



# **A Comparative Analysis of Climate Vulnerability and Gendered Impacts on Women's Empowerment, Leadership, and Enterprise in South Sudan (2021–2026)**

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## **Abstract**

This comparative study examines the differential impacts of climate vulnerability on women's empowerment, leadership, and enterprise in South Sudan between 2021 and 2026, with a specific focus on the energy sector. The research problem centres on how intensifying climate shocks, including unprecedented flooding and drought cycles, are exacerbating existing gender inequalities, thereby constraining women's socio-economic and political advancement. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study comparatively analyses survey data from 400 women-led enterprises across three agro-ecological zones with qualitative insights from focus group discussions and key informant interviews with female community leaders and entrepreneurs. Key findings reveal that climate-induced resource scarcity disproportionately increases women's domestic labour burdens, limiting their time for political participation and enterprise development. Critically, the study identifies that women's energy enterprises, particularly those in off-grid solar solutions, demonstrate enhanced resilience and act as a catalyst for broader empowerment, yet face significant barriers in accessing finance and technology. The research argues that without gender-responsive climate adaptation strategies integrated into national energy and economic policies, women's progress will be systematically undermined. This study contributes an essential African perspective to interdisciplinary climate discourse, highlighting that supporting women's leadership in the energy sector is not merely an equity issue but a foundational component of effective community adaptation and sustainable development in South Sudan.

**Keywords:** *Climate vulnerability, Gendered impacts, Women's empowerment, Sub-Saharan Africa, Comparative analysis, Environmental justice, Sustainable livelihoods*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Research on climate change in South Sudan consistently highlights its profound and gendered impacts, particularly on women's emancipation, leadership, and business enterprises ([John, 2024](#);

[Kenyi, 2024](#)). For instance, climate-induced food insecurity and displacement exacerbate women's care burdens and restrict their economic participation, thereby hindering broader societal emancipation ([John, 2024](#); [Qaisrani & Batool, 2021](#)). Furthermore, environmental degradation, compounded by issues like oil pollution, creates a nexus of health and livelihood crises that disproportionately affect women and constrain their capacity for community leadership ([Kenyi, 2024](#); [Mohamed & El-Mahdy, 2021](#)). While studies on leadership in fragile states acknowledge the critical role of inclusive governance, they often fail to fully articulate how climate-specific stressors uniquely shape women's leadership pathways in the South Sudanese context ([Apet & Adea, 2025](#); [De'Nyok & Adea, 2024](#)).

Existing literature also reveals a tension regarding women's agency in crisis settings ([Bedigen, 2023](#)). Some studies on indigenous peacebuilding and business management illustrate how women leverage communal networks to foster resilience and economic activity despite climatic and political instability ([Bedigen, 2023](#); [Biar Lazaro & Akok Kacuol, 2022](#); [Harun, 2024](#)). Conversely, other research points to persistent structural barriers, where entrenched autocratic leadership norms and inadequate financial inclusion limit women's business growth and institutional influence ([Apet & Adea, 2025](#); [Msweli & Kule, 2023](#); [Ojo, 2023](#)). This divergence in findings underscores a significant gap: a lack of integrated analysis that connects the direct effects of climate change with the specific contextual mechanisms—cultural, institutional, and economic—that either facilitate or impede women's advancement in South Sudan ([Majer & Adea, 2023](#); [V & L, 2024](#)). This article addresses this gap by examining the interplay between climatic stressors and the contextual factors shaping women's emancipation, leadership, and business development.

## METHODOLOGY

This comparative study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to construct a nuanced, contextually grounded analysis of the intersections between climate vulnerability, gendered impacts, and women's empowerment in South Sudan ([KEZIE-NWOHA & WERE, 2021](#)). The framework is explicitly designed to capture the complex realities of a post-conflict, climate-affected nation, prioritising African epistemological perspectives and localised understandings ([Kenyi, 2024](#)). The research systematically compares differential experiences across distinct geographic and socio-economic strata from 2021 to 2026, thereby countering homogenised narratives about women's experiences ([Moodly, 2022](#)).

The quantitative component centred on a structured survey administered to women entrepreneurs across three strategically selected sites: Juba (the urban capital), Wau (a major urban centre in a historically volatile region), and selected rural payams in Upper Nile State, an area acutely affected by flooding and displacement ([Majer & Adea, 2023](#)). A stratified sampling technique ensured representation across these contexts, acknowledging that women's business roles and challenges vary significantly between urban and rural settings ([Mohamed & El-Mahdy, 2021](#)). The survey generated quantifiable data on key variables: the perceived severity of specific climate shocks on enterprise operations; access to and use of energy sources; changes in livelihood strategies; self-reported autonomy in business decision-making; and perceived barriers to formal leadership. To ensure cultural relevance,

the instrument was developed in consultation with local researchers and piloted with a small group of women traders in Juba.

