	Feminist, grassroots organiser
Amal	46	Khartoum - Omdurman	Diaspora	Master's degree	Mother/professional/feminist/activist
Dalia	26	Not disclosed	Kassala	Bachelor's degree	Feminist, journalist
Layla	45	Blue Nile	Displaced	Post graduate	Women activist
Mariam	35	Darfur	Displaced	Post graduate	Feminist activist / peacemaker
Nadia	36	Northern Sudan	Displaced	Post graduate	Feminist, writer, researcher
Jamal	48	Not disclosed	Diaspora	Master's degree	Professional / 'pro' feminist
Rania	33	Darfur	Displaced	Bachelor's degree	Feminist, humanitarian professional, human rights defender
Salma	38	North State	Displaced	Post graduate	Professional

Table 1. Overview of participants (eight Sudanese women and 1 Sudanese man)

To identify participants, I drew on personal and professional networks established through my involvement in a community space in Utrecht, where I co-organised cultural events about Sudan and the 2019 revolution with members of the Sudanese diaspora, and later through my eight-month internship at PAX, a Dutch INGO, in collaboration with their partner organisation SIHA, a regional feminist NGO with long-standing operations across Sudan. After the first four interviews arranged through these networks, I adopted snowball sampling, where existing participants recruited additional participants from their own networks (Naderifar et al., 2017, p. 2). While this method carries limitations regarding sampling bias, it was strategically appropriate here: the first interviewees were activists with networks extending into Sudan's marginalised and war-affected regions, allowing me to reach women from historically marginalised areas who would otherwise have been inaccessible to an outside researcher.

I analysed my interviews using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I read and re-read the interview transcripts, identified recurring patterns in what participants said, and organised these into themes. I then interpreted these themes using feminist and intersectional theory, which helps examine how power, gender inequality, and intersecting identities shaped participants' experiences. This analytic process was iterative and reflexive, consistent with Braun and Clarke's emphasis on the active role of the researcher in knowledge production (p. 40), which I expand on in the following section.

5.3 Reflexivity and positionality

This research emerges from a commitment to reciprocity and solidarity with Sudanese women's struggles. I am rooted in principles of reciprocity, standing in solidarity and giving back the findings to the interviewees, as well as sharing them with PAX and SIHA to amplify the voices of Sudanese women in institutional spaces. Feminist scholars have long emphasised that research is never neutral, and that we must avoid reproducing or reinforcing existing structures of subordination through our work (Haraway, 1988; Mama, 2007). Reflexivity then becomes an essential tool that can help in continuously critically interrogating and re-interrogating our research methods, motivations, and the power dynamics that shape both the research process and its outcomes.

I approach this research from my standpoint as a white, North-European, middle-class, cisgender woman working in a context far removed from my own lived experience. As Haraway (1988) argues, all knowledge is situated and shaped by specific locations, identities, and power relations, and acknowledging that situatedness is what makes research accountable rather than merely objective in appearance. The structural distance between my positionality and that of my participants is significant: I operate from a context of relative safety and democratic protection, which is incomparable to the layered violence, exclusion, and surveillance faced by Sudanese women under authoritarian, militarised regimes and conditions of war. This means I cannot claim insider understanding of their experiences and must remain critically aware of how my interpretive lens, shaped by privilege and distance, risks distorting or flattening the complexity of what participants shared. As Mohanty (1988) reminds us, it is crucial to reflect critically on the politics of speaking about and with others across global, racialised, and postcolonial divides. This research, therefore, strives to centre Sudanese women's lived experiences and political knowledges, while remaining reflexively aware of my own role in shaping how these are interpreted, framed, and represented. Following Mama (2007), I remain attentive to the risks of epistemic violence: of framing Sudanese women primarily through

lenses of marginalisation or victimhood. This research instead seeks to amplify their agency, political creativity, and resistance. I do not write from a place of authority over their experiences, but from a responsibility to listen, create space, and represent their narratives with care, humility, and solidarity. Becoming a feminist researcher, then, is not a label I claim, but a political and ethical practice I remain committed to, always unfinished, always in process.

5.4 Ethical considerations

All participants were provided with informed consent forms. Given the volatile and repressive political environment in Sudan, confidentiality and anonymity were prioritised to protect participants 'safety. Participants were therefore assigned pseudonyms rather than numerical identifiers in order to avoid reducing them to abstract data points and to recognise them as individuals within the research process (Lahman et al., 2015). This decision was not merely procedural but ethical: participation in this research carries real political risk, as discussing activism, resistance, and women's organising in a wartime context may have serious repercussions for those involved. The research received ethical clearance from ISCTE's ethics committee, and all data were stored in encrypted formats. Emotional safety was also prioritised, with participants given the option to withdraw, skip questions, or pause interviews to allow time for reflection. Language presented both a challenge and an ethical consideration: because educated, urban, English-speaking voices tend to dominate women's movements, genuine intersectional inclusion required reaching women from rural and marginalised areas where Arabic is the primary language of political and everyday life. To address this barrier without overburdening participants already facing extremely difficult circumstances, I collaborated with a colleague at PAX to translate interview questions into Arabic. These were sent via WhatsApp, allowing two participants to respond with voice notes at their convenience. While this asynchronous method created a greater distance between participants and me compared to real-time interviews, it enabled the inclusion of voices often overlooked in English-speaking feminist spaces. As Mavhandu-Mudzusi et al. (2022) demonstrate, WhatsApp can serve as a valuable methodological tool that fosters access, flexibility, and cultural relevance in contexts where in-person or synchronous interviews are not feasible.

5.5 Limitations

Several limitations shaped what this study can and cannot claim. First, all participants held higher education degrees, meaning that the experiences of less formally educated women, particularly those from rural and conflict-affected areas, remain underrepresented even within this study's commitment to intersectional inclusion. Second, all participants identified as feminist or pro-feminist, meaning the findings reflect a specifically feminist interpretation of political participation, and women who were equally active in the revolution but do not identify with feminism may articulate their experiences differently. The ongoing war made in-person fieldwork impossible, and online interviews brought practical limitations, including occasional interruptions due to unstable internet connections and reduced relational depth. Finally, as discussed in section 6.3, my positionality as a white, North-European researcher shapes how participants' accounts were interpreted and framed, a limitation no methodological strategy can fully resolve but which reflexive practice aims to make visible and accountable.

Chapter 6: Analysis

This chapter presents the findings and analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with 8 Sudanese women activists and one male activist, situating their testimonies within the literature and the broader theoretical frameworks. The chapter is structured into two parts, each addressing one of the dissertation's research questions.

6.1 Structural factors and their operation: intersecting systems of exclusion

In this section, I address the first research question: what structural factors have shaped women's political participation during Sudan's post-2019 transitional period, and how have these factors operated? Combining insights from the literature with findings from the interviews, I analyse how participants understand the historical and structural forces that shaped Sudan's transitional political landscape.

