

Unseen and Unheard: The Plight of Missing Women and Girls Amidst Sudan's Crisis



Strategic Initiative
for Women in the
Horn of Africa



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the
Netherlands

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Introduction:

Since the onset of the war in Sudan on April 15, 2023, civilians have suffered severe atrocities, including mass killings, forced displacement, looting, and the destruction of infrastructure. Women and girls have been particularly targeted, facing sexual violence, enforced disappearances, and other grave violations.

This report will specifically delve into the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) Network’s work on enforced disappearance. As a critical starting point, enforced disappearance is defined under Article 2 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance as:

“the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law.”

Interestingly, non-state armed actors are not included in this definition. However, under Article 3 of the Convention, state parties are obligated to take appropriate measures to investigate acts tantamount to enforced disappearance by persons or groups acting outside state authorization and to bring them to justice. Sudan ratified this Convention on August 10, 2021 .¹

According to Ana Srovin Coralli², this was because of the state-centric nature of the offense and the fact that non-state actors have traditionally not been seen as subjects under international law. However, this stance is now evolving. This is due to the fact that steadily, more and more conflicts involved non-state actors as opposed to merely between States. As such, in 2019, the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances began documenting cases “tantamount to enforced disappearances allegedly perpetrated by non-state actors exercising

1 Redress, “Press Statement: Sudan Ratifies Key International Treaty on Torture,” available at: [https://redress.org/news/in-historic-move-sudan-ratifies-key-international-treaty-on-torture-joining-171-other-states/#:~:text=\(12%20August%202021\)%20REDRESS%20welcomes,All%20Persons%20from%20Enforced%20Disappearances%20\(\(August 12, 2021\).](https://redress.org/news/in-historic-move-sudan-ratifies-key-international-treaty-on-torture-joining-171-other-states/#:~:text=(12%20August%202021)%20REDRESS%20welcomes,All%20Persons%20from%20Enforced%20Disappearances%20((August 12, 2021).)

2 Ana Srovin Coralli, “Non-State Actors and Enforced Disappearances: Defining a Path Forward,” available at: <https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomlatools-files/docman-files/working-papers/Non-State%20Actors%20and%20Enforced%20Disappearances%20Defining%20a%20Path%20Forward.pdf> (September 2021).

Government-like functions or de facto control over territories and populations.”³

Additionally, the definition of enforced disappearance in the Rome Statute encompasses arrests, abductions and detentions carried out by political organizations as well and flags enforced disappearance as a crime against humanity under Article 7.

With the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) identified as the perpetrator of most documented cases of disappearance in Sudan, SIHA Network argues for the consideration of these cases as instances tantamount to enforced disappearance. This is noting that while SIHA does not recognize the RSF as legitimate state actors, it does have de facto control over RSF holds in areas such as Al Geneina, Zalingi, Nyala and Al Duayin.

SIHA has been actively tracking cases of missing women and girls reported online from the beginning of the war up until December 2024, when this report was produced. To date, we have been able to track 236 cases of women and girls that have been reported missing. While this number is significant and grossly underreported, it is still lower compared to the number of missing men.

It is crucial to recognize that the officially reported number of missing women and girls likely underrepresents the full scope of this crisis. Factors such as fear, stigma, and inadequate reporting mechanisms contribute to this concealed reality.

In presenting SIHA’s findings on this issue, this report begins with an outline of its methodology. It then examines the patterns observed from enforced disappearance data, looking at occurrences documented when the RSF first arrive in an area versus after they have established control and settled. In sharing current statistics with respect to missing persons, the report brings the voices and experiences of family members who continue to search for their loved ones. The report then concludes with a call for protection and public support in solidarity with those who are missing and their affected families.

³ United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures, “Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) “in a nutshell,” available at: <https://www.oacnudh.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/WGEID-CED-InglesWEB.pdf>

Methodology:

The data examined in this report has primarily been gathered from credible open sources, including information shared by the MISSING initiative. This group was formed in response to the 2019 Khartoum Massacre⁴ in which 120 protestors were killed by the State military for staging a sit-in, in calling for a return to democracy and civilian rule. Since the outbreak of the current war, reports of disappeared individuals have flooded the internet, highlighting the escalating crisis in Sudan.

We have also monitored social media posts and reached out to the families of missing women and girls. Verifying these cases has been challenging. Difficulties include unreachable phone numbers and reluctance from families to share information, likely due to fear of retaliation (especially for those still in RSF-controlled areas). Additionally, social media posts about missing women and girls are often deleted without further clarification, possibly due to fear and stigma, making it hard to accurately confirm their status.

