

Women on the FRONTLINES

Closing Civic Space and Feminist Organising in Sudan

INTRODUCTION

Between 2012 and 2018, CREA strengthened the lobby and advocacy capacity of over 50 Sudanese activists through its Feminist Leadership, Movement Building and Rights Institutes in the Middle East & North Africa (MENA) and East Africa. The Institutes' trainings focused explicitly on the collective mobilisation of women for democratic rights. Despite the ongoing crackdown and closure of several civil society organisations by Sudanese authorities, CREA continued finding ways to engage with and include Sudanese feminist activists in its trainings.

CONTEXT

Many of the young activists who attended CREA's Institutes operated in tandem with the Salmaah Women's Resource Centre in Sudan. However, with its closure in 2014, CREA's trainings and Institutes served as trusted spaces for Sudanese activists to continue developing their advocacy agenda while building networks and alliances with other feminist activists from MENA and East Africa. Against the backdrop of Sudan's intensifying political restrictions, this was of the utmost consequence, as civil society actors in the country faced increasing government scrutiny and regulation.

RESULTS

On 19 December 2018, Sudan witnessed the beginning of massive civil unrest and widespread street protests against then-President Omar al-Bashir's regime¹. Almost all of the 50 activists who attended CREA's trainings played an integral role in the revolution — they occupied streets, led demonstrations, launched and fuelled aggressive social media campaigns, and built community support groups. Of note, one participant became the leader of a neighbourhood youth committee, while another led a medical team that ran emergency mobile clinics. This network of activists also made gender and women's rights key priorities in their advocacy agenda. For the first time, their participation was framed as a 'feminist project', as they used their platforms to engage the public in discussions around power, patriarchy, and feminism.

EXPERTISE AND EFFECTIVENESS

CREA's Institutes are recognised globally as spaces in which participants can further understand the conceptual underpinnings of their work and invest in strengthening the links between theory and practice. In the past 16 years, CREA's Feminist Leadership, Movement Building and Rights Institutes have produced over 1,000 alumni from 15 countries in the Global South. With CREA's support and active guidance, alumni have gone on to become critical movement actors working across a diverse set of issues, including women's rights, HIV/AIDS, livelihoods, peace and security, women's political participation, and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

EVALUATION AND LEARNING CAPACITY

The curricula for CREA's Institutes are consistently revised to meet the needs of evolving political contexts. As such, the organisation has learned how to: (a) strengthen our own capacity to finetune and appropriately contextualise its feminist leadership curriculum, particularly as it relates to young women organising in restricted civic spaces; and (b) effectively build and support resilient movements that actively include or are led by young women.

TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND PUBLIC SUPPORT

Faculty from CREA's Institute included a team of feminist activists who have done trailblazing work in the fields of civil liberties, economic and social justice, democracy and political rights, and criminal justice. Faculty leveraged their networks to connect Sudanese activists with other organisations and social movements with common strands of work.

CREA also used several measures to ensure the safety and security of participants. While working with the Sudanese activists, trainings were conducted outside Sudan and participants were divided into small groups while travelling outside the country. In consideration of the context CREA refrained from circulating photographs or other documentation, and prioritised keeping



Solome, a faculty member of the Feminist Leadership, Movement Building & Rights Institute, East Africa, in the middle of her session, hosted in Kenya in 2018.

the names of individuals and affiliated organisations confidential in communications and reports to donors.

KNOWLEDGE AND ADDED VALUE

CREA's Institutes attended by Sudanese activists used a movement-building lens and allowed participants to increase their knowledge around the theoretical underpinnings of movement-building, synthesised from analyses of global movements. CREA's knowledge resources on feminist leadership and movement-building — recognised across contexts for their nuance and critical perspective — are also made available to Institute participants. Most recently, this included CREA's publication on the constructs of power², 2,000 copies of which have been disseminated globally in a span of ten months.

INCLUSIVE APPROACH

While many of CREA's Institute participants are already knowledgeable about their local contexts, trainings challenge both individual activists and collectives to jointly question their socio-political agendas, inclusion of diverse constituencies, and strategies for collective action. The same held true for the Sudanese activists

CREA worked with. While many did not identify as feminists at the beginning of the trainings, by the end, a number of them acknowledged the value of using an inclusive, feminist approach to organise and mobilise around a common agenda.

SUSTAINABILITY

Of the 50 young activists who attended CREA's Institutes, most continue to be at the forefront of the democratic movement in Sudan³. For instance, a small group of participants are leading the campaign for 50 percent representation of women at all levels of the transitional government. These activists have, in turn, also facilitated trainings for other local activists and organisations in Sudan.

- 1 Amnesty International, "Sudan: 37 protestors dead in government crackdown on demonstrations", December 2018 https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/12/ sudan-protesters-dead-in-government-crackdown-on-protests/
- 2 Batliwala, S. (2018), "All About Power: Understanding Social Power and Power Structures" https://reconference.creaworld.org/ wp-content/uploads/2019/05/All-About-Power-Srilatha-Batliwala.pdf
- 3 Al Jazeera, "Sudan's female protestors leading the prodemocracy movement", April 2019 https://www.aljazeera.com/ news/2019/04/sudan-women-protesters-leading-pro-democracymovement-190423134521604.html



ABOVE Participants in the midst of a disussion at the Feminist Leadership, Movement Building & Rights Institute, MENA, hosted in Lebanon in 2017 COVER IMAGE Participants in the midst of a discussion at the Feminist Leadership, Movement Building & Rights Institute, East Africa, hosted in Kenya in 2018



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CREA builds feminist leadership, advances women's human rights, and expands sexual and reproductive freedoms.

Founded in 2000, CREA is a feminist human rights organisation based in the Global South, led by Southern feminists, which works at the grassroots, national, regional, and international levels.