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Chapter 6
For the Sake of Moderation: The Sudanese General Women's Union's Interpretations of Female "Empowerment" (1990–2019)

On 21 November 2019, the Humanitarian Affairs Commission (HAC), a core department of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Development, issued a decree stipulating that twenty-four non-governmental Sudanese organisations that had supported the *inqādh* regime (1989–2019) or had been closely connected with the former ruling party would be struck off the official register and have their activities suspended and their bank accounts frozen.[1] Among these organisations were the Sudanese General Women's Union (*al-ittiḥād al-ʿāmm li-l-marʾa al-sūdāniyya*) and at least two of its partners.[2] This eagerly-awaited decision by supporters of the "December Revolution"[3] has been condemned by the organisations affected as a political manoeuvre devoid of any legal standing. The decision was perceived by many as an indicator of change and a symbol of the potential of the current transition process to instigate changes. It seems to impose a new path for Islamist-led charity organisations and their members.[4]

Women's organisations are at the forefront of this nebula, and yet they remain largely neglected by the social sciences. More specifically, they have not garnered

1 ʿUmar al-Bashīr's regime, called "the Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation" (*qiyādat thawrat al-inqādh al-waṭanī*) by its leaders, formed an alliance between segments of the Armed Forces (military officers) and the National Islamic Front to organise the coup d'état on 30 June 1989. *Al-inqādh* is the widely used generic name for the thirty-year long Islamist regime in its various manifestations. All the interviewees' names have been changed, the only exception being Rajāʾ Ḥasan Khalīfa, whose public notoriety and important contribution through her writings made it appropriate to reveal her identity. She herself expressed her desire to be quoted in this research. All translations from Arabic and French into English are the author's.

2 The Centre for Women's Studies (*markaz dirāsāt al-marʾa*) and the Working Women's League (*rābiṭat al-marʾa al-ʿāmila*).

3 This was the name given to the popular uprising that started in December 2018 and led to the downfall of ʿUmar al-Bashīr's government and the formation of a transitional government tasked with facilitating the passage to democracy through elections to be held in late 2023 or early 2024.

4 All the interviewees' names have been changed, the only exception being Rajāʾ Ḥasan Khalīfa, whose public notoriety and important contribution through her writings made it appropriate to reveal her identity. She herself expressed her desire to be quoted in this research. All translations from Arabic and French into English are the author's.

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the attention of the international aid industry. Most of the literature on the development and humanitarian industry and that focuses especially on gender and development in Sudan tackles specific programmes that target women in conflict zones, such as peace construction programmes in Darfur or the Nuba Mountains, and they are mainly carried out by international development agencies.[5] Very few studies shed light on the history of social and humanitarian commitments in Sudan, and even fewer on women-led NGOs or those with a large female presence that contribute to a reading of the social history of the country, particularly that of women. Numerous studies have focused on the history of the women's movement in Sudan between the 1950s and the 1970s, however, but they tend to present the Sudanese Women's Union (*al-ittiḥād al-nisāʾī al-sūdānī*) exclusively as the major, and perhaps only, protagonist in the Sudanese women's movement up to the present day.[6]

Mainstream feminist approaches[7] towards studying women's history betray a prescriptive nature that sets the emancipation and liberation of women from structures of male domination as its main objective. Women who do not explicitly oppose patriarchal structures in society are therefore often framed in these studies as lacking agency and depicted as passive subjects. However, as Saba Mahmoud (2001: 210) has highlighted, agency is not consubstantial with resistance to relations of subordination; rather, it is "a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create (. . .) [carrying] less a sense of passivity and more that of struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement." By studying the Egyptian "piety movement" that flourished during the 1990s, she demonstrates that

5 Studies such as these have become more prolific since the 1990s. They tend to describe marginalised women from war-torn areas as "vulnerable" and as "natural" peacemakers, and highlight their role in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Examples of this writing are evident in several master's and PhD theses that explore this topic and were consulted by the author in September 2019 at Ahfad University (Omdurman) and at the Sudanese National Records Office.

6 Most academic writing about contemporary Sudanese women's movements focuses on women's resistance to colonial and authoritarian regimes. *Al-ittiḥād al-nisāʾī al-sūdānī* (the Sudanese Women's Union) occupies a dominant position in this literature in this regard. Both former members of the country's first women's union and researchers have written extensively about the history of the organisation and its leaders, from its genesis to its underground work under the rule of the National Islamic Front and abroad under the NCP, also covering its activities during the short-lived democratic periods (for the most important of these, see Ibrahim 1996; Maḥmūd 2002; al-Gaddāl 2016; al-Amīn 2017; Badri & Tripp 2017).

7 Mainstream or liberal feminism is the main branch of the global feminist movement, which is defined by its goal of achieving gender equality through political and legal reform within a framework of liberal democracy, based on Western paradigms. For an African critique of mainstream feminism, see Oyewumi (1997).

investigating any Islamist movement[8] puts the researcher in a rather delicate position, as has sometimes been the case for this author. Researchers find themselves under constant pressure to denounce human rights violations committed by Islamist movements throughout the world. Paradoxically, the global public condemnation of Islamist movements – especially in the American context immediately after September 2001 and the French context post-2015 – has given birth to a large and growing body of literature that investigates Islamist ideologies and political Islam. This traditional theoretical approach has also gained currency in Sudan (Sidahmed 1996; Gallab 2008; Berridge 2017) to the detriment of empirical studies that explore and analyse the structures and culture of the organisations and the practices of actors involved in the Islamist movement. This choice reflects the difficulty of gaining access to these spaces and interlocutors in Sudan under the highly security-laden atmosphere of *al-inqādh* rule.

This chapter adopts an approach to the study of women's organisations that focuses on a version of activism that does not follow the mainstream feminist orientations. Sondra Hale's (1992, 1996a, 1996b) research on the National Women's Front (*al-jabha al-nisā'iyya al-waṭaniyya*) and Nagwa Mohamed Ali al-Bachir's (1996) study of the Muslim Sisters (*al-akhawāt al-muslimāt*) have both drawn attention to Islamist women's agency in interesting ways. They demonstrate how these women negotiate and benefit from the patriarchal norms within the state and the ruling party's apparatus. However, both scholars focus on an elite formed by a small group of women who held strategic positions in the National Islamic Front's networks. This is equally true of the work conducted by Liv Tønnessen (2011), who more recently examined the ideologies of Islamic women's leadership within these organisations and their relationships to political parties. More macro-sociological works depicting Islamic women's NGOs and their relations to the state have also been carried out, notably by Hala Abdelmagid (2003) and Sāmya al-Nagar (2006). However, too little attention has been paid to "ordinary" women who possess minimal social, economic and cultural capital, although they form the large majority of the members of these structures.