While most reports originate from urban centers, reporting from rural villages remains significantly lower despite the fact that there are actual cases to report. The absence of formal reports from these areas obscures the true extent of the crisis.

Patterns of Enforced Disappearance:

Our data and observations reveal distinct patterns in the cases of missing women and girls, which occur in two stages, each marked by its own set of violations and crimes. The first stage begins when the RSF enters a new area, and the second unfolds once they establish control and settle in. Each stage presents unique dangers for women and girls, leading to increased reports of disappearances and other forms of violence against women.

⁴ Aljazeera, “What was the ‘Khartoum Massacre’ marked by Sudan’s activists?” available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/3/what-was-the-khartoum-massacre-marked-by-sudans-activists> (June 3, 2024).

Pattern 1: Disappearance During First Days of the Invasion:

A recurring pattern since the onset of hostilities is the sharp rise in reports of missing persons in the initial days and weeks following the RSF's invasion of a new area.

This trend was observed first in the capital, Khartoum, and later in the states of Gezira and Sennar.

In Khartoum State, most disappearances occurred between April and May 2023, during the early stages of the RSF's invasion of the capital. Khartoum is home to numerous boarding houses for university students, many of whom are young women living far from their families. The city is also filled with single women working and living independently. As soon as the invasion started, the RSF began entering homes, creating an atmosphere of fear and terror for these women.

Disappearances began from the very first days of the war. On May 28, 2023, Hala Ahmed Isaak, a young woman from Haj-Yousif, was found dead in a car stolen by the RSF.⁵ The car bore bullet marks, and Hala had died from a gunshot wound to the head. Given that the car was in RSF possession, it is likely that she was kidnapped by the RSF before her tragic death.

In the same month, another girl, Insaf Saroor Fadl-Allah, was found dead⁶ near a gas station in the Al-Jerif area of Khartoum. She was initially buried under a number, 3487, as no one knew who she was. It was not until her photo was shared widely on social media that her family managed to identify her and locate her grave. This suggests that she had likely been missing for some time.

According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR),⁷ reports from survivors and witnesses during this period revealed disturbing patterns of abductions and enforced disappearances of women and girls. In Khartoum's Al-Riyadh district, women and girls were reportedly

5 MISSING Initiative, "Update: 28th May 2023," available at: <https://web.facebook.com/groups/392935134763820/permalink/1298637600860231/?rdid=knzMH1OUeDyoRIhK#> (May 28, 2023).

6 MISSING Initiative, "Woman Found Dead in Al-Jerif," available at: <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/14U74NUz6e/?mibextid=K35XfP> (May 23, 2023).

7 Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), "Sudan: Alarming Reports of Women and Girls Abducted and Forced to Marry, Held for Ransom," available at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2023/11/sudan-alarming-reports-women-and-girls-abducted-and-forced-marry-held> (November 3, 2023).

detained at RSF-controlled locations as early as April 24, 2023.

In May 2023, additional reports received by SIHA, women and girls were seen in Darfur in vehicles associated with the RSF. According to witnesses, the women and girls were tied up in the back of pickup trucks, raising concerns about their fate and the RSF's involvement in their disappearances.

An additional spike in disappearances was recorded in November 2023, particularly in Jabal Awlya⁸

Fourteen cases were documented within a span of just two days, from November 15 to 17. A similar pattern was seen in Al `Alyafun⁹ in October of the same year, where 50 families were reported missing amid the chaos created by the RSF's entry into the area.

In Sennar State¹⁰, the situation has been particularly dire since the RSF's invasion in June 2024, with a staggering 1,000 people¹¹ reported missing, including entire families, according to Sennar Youth Assembly. 14 additional cases involving reports of missing women and girls were also made in June 2024 as well. This alarming trend underscores the severe impact of the RSF's presence, as disappearances surge dramatically whenever they take control of new areas—mirroring the spike observed after the RSF's attack on Gezira in mid-December 2023.

Pattern 2: Disappearance After the RSF Settles in the Area:

Once the RSF establishes control over an area, the risk of enforced disappearances for women and girls significantly increases. These disappearances typically occur in specific patterns, including disappearances during movement, abductions, and forced servitude.