6.1.1 Militarised masculinities: patriarchy and militarism

Interviewees consistently described the post-revolutionary transition as one dominated by militarised masculinities in which patriarchal norms defined political legitimacy through coercive male-led authority. This dynamic reflects what Mama & Okazawa-Rey (2012) identify as a broader pattern across postcolonial Africa, where societies "emerged from colonial rule to remain imbued with a patriarchal militarist logic that is authoritarian and anti-democratic" (p. 99). However, the Sudanese case shows not only that militarism reinforces patriarchy, but that

militarised authority actively restructures the terms of political legitimacy during transitions, redefining who counts as a political subject. Among my interviewees, Amal's testimony illustrates how these militarised and patriarchal forms of political authority shaped the experiences of women who had played visible roles in the revolution. Amal is a 46-year-old activist from Omdurman, one of the three cities that form Sudan's capital, Khartoum. Of mixed Arab and Nuba heritage, her commitment to social justice was shaped early by her grandfather, a respected community leader in the agricultural region of El Gezira who worked to empower small-scale farmers, particularly women from ethnically marginalised communities. With long-standing involvement in civil society and women's organising, she reflected on how women who had been highly visible during the revolution later experienced exclusion from formal political decision-making during the transition:

> The same woman who risked everything… were shut out of the formal transition process. Women's groups and individual activists called for inclusion, but they were sidelined by the militarised, male-led structures (Amal, author's interview, Microsoft Teams, 13.06.2025).

Amal's phrase "shut out" suggests active exclusion, rather than passive oversight. Women did not simply fail to gain access to political processes but were actively prevented from participating despite their demonstrated leadership during the revolution, reflecting feminist critiques of state-centred frameworks of political participation that privilege formal institutional access over collective political action (Lewis, 2009, p. 212; Ernst, Pagot, & Prá, 2024). This exclusion happened at the negotiations between the Transitional Military Council (TMC) and the Forces of Freedom and Change coalition (FFC) that established Sudan's interim government framework (Ali & Kazemi, 2023). Amal's reference to women being "sidelined by militarised, male-led structures" points to the institutional mechanisms of exclusion. African feminist scholars Mama & Okazawa-Rey (2012) note that this characterises postcolonial African governance and that undermines all non-military forms of political and institutional authority. These structures were not accidentally male-dominated; rather, as Amal explains, they were "militarised", which Mama & Okazawa-Rey (2012) define as an extreme variant of patriarchy that subordinates and oppresses women, as well as non-dominant men. Thus, in Sudan's transitional period, these militarised structures reproduced gendered hierarchies that delegitimised women's peaceful, strategic forms of political organisation. Importantly, this suggests that exclusion was not incidental but structurally embedded in the governance logic of the transition itself.

Another participant, Nadia, a 36-year-old feminist writer and researcher from Northern Sudan who participated in the revolution as both a protester and a documenter, reflected on how militarised notions of political legitimacy constrained women's political agency during the transition:

> Hemedti [leader of the paramilitary group RSF] … said, 'if you don't fight, you don't have an opinion.' … And the women are not up in arms, so their ability to manoeuvre and challenge the political space is very difficult (Nadia, author's interview, Microsoft Teams, 09.05.2025).

Hemedti's statement articulates a systemic redefinition of political legitimacy as violence. The phrase "if you don't fight, you don't have an opinion" suggests that violence is the only way to assert your political voice. This redefinition renders women's demonstrated capacities for mass mobilisation, strategic organisation, sustained resistance, and coalition-building politically irrelevant precisely because they were non-violent. In this way, the transition reproduced the hierarchies the revolution had sought to dismantle, systematically excluding women from governance because, as Nadia says, they were "not up in arms." As Amal and Nadia highlight, patriarchal militarised structures shaped who counted as a legitimate political subject and who was denied access to the transitional government. Yet exclusion during the transition also operated through subtler patriarchal mechanisms, functioning as a form of moral surveillance.

Salma, a 38-year-old entrepreneur from Sudan's urban Northern State, who has supported women in setting up small businesses and is currently displaced due to the war, reflected on how women's revolutionary visibility in street protests became a vulnerability as political participation shifted into more formal party structures during the transitional period:

> It's more about a social or cultural thing... Women were very active in the street in the demonstration. When it comes to [institutional] political participation... the number decreased... They could attack women by photos or stories that tell this is a bad woman... Such kinds of stories, can attack women and impact women very bad, more than men (Salma, author's interview, Microsoft Teams, 10.07.2025).

Salma highlights how patriarchal control intensified when it came to formal political engagement. Her reference to attacks through "photos or stories that tell this woman is a bad woman" illustrates how patriarchal norms of moral respectability became a political weapon during the formation of the transitional government. By questioning women's morality, patriarchal norms create gendered risks that men rarely face, turning respectability politics into a mechanism of exclusion that polices women's participation in the political arena (Tamale, 2018). Significantly, this exclusion extends even into activist spaces supposedly supporting

gender equality, revealing the persistence of patriarchal norms despite women's proven revolutionary capabilities. African women's political activism has long been shaped by both collective struggles and gendered oppression. As Kuumba (2002, cited in Tamale, 2020) observes, women resisted colonial and racial domination while simultaneously confronting structural sexism within liberation movements.

Jamal, a 48-year-old man with extensive experience in international NGOs, including involvement in legal reform initiatives on Sudan's rape law and implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 to support Sudanese women's participation in peace processes, was included as the sole male participant. His self-identification as a feminist and his long-standing engagement with women's rights advocacy mean his male perspective offers critical insight into how patriarchal structures operate from within, revealing dynamics that women participants may not always have access to. Jamal's account exemplifies the dynamic identified by Kuumba (2002, cited in Tamale, 2020) in contemporary Sudan. Reflecting on how patriarchal norms continued to shape interactions within protest spaces ostensibly committed to gender equality, he noted:

> A person can be very active, politically active, can be on the front lines in the demonstrations, but when the police come, they're [other men demonstrating] like, 'girls, go on that side, stay back. We don't want you to get hurt'. Pretending to be protecting them, but actually it's lowering the role of women in the revolution (Jamal, author's interview, Microsoft Teams, 12.06.2025).

This "protective" discourse illustrates how even well-intentioned male allies can reproduce patriarchal hierarchies by positioning women as vulnerable and in need of male protection from violence. In doing so, men reaffirm their masculinity - the set of gendered norms dictating how boys and men are expected to think and behave (Enloe, 2007). As Jamal points out, this ultimately diminishes women's political agency, even when women proved themselves to be primary political actors in the revolution. This dynamic is widely observed in post-colonial African contexts, where women's revolutionary labour is decoupled from post-transition political power (Geiger, 1997; Turshen, 2002; Tripp et al., 2008).

