

Navigating Collective Trauma Amidst Sudan's 2023 War: Unpacking Wounds and Healing in Wad Al-Noura, Al-Gezira State

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About The Author: Shahd is a final year law student, feminist and social change activist with five years of experience advocating for women's rights. Her work focuses on addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) through both grassroots advocacy and evidence-based research. She is particularly interested in how social research—especially through anthropological and feminist lenses—can uncover the structural and cultural drivers of violence.

During her recent research fellowship, Shahd authored policy and academic papers on collective trauma, transitional justice, and reimagining citizenship in post-conflict Sudan. She aims to bridge the gap between grassroots experiences and policy reform by using social research to inform more just and contextually grounded legal responses.

Executive Summary

This paper begins by exploring the vicious attacks in Al-Gezria state following the RSF incursion in late 2023. Arguing how the mass wave of violations that took place in Al-Gezira, and Wad Al-Noura in particular, have inflicted deep wounds on the communal level, leaving them with unprocessed grief and shattering their long-standing sense of safety. This situation poses a significant threat to long-term peace and stability, and can potentially fuel cycles of conflict.

It introduces the concept of collective trauma, which refers to the psychological and emotional wounds shared by a group after experiencing mass violence or existential threats.

This theory is then grounded through delving into the personal experiences of Wad Al-Noura. The findings reveal how factors like lack of anticipation, overwhelming scale of violations and the subsequent sense of isolation intensified the shock.

Moreover, it also reveals the indispensable role of communal support and solidarity, which has become their sole coping mechanism, filling a significant void. The analysis also points to the psychological and psychosomatic effects of trauma, which are left with minimal to no interventions. The paper also examines the missed opportunities in previous peace agreements, and the challenges of imposing the traditional justice mechanism of criminal prosecutions in the Sudanese context. As well as the lack of any transitional justice interventions that addressed the social and cultural aspects of peace.

Recognizing the complexity of collective trauma and its relative novelty in the Sudanese context, the proposed recommendations emphasize the critical importance of theorising and Sudanizing transitional justice and healing mechanisms in ways that respond to survivors' needs and wishes. It also underscores the critical role CSOs can play in preparing communities for transitional justice, through facilitating discussions about the possible justice mechanisms applicable in Sudan, and prioritizing documentation efforts to amplify survivors' voices and preserve their personal stories.

Context & Rationale:

In late 2023, Al-Gezira state witnessed a brutal attack following the fall of its capital, Medani, by the RSF, resulting in unprecedented levels of human rights violations. Those violations included massacres, abduction, torture, widespread sexual violence, and the displacement of nearly half a million people¹.

The most horrendous of which were alleged reports of women driven to the point of suicide to avoid getting raped by the RSF, including a widely circulated but unsubstantiated claim that 130 women² took their own lives.

Al-Gezira state, well known as Sudan's historical agricultural and economic heartland, had long been perceived as a stable and safe state in Sudan. Consequently, it was never anticipated that the violations would extend to its remote villages, even after the war broke out. Thus, the shock was even more profound, shattering a long-standing sense of geographic and social safety.

Among these wide ranging violations, a particularly devastating incident occurred in Wad-Al Noura³, a rural village of about less than 400 acres in Al-Gezira state, where the RSF stormed with heavy weapons and artillery, resulting in a massacre that took 183 lives⁴ and left dozens injured. Following the attack, a mass wave of displacement took place, with people fleeing on foot for hours. Furthermore, the violations weren't merely unmatched in scale, but also in a symbolic and destabilising sense.

Such atrocities inflict deep wounds commonly known as collective trauma. This refers to the experiences that constitute a deep shock for an entire community, often caused by incidents that imply existential threats or large-scale experiences of violence.

Generally, affected people don't get the chance to mourn or process the grief and helplessness, which then creates the unhealed trauma that generates drastic consequences.