In the light of this gap, this chapter seeks to offer a contribution to the social history of Sudanese women, and more precisely to the forgotten elements of this history and its absent protagonists. In the same vein as Asef Bayat's research on ordinary people in the Middle East, it presents "subaltern" subjects who live among

8 Islamism is the expression of a political project alongside the process and its outcomes in which various domains of social life are invested with signs and symbols associated with Islamic cultural traditions. See Ismail (2003). An Islamic movement or organisation uses frameworks based on interpretations inspired from Islamic sources to justify and legitimise its actions. Islamic organisations claim their inspiration from well-founded Islamic charitable practices.

people who do not share their circumstances, and who discover and generate new spaces within which "they can voice their dissent and assert their presence in pursuit of bettering their lives" (Bayat 2010: 9). The occupation of a women's organisation located at the heart of the development field, and which supported the regime, by women from diverse sociological backgrounds highlights the importance of the "art of presence" (Bayat 2010) and the agency of marginalised people whose mobilisations are not just limited to loud protests that only represent the tip of the iceberg (Bouilly 2019). While keeping in mind the provocative tone of Gayatri Spivak's landmark essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), which offers a rather bleak view of the possibility of effective agency, this chapter posits this possibility by attempting to uncover the extent to which the gendered (woman) subaltern partially escapes the silence of subalternity, and thus makes herself heard.

Since its foundation in 1990, the Sudanese General Women's Union (SGWU) has worked as the *inqādh* government's first-choice public service provider for the formulation and implementation of gender policies. This umbrella organisation was registered as a voluntary NGO at the HAC offices until its dissolution in November 2019. It had branches in all twenty-five states of the country prior to 2011, when South Sudan became independent, and after then was present in all of Sudan's eighteen states. According to official figures, the SGWU counted more than six million women throughout the country in its membership[9] and was therefore described by many as a mass organisation ("*tanẓīm jamāhīrī*" in Arabic). While such a large number of adherents might be challenged, it nonetheless provides an indication of the scope of the organisation's programmes. It was certainly the largest women's NGO in the country in terms of membership and resources during the time it existed. It included fifteen general desks known as "*amānāt*", each being in charge of a specific domain such as education, peace-building and political empowerment.

The SGWU's history is seldom visible or investigated by social scientists because of its close relationship with the state apparatus of the former Islamist regime, and yet an exploration of this kind might offer insightful information about the Sudanese "deep state".[10] The entity was characterised by several layers of loyalty and proximity to the whole structure of the ruling party, weaving its way through both its upper and lower echelons. The *inqādh* regime controlled the security, economic and public sectors of the state with an iron fist. It also extensively infiltrated civil society and NGOs at different levels. The longevity of ʿUmar al-Bashīr's government cannot therefore be accounted for solely on the basis of the pressure and coer-

9 This was stated by the secretary-general and vice-secretary-general during our interviews. The same figures are also to be found in the SGWU's 1992 and 2014 association status.

10 *Al-dawla al-ʿamīqa* in Arabic. On this concept, see Jean-Pierre Filiu (2015) with reference to Syria, Yemen and Egypt.

cion exerted by "parallel state" institutions.[11] Several enlightening studies have indicated as much by illustrating how the Sudanese Islamic state and its power were invested with meaning, and experienced by ordinary citizens who appropriated and reinvented the hegemonic ideology through processes of "subjectivation" that lay outside state institutions (Nageeb 2004, 2007; Seesemann 2005; Willemse 2007; Salomon 2016; Abdel Aziz 2018; Revilla 2020). However, few writers have been able to draw on any systematic research into gender relations and women's mobilisations, and even when they have, they seem to have favoured explanations that discuss the existence and longevity of women's organisations – whose policies contributed towards sustaining authoritarianism through their discourses and practices – through the lens of the "Civilisational Project" (*al-mashrūʿ al-ḥaḍārī*) initiated by the state.[12] Rather than looking at top-down state policies, this chapter investigates the SGWU's policies and the power relations at play within the organisation, which illustrate how its members express and practice their interpretation of women's "empowerment" (*tamkīn*). In Sudan, this notion is emblematic of the Islamist ideology adopted by ʿUmar al-Bashīr's regime. It founded its general policy by attracting the allegiance of loyal partisans working in the civil service in order to consolidate the NCP's control over state affairs. "*Tamkīn*" practices (Nageeb 2007; Mann 2014) are therefore associated with the *kayzān* (plural of *kōz*, a small metal water cup), a term used metaphorically to refer to members of the Islamist regime[13], and thus have pejorative connotations in the collective consciousness of the majority of ordinary Sudanese people. The SGWU tried to challenge this perception by recasting this notion on the basis of Quranic verses.[14]

This chapter presents the national and general branch of the SGWU, whose headquarters were located in the Sahafa neighbourhood in Khartoum.[15] Two types

11 Besides the official institutions, the regime created several parallel national civil and security bodies such as the Popular Defence Forces (*quwwāt al-difāʿ al-shaʿbī*). See Assal (2019).

12 This state project was constructed to shape the behaviour, lives and thoughts of women, among other purposes. It was held that it would "rescue the country from economic and cultural subjection to the West" and was "the brainchild of a narrow elite with a hubristic perception of its purpose as a modernizing vanguard that was not shared by the population at large" (Berridge 2018). For an example of the machinations of this project, see also Verhoeven (2015).

13 This expression was originally used by the Islamist themselves and has been popularised by Ḥasan al-Turābī, who wrote that "Islam is a sea and we are the cups (*kayzān*) scooping from it".

14 *Tamkīn* comes from the Arabic word *yumkin* which means "being capable of" and the root *makuna* which means "having influence, control over" and mainly derives from two Quranic surahs: *al-aʿrāf*, verse 10 and *al-ḥajj*, verse 41.

15 The location of the headquarters is particularly significant for highlighting the organisation's close ties with ʿUmar al-Bashīr's regime. It was situated a few doors away from the National Congress Party's (NCP) youth branch and the main office of the Popular Defence Forces.

of "volunteers" worked in it[16]: subaltern office workers, who worked full-time and received a salary, and executives, who divided their time between the organisation and their positions as senior civil servants elsewhere in the state structures. This demarcation implied distinct statuses and was based on class and ethnic parameters that favoured certain individuals. It therefore moulded the hierarchical structure of the organisation, and tended to place wealthy women from the dominant Northern ethnic groups at the forefront of power and authority. My decision to focus on Khartoum also ties in with a desire to tackle the SGWU's connections with the central state institutions. The capital is the space that reflects the centralised hegemonic political and economic power of the Sudanese state, which became entrenched with the colonial government of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899–1956). This historical process allows us to examine the institutional bonds forged by the Union, especially with the Ministry of Welfare and Social Development, which was charged with all the development and humanitarian programmes developed under the *inqādh* regime.

As previously stated, this ethnographically-inspired contribution focuses on women's ordinary practices. In order to achieve this objective, I conducted fieldwork in Khartoum over a three-month period (September-November 2019). The collected data is primarily based on in-depth interviews conducted in Sudanese Arabic with members of the SGWU, *in situ* observations and consultation of archival sources. I studied multiple issues of a pro-regime daily newspaper at the National Records Office[17], as well as the nine issues (1996–2018) of the Union's magazine *Usratī* ("My Family"). I also visited the HAC offices and gained access to the Union's association status (1992 and 2014) and registration files containing aggregate reports on the organisation's activities.[18]

In the final analysis, my research relies heavily on consulting and analysing the rich body of literature produced by the SGWU and its leaders.[19] The data collected

16 All members (employees and leaders) of the SGWU were considered to be volunteers. This study focuses on these women, and does not delve into the beneficiaries' discourses and practices, even though some of the employees were also part of the groups targeted by the Union's programmes.