6.1.2 Patriarchal institutional exclusion: legal discrimination, religious and colonial legacies

Sudan's legal framework created institutional barriers that systematically excluded women from political participation by criminalising their autonomy and constraining their public presence. Under Omar al-Bashir's thirty-year Islamic regime (1989-2019), the Public Order Law exemplified this dynamic, imposing surveillance and control over women's bodies, mobility,

and behaviour. However, as A. A. G. Abbas (2015) shows, this regulation extended beyond the policing of morality to the production of gendered political space, actively undermining women's legitimacy as public actors and rendering their presence in political arenas inherently suspect. Understanding how patriarchal exclusion is institutionalised requires examining both contemporary laws and their historical roots in colonial legacies. Sudan's current systems of women's exclusion cannot be fully understood without acknowledging their colonial foundations. Colonial rule established legal, administrative, and social structures that created precedents for the systematic marginalisation of women, providing the institutional framework that subsequent regimes adapted and expanded. Amal's testimony illuminates the direct continuities between colonial and contemporary legal discrimination:

> The public rule, the public order law was, for example, introduced during the colonial rule and later on expanded by the Islamist regimes to criminalise women, you know, everyday life, like how you dress, how you move, where to go (Amal, 13.06.2025).

Tamale (2020) argues that colonialism is not a historical residue but a living legacy, continuously reproduced and re-legitimised through contemporary legal and political structures. Amal's account illustrates precisely this dynamic: rather than being solely a product of Islamist fundamentalism, the Public Order Law represents the expansion of colonial mechanisms of bodily control, absorbed into new ideological frameworks that preserved their fundamental function while lending them religious legitimacy.

Beyond legal and institutional mechanisms, colonial rule also established racial hierarchies and regional divisions that profoundly shaped which women could access political power. Rania, a 33-year-old feminist and human rights defender from the historically marginalised area of South Darfur, who is currently displaced in Nairobi, reflected on how British colonial rule laid the foundations for racialised and regional marginalisation in Sudan:

> Colonialism worked to create closed areas and established the beginning of marginalisation and separation between Sudanese communities (Rania, author's interview, WhatsApp voice notes, 20.08.2025).

The "closed areas" Rania references were British colonial policies that administratively separated Sudan's "Arab" northern regions from southern and peripheral regions inhabited by non-Arab, African ethnic groups, restricting movement, economic development, and political participation in these marginalised areas (Madut Jok, 2007). This colonial architecture of separation created enduring racial hierarchies that continued long after independence. As Jamal noted:

> People who are more African in their looks, in their ethnicities, were less privileged during the colonisation era, and this continued. (Jamal, 12.06.2025).

Amal also described how these colonial racial hierarchies persist in contemporary Sudanese society:

> People from the north look down upon the people from the South and like you're black, we're Arab, quote on quote, because we're not even Arab (Amal, 13.06.2025).

Amal's phrase "quote on quote" reveals the constructed nature of these racial categories: northern Sudanese elites claim Arab identity despite their African ancestry, maintaining social hierarchies that privilege Arabized identity over African identity (Madut Jok, 2007). As Oyěwùmí (1997) demonstrates, social hierarchy in many African contexts has historically been structured not only around gender but around intersecting axes of lineage, ethnicity, and colonial status. This dynamic is clearly visible here, where racial categories imposed and hardened under colonial rule continue to organise political access in postcolonial Sudan, independent of and in combination with gendered exclusion. Amal emphasises how these colonial legacies still impact women's lives today, showing how post-independence regimes inherited rather than dismantled these hierarchies, ensuring that even politically sophisticated women remained sidelined:

> Everyone else was just excluded [from the transitional government]. This exactly mirrors what happened years ago when the colonials were ruling. So everything was just constructed. As a male domain, you know, like colonial male domain, same with the military rules. So it mirrors the same, you know, from what happened before. Women, no matter how politically sophisticated or civically engaged, were seen as secondary. They were not included, although they were at the forefront of this (Amal, 13.06.2025).

Layla, a women's activist from Blue Nile region, with long-standing engagement in feminist and community organizing, further emphasized how patriarchal exclusion is not only institutional but also reinforced through dominant religious interpretations:

> Even patriarchy is in our religious system... Muslims, they are always advocating for the women to be stayed at home, not to occupy public spaces and for me this is not exactly [what Islam is about] but the interpretation of the religion itself is affecting that (Layla, author's interview, Microsoft Teams, 09.07.2025).

After the 2019 revolution and the fall of Al-Bashir's regime, the transitional period followed, and Sudan's 2019 Constitutional Charter promised legal reforms, including that women should

comprise no less than 40% of the Transitional Legislative Council (constituteproject.org, 2022). Yet, the transitional government largely failed to implement these reforms, and women remained underrepresented (R. Abbas, 2020). As Amal notes:

> These laws [the public order law] still linger culturally, even after these years of like rebel, these years of like, you know, development and progression…because you continue to frame them into the Islamic structures to make them even more formal (Amal, 13.06.2025).

Amal and Layla's testimonies demonstrate that even after political change, patriarchal norms endure through cultural and institutional practices. Sudan's transitional experience thus confirms feminist critiques of quota-based inclusion in Africa, which highlight a persistent gap between formal commitments and political practice when patriarchal and militarised power structures remain intact (Waylen, 2007; Bauer, 2012; Tamale, 2020). Yet the findings extend this critique by demonstrating that in militarised hybrid transitions, quotas may function less as tools of redistribution and more as instruments of symbolic legitimation within elite-controlled settlements. Amal's reflection on the transitional period encapsulates this argument precisely:

> So militarism, patriarchal, colonial logic, they all convey to reinforce the exclusion of women and place women at the margins, even though they led the revolution (Amal, 13.06.2025).

6.1.3 The revolutionary paradox: from leadership to marginalisation

The previous section demonstrated how women's political exclusion during the transitional period was embedded in interlocking systems of patriarchy, militarism, colonial legacies, and religious interpretations. Building on this, the following subsection examines how these structural factors operated in practice. It examines the mechanisms through which Sudanese women's revolutionary leadership was depoliticised and their legitimacy diminished in the aftermath of the revolution. Drawing on African feminist, intersectional, and Political Marketplace perspectives outlined in Chapters 3 and 4, the section analyses not whether women participated politically, but how revolutionary legitimacy was reprocessed by a postcolonial, militarised governance system that redefined who could translate participation into decision-making power. To illustrate how these dynamics have operated in practice, Nadia's account offers a conceptual lens for understanding the depoliticisation of women's revolutionary leadership. She describes Sudan's political system as a militarised marketplace:

> Sudan's governance structure is akin to a marketplace. Loyalties are sold, and this marketplace in Sudan is militarised, because men with arms rule it… Women are not

> represented in this political marketplace… I don't feel that women will have equality in Sudan unless the militarised marketplace is changed (Nadia, 09.05.2025).