8 <https://web.facebook.com/100068941773386/posts/635243278783726/?mibextid=WC7FNe&rdid=k-3CfwY8Pyoqymo8>

9 SIHA Network, "More Violation Against Civilians, Women and Girls in Sudan," available at: <https://web.facebook.com/100068941773386/posts/635243278783726/?mibextid=WC7FNe&rdid=k3CfwY8Pyoqymo8> (October 9, 2023).

10 SIHA Network, "Press statement – Sennar State: Another Hotspot for Violence and Atrocities," available at: <https://sihanet.org/press-statement-sennar-state-another-hotspot-for-violence-and-atrocities/> (July 7, 2024).

11 Ibid.

1. Disappearances During Movement:

Many disappearances occur when women attempt to flee conflict zones or engage in routine activities, such as moving between locations or stepping out to gather necessities. Simply going out to get food, medicine, or other supplies can result in women and girls vanishing without a trace.

For instance, according to information received by SIHA from her family, Jihad Fadl Allah Suliman Nassir, a mother in her thirties, went missing in July 2023 while seeking medicine for her son. She and her friend Wahla were last seen entering a vehicle with an RSF member. Attempts to contact the RSF member were met with claims that they had been dropped off, followed by a warning not to call again. Jihad's family later searched for her at Hattab Camp, where they were informed of clashes and the reported deaths of two girls, though no confirmation was found.

The United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission¹² for Sudan also documented two particularly harrowing incidents in West Darfur and Khartoum states, where women were abducted from the street by the RSF. They were held for durations ranging from four days to more than eight months and subjected to consecutive rapes, including gang rape. Another testimony recounted a woman in South Darfur who was abducted from a road, held for three days, and raped repeatedly by RSF members.

Victims and witnesses recounted four separate incidents where women were abducted from the street and taken to houses or remote locations. There, they were physically assaulted, beaten, and raped by members of the RSF before being released or abandoned unconscious in the streets.

2. Abduction:

Another pattern that emerges when the RSF gains control is abduction. There have been multiple reports of women and girls being abducted from their families. For example, SIHA documented the case of two young sisters, D. and O., aged 15 and 13, who were forcibly taken at gunpoint by the RSF in front of their mother in Al Kalakla, Khartoum.

¹² UN Human Rights Council, "Findings of the Investigations Conducted by the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan," <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hr-council/sessions-regular/session57/A-HRC-57-CRP-6-en.pdf> (October 23, 2024).

Recent observations suggest that underage girls who are abducted are sometimes held briefly before being returned to their families in RSF-associated vehicles. Stolen goods are often returned with the girls, possibly to obscure criminal activity and as compensation to those affected. In some cases, families are coerced into relocating by the RSF, to possibly prevent further investigation.

In July 2023, the resistance committee in Al-Halfaya¹³ reported several cases of girls being abducted by the RSF, during which citizens were also assaulted. The girls were later returned to their families after negotiations. However, many cases involve women and girls who either never returned or were released after their families' paid ransoms to the RSF. More recently, reports from the Sennar Youth Assembly indicate that the RSF abducted women and girls¹⁴ after killing their families in the village of Galgani, Sennar province.

Another deeply disturbing case reported to SIHA involves a girl who was released from the RSF following a payment for her ransom, after being held captive with 19 other girls. Some of these girls were subjected to sexual violence, found without clothes, and tragically, some were found dead. The girl was held in a location filled with the decaying bodies of other girls, underscoring the horrific conditions they endured.

One particularly disturbing report, confirmed¹⁵ in July 2023 by sources on the ground, revealed that an unknown number of girls and women from both Khartoum and Darfur were being held hostage in the Musaie Dorm at Nyala University, which was under RSF control. Among these hostages were three young women who had been kidnapped from Northern Khartoum. This alarming information came from one of the hostages who managed to escape the horror, but the fate of the remaining girls remains unknown.

In the same month, SIHA received additional reports¹⁶ from Wadaah, Southeast of Al-Fashir, where several women and girls were seen tied and bound in vehicles associated with the RSF. The source noted that the women and girls

13Resistance Committee in Al-Halfaya, "Two Girls are Kidnapped from their homes," available at: <https://x.com/hlfayatalmllook/status/1675581371392065540> (July 2, 2023).

14Sennar Youth Assembly, "Update: Galgani," available at: <https://x.com/SHBABSENNAR/status/1824492993791082935> (August 16, 2024).

15 SIHA Network, "Update: #BringSudanMissingGirlsandWomenBack," available at: <https://x.com/sihanet/status/1679842675606822912?s=46> (July 14, 2023).

