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Women say Darfur peace won't work without them

01 Nov 2007 17:17:00 GMT

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The Darfur peace talks in Libya may have got off to a disappointing start with a boycott by key rebel factions. But activist Safaa Elagib Adam made sure she was there to push for better representation for women from the outset.

As a veteran of the last round of talks in Abuja, the secretary general and gender adviser of the Khartoum-based Community Development Association knows she faces an uphill struggle. She was one of only four women representing civil society last weekend in Libya, and says there were no women on either the government or the rebel delegations.

Nonetheless, Elagib Adam and her colleagues were able to communicate the importance of women's participation in a speech to delegates, as well as at meetings with the government, rebels and international mediators. "We are legitimate, we are now part of the process, and we will keep the connection going," she told me in a phone interview from Khartoum.

The women received a positive response, although they don't yet know what role they'll be offered at the talks going forward.

One thing they are sure about, though, is that the peace process won't work without them.

"Women are not just victims," says Elagib Adam. "They must have a voice at all levels. We need to include women to reach a sustainable peace." She stresses that women should be part of each negotiating delegation as well as civil society representatives at the talks.

A wish list drawn up at a September consultation on the Darfur peace process bringing together 10 or so women's groups from across the political spectrum states that women should make up at least 30 percent of participants in all negotiations.

Carla Koppell, director of the U.S.-based Initiative for Inclusive Security which organised the consultation, says Darfuri women have been marginalised in the peace process so far. "Even those who have made it into the room don't really feel like they have a voice. And they see a difference in how they would have raised the issues. For example, they would like to have seen security addressed earlier."

The urgency of getting their concerns onto the agenda means they're willing to adopt a pragmatic approach and bury their political differences on certain issues, Koppell says.

The ill-fated Darfur Peace Agreement, which only one rebel group signed in May 2006, hasn't been worth the paper it's written on as far as women are concerned. "We don't see any benefit. The situation is escalating on the ground; there is more violence and more tribal conflict," says Elagib Adam.

She outlines Darfuri women's priorities for any new agreement: the establishment of peace and security through a ceasefire; better protection on the ground for women, who have suffered high levels of sexual violence; affirmative action, including more participation for women at every stage; a reparation fund earmarked for women; guarantees of land and property rights for women; and an equal share of reconstruction benefits.

The activist, who has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, says even when men do address issues that are important to women, they often see things differently. "For them, security is about moving forces from place to place, but for a woman farmer, that's not her business. She wants to be able to go to the market or her land in safety. We need to create space for women in which they are not subjected to violence."

If that's to happen, then any new deal must be structured so that it translates into real change on the ground. Elagib Adam proposes targets for women's participation and compensation and clear mechanisms for implementation.

In the meantime, she and other civil society representatives believe they could play a role in helping unite the fragmented groups.

Koppell recalls with a chuckle how frustrated women's groups at Liberia's peace talks ended up locking negotiators in a room - without which the vice president later conceded the negotiations wouldn't have concluded so efficiently.

While such tactics may be a last resort, Koppell believes Darfur's trouble-fraught talks could certainly benefit from more creative thinking. "It may well be time to look to those who aren't armed but who have the largest stake in the peace process, and give them more influence," she says.

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