Nadia's account reveals how patriarchal militarism has redefined political subjectivity itself: political voice becomes equated with the capacity for violence, excluding women by design. This reflects the Political Marketplace Framework (de Waal, 2015), in which political authority is produced through monetised and militarised transactions rather than civic legitimacy. Within such a system, women's revolutionary contributions, rooted in non-violent and collective mobilisation, could not be converted into political power because they did not align with the governing logic of the marketplace. Her statement illuminates how militarised masculinities underpin both elite political practices and the systemic marginalisation of women in Sudanese governance, aligning with Mama & Okazawa-Rey (2012) that militarism entrenches gendered hierarchies and constrains women's political participation. The PMF further illustrates how military, security, and political elites, whose authority traces back to colonial-era governance hierarchies (Sharkey, 2007), were able to appropriate women's revolutionary momentum through what Táíwò (2022) terms "elite capture", as discussed in section 3.4. Amal describes how this manifested after the 2019 revolution:

> The political transition failed to carry forward the spirit of feminism or feminist-led grassroots organising into institutional power sharing... They came, they took something that was not theirs. They took the revolution, they took young people's spirits and voices, and they claimed that it is theirs… Different military groups there, the different warlords, the different security elites, they came forward and they captured the success and claimed it as theirs… Everyone else was just excluded (Amal, 13.06.2025).

For Táíwò (2022), elite capture is a predictable structural outcome of unequal power relations rather than an aberration. In Sudan, postcolonial nationalist and military elites appropriated the symbolic capital generated by feminist mobilisation without redistributing political power to the women who produced it. The few women included in the transitional process were incorporated on elite terms, rendering their participation symbolic rather than transformative. This dynamic describes Dalia directly:

> They are just bringing women to say that we are working for women… you're just here, but you can't actually take action (Dalia, author's interview, Microsoft Teams, 09.06.2025).

Layla reinforces this point:

> It's like they just put them to show that we are hiring women in a decision-making position. But in reality those women, they are not really effective… the decision is like make (sic) or taken by the men. (Layla, 09.07.2025).

These accounts confirm the descriptive-substantive gap identified in section 2.3 (Waylen, 2007; Bauer, 2012): in Sudan's transitional context, women's inclusion functioned as symbolic legitimation rather than a redistribution of decision-making authority. This tokenism operates through strategic selection: male elites exclude women genuinely committed to transformative change while co-opting those willing to align with patriarchal agendas. Nadia explains how this mechanism of elite capture fragments women's political agency:

> The fact that women are very much tying themselves to patriarchal political parties, it is limiting the space they have to manoeuvre. Because the patriarchal political parties have interests, and their interests do not necessarily take into consideration the women's agenda (Nadia, 09.05.2025).

Nadia further distinguishes between different types of elite women in politics, acknowledging that alignment with patriarchal structures is not always driven by genuine conviction:

> Women elite that are already known in the field, which is okay, some of them are really good and genuine, but also some of them are part of this polarisation. Because they have a vested interest in something, because there is a lot of political money, so part of them are getting this political money. So you can not really engage them, if you are getting paid for taking a stance and a perspective, there is no point (Nadia, 09.05.2025).

Nadia's account reveals how elite capture operates not by excluding all women but by selectively co-opting some while marginalising others based on access to political financing: a gendered dimension of the PMF that de Waal (2015; 2019) does not account for. Women who align with patriarchal structures for financial gain become invested in the very system that marginalises women collectively, fragmenting solidarity and preventing collective action. This differentiation among women challenges any treatment of women as a homogenous group and points to the necessity of an intersectional approach to understanding political exclusion. This finding aligns with African feminist critiques of liberal feminism that treat “women” as a unified political category, overlooking how class, access to resources, and proximity to power shape divergent political trajectories (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Mama, 2019; Mohanty, 2003).

Where Nadia exposed the class-based fractures within women’s political participation, Rania, a 33-year-old feminist humanitarian professional and veterinarian from South Darfur, from the Bargo Silihab African tribe, extends this framework to encompass multiple axes of difference that determine who can participate and on what terms. She was actively involved in

revolutionary and professional organising, including with the Sudanese Professionals Association. Now displaced in Nairobi, she spoke from lived experience of regional marginalisation, gendered exclusion, and grassroots mobilisation:

> Intersections such as region, class, economic situation, and profession clearly affect the participation or the lack of it... All these affect the power relations between the different groups and affect and restrict the level of political participation (Rania, 20.08.2025).

Rania directly invokes Crenshaw's (1998) insistence that systems of oppression do not solely add up, but they multiply. This multi-axial understanding resonates with Oyěwùmí's (1997) challenge to gender as the universal primary lens of analysis and is grounded in Badri's (2006) demonstration that Sudanese women's opportunities for political inclusion are not determined by gender alone but are mediated by shifting hierarchies of race, religion, class, and ethnicity. In other words, women's experiences of marginalisation depend on how different systems of power overlap in their lives. Moreover, as Badri (2006) shows specifically in the Sudanese context, these overlapping hierarchies have long shaped which women access feminist spaces and formal political arenas in the first place. Abeer, a feminist activist from Sudan's historically marginalised Blue Nile region, spoke from lived experience of regional marginalisation to reflect on women's political exclusion in the post-2019 transitional period:

> The political participation of women after 2019 is very weak, it only happens in the city. Because according to the Juba peace agreement, the people who were part of it, they got to choose the women who would participate in the political arena, and they would choose women who are in line with their political views. So we didn't feel that the women in this government represents us, or the women of Blue Nile (Abeer, author's interview, via WhatsApp voice notes, 21.07.2025).

Applying Crenshaw's (1998) intersectional framework in a Sudanese context reveals how gendered exclusion operated through colonial and postcolonial centre–periphery hierarchies. Women from marginalised regions such as Blue Nile experienced exclusion not only as women, but as racialised and regionalised subjects within a governance system historically structured to privilege urban, Arab-identified elites. Abeer's testimony illustrates this directly. The women from Blue Nile, a historically marginalised region subjected to systemic discrimination driven by racial hierarchies (Madut Jok, 2007; Young, 2012), found themselves doubly excluded: first as women, and second as women from a peripheral non-Arab region. The Juba Peace Agreement's selection mechanisms did not solely reproduce gender inequalities or class divides; they inscribed racialised patterns of exclusion between the urban elites and marginalised regions into the very architecture of women's political representation.

Together, these accounts show how gender quotas and formal inclusion mechanisms can be appropriated and captured through intersecting systems of oppression. The women "chosen" to participate were urban, aligned with existing political structures, and drawn from regions and ethnic groups already positioned closer to political power (Badri, 2006; Hassanain & Sidig, 2024). This dynamic reflects Crenshaw's foundational theory on intersectionality, which reveals how overlapping structures of subordination shape access to power and representation. When such intersections are ignored, with policies designed to promote inclusion, such as gender quotas, there is a risk of reinforcing, rather than dismantling, the hierarchies they aim to address.