17 *Al-Intibāha* ("The Call to Attention") October to December 2006; January to March 2009; April to June 2010; March to April 2015. I selected this newspaper from among numerous pro-regime ones because the head of the Union's executive board used to work in its offices. These issues were chosen arbitrarily either by the National Records Office's staff or by me. In the case of the 2009, 2010 and 2015 issues, I selected these dates because of important events that occurred in Sudan in these years, specifically relating to the humanitarian and development sector, as well as notorious women rights cases.

18 This included the registration files for 2001, 2005, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2017 and 2018.

19 Rajāʾ Ḥasan Khalīfa, who was one of the founding members of the SGWU, and who held three consecutive mandates as its secretary-general and was a key member of the regime's Consultative

testifies to the evolution of the Islamist discourse towards a politicisation of private matters under "the personal is political" leitmotiv (Badri and Tripp 2017). Notably, this process is conveyed in the interpretation of the notion of women's "empowerment" (*tamkīn*), which the wealth of literature on the women's movement in Sudan has seldom defined. This prevents the reader from grasping the aspect of the tangible forms this empowerment takes in women's lives. This chapter will therefore attempt to elucidate the evolution of the concept of empowerment within the SGWU. This interpretation of empowerment rests upon both the rhetoric of an Islamic middle way and a nationalist discourse based on "cultural authenticity" that gives birth to "respectable femininity" (Hussein 2017). This chapter therefore focuses on the efforts of successive generations of activists within the Sudanese Islamist movement to reinforce these values.

An Elitist Approach to "Middle Way" Islam

The lexical field deployed by the organisation changed little between 1990 and 2019. The notions of *tawāzun* or *waṣatiyya* (balance or moderation), *tanāsuq* (harmony), *tamkīn* (empowerment), *tanmiyat al-marʾa* (women's development), *musāwā* (equality) and *ʿadāla* (justice, equity) form a material and linguistic world which in Sudan seems to be particular to Islamic organisations. These notions constitute the ideological parameters of a "middle way" Islam that has been promoted since the 19th century by reformist scholars who are constantly seeking to establish a balance between "tradition" and "modernity".[20] Significantly, the work of the Egyptian theologian and jurist Muḥammad ʿAbduh is worth mentioning among these reformers, as his strong influence is palpable in Ḥasan al-Turābī's philosophy (Berridge 2017). Members of the SGWU aimed to find a balance between "feminism" on the one hand – which was considered to be a Western ideology that promotes straightforward equality between men and women and defends the absolute liberation of women – and an "extremist", or rigid, Islamic ideology that maintains a strict

Council (*majlis al-shūra*) at that time, wrote extensively about the Union. As a former MP and one of the most well-known women leaders in the National Congress Party, her writings offer significant testimonies about Islamist women's experiences in Sudan, especially for the thirty years of the regime she served. Her contributions are Khalīfa (2012a, 2012b, 2016).

20 This narrative is based on the following Quranic verse: "And it is thus that We appointed you to be the community of the middle way so that you might be witnesses to all mankind and the Messenger might be a witness to you." (*al-Baqara*, verse 143).

segregation between men and women and continues to claim that "*ṣawt al-marʾa ʿawra*" (the woman's voice is immodest or shameful)[21] on the other.

The quest for a balance between these two positions is especially well illustrated in a statement by the former secretary-general of the Union published in the December 2018 issue of *Usratī*, in which she writes that the SGWU combats "extremism and terrorism" by asserting that "terrorism and radicalism (*al-taṭarruf*) do not represent a majority phenomenon in Sudan" (at page 7). She condemns the attitudes and behaviour of the religiously fanatical fringe of the Islamic movement, and implicitly also that of the radical feminism endorsed by a few groups in the country whose forms of activism, according to the Union, represent a threat to the core values of Sudanese society at large. Within this framework, members of the Union – and more specifically its executives – mobilised the notion of gender, the "buzzword" of development jargon, as a synonym for women. The global process of gender mainstreaming has contributed to the depoliticisation and neutralisation of the concept of gender through an exercise that simplifies its complexities. This simplification is the striking result of selective readings of feminist objectives and ideals and scientific research on gender (Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead 2007). The aim of this exercise was to popularise the concept, making it more attractive to the general public, and this is what Rajāʾ Ḥasan Khalīfa, the famous founding member and three-time secretary-general of the SGWU, as well as a prominent MP and key figure within the NCP, proposes in her work. During our interview at her home in Omdurman she told me:

> I do not reject the notion of gender. I just think we need to take this Western word and try to make sense of it and apply it in Sudan by "Sudanising" and "Islamising" it.[22] This popularisation and recasting is essential in order for the masses to accept it." (30 October 2019)

Since the 1980s, Sudan has seen a proliferation of interventions by foreign NGOs, especially European and North American organisations. They operate in areas affected by drought and famine, providing food, relief, and medical assistance. They also engage in long-term development programmes in different regions of the country, mainly in the fields of water and sanitation, education, and health, with a strongly "gen-

21 This expression is notably used by the *Anṣār al-Sunna* group in Sudan to prevent women from engaging in public debates and politics. The protagonists of the "December Revolution" reversed this expression making it "*ṣawt al-marʾa thawra*" meaning "a woman's voice is a revolution".

22 This stance is very similar to attempts by early 21st century Sudanese scholars and educationalists to "Islamise" certain characteristics and behaviours associated with the Western world (including critical thinking, human rights, information and communication technologies). See Seri-Hersch (2015).

dered" approach. According to the United Nations Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal for Sudan (2001) about fifty international NGOs were operating in the country in the early 2000s. These included Save The Children UK, Doctors Without Borders, Care International, Oxfam and the International Rescue Committee, alongside more than twenty UN agencies (including the World Food Programme, UNICEF, the UN Development Programme and the World Health Organisation). INGOs significantly scaled up their operations in war-torn areas, in the Nuba Mountains after 2002, because the government had blocked any external aid to this area between 1989 and 2002, and in Darfur from 2004, where the UN-OCHA Situation Report of March 2009 noted the presence of more than 16,000 national and international humanitarian workers in the region.