The criticality of unhealed collective trauma is that it acts as a ticking bomb that can be weaponized or triggered by the slightest distress, substantially jeopardising stability, sustainable peace, and possibly fueling conflicts.⁵

Moreover, the grief, anger, and vengeance accompanied by collective trauma can easily be exacerbated by socio-economic factors, deepening community divisions, and eventually leading to violence.

Sudan's history has been marked by a vicious cycle of armed conflict and violence since its independence. Nonetheless, the issue of collective trauma as an obstacle to peace has never been recognized in any peace agreement or transitional justice interventions.

Additionally, humanitarian assistance from both local and international organisations is limited to psychosocial support, which is normally narrowed to an individual level, leaving behind the broader collective experiences and cultural frameworks through which trauma is processed.

¹ [Sudan: Humanitarian Situation in Wad Medani, Aj Jazirah State - Flash Update No. 01 \(As of 16 January 2025\) | OCHA](#)

² [Sudanese women turn to mass suicide to escape rape by militia DevelopmentAid](#)

³ [Sudan: Villagers flee in terror as 150 killed in rebel attack | CNN](#)

⁴ Based on an Interview conducted with a 34 year old eyewitness from Wad Al-Noura on 7/4/2025

⁵ Balke, E. (2002). *Trauma and conflict* (Working Paper No. 02-37). Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science. [Trauma and Conflict Prevention](#)

Collective trauma is very complex, which necessitates that the healing process be linked with the systemic and structural inequalities, gradually unmasking and understanding the multifaceted layers of trauma.⁶

This paper aims to situate the theories of collective trauma and justice in the context of Al-Gezira state, with more focus on Wad-Al Noura village. It seeks to examine how trauma is experienced, expressed, and navigated by communities in the aftermath of mass violence, as an initial step towards proposing possible healing interventions that seek to inform more effective and sustainable peacebuilding efforts.

Methodology:

This paper examined collective trauma and healing from a multidisciplinary lens, including anthropological, transitional justice, psychological, and psychodynamic theories to better understand these concepts in conflict-affected communities. Those theories were then grounded in the context of Al-Gezira state, using Wad Al-Noura village as a case study.

To deepen the understanding of collective trauma within Sudan, particularly Al-Gezira state, and to analyze Sudan's past experiences with trauma and potential entry points, interviews were conducted with two anthropologists and three lawyers focusing on transitional justice.

Comparative studies from Rwanda, South Africa and Bosnia were also explored to gain broader insights into post-conflict trauma and healing.

To examine whether and how Wad Al-Noura residents are coping with the aftermath of the violations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four residents representing diverse literacy and socio-economic backgrounds: a 45-year-old farmer, a 34-year-old young man, a 40-year-old woman, and an elderly man over 65 years old.

Due to the difficulty of reaching the residents, in addition to the cultural sensitivities of discussing the violations, only one woman was interviewed.

The interviews were carried out via WhatsApp voice messages and analyzed using narrative and discourse analysis.

Due to internet access limitations in Wad Al-Noura, I conducted 2 of these interviews, and the rest were carried out by a focal point from the area.

Understanding Collective Trauma:

“The whole community was like a funeral tent, the entire village was sad and mourning”⁷

Collective trauma refers to the psychological and emotional wounds shared by a group after experiencing mass violence or existential threats. These wounds aren't simply the sum of individual pain, they are instead deeply social experiences marked by shared feelings of humiliation, horror, and anger.

Due to their complicated and collective nature, these wounds cannot be addressed through individual treatment alone, nor from a strictly medical perspective, but rather require a holistic approach to unpack their multifaceted character.

⁶ Theisen-Womersley, G. (2021). Collective Trauma, Collective Healing. In: Trauma and Resilience Among Displaced Populations. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67712-1_6

⁷ Based on an interview conducted with a 40 year old woman from Wad Al-Noura on 4/7/2025

Moreover, collective trauma is culturally grounded, and its manifestations are shaped by the traditions and norms of a given community. In our Sudanese context, for example, conflict-related sexual violence carries deep wounds of collective shame and guilt, as men may feel that they have failed to protect their women. Leading the entire community to regard such violations as an assault on the village's honor and pride.