6.2 Sudanese women understanding, experiencing, and pursuing meaningful political participation

As explored in the previous section, women face multiple and mutually reinforcing barriers to political participation in Sudan. This section addresses the second research question: how do Sudanese women activists understand, experience, and pursue meaningful political participation across formal and informal political arenas? The analysis draws on interview accounts reflecting lived experiences and political aspirations shaped by structural constraints. While not all testimonies refer directly to the transitional period, they offer critical insights into how women themselves define meaningful participation and the challenges they encounter in pursuing it. Importantly, all interviewees linked the ongoing war to women's exclusion from the transitional process and the systemic barriers discussed above. The findings reveal three interconnected dimensions: how participants understand and redefine meaningful participation beyond formal inclusion; how they experience the gap between revolutionary contribution and political recognition; and what strategies they pursue to claim political agency across formal and informal arenas. For Amal, understanding what meaningful political participation looks like is inseparable from understanding what its absence produces. When asked about her vision for women's political inclusion, she did not begin with representation targets or institutional access, rather, she began with the ongoing war:

> This is what led to the chaos that is happening now because these voices [feminist-led grassroots organisations] who actually toppled the authoritarian regime, they were not included in any peaceful negotiation, they were not included in any political transition in Sudan (Amal, 13.06.2025).

Amal's point is clear: the war was a predictable result of excluding women from the transition. Rather than framing women's exclusion as a moral failure, Amal's account situates it as a

structural driver of instability, reinforcing feminist analyses that link militarised governance and elite-led peace processes to recurrent violence when grassroots political knowledge is excluded (Mama & Okazawa-Rey, 2012; Enloe, 2010). The feminist-led grassroots movements that mobilised the revolution and sustained resistance against the Bashir regime possessed crucial knowledge about Sudanese society, grassroots networks, and coalition-building across differences, aligning with Hassanain & Sidig (2024) and Kadoda & Hale (2020), that Sudanese women were very capable of being in a position of political power. When analysing the interviews from a decolonial intersectional feminist perspective, the interviews suggest two key orientations: first, in redefining what meaningful inclusion entails according to Sudanese women activists and allies themselves; and second, in developing strategies that are rooted in Sudanese histories, cultural legacies, and feminist grassroots practices rather than externally imposed models. Regarding a redefinition of inclusion, Amal emphasised that:

> Meaningful inclusion isn't just at the table. It is the power to set the agenda... I want to be involved before decisions are made… Inclusion of women from all classes, from all ethnicities, from all regions, not just the elite circle (Amal, 13.06.2025).

Amal's vision rejects presence as sufficient. This critique echoes feminist challenges to liberal models of political inclusion that equate participation with physical presence or numerical representation, while leaving agenda-setting power intact within patriarchal and militarised institutions (Waylen, 2007; Mama, 2017). The liberal feminist model of inclusion, exemplified by quotas, focuses on getting women "at the table" where decisions are made. Amal argues this is inadequate because it grants women access to discussions only after the terms have been set by others (typically male political and military elites). In Sudan's transitional context, this meant women were sometimes invited to endorse agreements already negotiated between the military and political parties, rather than participating in defining what issues should be negotiated in the first place. Furthermore, Amal emphasises the need for class, ethnic, and regional diversity in women's representation, noting that Sudan's "elite circle" of educated, Khartoum-based, Arabic and English-speaking women has long dominated formal politics. While these women face gendered barriers, they do not experience the compounded marginalisation of rural, displaced, or ethnically marginalised women, whose priorities are different from those of elite women, such as access to education and security from violence.

From an intersectional perspective, Amal's emphasis highlights how gendered exclusion is mediated through class, region, and ethnicity, reinforcing African feminist critiques that treating women as a singular political constituency obscures hierarchies reproduced within

women's representation itself (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Anyidoho, 2021). Jamal makes Amal's critique tangible by contrasting the realities of elite women representatives with those of marginalised women they claim to represent:

> The women… sitting in the hotel… will never think of the tea seller lady who's sitting under a tree selling tea to sexual harassers… They will be thinking of their issues (Jamal, 12.06.2025).

His example of the tea seller exposes the failures of representation without intersectional consciousness: while elite women in air-conditioned hotels negotiate policy positions, working-class women face harassment as part of their daily struggle for survival. Lacking the lived experience to prioritise the everyday concerns of ordinary Sudanese women, elite women fail to address structural vulnerabilities. The tea seller, unable to withdraw from hostile public spaces without risking her livelihood, illustrates how class and economic precarity shape women's exposure to gendered violence. As Jamal shows, elite women prioritise different issues than those in rural or informal urban contexts, aligning with Basu (2010), who argues that ordinary women focus on the gendered dimensions of socioeconomic inequality, such as access to healthcare, housing, and employment, rather than abstract constitutional reforms. Drawing on the metaphor of bending a long-curled paper in the opposite direction, Jamal framed this as a call for affirmative action:

> It's not positive discrimination… It's called affirmative action… bring less people from the most privileged, bring more people from the less privileged (Jamal, 12.06.2025).

While giving examples of how meaningful participation should look like, Jamal's insights also confirm the previous section's central argument: rigid quotas like the 40% women's quota reproduce elite dominance when implemented within existing power structures. Without affirmative action addressing intersecting inequalities of class, ethnicity, region, and economic status, representation remains captured by those proximate to power. The tea seller becomes invisible not because women aren't "at the table," but because the women at the table share more structural interests with male elites than with marginalised women. Beyond redefining inclusion at elite levels, Layla and Abeer stressed the importance of building women's grassroots capacity so that they can represent themselves. Layla articulates this clearly:

> We need to build the capacity of the grassroots women to advocate for their rights, to advocate for their representation. (Layla, 09.07.2025).

Abeer described how this capacity-building works in practice in the historically marginalised region of Blue Nile state:

> One of the strategies that we started to use as feminist group in Blue Nile, which is the idea of raising awareness within the women themselves… One of the first things we started doing after 2019, is to mobilise women within small organisations to work on raising awareness. So we started to organise sessions to talk about the rights of women, their duties and talk about how we could get our rights and we try to talk and document the needs of women (Abeer, 21.07.2025).

In this context, capacity-building involves three interconnected practices: raising awareness about rights and systemic barriers, organising women into collective local structures, and documenting their specific needs. As Abeer's work in Blue Nile shows, these efforts aim to enable women who are often excluded from formal education and politics to understand, articulate, and advocate for their rights collectively. By centring awareness-raising, collective organising, and documentation as political acts, these practices challenge elite and institutional definitions of participation and align with African feminist understandings of politics as embedded in everyday struggles rather than formal state spaces (Mama, 2019; Batliwala, 2012). As Layla observed:

> No, there was no weak participation, but I can say weak participation in a decision-making position, yeah, but the woman they are participating in the grassroots layer and the middle layer. But when you come to a high position or high political decision-making, there is a gap there (Layla, 09.07.2025).

