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Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Peacemaking: Building Resilience among Sudanese Women

One in five people in conflict zones suffer from serious mental health difficulties such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with women being disproportionately affected. The ongoing conflict in Sudan has led to widespread human rights violations, including sexual and gender-based violence and displacement, while access to mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) remains limited. In response, CMI has organized MHPSS workshops for displaced Sudanese women, resulting in improved mental health, increased resilience and enhanced leadership skills. This enables women leaders to advocate for and meaningfully engage in a political process.

Conflict and displacement have a profound impact on mental health. Researchers and peacebuilding practitioners increasingly highlight how crucial it is to integrate mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) into peacemaking and peacebuilding frameworks to promote long-lasting peace and to mobilise women and men in peace processes. Research shows that achieving successful and peaceful coexistence is possible only when mental health problems and difficulties in social and interpersonal relations are tackled.¹ Healing from trauma is therefore vital for fostering reconciliation and developing peaceful relationships. In addition, a peaceful environment is essential for physical and mental health.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.”² Mental health is not solely defined by the presence or absence of a mental disorder.³ Rather, it encompasses emotional, psychological and social wellbeing, influencing thoughts, feelings, actions and interactions with others.

Although war and violence can severely disrupt relationships, communities and economic stability, about four-fifths of people demonstrate resilience, adapting and recovering without developing lasting psychological problems. The remaining one-fifth of people in conflict-affected areas suffer from serious mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD

Key takeaways

- Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) interventions are essential for peacemaking processes, as they can deal with trauma and difficulties in interpersonal relations that disrupt social cohesion and hinder conflict resolution.
- Women and girls in conflict zones face disproportionate mental health problems that limit their ability to engage in political and peace processes.
- MHPSS interventions increase women’s leadership and political agency by giving them the means to heal from trauma while building resilience.

or schizophrenia. Of these, women face a greater burden that increases with age. Poor mental health can be very harmful to interpersonal relations, and can obstruct efforts to promote conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This is because people affected by conflict are less likely to engage in peacebuilding, mediation, negotiations or development activities unless their mental health needs are taken care of and their relationships restored. Mental health and psychosocial interventions have proven effective in these cases, helping to bring about more constructive and lasting peacebuilding outcomes.⁴

Nearly two years into the ongoing conflict in Sudan, clashes between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have caused widespread violence and human suffering. Over 10 million people have been displaced, including

millions of women and girls. A catastrophic humanitarian crisis and threat of famine has unfolded within Sudan, with increasing violence against civilians, sexual violence, exploitation and abuse, kidnappings, forced disappearances and unlawful killings.

The human impact of the conflict in Sudan is not only physical, with women and girls also experiencing serious harm to their mental health. Reports indicate an increase in depression and post-traumatic stress disorders, particularly among survivors of gender-based violence. These individuals also show heightened suicidal tendencies. Despite the growing need for MHPSS, access to these services remains severely limited, leaving many survivors without the support they badly need.

Since 2020, CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation has supported Sudan’s political

processes by promoting inclusive process design, recognising diverse societal priorities and supporting women as leaders of change. After the war began in 2023, CMI has supported efforts to resume an inclusive political process, while building trust and consensus among key groups on issues related to resolving the conflict in Sudan. Shortly after the war broke out, CMI convened broad-based consultations with women's organisations, alliances and networks to identify priorities for women and girls as well as clear steps towards ending the war and preparing women for the resumption of a political process. The consultations highlighted a clear need for MHPSS for Sudanese women. In response, the first MHPSS workshop was held in Kampala in December 2023, followed by two more workshops for displaced Sudanese women in 2024, in Cairo and N'Djamena.

The workshops deal with trauma and distress that hinder women's political engagement by combining recovery strategies with leadership development, helping to increase personal resilience and collective agency. These efforts foster cohesion, enhance political agency and support Sudanese women's advocacy for inclusive solutions and democratic transition. They also provide practical ways of managing trauma and PTSD while exploring leadership models that enable women to lead both in their communities and broader peacemaking efforts.