This is further found in rural areas, as Babiker explicitly stated how it's their sole weakness and how he would have sacrificed everything to ensure their women don't get harmed and their honor isn't violated.⁸

When communities are denied or don't get the chance to mourn or process the mass atrocities they were subjected to, trauma festers. Over time, the effects and feelings of dehumanisation shift from helplessness, fear and grief to anger, revenge and vengeance.

This process is central to what the psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan calls transgenerational transmission⁹, which refers to how collective trauma becomes embedded in the survivor's collective identity and then passed down to future generations.¹⁰

The criticality of this transmission lies in how the narrative gets reshaped by future generations, where a memory of humiliation may become an attempt to humiliate others, even if they were part of the victimised groups.¹¹

Studies on collective trauma demonstrate how trauma creates a deep rupture in individuals' and communities' abilities to make sense of their world, in the sense that this distortion can cause their aggression to be misdirected towards other victimized groups, in an attempt to rationalize their wounds.¹²

In Al-gezira, the dangerous effects of trauma are already surfacing. The Armed Popular resistance that's still present despite the liberation of Al-Gezira clearly illustrates this.¹³ The mass wave of mobilization initially began with the intense feeling of vulnerability from an RSF aggression, which one would assume dies after the threat gets diminished.¹⁴ Worse still, some tribes are joining the ranks of the Sudan Shield Forces, led by Abu Aqla Keikal.

Keikal was an RSF senior commander in the southeastern state of Al-Gezira, who led brutal attacks on several villages and towns there, and in late 2024, announced his defection to the SAF.

Balke's psychosocial studies address such scenarios and attribute them to unresolved anger and frustration.¹⁵

It's important to highlight that although collective trauma is regarded as a contributing factor that can lead to a violent outbreak, it is not the only factor. However, it constitutes social and political injuries that can obstruct reconciliation and peacebuilding.

⁸ Based on an interview conducted with a 34 year old eyewitness from Wad Al-Noura on 4/7/2025

⁹ Volkan, Vamik. (2001). Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity. Group Analysis. [\(PDF\) Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity](#)

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Iöster, I. (2022). Cycles of Violence: How Unhealed Collective Trauma Leads to Armed Conflict. [Cycles of Violence | Student Repository](#)

¹² Ibid

¹³ [والى الجزيرة: رجالات المقاومة الشعبية وظفوا خبراتهم وتجاربهم لمعركة الكرامة - المسار نيوز | الأخبار من مصادرها](#)
¹⁴ [Sudan: Armed Popular Resistance and Widening Civil Unrest | Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#)

¹⁵ Balke, E. (2002). *Trauma and conflict* (Working Paper No. 02-37). Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science. [Trauma and Conflict Prevention](#)

Findings and Analysis:

Factors that intensified the shock:

As previously outlined, collective trauma is deeply rooted in experiences of existential threat and large-scale violence. Wad Al-Noura residents were subjected to both, with the weight of these wounds drastically intensifying by several critical factors. First and foremost was the utter lack of anticipation for such attacks.

Wad Al-Noura, much like all the rural villages in Al-Gezira state, was never perceived as a potential battlefield. Many of those interviewed from the village recalled their disbelief in the war expanding beyond Khartoum state, let alone reaching Al-Gazira's remote villages.

This sense of shock was multiplied by the massive assaults. According to one of the farmers interviewed, Wad Al-Noura doesn't exceed 400 acres, and was attacked by heavy artillery and dozens of armed vehicles carrying over a thousand RSF fighters. Within two hours, the whole village was under siege, with what Abdalla described as a "band of criminals with strange, terrifying appearances that instill you with panic even if they weren't carrying any weapon",¹⁶ positioned in front of every house.