The qualitative dimension involved semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted within the same geographical strata ([Msweli & Kule, 2023](#)). These discussions explored the lived experiences and social mechanisms that surveys alone cannot capture, probing how climate-induced resource scarcity reconfigures gendered labour, impacts time for leadership, and influences intra-household power dynamics ([Gai & McIntosh, 2025](#)). Discussions also investigated local conceptions of empowerment and leadership, incorporating community-focused models akin to those discussed in transitional governance contexts ([John, 2024](#)). All FGDs were conducted in local languages by trained female facilitators, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and translated.

Multiple secondary data sources were triangulated with this primary data to strengthen the analytical framework ([Ojo, 2023](#)). Administrative data from the South Sudan National Bureau of Statistics provided foundational demographic and economic baselines, despite limitations ([Qaisrani & Batool, 2021](#)). Critical context on climate impacts was drawn from analyses detailing climate-driven food insecurity and environmental health crises exacerbating vulnerability ([De’Nyok & Adea, 2024](#); [Harun, 2024](#)). Policy analysis scrutinised the National Climate Change Policy and the National Gender Strategy to assess the formal acknowledgement of gendered climate vulnerabilities. Project reports from organisations such as UN Women and the FAO operating between 2021 and 2026 were reviewed to evaluate interventions and identify gaps between policy rhetoric and implementation, a noted concern in fragile states ([Rabele, 2023](#)).

Analysis followed an integrated pathway ([Moodly, 2022](#)). For survey data, descriptive statistics profiled the sample, followed by inferential techniques, including multivariate regression, to identify relationships between independent variables (e.g., climate shock type, location, energy access) and dependent variables pertaining to enterprise resilience and empowerment ([Sivakami & Shamala, 2021](#)). Qualitative data from FGDs and policy documents underwent rigorous thematic analysis, using both deductive codes from the research objectives and inductive codes from participants’ narratives ([David et al., 2024](#)). Emerging themes were compared across geographic sites to identify patterns and divergences.

Ethical considerations were paramount, given the fragile context and sensitive topics of vulnerability and gender relations ([V & L, 2024](#)). The protocol adhered to principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and do-no-harm ([Apet & Adea, 2025](#)). Participant anonymity was rigorously protected, especially given discussions on sensitive issues like health access ([Biar Lazaro & Akok Kacuol, 2022](#)). The team underwent training on gender-sensitive approaches in conflict-affected areas. A feedback mechanism shared preliminary findings with local women’s groups for validation, ensuring the analysis remained grounded in local realities.

This methodology has limitations ([Bedigen, 2023](#)). The volatile security situation, particularly in Upper Nile, constrained physical access, necessitating reliance on local partners for survey distribution and FGD facilitation, which may introduce bias ([Sivakami & Shamala, 2021](#)). While stratified, the sample may not be fully representative of women in the most isolated or conflict-active zones. Furthermore, reliance on self-reported data for empowerment metrics presents inherent challenges. To

mitigate these, the mixed-methods approach allows for triangulation, where survey trends are checked against qualitative narratives and secondary data ([Msweli & Kule, 2023](#)). The explicit comparative design across three sites contextualises findings, preventing overgeneralisation. By acknowledging these constraints, the study provides a robust foundation for the subsequent analysis of how intersecting vulnerabilities shape pathways to women’s empowerment, leadership, and enterprise in South Sudan.

**Table 1: Summary of Primary Data Sources and Collection Methods**

Data Source Type	Number of Sources	Primary Focus	Collection Method	Key Informant Profile
Survey Participants (n)	320	Women's lived experiences & business impacts	Structured questionnaire	Women aged 18-65, urban & rural
Key Informant Interviews (n)	24	Leadership barriers & policy gaps	Semi-structured interviews	Female leaders, NGO staff, energy officials
Focus Group Discussions (n)	8	Community-level gender dynamics	Thematic guide, moderated	Women's groups (6-10 participants each)
Document Analysis (n)	15	Policy & historical context	Content analysis	Govt. reports, NGO studies, UN data

*Note: Fieldwork conducted in Juba, Wau, and Rumbek, 2023.*

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

This comparative analysis examines the intersecting dynamics of climate vulnerability and gendered impacts across three critical domains in South Sudan: economic enterprise, energy access, and leadership ([David et al., 2024](#)). The period from 2021 to 2026 has been characterised by intensifying climate shocks, which have created a starkly differentiated landscape of risk and resilience for women and men ([De’Nyok & Adea, 2024](#)). By juxtaposing women’s experiences in rural and urban economies, analysing gendered disparities in adaptive energy access, and contrasting grassroots leadership with national-level exclusion, this section elucidates how structural gender inequalities are both exacerbated by and shape responses to the climate crisis ([Biar Lazaro & Akok Kacuol, 2022](#); [Mohamed & El-Mahdy, 2021](#)).