The workshops were delivered by a team of three female experts with solid experience working with displaced Sudanese people who are well positioned to assess the participants' needs and design the content accordingly. This is done while taking into consideration the specific contextual factors related to the situation in Sudan, such as deep-rooted communal and identity-based trauma, as well as intergenerational suffering. Consequently, Sudanese women require a distinct MHPSS approach that differs from Western clinical models, emphasising community support rather than individual therapy. Integrating modern MHPSS practices with culturally specific healing methods has proven effective in meeting the needs of the women in the workshops.

The workshops provided a transformative space for Sudanese women to share experiences and acquire means for personal and collective healing. Participants appreciated the safe and inclusive environment, saying it allowed for open discussions about shared guilt, trauma and the difficulties of displacement. Activities such as the "Honoring our Pain" ritual and

folk singing highlighted the importance of cultural integration in trauma-focused sessions. Psychodrama sessions facilitated emotional relief and reflection, with many women reporting improved sleep and a stronger connection to their minds, bodies and spirits. Leadership discussions, focusing on historical female leaders like Kooni Kandaka, inspired participants. These discussions highlighted the role of women in Sudan's political and cultural narratives.

In their feedback, participants said they were pleased with how well the workshops helped women to deal with MHPSS, and to develop their leadership skills and foster supportive networks. Most attendees appreciated the balanced approach, which integrate theory, traditional practices and participatory activities. The emphasis on leadership in relation to trauma made women better able to engage in future political processes and democratic transitions. The keen interest in extending and deepening MHPSS and leadership components indicates a high demand for continued support and customised programmes. The N'Djamena workshop included a capacity-building element tailored to the needs of women in Chad's refugee camps, enabling them to provide MHPSS to other Sudanese women that have fled from Darfur. This supported the establishment of a mobile clinic at the Adre refugee camp and filled important gaps in psychosocial support for displaced communities.

The lessons learned from the MHPSS workshops for Sudanese women are valuable for other peacemaking initiatives, particularly in conflict and post-conflict contexts. The most important point is the need to integrate MHPSS into peacemaking processes. It is also essential to adapt MHPSS programs to local, cultural and societal contexts, as shown by the success of combining Sudanese cultural practices

with modern therapy. This highlights the need for peacemaking and peacebuilding processes to develop interventions that meet the particular needs and traditions in the affected communities.

The focus on leadership development in the workshops not only strengthens the resilience of women leaders but also better prepares them to take an active role in political and peace processes, giving them greater influence. The success of these initiatives shows that similar efforts could be expanded to other contexts. It also highlights how combining MHPSS with leadership training and peacemaking can help build stronger, more resilient communities that support lasting peace and stability.

¹ CWWPP (Coalition for Work with Psychotrauma and Peace). (2010). Social reconstruction and health towards the future. Lessons learned from eastern Croatia, 1995–2010. Nieuwe Pekela: CWWPP.

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² World Health Organization (WHO). (2022). Mental health. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>.

³ World Health Organization (WHO). (2022). World mental health report: Transforming mental health for all. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240049338>.

⁴ Bubenzer, F. (2020). Coming together: Mental health and psychosocial support in peacebuilding. Stanley Centre. Retrieved from: <https://stanleycenter.org/publications/mental-health-psychosocial-support-peacebuilding/>.

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⁵ Sudan: Impact of the war on women and girls. (2024). ACAPS. <https://www.acaps.org/en/countries/archives/detail/sudan-impact-of-the-war-on-women-and-girls>.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Integrate MHPSS into peacemaking processes locally, nationally and internationally.
- Adapt MHPSS interventions to specific cultural, social and historical contexts.
- Enhance access to MHPSS services for communities, particularly for women leaders and other key constituencies.
- Foster regional cooperation in MHPSS, sharing best practices and resources to effectively support those affected by cross-border conflicts.