16SIHA Network, "Kidnapping and Slavery: The RSF is Committing More Dangerous Rights Violations in the Malign War Against Civilians in Sudan," available at: <https://sihanet.org/kidnapping-and-slavery-the-rsf-is-committing-more-dangerous-rights-violations-in-this-malign-war-against-civilians-in-sudan/> (August 1, 2023).

did not appear to be from Darfur, suggesting they were kidnapped from other areas. These women and girls were reportedly being held for ransom, with their families negotiating for their release. The incidents were described as public and undeniable. According to an eyewitness, “Everyone in Wadaah saw this, we all saw this.” Despite confirmation from multiple sources, further details remain scarce due to ongoing security concerns in the area.

3. Forced Servitude:

Disturbingly, SIHA received confirmed reports of women being forced into servitude by RSF soldiers after they gain control of an area. In multiple locations across Khartoum, women are being held captive in their own homes and forced to cook, clean, and perform other tasks for RSF soldiers. These women are practically enslaved, trapped in their homes and compelled to work under threat. Similar reports have also emerged from Wad Madani in Al-Gezira State.

This pattern of forced servitude underscores the severe abuse and dehumanization women endure, adding another layer to the already dire crisis of disappearances and abductions.

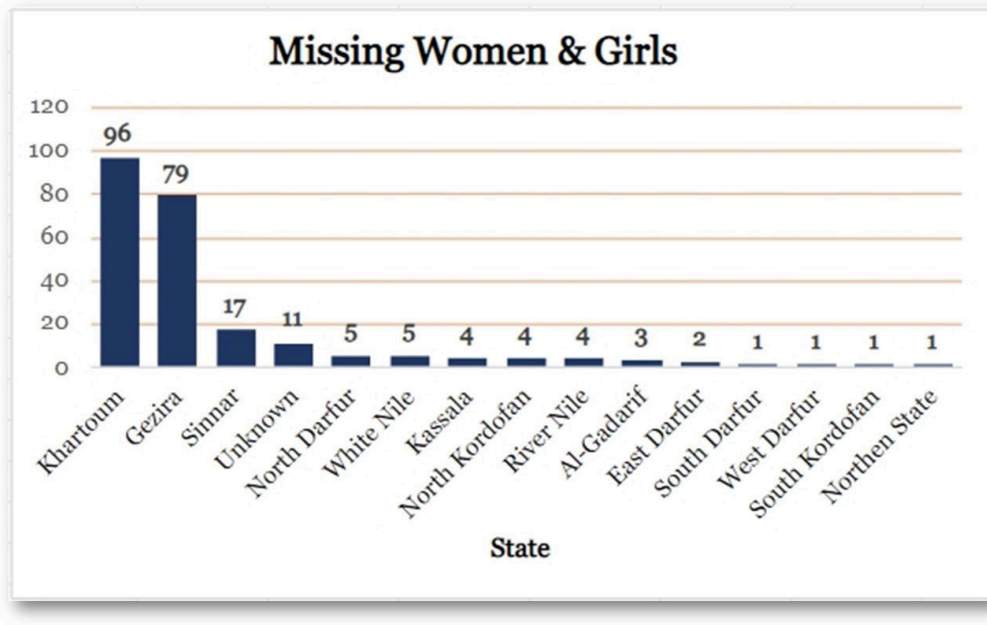


Figure 1: Missing Women and Girls in Sudan

Figure 1 highlights an alarming concentration of missing women and girls in Khartoum (96 cases) and Gezira (79 cases), with a spike in Gezira during the RSF's retaliation campaign in October 2024, resulting in 45 additional cases. Across Sudan, a staggering 88% of the 236 reported cases (209 women and girls) remain unaccounted for, while only 27 (11%) have been found (Figure 2).

These figures, derived from open-source data, likely underrepresent the true extent of the crisis. Testimonies received by SIHA from survivors frequently reveal that women and girls are held in groups, sometimes numbering a dozen or more, in RSF-controlled detention centers. However, many of these women and girls are not documented as missing, highlighting a significant gap between reported numbers and the reality on the ground. This discrepancy reflects systemic barriers to reporting and tracking disappearances, leaving countless victims unaccounted for.

As the conflict spreads into new areas, the number of women and girls subjected to violations is expected to increase. This escalating crisis demands urgent recognition and targeted interventions to protect and support those affected. Without proper acknowledgment and a coordinated response, the suffering of these women and girls will remain hidden, and the crisis will continue to intensify. Highlighting this issue is a critical step toward mitigating the devastating effects of enforced disappearances on women and girls in Sudan.