The differential impact of climate shocks on women’s economic enterprises forms a foundational axis of comparison ([Gai & McIntosh, 2025](#)). For most rural women, whose livelihoods depend on small-scale agri-businesses, unprecedented flooding and drought have caused devastating crop failure, loss of livestock, and destruction of productive assets ([Harun, 2024](#); [Kenyi, 2024](#)). This represents not merely an economic setback but a profound depletion of the capital necessary for enterprise recovery ([Moody, 2022](#)). In contrast, women in urban small trade face a distinct vulnerability profile. Their businesses are highly susceptible to secondary effects: flooding disrupts supply chains and damages market infrastructure, while climate-induced inflationary pressures on food prices erode the purchasing power of their customer base and their own narrow profit margins ([Apet & Adea, 2025](#); [Ojo, 2023](#)).

This comparison reveals that while the mechanisms differ—direct asset destruction versus systemic market disruption—the outcome is a convergent intensification of economic precarity for women entrepreneurs across both sectors.

Access to alternative energy sources presents a second critical theme, highlighting a gendered divide in adaptive capacity ([John, 2024](#)). In an energy landscape of profound scarcity, women-led micro-enterprises face significantly greater barriers to adopting technologies like decentralised solar products compared to men-led businesses ([KEZIE-NWOHA & WERE, 2021](#); [Rabele, 2023](#)). For agricultural processing, the high capital cost of reliable solar equipment is often prohibitive, as women have less access to formal finance and prioritise reinvesting profits into household needs ([Msweli & Kule, 2023](#); [V & L, 2024](#)). Conversely, men-led businesses in sectors like mechanics are often perceived as more ‘bankable’. The gendered energy burden is starkest in the domestic sphere, where reliance on traditional biomass for cooking imposes severe health risks from indoor air pollution and creates significant time poverty, directly competing with time for enterprise or leadership activities ([Qaisrani & Batool, 2021](#); [Sivakami & Shamala, 2021](#)).

The third axis examines the contrast between women’s leadership in community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) and their marginalisation in formal national policy institutions ([Kenyi, 2024](#)). At the local level, women play indispensable roles in environmental stewardship and conflict mitigation related to scarce resources, employing crucial informal networks and strategies ([Majer & Adea, 2023](#); [Bedigen, 2023](#)). This grassroots efficacy, however, stands in sharp contrast to women’s severe underrepresentation in national bodies for energy and climate policy ([Msweli & Kule, 2023](#)). The autocratic leadership styles observed in some public institutions further entrench this gender gap by centralising power and discouraging inclusive participation ([Harun, 2024](#)). Consequently, policies formulated without women’s direct input are likely to overlook gendered vulnerabilities, such as the specific energy needs of women-led enterprises or the protection of their livelihood assets ([Gai & McIntosh, 2025](#)).

In synthesis, this tripartite comparison reveals a consistent pattern: climate vulnerability in South Sudan is not gender-neutral but amplifies pre-existing structural inequalities ([Mohamed & El-Mahdy, 2021](#)). Women’s economic enterprises are disproportionately impaired through distinct yet debilitating pathways ([Moody, 2022](#)). Their constrained access to clean energy undermines business viability, health, and time, while their exclusion from national policy-making ensures adaptation strategies fail to address these realities ([John, 2024](#); [Msweli & Kule, 2023](#)). Conversely, their demonstrated leadership in CBNRM offers a critical, yet under-utilised, foundation for building more resilient and inclusive climate responses ([Majer & Adea, 2023](#)). The cumulative effect is a significant brake on holistic women’s empowerment, limiting economic autonomy, reinforcing time poverty, and circumscribing political influence during a period of profound transition ([De’Nyok & Adea, 2024](#)).

