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Basmat Suleiman Mursal Khalil:
The Iron Woman of Sinnar

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Portrait by: Obada Gabir

Every morning, the land stirs to the rhythm of hands that know its secrets, hands that break the soil and sow it with seed. Across agricultural schemes, stories unfold in which food is coaxed from the language of the earth.

Between seasons of planting and harvest, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) selected farmer Basmat Suleiman Mursal Khalil among its first 100 women champions of agrifood systems and rural development worldwide, in recognition of her contributions to rural communities, agricultural development, producer empowerment and the protection of natural resources. She was selected from more than 600 nominees representing 131 countries.

The World Is Still a Good Place

"I am from Sinnar State, East Sinnar locality, from the village of Hilmi Abbas. I have been a farmer for a very long time. Ever since I was old enough to remember, I found myself drawn to agriculture. My father and mother are both farmers, and my father owns large areas of rain-fed and irrigated farmland," Basmat introduced herself to *Atar*. "When we were children, my father would take us with him to the agricultural schemes. While he worked on the land, searching its soil for what it might yield, we would play beside him. He never burdened us with work. Instead, he always urged us to focus on our education."

After completing secondary school, Basmat devoted herself to farming, the profession she loved, alongside public and charitable work among women. "My journey began in 1989, when I established a women's charitable association aimed at helping the poor and those in need," Basmat said. "It received a very positive response. We joined forces, formed an executive office, registered the association with the Ministry of Social Welfare, and financed its activities through modest membership fees and support from the local community. We also organised cultural weeks and exhibitions to raise funds for our activities."

The women's charitable association sought to showcase the capacities of productive women and instil in them the confidence to develop themselves and build dignified, self-reliant families. The association sponsored the education of a number of orphaned female students and paid their school fees. Basmat personally delivered the payments to teachers, who eventually began referring to her other students, boys and girls alike, who were struggling to meet their fees. The association also assisted patients unable to afford treatment in hospitals, standing beside them in times of hardship. It purchased quantities of sorghum and distributed them among poor families and households without a breadwinner.

Looking back on her years with the association, Basmat gives thanks for the providence that made their work possible.

"I believe deeply in this work, and I find immense comfort and happiness in the path of voluntary service."

Basmat later embarked on another journey, this time in environmental protection. She led an environmental protection association in her village and worked in direct coordination with the relevant authorities. On the difference that individual initiative can make in strengthening collective action, Basmat told *Atar*: "The Environmental Protection Association received valuable support from Rajab Yagoub Abdalla, a translator at the Qatari Embassy. He supplied us with information, specialised environmental magazines and the materials we needed to carry out our work to the best of our ability, particularly during World Environment Day celebrations," she said, adding: "He also helped us obtain many seedlings to beautify streets and homes. One of our most notable World Environment Day activities in one particular year was planting more than 300 fruit trees and distributing them among households. The villagers benefited from them directly."

Basmat documented her work on compact discs (CDs), preserving certificates from training and awareness programmes at local, state and national levels, as well as records of programmes she implemented with university students in the health sector. "I used to supervise summer health programmes for university students and graduates, follow up on their budgets, and arrange their accommodation and hospitality, even when that meant paying out of my own pocket."

Basmat's archive contains an extensive record of reports written by university students about the health days they spent across the various areas where the association operated. She regularly participates in seminars and forums and maintains an active presence in social, health, agricultural and food-related circles.

"I find happiness in charitable work. It is the purpose I strive for."

"I am proud to be a model of the Sudanese woman who seeks to serve her country during these difficult circumstances, when every sector is suffering. I find happiness in charitable work. It is the purpose I strive for. I believe that God does not allow the reward of those who do good to be lost.

"By nature, I am drawn to doing good, and I feel the pain of others. I do not hesitate to help anyone who is in need. Serving people and addressing their concerns, particularly those of women, is among my life's priorities. I have always urged my fellow women and encouraged them to form women's associations. We care for our families, educate our children, safeguard their health and provide them with clothing."

Agricultural Associations: "Our Hands for the Country"

Driven by this commitment to charitable service, Basmat established five women-led agricultural associations, each comprising 30 women farmers alongside a group of male farmers.

Among them is the grassroots Adan Association, which Basmat heads. She cultivates 50 feddans of her own land there, while distributing the remainder of her holdings among other women. Together, they turned to farming along the Blue Nile corridor in Sinnar State, supporting one another and sharing land among themselves so they could meet the demands of daily life, particularly amid the difficult circumstances brought about by the war.

