



Climate Change, Gender and Governance: A Brief Report on Environmental Stressors and Women's Socio-Economic Agency in South Sudan (2021–2026)

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Abstract

This brief report examines the critical nexus between climate change, gender, and governance in South Sudan, focusing on the period 2021–2026. It investigates how intensifying environmental stressors—specifically increased flooding and drought—are reshaping the socio-economic agency of women, with particular attention to women-led businesses and leadership within the energy sector. The methodology synthesises field-based qualitative interviews with women entrepreneurs and community leaders, alongside analysis of recent national climate and gender policy frameworks. Findings indicate that climate-induced displacement and resource scarcity have disproportionately increased women's labour burdens, yet concurrently catalysed new forms of agency. Women are emerging as pivotal actors in decentralised renewable energy solutions, such as solar-powered enterprises, which enhance community resilience. However, entrenched governance challenges and limited access to finance severely constrain the scalability of these initiatives. The report argues that, without gender-responsive governance integrating women's climate adaptation strategies into national energy and economic planning, a significant opportunity for equitable, sustainable development will be lost. This underscores the imperative for African-led policy that recognises and resources women not merely as victims, but as essential agents of climate adaptation and socio-economic transformation in fragile states.

Keywords: *Climate change adaptation, Gender and governance, Environmental stressors, Women's socio-economic agency, Sub-Saharan Africa, Intersectionality, Sustainable livelihoods*

REPORT

This report examines the impact of climate change on women's emancipation, leadership and business enterprises in South Sudan. The nation's acute energy deficit, overwhelmingly reliant on traditional biomass and imported fossil fuels, constitutes a uniquely gendered economic trap that stifles women's entrepreneurial advancement. The near-total absence of a national electricity grid, with access rates below 10% nationally and virtually non-existent in rural areas, imposes profound time poverty on women and girls responsible for domestic fuel collection. This daily burden, exacerbated by environmental degradation which forces longer journeys for dwindling supplies, directly competes with time for income generation, skills training or civic participation. For women-owned micro-enterprises in sectors like food processing or tailoring, the lack of reliable, affordable energy is a primary constraint. Operations are limited to daylight hours, perishable goods cannot be stored, and inefficient tools cap output quality. Reliance on expensive diesel generators remains the preserve of a privileged few, locking most women-led businesses into a cycle of subsistence. Consequently, this energy poverty nexus acts as a formidable barrier to economic emancipation, ensuring commercial endeavours remain vulnerable, informal and unable to scale, thereby perpetuating socio-economic marginalisation.

Furthermore, the intersection of climate-induced displacement and the energy crisis has critically undermined women's traditional and potential leadership in community governance structures for natural resource management. As persistent flooding and drought force large-scale population movements, established systems for managing common resources like woodlots are profoundly disrupted. In new, often temporary settlements, governance of scarce energy resources like fuelwood frequently becomes ad-hoc and militarised, with control prioritised over equitable management. Women, who possess intricate knowledge of local ecosystems, are systematically excluded from these emergent decision-making bodies, which are often dominated by male leaders and youth militias. This exclusion represents a significant erosion of female socio-economic agency, removing their influence over policies that directly impact their daily security and labour. Moreover, the constant struggle for energy security in displacement settings consumes the social capital and time women might otherwise invest in community leadership, effectively silencing their voices in broader governance dialogues. Thus, environmental stressors have not only physically displaced populations but have also displaced women from their historical roles as environmental stewards.

Nevertheless, the period from 2021 has witnessed the tentative emergence of decentralised renewable energy solutions, primarily solar, which present a transformative opportunity for enhancing women's socio-economic agency. Small-scale solar home systems and community hubs, often deployed by non-governmental organisations and private actors, have begun to alter gendered energy dynamics in select urban areas. For women entrepreneurs, solar energy enables the use of efficient electrical appliances, extends productive hours and powers equipment for milling or refrigeration, thereby increasing income diversification. Crucially, some initiatives have integrated women into their delivery models as technicians, sales agents and committee members, not merely as consumers. This nascent trend towards 'green livelihoods' has the potential to reconfigure gender norms by positioning women as technical actors in the energy sector, bolstering their credibility in broader economic affairs. However, these successes remain geographically fragmented and dependent on external funding; the lack of a supportive national policy framework and persistent barriers to women's finance and technical training mean such empowerment is not yet systemic. The challenge lies in scaling these isolated

successes into a coherent national strategy that recognises energy access as a fundamental prerequisite for gender-inclusive development.

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