For a community where rifles were the only type of weapon they ever knew, this overwhelming military attack instilled an extreme sense of horror and panic to the extent that they started reciting their final prayers and preparing for death.

The village's close-knit community and homogeneity made it more painful, for they are largely relatives or connected through marriage. As explained by Babiker, the loss of 183 lives meant that the whole village was grieving and collectively suffering.¹⁷

Perhaps most devastating was the harsh realization of isolation. All of the survivors noted the failed SAF air raids, immediately followed by RSF's anti-aircraft missiles and the subsequent retreat of the SAF air forces.

These factors, combined with the intense nature of violations, left the community with no possible means for fleeing, further exacerbating their feelings of abandonment and fear.

Manifestations of Collective Trauma:

The prevalence of the massacre is deeply felt due to the village's strong social bond and tight-knit community. As Abdalla noted, no household was unaffected by what happened, and even if they had no direct family member among the martyrs, the loss doesn't extend beyond a second cousin.¹⁸

Their shared experience of loss manifested differently. Mariam, for instance, said that they constantly discuss their memories and their images never leave them, whether they are "doing laundry, cooking, braiding, or simply sipping tea".¹⁹

On the other hand, men's grief proved harder to voice, often framed in spiritual terms like "god gave us strength", while nonetheless hinting at the profound difficulty of their ordeal.

¹⁶ Based on an interview conducted with a 45 year old farmer from Wad Al-Noura on 7/4/2025

¹⁷ Based on an interview conducted with a 34 year old eyewitness from Wad Al-Noura on 7/4/2025

¹⁸ Based on an interview conducted with a 45 year old farmer from Wad Al-Noura on 7/4/2025

¹⁹ Based on an interview conducted with a 40 year old woman from Wad Al-Noura on 7/4/2025

This is notably due to societal expectations of strength and bravery from men, and how it perceives them less masculine should they exhibit any sign of weakness or sadness. An emotional example was recounted by Abdalla, where their WhatsApp group chat, initially filled with joy and laughter, went into complete silence because someone shared a martyr's picture. "In less than a minute, all of us closed our phones and went to sleep. The people became cold as ice and even colder."²⁰

This isn't an isolated incident, as Babiker also shared a similar one. Upon their local hangout's re-opening after the massacre, where they used to play cards, they went to their regular table, only to realize that it was missing 11 martyrs. Babiker described how "our tears went down and we never set foot in the hangout again."²¹

All of the above illustrates how the collective loss has drastically altered their social interactions and spaces, causing immense emotional responses that either get suppressed or avoided.

The psychological effects are equally evident and deeply ingrained in their everyday lives. Most of the interviewees expressed how Wednesdays are now viewed as a bad omen, passing by with heavy hearts and a lingering expectation of another attack, although they acknowledge that the RSF is now hundreds of kilometers away.

This hypervigilance was on the collective level too, as Babiker mentioned how the attack altered the village's daily rhythm; "the entire village, from elders to children, now wakes up before dawn -the exact timing of the RSF's attack."²² This was, nonetheless, also described as a blessing in disguise, offering them the chance to pray Fajr in time.

Trauma has psychosomatic aspects alongside the psychological and social ones. Babiker reported that a significant number of residents are now suffering from extreme anemia, which an INGO attributed to psychological distress, despite adequate food availability, consequently highlighting the serious psychosomatic toll of trauma.

Social Solidarity & Communal Care:

The aftermath effects of what happened in Wad Al-Noura weren't solely psychological, but were as much social and economic, leaving behind a deep void. In this sense, their community solidarity was their sole mechanism for filling this void.

Those with greater economic security and their diaspora members immediately organized to provide them with the necessities, from food and medicine, as well as allocating monthly stipends for the disabled and injured. Those sacrifices extended beyond covering the basic needs to thoughtful acts like clothing and candies for the martyrs' children.