Figure 2: Status of Women and Girls in Sudan

As a recent update in the conflict, on January 11, 2025,¹⁷ SAF recaptured Wad Madani City and released prisoners who were previously detained in RSF prisons in the area. This has included substantial numbers of women and children. As SIHA Network continues to work in partnership with the Gender Based-Violence (GBV) Unit in the Ministry of Social Welfare, in assisting, several challenges have begun to emerge.

Firstly, with the release of prisoners, it has been difficult to verify whether the women and children we documented as enforcedly disappeared, are among those that have been released from RSF prisons. Secondly, working in collaboration with the GBV Unit, it has also been a challenge to facilitate the release of some of the women and girls into the two small women shelters that are located in Port Sudan, which is approximately 1000 kilometers away from Wad Madani. Already, without this influx of those in need of shelter, these women shelters are currently understaffed, at the limits of their capacity and are in dire need of funding support. Additionally, the GBV Unit itself is also understaffed and under supported.

Voices of the Missing: A Mother's Endless Search

On the morning of June 26, 2023, Siham Ishaq Hassan's daughter, Roqia Ibrahim, left home to fetch ice during a power outage. It was a simple errand, but when hours passed without her return, Siham's concern grew into panic. By evening, she and her family began a desperate search, reaching out to neighbors, friends, and relatives—no one had seen or heard from her.

Determined to find her daughter, Siham contacted local mosques and distributed announcements, hoping for any news. She visited hospitals, mortuaries, and markets, fearing the worst. "We thought maybe she had been hit by a stray bullet, but we found nothing," Siham recalls.

Siham reached out to both the RSF and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), desperately pleading for help. The RSF soldiers took her daughter's photo and

17 Sudan Tribune, "Sudanese Army Frees Prisoners from RSF Jails in Al Jazirah State," available at: https://sudantribune.com/article295813/#google_vignette (January 11, 2025).

promised to help. The SAF also assured her they would look for her, but days turned into weeks with no sign of Roqia. “We left no place unsearched. I went everywhere, hoping to hear something about my daughter, but I didn’t.”

As weeks stretched into months, and now over a year, Siham has not given up. She reached out to SIHA, hoping to amplify her search. Her voice trembled as she cried for help, exhausted but persistent. “Since June, I haven’t been able to sleep, eat, or drink. I’m just relying on God.”

These women and girls are not just numbers, they are daughters, sisters, and loved ones whose absence leaves their families in unbearable anguish. Their mothers, like Siham, spend sleepless nights tormented by the unknown, haunted by thoughts of what horrors their loved ones might be facing. The uncertainty is suffocating, as families do not know whether their daughters are alive, dead or fallen victim to unimaginable cruelty. Each missing woman or girl represents a life torn away, leaving behind those who will never stop searching, hoping, and grieving.

Call for Protection and Public Support:

We urgently call for immediate action to protect the missing women and girls, lobby for concrete steps in locating them, and to establish measures to both prevent and mitigate their enforced disappearance.

Specifically, we call for:

The immediate and prompt return of all individuals, particularly women and girls who have been enforcedly disappeared, unlawfully detained, abducted or held in captivity by the warring parties.

The establishment of a network of civil society organizations dedicated to strengthening electronic documentation efforts of missing persons and support for affected families.

Increased public advocacy efforts targeted towards obtaining information on the current whereabouts of those enforcedly disappeared by the warring parties.

Awareness-raising regarding the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the Committee on Enforced Disappearance and their respective tools.

The establishment of community-based protection systems and initiatives to prevent enforced disappearance, share information on disappearance “hotspots” to avoid and general updates on missing person searches.

The provision of funding and capacity support to women shelters currently receiving women and children who had been detained by the RSF and other entities providing social services.

Relevant state authorities to intensify investigation efforts towards uniting affected families with their missing loved ones, to provide closure in the event of tragedy and to bring perpetrators to justice in terms of their state obligations under the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

For the assistance of international bodies such as the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and the Committee on Enforced Disappearances to monitor and highlight these instances of disappearance, lending a voice to the unraveling crisis.

As a call for public support, your involvement can make a significant difference. The protection of these vulnerable individuals and their safe return to their families depend on our collective effort and vigilance.

By bringing these issues to light and mobilizing public support, we can work towards alleviating the devastating impact of enforced disappearances on women and girls in Sudan and ensure their protection and recovery.



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