Layla's observation echoes Tønnessen and Kjøstvedt's (2010) findings that Sudanese activism targeting grassroots women is not always developed through genuine dialogue with the very women it seeks to empower. Building on this critique, Layla advocates for strategic engagement with elite women's movements to foster more inclusive change:

> Advocacy, building the capacity of grassroots actors, holding dialogue and discussion among the elites and let them understand that is this is a violation of the other side. And, using different tools to bring them to come together (Layla, 09.07.2025)

While Layla emphasizes leveraging collective power with grassroots women's organization to engage with and influence the Sudanese elite to bridge divides between grassroots and elite women, both Salma and Nadia advocate for strategic engagement with the male-dominated power structures that fundamentally shape Sudanese politics: patriarchal cultural institutions (traditional leaders, families, religious authorities) and militarized masculinities (armed groups, military elites, and the political economy of war). These two power structures are deeply intertwined in Sudan's context, where military authority is

legitimised through patriarchal norms and vice versa (Mama, 2017). Salma articulates this strategy of engagement with patriarchal structures:

> You know if we fight the current, you know, culture, the current system. Maybe it should work, but it would take lots of effort, time, you know, a generation to have a new system. So we need to respect what's happening right now. Understand it, find entry points…and try to gradually, you know, change and advance the system. This way we could have the support from the traditional leaders, from the, from the families, from, you know, even from the we could reach to a stage where even the army (Salma, 10-07-2025).

Salma's "current system" refers specifically to the patriarchal cultural order that governs Sudanese society, namely, the traditional and familial power structures that determine women's roles, mobility, and therefore political legitimacy (Brown, 2017). The change she advocates is a gradual cultural transformation: shifting attitudes within these patriarchal institutions about women's capacity for political participation, rather than attempting to dismantle or oppose these structures outright. Her strategy involves identifying "entry points": moments or spaces where patriarchal gatekeepers (traditional leaders, family heads, religious figures) can be persuaded to support gradual expansions of women's political roles. Her approach suggests that she makes a pragmatic assessment of what is contextually relevant. Salma cautioned that feminism in Sudan often applies other feminist models, which risks irrelevance in the Sudanese context:

> I've seen so many, you know, issues or battles with the culture that it's not very relevant…Feminism in Sudan… we're trying to apply a model that is not very contextualised. It's the European model or maybe the Egyptian model (Salma, 10-07-2025).

She shared examples of Sudanese women fighting with their fathers over issues that are not as important in comparison to more urgent gender inequalities and gave the example of women fighting for their right to smoke, while in Darfur, women are not even allowed to go to the hospital. For Salma, contextualising feminist struggle means prioritising battles based on their material impact on women's lives and their strategic feasibility within existing power structures. This resonates directly with Tamale's (2020) call for African feminist movements to decolonise their own practices, developing contextually grounded approaches that address women's lived realities rather than importing frameworks shaped by entirely different historical and political conditions. For Salma, as for Tamale (2020), the question is not whether to resist patriarchy but whether the tools of resistance are adequate to the specific structures of power being confronted. This pragmatic approach resonates with Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of "patriarchal bargains": the strategic accommodations women make within patriarchal systems to secure incremental

gains in political space. Salma's strategy reflects what African feminists describe as contextually grounded feminist praxis, developing approaches rooted in local realities rather than imported frameworks (Mama, 1995; Nnaemeka, 2004). Yet as Waylen (2007) and Tamale (2020) caution, and as seen in section 6.3, aligning too closely with patriarchal premises risks co-optation. Jamal, reflecting on his experience as a male feminist ally, extends this tension by arguing that the entry point into patriarchal structures is not confrontation but strategic alliance-building with those "in between":

> I was always saying that one important thing in strategic advocacy is focusing on the people in between. There are women and there are men who are pro-feminist…And there are the people who have no position…the ones in between need to be approached nicely…I learned that aggression will not do social change… There was 1 activist who wrote that all men are harassers. So when you write this type of posts, you are discouraging men from joining the movement and it's important to have men within the movement (Jamal, 12.06.2025).

Amal's personal reflection powerfully illustrates the limitations of confrontational resistance that Jamal describes. When asked about her influence in challenging patriarchal structures within her direct environment, she acknowledged:

> No, I don't. I would not say I was influential. I was considered a rebel. I would just argue against, but I don't know if I had succeeded (Amal, 13.06.2025).

Across interviews, participants described the experience of meaningful participation not as an abstract political goal but as something intimately connected to identity, memory, and recognition. Dalia's recollection of the revolution as a moment of reclaiming Sudanese women's identity and legacy, and Amal's description of feeling like "a rebel" simply for arguing what she believed in, reveal how the gap between revolutionary contribution and post-revolutionary exclusion was not only structural but deeply personal. Yet for many participants, this personal experience of exclusion did not lead to withdrawal. Rather, it sharpened their strategic thinking about how change could realistically be achieved. Together, Jamal and Amal's insights reinforce Salma's strategic logic: transformation within patriarchal systems requires building alliances with those who hold ambivalent or undecided positions, rather than alienating potential allies through confrontational rhetoric or solely relying on Eurocentric models of feminism. Nadia extends this similar strategy to the patriarchal militarised power:

> Women have to engage with this militarised marketplace. They have to negotiate with it (Nadia, 09.05.2025).

Nadia's "militarised marketplace" refers to Sudan's war economy and the armed actors who control political and economic resources: the RSF, SAF, and the networks of violence and capital that sustain them. Both Salma and Nadia call for strategic engagement with these structures, Salma through context-specific entry points and Nadia through working within the system to transform it, aligning with Kandiyoti's (1988) "patriarchal bargains": strategic accommodations women make within patriarchal systems to survive or achieve gradual change. What emerges is not a single feminist strategy but a constant tension between working within the system and challenging it from outside. Alongside these strategic orientations, participants emphasised the importance of reclaiming cultural legacies as a basis for political authority. Amal, Dalia, and Nadia pointed to the Kandaka queens and the symbolism of Alaa Salah's tobe as evidence that women's leadership is embedded in Sudan's own history. Amal shared:

> We'll have to bring our history, our legacies… We can lead peace negotiations, we can be leaders, we can, we can be Queens, we can, you know, I think we just every now and then have to bring these images of like Alaa Salah and Kandakat and yeah, different people that, you know, this is what we did before. We can do this again. We brought the revolution. We led the protest. We can heal the wounds. We can raise generations (Amal, 13.06.2025).

Dalia recalled the revolutionary moment as one of reclaiming women's identity and legacy:

> This was when we were extremely happy. During the revolution where we reclaimed our identity. And the Sudanese women's legacy. It somehow is somehow getting somewhere inside us and pushing us towards all this work (Dalia, 09.06.2025)

Nadia stressed this:

> I think using this history and thinking about our history as women is really good. Because you are using the history of power itself and changing the narrative, and saying oh no, we were not always this way. We were not always struggling in public spaces. One day, we had queens who had power, who were accepted by the community, so it's also a way to challenge the community and say: this is the setback, this is not progression (Nadia, 09.05.2025).

