

## **Darfur Women Take on Hard Labour**

**Author:** [Blake Evans-Pritchard](#)  
[Zakia Yousif](#)

Gruelling, poorly-paid construction work seen as only way of earning an income.

Across the Darfur region of western Sudan, female workers weighed down by heavy buckets are a common sight on building sites.

The work is arduous and the pay pitiful, but many women in Darfur have no other way of earning a living.

“This work is very hard,” said Aisha (not her real name), who works on a construction site in Nyala. “Most days, we stay on the site from six in the morning to six at night without eating anything. We drink water perhaps once or twice a day. Anything we do eat is taken out of what we are paid.”

Khadeja, another construction worker in Nyala, said, “We earn two Sudanese pounds [about half a US dollar] each day and sometimes we don’t even get that. There are men working with us, but they earn five Sudanese pounds or more. We asked if we could be paid the same as men, but our employers refused.”

The strenuous work often has serious health repercussions.

Ahmed Musa Adam, is a primary school teacher in Kabkabeya, a region of northern Darfur, and his wife works in construction in the town of El Fashir.

“Building work and making bricks and concrete is very hard for women,” he said. “Sometimes she has fever and pain all over her body, and she is stressed all the time from thinking about the work that she has to do. For two to three days she doesn’t feel good at all, and when she starts to feel better she goes back to work again.”

It is not just health problems that these female workers face – they are in danger of being attacked and raped on the way to and from work. Many of them have been displaced from their homes and are living in refugee camps. They slip out of the camps in the early hours of the morning and come back only when it is getting dark, increasing the risk of attack.

“The security situation isn’t very good and there is always danger,” Adam said. “A few months ago, there was a clash between the janjaweed [militia] and some people near where my wife works. My wife was afraid and didn’t come back home. I spent the whole night looking for her. It was only in the morning that I discovered that she had spent the night at a friend’s house.”

Adam says his wife’s job is taking its toll on family life.

“My wife leaves home before six in the morning and comes back at night. All day, the children are alone with no one to look after them. After I come back from school, I’m forced to stay with them and organise their things until she returns. But when she gets back, she’s tired and needs time to rest. All of these things have an effect on our home life.”

So why does she still do this kind of work? Quite simply, Adam explains, because there is no alternative.

“Circumstances mean that we have no choice but to let these women work in these kinds of jobs,” he said. “My basic salary of 250 Sudanese pounds [94 dollars] a month isn’t enough for someone with a family. This is why I let her work. She gets 13 pounds per week. This is barely enough to improve our lives, but it is better than nothing.

“I know this is not suitable work for a woman, but conditions force us. The security and economic situation remains a risk.”

The kind of work these Darfuri women are forced to do contravenes Sudan’s labour legislation.

“In Sudanese labour law, there is a provision to prevent the employment of women and children in arduous labour,” Omer Musa Omer, a lawyer in Nyala, said. “However, there is nothing in the text that provides for specific criminal responsibility for those that hire women.”

The law bans the employment of women in occupations hazardous to their health, such as carrying heavy burdens. Women are also legally entitled to a paid break of at least an hour a day, and should not work more than five hours at a stretch.

Women interviewed by IWPR said these rules were broken all the time. There is little opportunity to seek

redress through the courts, Omer said, because there is no framework for prosecuting employers. Nor are women likely to complain about their treatment, because they are unaware of their rights.

Adam Fadoul, an employer in the construction sector, defended the policy of hiring women.

“If a woman comes to us and says, ‘I have nothing, my children need to eat and they need clothes to wear’ – what can we do?” he asked. “We just tell her this is the work we have, and at the end of the day we pay them for what they have done. It is up to them. They know the dangers they face.”

Fadoul said most of the women working for him were vulnerable widows and the elderly. He employs only a few men.

“Men don’t work,” he argued. “They say that the wage is not high enough for them. Women come to us and they say they have nothing and they need to work, so we pay them. We can’t raise the wages because the economic situation here is weak, not like in other places [in Sudan].”

NGOs and aid workers in Darfur say women have few alternatives as they try to rebuild their lives after the long-running war in the region. They acknowledge that more should have been done to improve these women’s working lives.

Suzan Abdelslam, a programme officer for the United Nations’ International Labour Organisation, ILO, says this is because until now, there have been other priorities in Darfur. Now that the situation has improved, Abdelslam says the ILO will launch a programme to address the issue.

“Economic empowerment is important for these women [to ensure] they don’t need to work in such hazardous environments. We have been talking to the ministry of social welfare about developing a project that can give these women this kind of empowerment,” she said. “We also need to talk about standards on how women should be treated [in the workplace] and we are going to be providing training programmes to promote these standards.”

**Blake Evans-Pritchard is an IWPR trainer. Zakia Yousif is an IWPR contributor**

**Location:** [Sudan](#)

**Topic:** [ICC - International Criminal Court](#)

**Focus:** [ICC - International Criminal Court](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/darfur-women-take-hard-labour>