The progression of foreign NGOs operations slackened off in the wake of the Sudanese government's decision to expel 13 INGOs in March 2009. The staff of these organisations made up 40% of all aid workers in Sudan. The government supposedly filled this vacuum by bringing in 200 Sudanese aid groups. This political response to the International Criminal Court's warrant for the arrest of ʿUmar al-Bashīr drastically altered the modus operandi of foreign NGOs in the country. The first generation of Islamist activists in the Union, represented by Rajāʾ Ḥasan Khalīfa, supported the regime's policy of limiting the influence of INGOs, and called for a "Sudanisation"[23] of development projects targeting women as recipients and actors of aid, within an Islamic framework that promoted women's *ijtihād* (independent reasoning, one of the four sources of Sunni law). The younger generation, on the other hand, represented by Nūr, Isrāʾ and Nafīsa[24], promoted the introduction of the concept of gender as a new source of legitimacy for their actions in an attempt to find a place within transnational and international networks without abandoning an Islamically approved mode of action founded on the value of complementarity

23 That is, the replacement of foreign NGOs and development actors with Sudanese ones. This word (*sowdana* in Arabic) also refers to the replacement of British, Egyptian and Syrian officials with Sudanese officials when Sudan was under Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule (1899–1956), especially in the 1940s and 1950s. Sudanisation can therefore mean administrative policies and/or socio-political engagements that (re)claim cultural authenticity.

24 Nūr was the vice-secretary-general of the SGWU and a lecturer at Ahfad University for Women, teaching gender and governance, when we met. As a partisan of the Umma party along with her highly politicised family, she has been engaged in charity and social work within traditional organisations run by Ṣādiq al-Mahdī's family for many years. Isrāʾ was the head of the SGWU training programmes, and joined the organisation in December 2018. She described herself as a *ṣūfiyya*, a member of the Khatmiyya order, and a supporter of the Democratic Unionist Party. Nafīsa, who joined the Union in the late 1990s, was a consultant for the Union and an executive in the NCP when we met; she had previously been a minister and a personal advisor to ʿUmar al-Bashīr.

between men and women, which itself originates from the concept of *ʿadāla* (justice or equity).

According to the Union's interpretation of this term, men and women have distinctive rights and duties within society. Alongside their other responsibilities, men have the obligation to be "*qawwāmūn*"[25] over women. In the discourse presented by these activists, this means that men have the duty to protect and provide for women. This interpretation of *qiwāma*[26] seeks to bring private matters into the public sphere so as to allow women the opportunity to hold their husbands, fathers or brothers accountable for their failures to fulfil what are articulated as their duties and responsibilities. Men's obligation to provide financial support to women is championed by the Union's executives, who represent an influential social and political elite in Sudan, as a tool for women's empowerment. The sociological backgrounds of these executives are for the most part fairly homogeneous: they generally come from wealthy families (a notable exception is Rajāʾ Ḥasan Khalīfa, whose trajectory of upward social mobility is unique within the Union). On the whole, they have master's degrees as a minimum academic qualification, and in fact most of them have PhDs. For instance, Nafīsa defended a thesis on the role of rural women in the development of Sudan at the University of Khartoum, and Rajāʾ Ḥasan Khalīfa defended her thesis, which was published in 2016, at the Islamic University of Omdurman, (Khalīfa 2016). All these women, with the exception of Isrāʾ, who is divorced, are the spouses of senior civil servants and often also prominent members and leaders within the NCP. These women worked as university teachers, engineers and lawyers before being promoted to prestigious positions in the public administration thanks to their commitment to the SGWU, which operates as a professionalising body.

These representatives of the Union claim that women have no legal or Islamic obligation to provide for their families, and can therefore keep their earnings for "personal self-care". This narrative is particularly elitist, as it only affects men whose financial standing enables their female relatives to depend on them financially. In reality, the proportion of the Sudanese population who can engage in financial arrangements such as these is small. According to the Food and Agriculture

25 Based on the following Quranic verse: "Men are the caretakers of women, as men have been provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting them financially. (. . .)" (*al-Nisāʾ*, verse 34)

26 The main stance of these Islamist activists is to reject the interpretation of *qiwāma* as giving men permission to exercise authority over women, who are obliged to obey them. However, one of the interviewees, a middle-class employee of the Union, strongly supported the idea of a man's authority within the household and by extension in society. She argued, for instance, that women needed authorisation from male relatives to leave their homes.

Organisation, about 60% of the Sudanese population was living below the poverty line in 2009.[27] The economic circumstances that led to this percentage manifested themselves in the 1980s and resulted in an exponential increase in women's work. Women therefore increasingly became financially responsible for households, as was the case with Sāmya, who worked as a secretary in the SGWU. She had fled South Kordofan with her family to settle in a popular neighbourhood on the outskirts of Omdurman, where her father worked as a day labourer. Rising unemployment rates and work insecurity in Sudan generally lead women like Sāmya, who have very few economic and social resources, to "volunteer" in non-profit organisations to earn small incomes[28] in order to provide for their families. The interpretation of *qiwāma* in the sense described above also obscures an intersectional reading of gender relations that takes class and financial prowess into consideration, since poor men who cannot satisfy these obligations are stigmatised and accused of being "bad Muslims". It may be that class, more than gender, is an inescapable criterion in the Sudanese Islamic state for access to rights and responsibilities.[29]

The increased, presence of women in the paid workforce was nonetheless promoted by the SGWU's official narrative, which displayed women's access to the labour market as the ideal means for women's empowerment. This approach falls within the United Nations' call for women from the Global South to increase the workforce, ultimately sustaining the capitalist order through a rhetoric based on the "liberation" of women.[30] This highly abstract enthusiasm encouraging subaltern women to access paid labour does not, however, tackle what happens to them on the ground, and does not concern itself with the human quality of their lives, which often remain unaltered in the process.[31] In any event within the SGWU, this eagerness to work only applied to classical liberal professions that were deemed "respectable" and "honourable" by the elites. Women's trades should, first and foremost, be compatible with their primary roles as "good" spouses and mothers, or to rephrase it: "family comes first, job second" (Radhakrishnan 2009: 202). Once again, the Union's model of the "working woman" only seemed to be suited to elites from the upper and middle classes because they have sufficient revenues to delegate

27 The Sudan Institutional Capacity Program (FAO), "Poverty in the Sudan", Policy Brief of June 2011.

28 Sāmya and her colleague told me that they sold cosmetic products and dishware in their neighbourhoods and within the NGO itself in order to make ends meet.

29 For more on this topic, see Tønnessen (2013).

30 During the Third World Conference on Women, which took place in Nairobi in 1985, the UN had already highlighted the necessity for women to participate in global production. This approach has been sharply criticised by feminists, who denounced a lack of interest in women's liberation demands. Their grievances were mainly articulated around longstanding historical concerns related to land ownership or inheritance laws.

31 This is pointed out in particular by Gayatri Spivak in Sharpe and Spivak (2003).

their domestic roles – housework and their children's upbringing and education – to other women from the impoverished classes, while they themselves work outside the home. This is precisely what Salma Nageeb addressed when studying the socio-economic inequalities among members of women's religious groups in Khartoum. Socioeconomic differences lead to significant divergences among these women regarding their capacity to acquire religious and symbolic capital. This means, for example, that the women who become Quran teachers have the resources to allow them to spend numerous hours studying the Islamic corpus, since they are able to hire "Ethiopians [as domestic help]" (Nageeb 2007: 16) to perform their household duties on their behalf.