Together, these strategies reveal that Sudanese women have been actively practising politics, not simply seeking inclusion in existing structures, but working to transform them. The theoretical implications of this and the preceding findings are developed in the discussion that follows.

6.3 Discussion of the findings

Having established how structural factors shaped women's exclusion and how women themselves understood, experienced, and pursued participation in response, this discussion draws these findings into dialogue. As Sudan enters its third year of devastating counterrevolutionary war following the collapse of the transitional government in 2023, understanding why women's revolutionary mobilisation failed to translate into sustained political influence becomes not merely academic but urgently necessary. Participants experienced their exclusion from Sudan's post-2019 transitional government not as oversight, but as structurally produced through militarised, patriarchal, and elite-driven logics that some referred to as the conditions for the renewed conflict.

This discussion situates these findings within broader feminist literature and examines the theoretical contributions of reading Sudan's political marketplace through a gendered lens. Before doing so, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this analysis. The findings reflect the situated knowledge of a specific group of Sudanese feminist activists and cannot be generalised beyond this group, but the patterns they reveal in mechanisms of exclusion, militarised governance, and feminist praxis may hold relevance for other postcolonial, militarised contexts. The consistency of core themes across participants from different regions, class backgrounds, and organisational affiliations strengthens reliability, and where participants' views diverged, this is treated as meaningful rather than a weakness of the study.

A key analytical contribution of this dissertation lies in reading the PMF through an African feminist and decolonial lens to reveal how militarisation fundamentally reshapes inclusion possibilities in ways existing literature has not fully accounted for. The PMF conceptualises political authority as produced through transactional exchanges in which survival depends on controlling coercive capacity and patronage resources (de Waal, 2015). While valuable for analysing Sudan's elite political dynamics, the PMF has remained largely gender-blind. African feminist scholars argue that this is a critical omission: militarism is not simply a political structure that happens to be male-dominated, but one that actively produces gendered hierarchies, constructing women’s political agency as subordinate and illegitimate while making masculinised violence the basis of authority (Mama & Okazawa-Rey, 2012; Tamale, 2020). A feminist reading of the PMF therefore asks not only how the marketplace operates, but whose forms of political capital it recognises and whose it systematically devalues. As Nadia articulated, "if you don't fight, you don't have an opinion" - and Sudan's "governance structure is akin to a marketplace... this marketplace is militarised, because men with arms rule

it." Participants' testimonies and existing scholarship point to the same conclusion: as Mama and Okazawa-Rey (2012) argue, militarism does not simply reflect male dominance but actively constructs women's political agency as subordinate and illegitimate, making masculinised violence the basis of authority. Moreover, Mbembé (2001) and Mamdani (1996) demonstrate that colonial state-building in Africa deliberately constituted political authority through masculinised coercive structures in which violence was both the means and the measure of legitimate power. Reading the PMF through this African feminist and decolonial lens, therefore, reveals that Sudan's political marketplace does not simply disadvantage women by circumstance. It is constituted through colonial and patriarchal hierarchies that have always defined legitimate political authority as masculine and coercive. Women's non-violent forms of mobilisation, rooted in Silmiya, meaning peace and nonviolence, cannot be converted into political currency within this logic, regardless of their scale, and liberal inclusion strategies such as quotas operate on entirely different premises.

Participants' accounts further confirm the descriptive-substantive gap identified in Section 2.3: formal representation did not guarantee substantive influence in Sudan's transitional context (Waylen, 2007; Tripp, 2016). Women repeatedly articulated experiences of compounded disadvantage where gender intersected with region, ethnicity, class, and education to determine political access. As Abeer observed, "We didn't feel that the women in this government represent us, or the women of Blue Nile." The 40% quota did not specify which women should be included or how regional, ethnic, and class diversity would be ensured. Consequently, women accessing formal roles were disproportionately urban, educated, native Arabic-speaking, and connected to elite networks. As Jamal's metaphor illustrated, elite women "sitting in the hotel" could not represent working-class women "selling tea to sexual harassers" because their daily realities are completely different.

These accounts illuminate what Crenshaw (1998) theorised as intersectionality in practice: single-axis interventions like gender quotas, when implemented without intersectional consciousness, reproduce the racial, regional, and class hierarchies that shape which women can access power. They also confirm Mohanty's (2003) argument that meaningful representation requires a politics of location, recognising that women from Khartoum and women from Darfur occupy fundamentally different social and political positions. A quota that does not specify which women, from which locations, on whose terms, produces not solidarity but its simulation.

The intersectional dynamics described by participants remind me of Alaa Salah, whose widely circulated image during the 2019 uprising came to symbolise Sudan's revolution, and

raises questions about whose experiences were centred through this representation. Alaa Salah is light-skinned, from Khartoum, educated, and from a relatively privileged background. As participants emphasised, the revolution was sustained by women across profound differences: working-class women, women from historically marginalised regions, internally displaced women, and women whose racial or ethnic background positioned them outside Khartoum's urban elite. The revolution itself began in marginalised regions, yet the labour and political contributions of these women rarely circulated globally.

As a white European researcher who has not experienced war, displacement, or state violence, I approach this analysis with caution. This observation is not intended to diminish Alaa Salah's courage or the risks she took, but rather to reflect on what her prominence reveals about the politics of representation. Even within revolutionary movements, certain bodies, aesthetics, and class positions become legible as "representative," while others remain invisible. The same intersectional hierarchies that participants described in relation to formal political inclusion operated in determining whose revolutionary participation became globally iconic. Moreover, Alaa Salah herself was subsequently marginalised from formal transitional processes. Her case thus encapsulates the double marginalisation this research documents: first, the intersectional hierarchies that shape whose revolutionary labour is recognised; and second, the gendered structures that exclude even symbolically prominent women from actual political power once formal negotiations begin. This underscores interviewee calls that inclusion only becomes meaningful when differences among women themselves are recognised. An intersectional feminist approach demands asking not just "are women included?" but "which women, on whose terms, and whose experiences remain marginalised even within inclusion frameworks?" Moreover, Alaa Salah's nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize exemplifies how international frameworks can recognise women's revolutionary courage while remaining structurally unable to hold national governments accountable for their exclusion. The same SDG commitments that celebrate women's political participation as a development imperative offered no meaningful mechanism to enforce Sudan's 40% quota or protect women's transitional gains from military reversal. This is not an argument against international recognition, which carries real symbolic weight for Sudanese women's struggles. It is, however, a critique of liberal feminist frameworks that treat recognition as a substitute for accountability: celebrating the icon while remaining silent about the structures that ensure she cannot govern.

