

WOMEN IN THE SUDAN

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(This article was written before the recent events in the Sudan. On May 25 a revolutionary coup by the army took place against the coalition which governed the country. The new regime represents a national front of the democratic forces inside and outside the army. The policy declared is a democratic socialist policy, maintaining the right of the Sudanese people to progress and further development.)

THE Sudan lies to the south of Egypt. Its capital is Khartoum, about 1,000 miles from Cairo. The Sudan is large—nearly a million square miles—with fourteen million inhabitants. The country was independent until the year 1820 when it came under Turko-Egyptian rule which was terminated in 1885 by a national revolt headed by the Mahdi. In 1898 in the battle of Omdurman the Khalifa was defeated by the British who then ruled until 1956.

During the British rule and since independence development has been very slow. The country's economy is predominantly agricultural, cotton being the main cash crop. The small industrial sector is dominated by foreign capital. The gross national income is very low: £40 per head per year. The illiteracy rate is high and medical services are meagre, while the standard of living is low.

Society in the Sudan is a male society, being a Muslim country. In such a society women have had to fight against many disadvantages, since the man is the highest authority in the family. Thus society provides better facilities for male children in education and opportunities for work. The number of schools for boys, at all levels, is double or treble the number for girls. Welfare for mothers is very limited (there is one health centre per 150,000 persons) and thus the infant mortality rate is very high due to lack of facilities, ignorance and malnutrition.

As an employee or worker a woman does not receive comparable job training, qualifications, promotion or pension with her male counterpart. The only leave she can have is confinement leave (without pay), with the exception of women teachers who get four weeks' leave.

(Continued on page 314)

* Fatma Ahmed Ibrahim has been President of the SWU since 1952. She was Sudan's first woman Member of Parliament, elected in 1965, and was the first editor of *Sout El Maraa*. She is 37, is married and has one child.

SUDANESE WOMEN CLAIM THEIR



1964—Sudanese Women's Union members demonstrate against the military government.

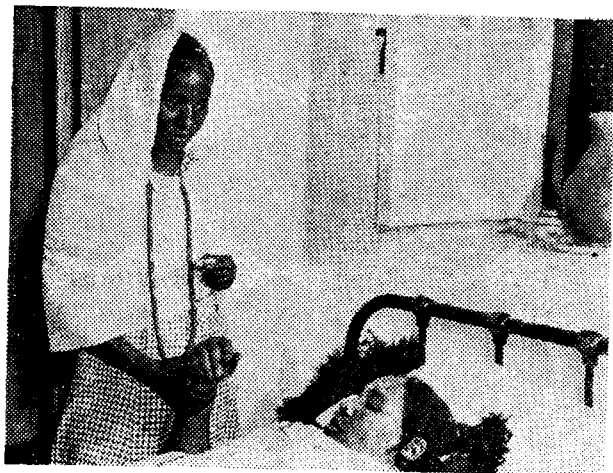


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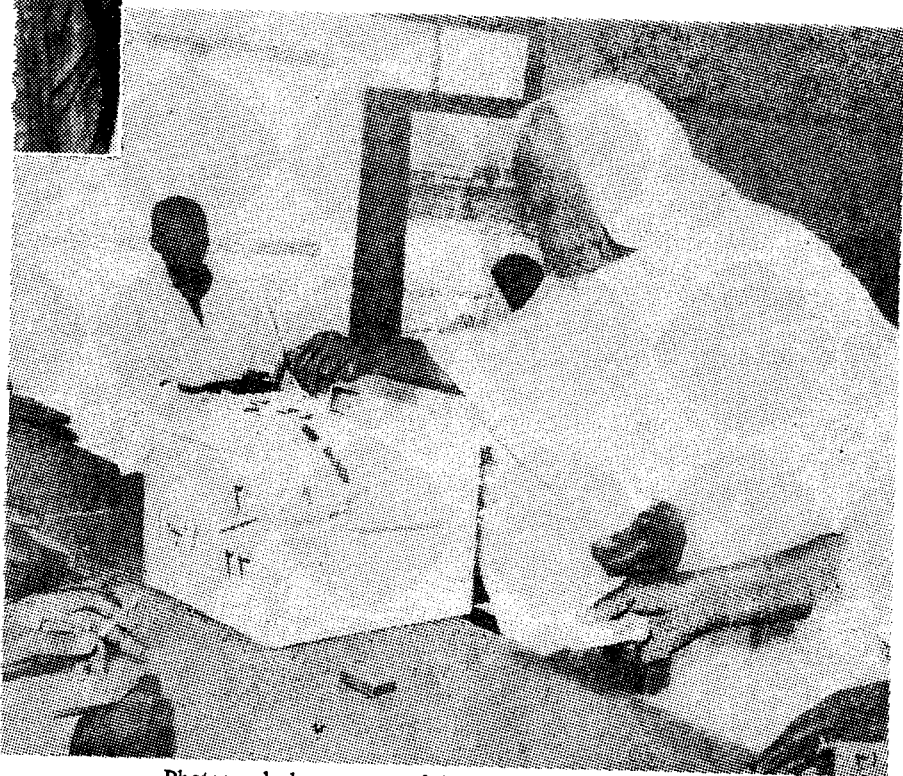
In some areas peasant women receive none of the pay for their work—their wages are still collected by the men.



GHTS



Dr. Khalda Zahir, a prominent member of the SWU, graduated as a doctor in 1952—one of the first two women to qualify in the Sudan.



The right of women to have equal opportunities has always been a slogan of the progressive forces and the national movement in the Sudan. In 1946, on the initiative of the progressive elements within the national movement, the first Women's Association was formed. This was followed by the Nurses' Trade Union; and in 1949 the Teachers' Trade Union was formed for both sexes. Counteraction from the British and the reactionary forces followed the old imperialist slogan of 'divide and rule' to split the Association.

But in 1952, despite all the counter movements, the Sudanese Women's Union, the largest women's organisation, was formed. The Union based its branches in the residential areas, and began painstakingly to carry out its job. A literacy campaign for women started; night schools to train housewives in needlework, house-keeping, child care, were opened. A social programme was laid down dealing with social problems of the women. On the political side the Union started a relentless fight for women's rights, politically and economically.

One of the great tasks facing the Union was how to convince the women to unite around socialist slogans. Economic freedom and political rights would not be attained without an ideologically united organisation. A means of reaching the mass of women was greatly needed. The first women's magazine, *Sout El Maraa* ('Women's Voice'), was published in 1955. This magazine played a great role in directing the women's movement, particularly during the campaign against the military regime in 1958-64.

The October revolution which overthrew the military regime in 1964 recognised the role played by the women and in 1965 women won the right to vote and to be elected—in the next election a woman was elected to the Constituent Assembly. This opened up the field of political and social life to women, and from this time they were elected to executives of parties and trade unions.

The Union was able to gain the support of other trade unions and professional bodies to put pressure on the Government for equal pay and working conditions for women, to be followed up by the attainment of equal social status in problems of divorce and marriage. Many tasks lie ahead of us and we are working hard among the masses to achieve them.

At a world level, the Union works with other women's organisations in their struggle for world peace. It is a member of the Women's International Democratic Federation and the Arab Women's General Union, and is a member of the Secretariat of the African Women's Congress.