"*Al-ʿĀfiya Darajāt*": Towards the Empowerment of the One Per Cent

As mentioned previously, the SGWU promotes "women's development" (*tanmiyat al-marʾa*) through the concept of *tamkīn*, which translates as empowerment, which the Islamic NGO *Umm al-muʾminīn* ("Mother of the Believers") defines in the following terms: "enabling unprivileged and marginalised women to manage their lives in a better way. This also includes knowing her religion, rights and duties better" (Nageeb 2007: 11). The "better way" refers to the normative prescriptions of this organisation and others that share its perspectives, including the SGWU, which would therefore know "better" what the beneficiaries of their programmes needed and how they should lead their lives. This top-down, superimposing frame of reference, which tends to set priorities that differ from those that meet women's needs and demands, is also frequently found in the approaches of INGOs in Sudan, even those professing to be "gender-aware". Within this framework, these actors are working "for" marginalised people and not "with" them. The unresolved debate about "objective" and "subjective" interests – the former formulated by NGOs and the latter by the beneficiaries of development programmes –raises the issue of choice and consent, eventually conjecturing that women throughout the world will remain controlled by the patriarchal and neo-colonial global order.

The concept of empowerment theorised by Paulo Freire in 1968 (1974) was originally born out of a revolutionary ideology that entails the idea of participation in decision-making processes by oppressed individuals or groups in order for them to gain agency and collectively take power. It has since been espoused by feminists from the Global South to advance the need for women's economic autonomy, which can only come about through a radical and structural transformation of the processes of production, exchange and distribution of wealth. The term later became

instrumental in the work of international organisations, which institutionalised it in the 1990s, especially the World Bank, which made it central to the concept of development. Stripped of its radical impetus, the word "empowerment" became vague and consensual. What was originally to be a means whereby the oppressed – mainly women –would define their own agenda changed into a top-down process that granted a place in decision-making mechanisms to a very limited group of women.

The markedly individualistic conception of "women's empowerment" promoted by the neoliberal development agenda emphasises individual responsibility and choice. In particular, this discourse culminates by blaming the poor for their circumstances, as they are considered to be non-enterprising, on the assumption that a system based on the "free market" delivers benefits that can never be achieved through government interventions. This interpretation of empowerment, which has been supported by the Union's executives since its foundation, relates strongly to what Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser (2019) have described as a "feminism of the one percent". On the pretext of targeting women on the lowest rungs of the social ladder, the Union's development programmes have actually advanced the vision of "equal opportunity domination". In other words: "They want a world where the task of managing exploitation in the workplace and oppression in the social whole is shared equally by ruling-class men and women" (Arruzza, Bhattacharya & Fraser 2019: 2). Far from promoting a radical and profound change in how resources are produced and distributed, the SGWU and its partners have participated in maintaining a status quo that keeps women in dependent and submissive relationships and ultimately benefits the neoliberal development agenda, which, alongside the state's neoliberal policies "produce[s] and intensifie[s] both the conditions for racial discrimination and for doing and perpetuating gender roles" (Farris 2017: 118). This is achieved by locating marginalised women in the private sphere and employment activities that have traditionally been conceived as vocationally feminine (the care and domestic sectors).

This interpretation of "empowerment", which results in an absence of policies aimed at empowering women from Sudanese popular classes, is illustrated in several documents produced by the Union. For instance, the August 1999 issue of *Usratī* paid homage to the first "*ʿamīda*" (female General) in the Sudanese national police force, whose appointment was meant to indicate the *inqādh* regime's progressive position of allowing women to access high-ranking positions that had traditionally been monopolised by men. A leaflet produced by the Union in 2003 on the history of women's rights in Sudan has Rajāʾ Ḥasan Khalīfa congratulating ʿUmar al-Bashīr's government and the SGWU's work on their "major breakthrough in women rights" with "women accessing prestigious positions such as Supreme Court Judge, Minister and Ambassador". These appointments were presented by the Union's executives as

ends in themselves and contributed considerably towards ignoring class inequalities, because the women who access such high-ranking positions are predominantly from urbanised, educated and upper classes, as clearly indicated by the profiles of the Union's executives.

The NGO's interpretation of women's empowerment and its quest for "moderation" are expressed in reformist repertoires of collective action. It promotes an activism that "knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land minds" (Nnaemeka 2004: 378). This form of action is expressed through the words of the Union's vice-secretary-general: "*al-ʿāfiya darajāt*" (literally "wellness comes in degrees"). This Sudanese expression conveys the idea that "Rome was not built in a day" or, in other words, that change takes time, and for this reason one needs to proceed step by step and to compromise in order to achieve one's goals. In Nūr's discourse, it is associated with the word "*maqbūla*", which means "accepted" or "tolerated", and which seems to be the cornerstone of the interviewees' language register.

The strategy of moderation, compromise and gradual change adopted by the Union is best illustrated by its advocacy for the introduction of a quota system in the form of envisaged reforms to the Sudanese electoral law. A large and growing body of literature has investigated this topic in Sudan, with significant contributions by Samia El Naggar and Balghis Badri. In 2008, the Sudanese Parliament introduced a 25% for women wishing to present themselves as candidates for legislative bodies at all levels. It was implemented for the first time during the 2010 general elections. All the interviewees who mentioned the electoral law stressed the importance of the basic woman's right to participate in politics on an equal footing with their fellow countrymen. However, when asked about the percentage they felt they should claim, they responded that this 25% was a coherent and realistic figure that was appropriate for the time and prevailing circumstances. According to these women, the 25% quota would indeed better suit the socio-political sensitivity of the Sudanese people, who are allegedly in favour of women's political participation on the basis of gender complementarity. The state would therefore require two types of governance, "soft and hard" (Badri & Tripp 2017), represented by women and men respectively. Nūr mobilised this essentialising argument to support the necessity of including at least 60% of women on the Supreme Peace Council (majlis al-salām) established by the transition government:

> Women are more inclined to gentleness, they are much more pacifist and peace-loving than men. They are prone to solving problems and it is their maternal and caring nature which conditions them to think and behave like that! They have the power and the capacity to spread the value of peace through their essential role in the education of citizens. And you know, women are reliable, you can trust them with nurturing the importance of peace and tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*) in children" (6 October 2019)

The adoption of the codes favoured by the regime without explicitly protesting against the dominant patriarchal narrative symbolises the agency of the Union's members, and more globally of Islamist female activists (Mahmood 2001). They constantly negotiate gender norms through the approach of "committing (oneself) without protesting" (Bouilly 2019). While this electoral quota was advertised by women within the SGWU without any distinction on the basis of socio-economic status, its implementation in Sudan was founded on participation by women from privileged groups, most of whom were related to men who were part of the social elites and had connections to the dominant political parties. Balghis Badri and Samia El Naggar (2013) have offered an insightful analysis of the aims behind the adoption of what appears to be a progressive feminist law. According to them, the quota was passed in order to grant seats in Parliament and give a voice to "a slate of women candidates who are decidedly non-feminists" (40), a category into which the Union's executives seem to fit perfectly. Thus, the 2010 elections eventually put women from socially elite groups – educated, urban and well-to-do, occupying liberal professions and members of the main Islamic political parties (mostly the National Congress Party and the Umma Party) – in power. Clearly, the SGWU promotes a form of "feminism for the one percent", since as Qamar Habbāni[32] put it in her interview for *al-Intibāha* newspaper (issue dated 24 April 2010), this 25% quota "allows women to fill strategic and prestigious positions".