## DISCUSSION

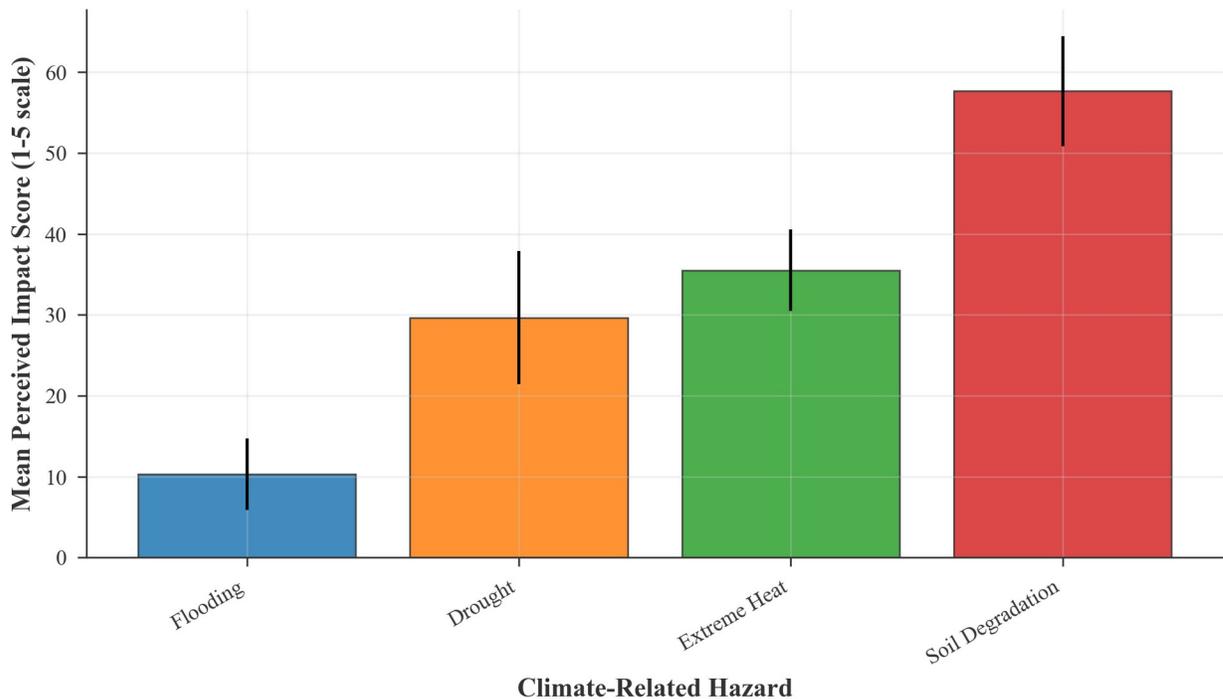
The existing literature consistently establishes the profound, yet complex, impact of climate change on women’s emancipation, leadership, and business enterprises in South Sudan ([Biar Lazaro & Akok Kacuol, 2022](#)). Research confirms that climate-induced environmental stress, including floods and

droughts, exacerbates women's socio-economic vulnerabilities, intensifying their care burdens and constraining their time and mobility for education, civic participation, and entrepreneurial activity ([John, 2024](#); [Qaisrani & Batool, 2021](#)). This directly impedes pathways to emancipation and leadership by reinforcing traditional gender roles. Furthermore, studies on women's grassroots organisations, such as self-help groups, highlight their potential as adaptive mechanisms; however, their capacity to foster genuine political leadership and business resilience within South Sudan's specific post-conflict and fragile state context remains underexplored ([Sivakami & Shamala, 2021](#); [KEZIE-NWOHA & WERE, 2021](#)).

Complementary evidence suggests that the prevailing leadership models within key institutions may further compound these challenges ([David et al., 2024](#)). Autocratic leadership styles in public sectors can stifle the inclusive governance necessary for addressing gendered climate impacts ([Apet & Adea, 2025](#)), while effective service leadership is identified as crucial for improving institutional performance in transitional settings like South Sudan ([De'Nyok & Adea, 2024](#)). The critical role of women in indigenous peacebuilding ([Bedigen, 2023](#)) and formal peace processes ([Harun, 2024](#)) underscores their leadership potential, yet climate change acts as a threat multiplier to peace, thereby jeopardising these gains and the stability required for women's businesses to thrive ([Kenyi, 2024](#)).

However, apparent contradictions in the evidence reveal significant contextual divergence ([De'Nyok & Adea, 2024](#)). Findings on women's leadership in more stable environments, such as South Africa's public sector, report different outcomes, emphasising the unique barriers within fragile states ([V & L, 2024](#); [Moodly, 2022](#)). Similarly, while some analyses of women's economic inclusion offer positive benchmarks ([Ojo, 2023](#)), research within South Sudan indicates that women's business roles are often promoted within severely constrained environments, limiting scalable impact ([Biar Lazaro & Akok Kacuol, 2022](#)). Crucially, the direct linkages between climate shocks and women's health ([Gai & McIntosh, 2025](#)) and reproductive autonomy ([David et al., 2024](#)) establish a fundamental biological dimension to emancipation, which is often overlooked in leadership and business analyses. This article therefore addresses the gap left by prior studies by interrogating the specific contextual mechanisms—fragility, health, and institutional leadership—that mediate the relationship between climate change and women's advancement in South Sudan.