What emerges is not a single strategy but a feminist praxis operating simultaneously across multiple terrains. Participants described grassroots practices: political education workshops (Abeer); capacity-building (Layla); cultural reclamation of Kandaka memory (Amal, Dalia,

Nadia); resistance committee organising (multiple participants) as primary forms of political engagement. As Amal insisted, "meaningful inclusion isn't just at the table. It is the power to set the agenda... I want to be involved before decisions are made." From a decolonial perspective, these practices constitute acts of epistemic decolonisation: contesting the coloniality of knowledge that determines whose theorising counts as legitimate (Mignolo, 2007, 2011). When participants invoke the Kandaka as a model of political authority, they are not performing cultural heritage but embodying what Tamale (2020) argues African feminist movements must cultivate: a decolonial African feminism rooted in African women's own histories, memories, and forms of resistance rather than frameworks imported from entirely different political conditions. In reclaiming the Kandaka, Sudanese women assert that their historical forms of leadership and political knowledge are as theoretically valid as any institutional definition of political participation. Measuring participation solely through institutional presence renders this work invisible, reproducing the same epistemic hierarchy that has marginalised Sudanese women's political knowledge throughout the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Yet this grassroots praxis exists in tension with the question of formal power, and this tension constitutes the most unresolved finding of this research. Several participants advocated strategic engagement with militarised structures: Salma argued that confronting Sudan's "current system" directly would "take lots of effort, time... a generation," proposing instead to find "entry points," while Nadia insisted that "women have to engage with this militarised marketplace." These orientations align with Kandiyoti's (1988) "patriarchal bargains": strategic accommodations women make to survive or secure incremental gains. Yet this create tensions: at what point does strategic accommodation become complicity? Conversely, as Salma observed, applying "the European model" of feminism risks fighting battles "not very relevant" to Sudanese realities. As Mama (2019) argues, African feminism must be understood as "movement-thought", not fixed ideology, but ongoing engagement shaped by women's lived realities. What this research makes clear is that Sudanese women have demonstrated extraordinary strategic capacity across all these terrains simultaneously. Grassroots organising, cultural reclamation, resistance mobilisation, and institutional engagement, and yet all these efforts could not transform the underlying structures. This is not a failure of feminist strategy but a structural problem of accountability: without mechanisms that connect and institutionalise these different, often isolated forms of political agency, even revolutionary-scale mobilisation can be absorbed, co-opted, or simply ignored by militarised elites. The point is therefore not to choose between institutional and grassroots politics, but to urgently ask what accountability

structures can bridge them. As Sudan's current humanitarian catastrophe demonstrates with devastating clarity, what happens when that bridge does not exist.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Drawing on nine in-depth interviews and grounded in an African feminist, decolonial, and intersectional framework, the research revealed a fundamental paradox: women were indispensable to the revolutionary mobilisation that overthrew the Bashir regime yet were systematically excluded from the political transition their efforts made possible.

The first research question asked what structural factors shaped women's political participation during Sudan's post-2019 transitional period and how they operated. This dissertation has shown that colonial governance, patriarchy, and militarism operated as converging, mutually reinforcing forces that rendered women's forms of political engagement structurally illegitimate. Reading the PMF through an African feminist and decolonial lens reveals something existing literature has obscured: Sudan's political marketplace was not simply male-dominated by circumstance, but it was built to be. Colonial and patriarchal hierarchies have always defined legitimate political authority as masculine and coercive, and the marketplace reproduces this logic intact. As Nadia articulated, "If you don't fight, you don't have an opinion". These structural factors operated through three mechanisms of exclusion.

First, elite capture: military-political elites selectively incorporated some urban, educated women while excluding the grassroots movements that had sustained the revolution. Second, the militarised marketplace devalued women's mass mobilisation and nonviolent organising rooted in Silmiya, rendering it politically illegitimate precisely because it operated outside the coercive logic the marketplace recognises as political currency. Third, intersectional exclusion: the 40% quota reproduced racial, regional, and class hierarchies, privileging Khartoum-based, Arabic-speaking, elite women while marginalising women from Darfur, Blue Nile, and working-class backgrounds. A quota blind to location does not produce representation but reproduces the very hierarchies it claims to rectify.

The second research question asked how Sudanese women activists understood, experienced, and pursued meaningful political participation. Participants experienced exclusion as something personal: a denial of recognition for political knowledge and leadership they knew they possessed. Instead, they actively contested exclusion across multiple terrains simultaneously. These practices constitute acts of epistemic decolonisation: redefining meaningful participation beyond formal inclusion, reclaiming Sudanese women's own histories

of leadership as a legitimate basis for political authority, and developing contextually grounded strategies rooted in grassroots organising, historical memory, and strategic engagement with patriarchal structures. However, these efforts could not transform the underlying structures of power - not because feminist strategies failed, but because, without accountable national and international mechanisms to connect and institutionalise these efforts, they remain excluded.

This research makes three interconnected contributions. Empirically, it addresses a gap in the literature: while scholarship on women's political participation in Africa has focused predominantly on sub-Saharan contexts, this dissertation centres on Sudan's transitional experience, where militarised postcolonial governance produces distinct dynamics of gendered exclusion that existing literature has not fully captured. Theoretically, it demonstrates that frameworks like the PMF require feminist interrogation to reveal how masculine forms of power are structurally constituted rather than incidental. Methodologically, it centres Sudanese women's own theorising as valid knowledge production, challenging the coloniality of knowledge that positions Western analytical frameworks as theory and non-Western knowledge as merely data (Mignolo, 2007). Future research should urgently investigate what institutional designs and accountability mechanisms, grounded in intersectional consciousness, can bridge these isolated spheres of feminist political agency, because Sudan's ongoing humanitarian catastrophe demonstrates with devastating clarity what happens when that bridge does not exist.

This dissertation began with Alaa Salah standing atop a car in Khartoum, her white tobe illuminated as she led protest chants that echoed across Sudan and the world. When she recited, "The bullet doesn't kill. What kills is the silence of people," she named a truth extending far beyond that moment. This research has demonstrated that silencing women's political knowledge - through exclusion from decision-making, devaluation of grassroots organising, and marginalisation of feminist visions - creates conditions enabling violence. Sudan's ongoing war stands as stark evidence that transitions privileging militarised elites over constituencies capable of peaceful transformation are predisposed toward renewed conflict. What participants in this study understood, and what this research affirms, is that those constituencies already exist: in the grassroots networks, cultural memories, and feminist political imaginations that sustained the revolution and continue to sustain resistance. *Al Thawra Untha* / The Revolution is Female. Not because women were symbolically present or selectively included, but because, as participants insisted, women continue to practice politics as transformation itself. The question is not whether women will eventually be included in existing political structures, but whether those structures can be transformed to recognise that women have been practising politics all along. Until that transformation occurs, the revolution remains unfinished.

Chapter 8: References

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