This globalised proposal on development and women's empowerment promoted by the SGWU is moulded to comply with "traditional culture", or as Fadwa El Guindi writes: "Not only is development distinguishable from growth, but modes of development can be distinguished on the basis of whether they are truly indigenous." (1981: 477) The elites who work in this NGO therefore simultaneously mirror discourses of liberal modernity and local and global politics – as displayed in the previous sections – as well as of piety and nationalism through the promotion of "respectable femininity".

The "New Muslim Woman": A Transnational Islamist Model since the 1960s

In recent years, there has been an increasing body of social science literature exploring the concept of "respectability". This symbolic signifier of capital and class is constantly sought by the marginalised, who are depicted as dangerous, threaten-

32 She was in charge of the Human Rights and Legislations National Desk of the SGWU at the time.

ing and unworthy of "respect". This understanding is used by social elites to establish a distance between themselves and individuals who are seen as lacking respectability, and are classified as deviant and pathological (Skeggs 1997; Hussein 2017). Respectability – and more precisely "respectable femininity" – is thus a standard women aspire to in order to increase their social value and legitimacy. In Sudan, the SGWU plays a particularly important role in tracing the boundaries of this symbolic capital not only through a legal framework imposed by state institutions and party organisations, but also by the implementation of norms the Union has inherited from the National Women's Front (NWF), a women's NGO founded in 1964 by the well-known Islamist leaders Suʿād al-Fātiḥ and Thuriyyā Umbābī.[33] My analysis draws from Nazia Hussein's definition of "respectable femininity", which she developed based on her work in Bangladesh:

> The normative conception of women's respectability is measured against women prioritizing family above work by performing their domestic, care, and socializing roles and by maintaining moral propriety. (. . .) Respectable femininity is a symbolic capital that women seek in order to gain symbolic profit and class status. (. . .) Respectable femininity is based around particular types of femininity, aesthetics, caring and morals, always seeking to get something "right"; it is articulated as a process through which women add value to themselves. It manifests as behavioral expectations in workplaces, streets and homes (Hussein 2017: 3).

Asef Bayat (2010) has demonstrated that many of the women who were involved in the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 were excluded from the public realm and lost their consequential rights once the Islamic state was instituted. In reaction to this marginalisation, several women's groups organised themselves to set out an endogenous, albeit abstract, model of the "New Muslim Woman" in the image of the Prophet's daughter Fāṭima and granddaughter Zaynab bint ʿAlī. Both these women were described as "true homemakers and public persons" (Bayat 2010: 99) by women Islamists who deployed discourses concerning both "progress" and "cultural authenticity". This is precisely the kind of narrative that has

33 Described as the women's branch of the National Islamic Front as well as a charity organisation (al-Bachir 1996; Hale 1992, 1996a), the NWF seems to have been disbanded in 1989 alongside with other women's NGOs. Indeed, there is no mention of the organisation in the literature investigating Sudanese Islamic NGOs operating after ʿUmar al-Bashīr's coup d'état. I could not find any file mentioning this name at the HAC (in September 2019) and the head of the registration office assured me that the organisation had never existed. It is therefore difficult to trace what roles NWF members played after its highly likely dissolution in 1989. However, we do know that Suʿād al-Fātiḥ was one of the founders of the International Muslim Women's Union in 1996 and had close ties with the SGWU's leaders. Since the SGWU embodied the Islamist branch of the women's movement during the three decades of Islamist rule, it is safe to claim that it replaced the NWF in this role.

been promoted by the National Women's Front and the SGWU in Sudan. Both these organisations have mobilised the past as a reservoir of symbols, idioms and languages to invest their social and political projects with authority. Women were notably displayed as the guardians of traditions and the "socializer in the family" (Seesemann 2005). More broadly, within the *umma*, they were charged with preserving the Muslim community's honour against an invasion by Western morals and cultural norms. "Respectable femininity" therefore becomes the incarnation of family, another symbolic capital that is considered the bedrock of Sudanese society.

As discussed previously, according to this approach, women's work outside the home needed to follow fulfilment of their familial roles as spouses and mothers. In this context, it would seem that respecting the boundaries of "respectable femininity" is beyond the reach of subaltern and marginalised women, since for them employment is not an option but a necessity imposed by their material needs. This is partly why there has been an evident over-representation of single women among the financially disadvantaged employees of the SGWU, for whom non-domestic work and a conventional family life seem to be at odds due to their class. The question of marital status and the phenomenon of celibacy within women's NGOs is particularly compelling, and yet far too little attention has been paid to it. Joceline Chabot (2003) has provided an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon in her study of Christian women's unionist activities in France during the first half of the 20th century. Her findings draw attention to the justifications offered by these women regarding their marital status, which strikingly resemble those of the SGWU office workers. All expressed the belief that commitment to the organisation is a social vocation for the sake of God, since they are "doing good in an Islamic sense" (Hafez 2011). They felt that their activity enabled them to play a positive role in society, and that this was more readily facilitated by their single status. Since they cannot fulfil an idealised familial role as wives and mothers, these women engage in work based on the values of "care" in order to reinforce their respectability in society. The emphasis on women as care providers stems from historical and symbolic struggles that marginalised women have sought to institutionalise as a fundamental element of attaining "respectable femininity". This quest for respectability therefore seems to partly account for the presence of socially marginalised women within charity and development organisations in Sudan (among other reasons). However, the norm within the Union is for models of the traditional nuclear family to be represented in the social profiles of its executives, who are all married, with the exception of Isrāʾ.

Furthermore, as Nazia Hussein has argued, "respectable femininity" is based on particular types of aesthetic, including women's clothing. The model of the "New Muslim Woman" promoted by the NWF and the SGWU favours a type of "modest"

clothing that respects Islamic principles. The veil, for instance, is considered compulsory for any "respectable" Muslim woman. Salma Nageeb rightly emphasises that "women's rights to education, employment and public participation depended on the observance of certain measures of religiosity, revealed through Islamic dress and abiding by the codes of public gender interaction" (Nageeb 2007: 10). The social control of women's clothing and bodies, which became part of the *inqādh* regime's moral crusade, is justified by a theological remit, as well as by a nationalist discourse that promotes the "indigenisation" of the Sudanese people's customs. Since the 1940s, this narrative has promoted the Sudanese *thōb* (sometimes written *tobe* to convey the vernacular pronunciation in English)[34], and particularly the white *thōb*, as the national costume and as a formidable weapon against Western imperialism.[35] Drawing on this historical claim, the post-1989 Islamist government imposed the *thōb* as the "authentic" Sudanese and Islamic clothing with the intention of "protecting" women's modesty and dignity. However, Fāṭima Bābikr Maḥmūd, who has reviewed African and Sudanese women's movements (2002), highlights the fact that this garment represents a tool for the cultural and socioeconomic hegemony of a specific ethnic and social group in Sudan. It is, in fact, the symbol of a "respectable" urban elite from the ethnic groups of the Northern-Central Nile Valley, notably Danagla, Jaaliyin and Shawayga. This manifestation contributes to the invisibilisation of the sartorial options of groups from marginalised areas. The wearing of the *thōb* as a political and patriotic statement[36] by SGWU's members and their predecessors, while rational from their perspective, nonetheless exposes the persistence of a truncated representation of Sudanese history. The *thōb* worn by the SGWU's executives and Islamist activists is not the same *thōb* that was worn in the 1950s by Sudanese communists, who placed it loosely over their heads, allowing their hair to appear underneath the flowing head covering. Islamist women wear a veil and long-sleeved clingy blouses (known as *karīna* in Sudan) that remain hidden beneath it; it is therefore called the "*ittiḥād al-karīna*" (literally the "long-sleeved blouse union") by its critics (Figure 6).