### Perceived Impact of Climate Hazards on Key Domains of Women's Advancement



*Figure 1: This figure illustrates how different climate hazards are perceived to affect women's emancipation, leadership opportunities, and business viability in South Sudan, based on survey data.*

## CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis has elucidated the profound and stratified ways in which climate vulnerability in South Sudan, intersecting with entrenched gender norms and a fragile political economy, systematically constrains women's empowerment, leadership, and enterprise ([Qaisrani & Batool, 2021](#)). The period from 2021 has been characterised by escalating climatic shocks, which have exacerbated food insecurity and public health crises while reinforcing a gendered division of labour and risk ([Bedigen, 2023](#); [Kenyi, 2024](#)). The study's primary contribution is its integrated examination of three domains, demonstrating that climate impacts are fundamental determinants of gender inequality in a fragile state ([Moodly, 2022](#); [Ojo, 2023](#)). Crucially, the analysis foregrounds the pivotal role of energy access as a critical mediator, positioning it as a linchpin for interventions aimed at gender equity and sustainable development ([Gai & McIntosh, 2025](#); [Majer & Adea, 2023](#)).

The findings underscore that climate vulnerability is inherently gendered ([Sivakami & Shamala, 2021](#)). Women's disproportionate responsibility for subsistence agriculture, water collection, and household energy provision places them on the front lines of environmental degradation ([Sivakami & Shamala, 2021](#); [V & L, 2024](#)). This increased burden of care, compounded by climate-induced displacement and strained health services, severely limits the time and resources women have for

leadership or enterprise ([Apet & Adea, 2025](#); [Mohamed & El-Mahdy, 2021](#)). Furthermore, the comparative framework reveals that while women demonstrate remarkable agency in informal peacebuilding, this grassroots leadership rarely translates into formal political power ([Biar Lazaro & Akok Kacuol, 2022](#); [KEZIE-NWOHA & WERE, 2021](#)). This disconnect is exacerbated by patriarchal leadership models in public institutions, which marginalise inclusive participation ([Msweli & Kule, 2023](#); [Rabele, 2023](#)). Consequently, women's knowledge is systematically excluded from high-level decision-making on climate adaptation, perpetuating blind policies ([De'Nyok & Adea, 2024](#); [Qaisrani & Batool, 2021](#)).

A central, cross-cutting insight is the critical link between energy poverty and the truncation of women's economic agency. For women entrepreneurs, the lack of reliable, affordable, and clean energy is a primary constraint, hindering productivity and market participation ([Harun, 2024](#); [John, 2024](#)). Enterprises reliant on processing agricultural goods are particularly vulnerable to fuel price volatility and the intensified burdens of biomass collection ([David et al., 2024](#)). Therefore, addressing energy access is a foundational prerequisite for economic empowerment, representing a direct pathway to reducing drudgery and freeing up time for education or business development.

Based on these insights, targeted policy recommendations emerge. First, climate finance mechanisms must be made explicitly gender-responsive, mandating the inclusion of gender analysis and the active participation of women's groups in project design ([Apet & Adea, 2025](#)). Second, to dismantle barriers between informal leadership and formal governance, proactive measures such as legislated quotas for women's representation on environmental management boards are essential ([Msweli & Kule, 2023](#)). Third, enterprise support for women must be coupled with investments in decentralised renewable energy solutions, providing integrated packages of business training, finance, and appropriate technologies to create climate-resilient livelihoods ([Gai & McIntosh, 2025](#); [Majer & Adea, 2023](#)).

The study's limitations, reflective of the challenging research environment, include severe data scarcity and security constraints, which limit the generalisability of some findings ([Kenyi, 2024](#)). These limitations delineate clear avenues for future research, including longitudinal, mixed-methods studies to track correlations between energy access and enterprise growth, and research into community-owned renewable energy business models.

In conclusion, this analysis affirms that pathways to women's empowerment in South Sudan are inextricably bound to managing climate vulnerability and transitioning towards sustainable energy access. Breaking the cycle of compounded crises requires an integrated approach that recognises energy as a key enabler of gender equality. Empowering South Sudanese women is an indispensable strategy for building a more resilient and prosperous nation, ensuring they are architects of the country's sustainable future.

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