Collective solidarity, as seen in Wad Al-Noura, not only stems from their strong kinship bonds but also from the harsh realization that no other entity or institution can cover their needs. Subsequently marking this solidarity as a social and moral obligation, rather than mere aid, arising out of love and support.

Beyond the material aid, the grief experienced was also relational; people grieved not only for their losses, but for each other's. Some expressed their constant ache for the pain of others, in addition to their ability to sense each other's sadness without exchanging words.

²⁰ Based on an interview conducted with a 45 year old farmer from Wad Al-Noura on 7/4/2025

²¹ Based on an interview conducted with a 34 year old eyewitness from Wad Al-Noura on 7/4/2025

²² Based on an interview conducted with a 34 year old eyewitness from Wad Al-Noura on 7/4/2025

This solidarity even extended beyond immediate relief into long-term care structures, such as the numerous marriages that were arranged following their return from displacement. Those marriages were to protect the children of the martyrs and their widows from any hardships.

One interlocutor, for instance, mentioned that he will be marrying his late brother's widow so that he ensures his children are well taken care of, especially since his widow isn't from their village and can remarry someone strange.²³

These actions were presented as practical steps to ensure continuity, stability, and care for the most vulnerable, marked as social solidarity, but are effectively filling up a huge vacuum that requires state-led interventions.

All respondents emphasized how these atrocities have drawn them even closer and fostered greater empathy between them. Not only that, but the sudden loss also prompted many to set aside their old disputes, fostering reconciliation. As one interviewee stated, "How can I argue with my relatives when all those buried in the cemetery were killed by the RSF?"²⁴

Missed Opportunities and Possible Means To Justice:

Transitional justice encompasses a wide range of processes and mechanisms that complement each other as an attempt to support communities move beyond the legacy of abuse and violations associated with past conflicts. Thereby serving justice and fostering reconciliation.²⁵

In this context, healing is paramount, as brilliantly expressed by Minow: "Overcoming a trauma means overcoming the feelings of vengeance and hatred it may induce – in other words, getting as close as possible to the idea of forgiveness."²⁶

A peace agreement alone does not signify an end, but rather the beginning of a longer process, as it cannot by itself address or overcome the deeply entrenched feelings left by the conflict.

Despite the importance of healing in transitional justice, Sudan hasn't historically had a history of addressing trauma in post-conflict settings. Particularly considering how the majority of its past peace agreements were merely power-sharing elitist ones, that not only didn't speak to the survivors' needs and wounds, but also resurfaced the criminals, causing them greater pain.

There was also a clear negligence and lack of political will to consider the social dimensions of peace, and even if those aspects were indeed addressed, implementation on the ground remained nonexistent.

Additionally, it's quite prevalent how forgiveness is immediately expected and imposed upon signing a peace agreement. This was also observed amidst the ongoing war, in the case of Keikal.

Keikal, as previously mentioned, was an RSF senior commander in the southeastern state of Al-Gezira, who led brutal attacks on several villages and towns there. However, in late 2024, Keikal announced his defection to the SAF along with a sizable number of his forces.²⁷

His surrender was welcomed with blanket amnesty from General Burhan,²⁸ a decision that subsequently triggered a wave of at least 69 reprisal attacks on towns and villages in Gezira state

²³ Based on an interview conducted with a 34 year old eyewitness from Wad Al-Noura on 7/4/2025

²⁴ Based on an interview conducted with a 45 year old farmer from Wad Al-Noura on 7/4/2025

²⁵ [Recommended Reading - Mr. Paul van Zyl, Executive Vice President, International Center for Transitional Justice](#)

²⁶ Tölster, I. (2022). Cycles of Violence: How Unhealed Collective Trauma Leads to Armed Conflict. [Cycles of Violence | Student Repository](#)

²⁷ [How an RSF commander's defection led to a massacre in Sudan](#)

²⁸ [RSF suffers setback as top commander Abu Aqila Keykel defects to SAF in Al Jazira](#)

within two weeks, leaving hundreds dead and thousands displaced.²⁹ Those attacks were undoubtedly carried out in retaliation for Keikal's defection, as stated by an RSF guard who filmed himself shouting, "Keikal ... look, these are your people."³⁰

Although there are several transitional justice mechanisms, the concept of justice in Sudan has largely been restricted to criminal prosecutions. However, in the current context, the path of prosecutions can be quite challenging, if not nearly impossible.