Basmat later stood for election alongside farmers from the area in a training cycle focused on agricultural and livestock production professions. She joined the agricultural and livestock production group, but only after considerable difficulty. Basmat attributes this to the challenges faced by a working woman entering a predominantly male environment.

"When I joined them, I sensed their apprehension and their reluctance to accept a woman among them in the agricultural production associations. They questioned whether I would be able to perform in the scheme with the same efficiency as a man. They had no idea of the scale of the work I was already undertaking among women."

When the time came to rebuild the organisational structure of the Adan Association, male and female farmers nominated Basmat once again for its leadership, citing their confidence in her commitment, principles and integrity. Her colleagues were re-elected for the same reasons.

During the formation process, the heads of the grassroots associations, including the Adan Association, expressed their desire for Basmat to lead the higher-level association.

Basmat explained, "The higher-level association consists of eleven grassroots associations. There is also a specialised association, which comprises five higher-level associations, bringing the total to 55 grassroots associations. If you take an average of 200 members for each higher-level or specialised association, the grassroots constituency is enormous."

"When I joined them, I sensed their apprehension and their reluctance to accept a woman among them."

Faced with the nomination to lead the higher-level association, Basmat said she saw a number of complications.

"So, I decided to study the situation carefully and sit down with each party to explain my position and why I did not want the position. It did not align with my ambition to keep moving forward. They assured me, however, that they were keen to have me involved.

"I later nominated a capable person from a neighbouring village who had excellent qualifications and experience in agriculture. I contacted him and persuaded him to run, and we agreed that the selection should be made by consensus rather than through an election.

"And that is exactly what happened. We held a meeting, the process went smoothly and calmly, and the association became one of the most stable. I put considerable effort into organising its registers and files and following up on its work."

"My role in my community was a great responsibility, and helping my people was an obligation."

The Iron Woman

Basmat told *Atar*, "When I moved to the specialised Kassab Association, a new chair had to be chosen. We nominated one of our colleagues because of his energy and distinction to take on the chairmanship, while I was selected as the association's treasurer. That season, we planted cotton with support from the Serve programme. I personally guaranteed 1,000 farmers. The association's chairman would tell me it was a difficult gamble, and I would answer that my role in my community was a great responsibility, and that helping my people was an obligation."

Basmat would leave for work at six in the morning and remain in the fields until eight in the evening, monitoring the land, irrigation operations and the progress of the work. She speaks highly of the agricultural inspectors from the General Directorate of Agricultural Extension who worked with them.

"The inspectors responded to our requests at any hour in the service of agriculture," she said. "When I needed a loader to clear the irrigation canals, I identified the site and asked the authorities to provide the machinery and open the canals so that water could reach us. The farmers had begun to lose hope because of the water shortage and feared falling into debt.

"Once the canals were opened, water was pumped through and reached an area of 4,050 feddans. By God's grace, we came through that difficult season with a success that exceeded expectations. The farmers benefited enormously: they paid off their debts and production costs and made substantial profits."

At the beginning of the new season, Basmat received the proceeds from her previous season's crop. Her cheque was handed to her in the presence of the farmers at one of their meetings, along with an additional incentive payment. They praised her and gave her the nickname "the Iron Woman".

"My happiness was not so much about the money as it was about the farmers' success and the profits they made — profits that enabled them to

educate their children, improve their living conditions and meet their needs," she said.

"Because of that success, the farmers nominated me once again to lead our grassroots association. Their confidence in me had not diminished; it had grown. Membership in the Adan Association also expanded, with an additional 226 feddans brought under cultivation."

In the Year of War: The State Withdrew, the People Stood Together

In 2023, they cultivated the land with their own hands, relying on traditional tools and labouring through hard, compact soil. Many farmers fled the area in fear of the war, while others chose to remain, preferring to face death in their homes rather than be displaced.

"Many displaced people settled in our village and the neighbouring villages," Basmat said. "The war came very close to us. A river separated us from the conflict zones, and it served as an impenetrable barrier that prevented the Rapid Support Forces from reaching us.

Despite these hardships, Basmat described that period as "a season filled with goodness and blessing".

"We did not lose anyone. Our children and women were spared harm, and the entire village stood as one, sharing food and looking out for one another."

She continued: "At that time, despite the electricity being cut off, despite the difficulty of obtaining water even though we were close to the Nile, and despite a cholera outbreak in neighbouring villages, three water pumps were operating in the area. They were the reason we had water and survived.