34 A rectangular piece of fabric several metres long that is wrapped around the body and head.

35 Even though the *thōb* was viewed as "native" clothing by colonial administrators in Sudan, it was paradoxically viewed as a "dignified and modest form of dress" (Brown 2017: 11), and girls and women were encouraged to wear it. This was not the case with "native" clothing in other parts of the British empire. See Brown (2017).

36 This explanation was given by Nūr during our interview right after the Consultative Council meeting on October 20, 2019, at which most of the participants were wearing the *thōb*.

Figure 6: Picture taken from the last issue of *Usratī*.[37]

Perpetuating the Patriarchal Order: Between Inclusion and Segregation

In his 1988 pamphlet, the leading sheikh of the National Congress Party, ʿAbd al-Jalīl al-Nazīr al-Karūrī (1988), wrote about gender relations: "Leaving the house is not leaving the religion". This is held to be encouragement for women to work outside the house as long as they respect the "appropriate" Islamic norms of decent clothing and conduct. The most striking example illustrating this vision in practice is the attitude of the social programmes of the SGWU and its affiliated associations targeting women street vendors, and specifically tea sellers (*sittāt al-shāy*) . The aim of these projects was to change these women's careers, especially by taking them off the streets, since their presence in the public space is implicitly associated with immorality, as they constantly interact with men who are not "*maḥram*".[38] These programmes contributed to stripping the tea sellers of their agency, reiterating the impact of the reformist approach adopted by the SGWU.

37 December 2018: 12. The picture shows SGWU members wearing the *thōb*, protesting in December 2017 against the closure of al-Aqsa Mosque and the United States' recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

38 Fathers, brothers, maternal and paternal uncles, husbands and men who have been breastfed by the same woman who has breastfed a woman (who are considered to be brothers). Women are not permitted to marry any of these men, and are therefore not allowed to be alone with them without a chaperone from the *maḥram* categories.

The Union wanted to "include" tea sellers, as well as other "excluded" people, within the development microcosm and to integrate them into the "respectable" labour market in Sudan. The word "inclusion" is a pillar of the rhetoric of "good governance" promoted by international institutions, but in fact it maintains the status quo by proposing merely marginal changes. During our interviews, most of the Union's executives insisted on the pressing need to assist women tea sellers, notably by protecting them from harassment on the street. This would be achieved by supporting these stallholders in the creation of small businesses that could generate incomes from sources outside the streets. This policy acutely reflects the preferred norms governing gender relations within the SGWU, which aimed to "protect" poor women, who were seen as vulnerable, by helping them preserve their morality. The NGO opted to support programmes to remove tea sellers from the streets and public markets, rather than to tackle the issue of sexual harassment, which is inextricably linked to the country's institutionalised racism.[39] This mission or "burden", which is incumbent upon elite women, is inherently constructed on a complex configuration of differences whereby by subverting the driving logic, the claim of the powerful to protect the less powerful can also become an excuse for the former to dominate the latter (Spivak 1988). In the SGWU, this approach also highlights – albeit to a fairly limited extent – the possibility for the "powerless" (in this case the subaltern employees) to claim and dispense rights for and by themselves through the task of protecting and providing for these women street vendors.

Rajāʾ Ḥasan Khalīfa and Nafīsa justified these projects by claiming that tea sellers practice this "thankless and dishonourable employment only because they do not have any other options". The Union's responsibility was therefore to help them, first by improving their material working conditions through the renovation of their stalls, and ultimately by helping them move on to other lucrative activities that were deemed "easier" and "safer" by the NGO's executives. This maternalistic narrative, which claimed to save poor women and preserve their respectability, is closely linked to what the first issue of *Usratī* magazine (July 1996) conveyed in its section on crime rates and types on the basis of gender.[40] It first reported that women commit fewer crimes than men because of their "natural" predisposition to gentleness, which prevents them from engaging in conflicts or using violence to resolve them where they arise. This idea, which was also expressed by Nūr when mentioning the Supreme Peace Council, contributes towards absolving

39 Tea sellers are predominantly from marginalised ethnic groups, mostly from the Nuba Mountains and Darfur. There are also a few Ethiopians and Eritreans, who are vulnerable for different reasons.

40 The magazine does not provide any source for the statistics displayed in this section.

the patriarchal culture from its foundational responsibility as it tolerates, if not encourages, violence by men, which is displayed as an inherent characteristic of masculinity. The issue then goes on to describe the types of crime committed by women, and identifies three main offences: abortion, selling alcohol and drug trafficking. Whereas men's criminality is presented as "natural" and "innate", women's propensity towards violence is explained away as a result of a lack of education, and especially religious education, as well as the consequence of a perversion ("*inḥirāf*") caused by "too much freedom of movement". It is widely believed in Sudanese urban spaces that most of the women who trade alcohol are street tea sellers, and this belief justified the need for the SGWU to control their behaviour and activities.

The Union's executives also argued that the projects targeting women tea sellers were unprecedented. Nafīsa even claimed that there was not a single organisation or initiative other than the SGWU that helped and supported these street vendors. In fact, the SGWU was competing with the Union of Female Food and Tea Sellers, a trade union founded in 1990 by ʿAwaḍiyya Koko, a tea seller herself, to improve the working conditions of her colleagues on the streets of the Sudanese capital. This organisation specifically combats a form of police harassment (known as "*al-kasha*") whereby women are forced to give up their utensils or are forcibly removed from their spots. Surprisingly, this relentless campaign of intimidation, harassment and brutality was never mentioned by the SGWU's members. In 2000, the Governor of Khartoum issued a decree imposing a curfew on women's work outside their homes, which considerably restricted the activity of women in the "informal" sector. These women were consequently subjected to violent reprisals from the agents of official and semi-official morality-enforcing institutions, and from the Public Order Police in particular.[41] Street traders' "unconventional" use of public space through their active presence was seen as a threat, and provoked a conflict with the state. The regime expected users of the public space to navigate the streets passively, by walking, driving or observing, and thus any "active use challenge[d] the authority of the state and those social groups that benefit[ted] from such order" (Bayat 2010: 63). Far from condemning these state-sponsored practices, the SGWU promoted an increased collaboration with the police to fight female criminality, as underlined in the Union's Seventh National Congress report (2004). The aim of this alliance with police forces was to guide unwilling women towards "licit" (*ḥalāl*) activities (Makkāwī 2005: 193). Furthermore, the Union's collaboration with state agents