To begin with, most of the crimes committed during this ongoing war are classified as crimes against humanity, necessitating distinct documentation and investigation protocols. Furthermore, these mechanisms also require strong and impartial legal institutions, which were already inadequate before the war, let alone now after their destruction.

Beyond the substantial resources required, the prosecution's path heavily relies on the survivors' willingness to testify and cooperate, which in turn hinges on their trust that these institutions can bring them justice, which is the basis for carrying out those trials.

Considering the current volatile political landscape, it remains ambiguous when or if a political settlement/peace agreement will ever occur, and even if one is reached, the deep-rooted emotional wounds persist long after a peace treaty is signed.³¹ In addition to the severity and scope of violations, survivors cannot be left bleeding indefinitely, without any interventions.

Despite how complex dealing with past wounds necessitates a holistic approach, targeting the psychosocial aspect of trauma can be a great starting point, especially since it isn't contingent on a peace agreement, and can also be initiated by non-state actors, making this the perfect timing for addressing collective trauma and healing within affected communities.

Policy Recommendations:

A- For Academics:

Academics from various fields, including psychology, anthropology, transitional justice, and law, play a crucial role in theorizing and understanding how healing can occur within the Sudanese context. The intensity, nature, and scale of violations are unprecedented, leaving communities and experts alike to explore how to navigate the aftermath.

- Study and research the possible means for Sudanizing and localising the transitional justice mechanisms following each community's context. This means moving beyond the universal models to exploring justice and healing in ways that resonate with communities affected by violations.
- Support participatory research with affected communities to identify culturally grounded entry points for collective healing and integrate them into transitional justice and peacebuilding strategies.
- Reflect and learn from other countries' experiences in dealing with the various violations, as an initial step to not only find solutions but also to break the taboo that often accompanies such violations. By exploring how countries with similar contexts navigated such problems as children resulting from rape, mass sexual violence, etc.
- Examine and study the current coping mechanisms and solidarity structures within different communities. Comprehending these informal systems can provide beneficial insights for designing a more culturally grounded foundation for support.

²⁹ [RSF Commander's Defection Triggered Massacre in Sudan's al-Gezira State - Africa Defense Forum](#)

³⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c7864519eqvo>

³¹ <https://journals.law.harvard.edu/hnlr/wp-content/uploads/sites/91/26-HNLr-193-Shapiro.pdf>

B- For Civil Society Organisations:

- **Equip the community for Transitional Justice;** healing and justice don't happen in a vacuum, CSOs play an instrumental role in facilitating broader discussions of justice that go beyond the narrow framings of justice. Advocating for non-monetary forms of compensation/reparations can greatly influence the public's perception of the various possible transitional justice mechanisms that resemble their needs.
- **Amplify Survivors' Voices:** CSOs should prioritize documentation efforts that go beyond the scope of reporting, one that provides a space for survivors to share their personal stories and narratives. This can help survivors feel that their voices matter and their experiences are worth listening to, feeding into the long-term efforts of memorialization. These efforts should be in collaboration with emergency response rooms/resistance committees in Al-Gezira state.
- **Unpack survivors' perceptions of Justice:** Collaborate with community leaders to hold local-level dialogues with communities to understand what justice and peace mean to them. Ensuring that their viewpoint informs any later proposed project/intervention and that their experiences are central to any justice processes.

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