"We did not prevent anyone from the neighbouring villages from drinking from them. We shared the water with everyone. God also blessed us with an abundant sorghum harvest, and we extended a helping hand to the displaced people who sought refuge among us. During the war, I hosted 35 displaced people from Khartoum in my home."

Amid the harsh circumstances they endured, Basmat said they received support from Sinnar State in the form of agricultural seed, which they distributed among people in their own village and neighbouring villages.

"We can lift our country up and achieve food self-sufficiency through hard work. Women should not leave this burden to men alone."

"We planted it with determination and resolve despite every challenge," she said. "By God's grace, and with support from the FAO during the 2023–2024 season, the harvest was exceptionally abundant. Each feddan yielded between seven and eight sacks."

Present and Future: How Do We Farm?

Asked about financing agricultural operations in the Adan Association, Basmat told *Atar*, "We rely on self-financing and prefer not to deal with banks. We have never dealt with them and will not do so. They either seize your land or imprison you, and their obligations require immediate repayment.

"Our approach is therefore to rely on ourselves. Whatever we harvest, we store. We allocate part of it for consumption and part for seed for the following season, ensuring a sound start. We believe in the importance of early cultivation and hard work from the beginning of the rainy season, because the agricultural season is short — no more than three to four months. We therefore advise farmers to save half of their harvest for the following season."

Basmat added, "Through the associations, we are currently working to establish contracts with companies in both the irrigated and rain-fed sectors. In the rain-fed sector, we entered into a partnership with WAS Company last July to cultivate 2,000 feddans for the production of sorghum seeds. We developed a precise plan under which the seed would be planted in remote and isolated areas to minimise pests and agricultural problems, protect the crop and ensure its success.

"We are looking to the future. We began with 2,000 feddans, and we now have 11,000 feddans, but our ambitions extend far beyond that. The Ministry of Agriculture has made commendable efforts to clear canals and irrigation channels, which has brought considerable relief to farmers. Our cultivation is progressing well this season."

Rising Through Knowledge and Learning

Basmat told *Atar* that agricultural associations and initiatives provide women and men farmers with the tools necessary to achieve their goals. Rather than relying on aid, she believes they can protect the country from hunger and achieve self-sufficiency.

"While I appreciate every effort being made, I do not want us to become dependent on assistance. We are capable of producing if we receive knowledge, ideas and practical means of implementation."

She took the argument further: "We can lift our country up and achieve food self-sufficiency through hard work. Women should not leave this burden to men alone. If a woman has a job, let her perform it well; if she owns land, let her cultivate and care for it.

"We have fertile land and vast areas suitable for rain-fed, irrigated and horticultural agriculture. All we need to do is cast aside idleness and begin working. If every woman were to summon her determination and work her land this season, we could transform our circumstances for the better in a short time and move from poverty to prosperity.

"Our ambitions should extend beyond ourselves to encompass our families and our people. I hope that, as Sudanese women, we can become a global model in our commitment to agriculture, education and health.

"Our rich lands are being squandered while others covet our resources and our water. If we succeed in involving a proportion of women in agriculture this season and gradually increase that proportion in the seasons ahead, we will achieve a genuine agricultural renaissance.

"I call for efforts to support scientists and put their agricultural theories into practice. By working with them, we can achieve our goals. We are not seeking a monopoly. We want to establish a clear, unified timetable that guarantees the provision of seed and agricultural inputs to every farmer, while training everyone in modern methods to increase production and productivity and enable every family to become self-reliant.

"I am certain that smallholder farmers who own between 10 and 15 feddans — as is the case in my association — are a fundamental pillar of production. That is not a small area; it is a productive unit capable of making a significant difference."

Basmat recounted to *Atar* a story told to her by a farmer about an encounter he had with an Egyptian farmer at an agricultural project in Egypt. The Egyptian asked him how much land he owned. When he replied that he had ten feddans, the Egyptian was astonished.

"I own only one feddan, and you own ten and still come here?" he asked.

"This moment should prompt us to reconsider our position," Basmat said, "and to work sincerely to rebuild Sudan, hold fast to our land and protect our water resources."

Basmat told *Atar*, "Receiving this award is deeply meaningful, particularly at a time when Sudanese women have lost so much — our loved ones, our homes and our money. We see families that once enjoyed stable lives now enduring extremely difficult circumstances.

"I hope this award will herald a near victory that restores happiness to children, women and men, and restores stability and wellbeing to Sudan. Sudan is dear to us."

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