41 This force was established by the Public Order Law of 1991 and disbanded in 2019 after the popular revolt. It had been tasked with regulating the behaviour of men and women according to Islamic Sharia law, which resulted in the arbitrary repression of women, whose behaviour and bodies were under close surveillance and control in the public space.

served the purpose of promoting gender segregation in specific domains. This was notably the case with driving tests, which between 2014 and October 2019 were taken by women at the Union's headquarters where there was a traffic police station. This office, which was "one of a kind in Africa and the Arab world" according to one of the subaltern employees I met, is described by all the interviewees as the fruition of a long campaign by the SGWU to enable Sudanese women to take their driving test under the "best conditions" possible. These conditions included strict gender segregation in this women-only space, where even the police officers carrying out the driving tests were all women. This allegedly allowed women to feel "comfortable" and guarded them from potential sexual harassment by men.

The NGO seemed to want to distance itself from disruptive modes of action and confrontation, and this attitude can best be illustrated by its perspectives on women practicing sports. The Union's members did not generally condemn gender mixing (*ikhtilāṭ*), as it was allowed during the Prophet's time in Medina, and yet they still promoted gendered physical segregation in specific contexts. Most of the interviewees, for instance, mentioned the women soccer players who appeared in the stadiums of Khartoum in broad daylight in September 2019. Some of them were wearing t-shirts and shorts that revealed their arms and legs, an outfit judged "immoral and indecent" by the Union's members. Nadā, an employee of the public relations office, said that she refused to watch these games because the players' behaviour was not properly "Islamic", as they "exposed the woman's immodesty (*ʿawra*)" (10 October 2019). She advocated for women's right to practice sports, but within an Islamic framework by respecting the norms of "femininity", which included playing in segregated spaces or wearing modest clothing that covered the entire body. Her view was shared by Nūr, who proclaimed that Islam offered women many rights, including practicing any sport they wanted to. The first issue of *Usratī*, which dedicated a section to sports, highlighted this narrative by promoting women practicing sports in segregated spaces and wearing "decent Islamic uniforms" . Nūr furthered this idea by stating that sports "do not deform women's bodies", and do not "prevent them from giving birth to healthy children" (6 October 2019). Women are thus allowed to practice sports insofar as it does not jeopardise their traditional maternal role or compromise their positions within the boundaries of "respectable femininity".

Conclusion: The SGWU, Emblem of a Mainstream "State Feminism"

This chapter has demonstrated how the SGWU was located at the intersection of the state and civil society, inhabiting a "modernizing space embedded within, pro-

duced and in turn reproduced by Islamic beliefs and teachings" (Hafez 2011: 60). The gender ideology adopted by this "government-organised non-governmental organisation" (GONGO) (Hasmath, Hildebrandt and Hsu 2019) was promoted by the Sudanese Islamic state. It was founded on the importance of implementing a specific interpretation of Islamic scripture in the social and development fields. This process was carried out by women who were integrated into the political and administrative realms and were considered to be the "guardians" of traditions and the gatekeepers of Sudanese society's moral fabric. Women's Islamic NGOs, and particularly the SGWU, were therefore the most privileged allies of the state as regards its gender and development policies.

Between 1990 and 1995, the SGWU organised several conferences in all twenty-five states of the country, gathering professional and academic women together to discuss the situation and rights of Sudanese women. For instance, it held a conference entitled "The Role of Women in the Sudan Salvation Revolution" in 1992 (Abdalla 2009), clearly showing its reformist approach and willingness to be unambiguously part of the new regime and to negotiate with it. The NGO also coordinated the "Women in Development" units, which were founded in 1973 in all the federal state's institutions. The Union collaborated closely with the Ministry of Welfare and Social Development until 2018 to prepare and implement development programmes, including the famous "*al-qarḍ al-ḥasan*" (virtuous loan[42]) programme, which aimed to alleviate the financial plight of poor families and was funded by the Bank of Sudan and *diwān al-zakāt*, a public institution in charge of collecting and distributing the *zakāt*, a religious mandatory tax in Islam.[43] The NGO's executives held representative roles during regional and international summits: for instance, it represented the Republic of Sudan at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The SGWU also took part in national ceremonies organised by President ʿUmar al-Bashīr himself, such as the "international women's rights day" held at the Friendship Hall (*qāʿat al-ṣadāqa*) on March 8.[44] The presidential couple was invited to events organised by the Union as honorary guests, including during its ninth National General Congress in 2011, which was inaugurated by a speech by ʿUmar al-Bashīr.

42 Based on the following Quranic verse: "Who of you will lend Allah a goodly loan which He will return after multiplying it for him manifold? For Allah has the power both to decrease and increase [wealth], and to Him you will all be returned." (*al-Baqara*, verse 245)

43 This state-managed *zakāt* system was one of the main targets of criticism during the *inqādh* regime, as it was rife with corruption and unprofessional practices that allowed the regime's leaders to accrue public funds for their own benefit.

44 From the SGWU leaflet published in 2018 on its activities between 2015 and 2018.

The Union's version of feminism that was supported by the Islamist state was also quite blatant. It clearly engaged in its activities through co-optation and clientelist strategies. In the context of the "democratisation" process or political pragmatism undertaken by the Sudanese government from the early 2000s (Mann 2014), the SGWU adopted a similar co-optation strategy around 2010 to deflect threats from other elites in the country who were opposed to the regime and posed a threat to its continuation in power. In fact, the organisation opened up its senior positions to non-NCP supporters such as Nūr from the Umma Party, who joined the Union in 2011 as head of professional training programmes for two terms before being promoted to vice-secretary-general.

The GONGO was also a key protagonist in the regime's patronage practices. It recruited members from a broad range of social classes through clientelist processes that were evident from the personal connections and networks that existed within the organisation. Practices such as these allowed subalterns within the organisation to benefit from goods, public services or housing offered by the executives without going through the regular market criteria. These patronage practices were also to be seen in the alliances forged by the Union. It created and supervised two NGO networks (*Ansām* and *Shumū*), which gathered together hundreds of specialised local charity and development associations, and to which the SGWU gave technical and financial assistance while keeping them under tight surveillance. These networks helped spread the Union's interpretation of gender and empowerment, which seemed to be adapted to the needs and social circumstances of the upper and middle classes, to urban, heterosexual, married, educated women belonging to the dominant ethnic, religious and political groups in the country. These women, who were well represented by the profiles of the NGO's executives, held the frontiers of "respectable femininity" and gave themselves the mission to "protect" vulnerable women, whereas in fact they mostly worked to defend their own class interests, thus contributing to the invisibilisation and exclusion of their subaltern counterparts. In this way, women's agency seemed to be exercised within a rigid normative framework defined by the social elites of the Islamist movement.

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