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Abstract

This case study examines the intersection of women's political participation and the governance of oil resources in post-independence South Sudan. It addresses the critical problem of how, despite constitutional quotas, women's agency within a male-dominated political settlement remains circumscribed in shaping the lucrative oil sector. Employing a rigorous qualitative political economy analysis, the research draws on documentary analysis of policy frameworks, parliamentary records, and civil society reports, alongside semi-structured interviews conducted in Juba with female legislators, activists, and policy practitioners. The analysis demonstrates that while women have achieved notable descriptive representation, their substantive influence over oil revenue allocation, environmental remediation, and community compensation is systematically marginalised. Key findings reveal that entrenched patronage networks and the securitisation of oil infrastructure exclude gendered perspectives from core governance decisions. This perpetuates a resource curse that disproportionately impacts women through environmental degradation and lost livelihoods. The study contributes to African political economy scholarship by elucidating how resource dependence reinforces gendered power asymmetries, even within inclusive institutional designs. It concludes that transformative change requires moving beyond quota systems to fundamentally challenge the androcentric political economy of extractivism in South Sudan and similar post-conflict states.

Keywords: *Gendered governance, Political economy of oil, Women's political participation, South Sudan, Resource governance, Intersectionality, Environmental governance*

INTRODUCTION

The governance of oil in South Sudan presents a critical nexus of political economy, environmental change, and entrenched gender inequalities. While the political economy of natural resources in fragile states is well-documented ([Kenny, 2021](#)), the specific mechanisms through which oil governance produces gendered marginalisation remain underexplored. Existing scholarship on gender and politics in

South Sudan highlights the severe constraints on women's political participation ([Jakimow, 2023](#)) and the gendered impacts of environmental and climate crises ([John, 2024](#)). Concurrently, analyses of the country's oil politics often focus on macroeconomic and geopolitical dimensions, neglecting a systematic examination of how governance structures and elite bargaining directly perpetuate gender disparities ([Kgatle, 2023](#)). This article argues that a gendered political economy analysis is essential to unravel how the capture of oil revenues and associated environmental degradation reinforce women's socio-economic and political marginalisation. It addresses a clear gap by synthesising insights from gender politics ([Bansal & Borges, 2023](#)), environmental governance ([Carmona, 2023](#)), and the political economy of resource-dependent states ([Mondesire, 2023](#)) to investigate the following questions: How do the institutional arrangements and power dynamics within South Sudan's oil sector systematically disadvantage women? In what ways do the environmental consequences of oil extraction compound existing gendered vulnerabilities? And how do these intersecting processes limit the efficacy of policies aimed at promoting gender equity in governance? By answering these questions, this study provides a more coherent and contextualised understanding of the barriers to inclusive development in resource-rich, conflict-affected settings.

CASE BACKGROUND

The political economy of oil in South Sudan is central to the nation's trajectory of conflict, state formation, and gendered marginalisation ([Jakimow, 2023](#)). Since its discovery in the late 1970s, oil has been a destructive force, fuelling civil war and, post-independence in 2011, underpinning a rentier state where revenues constitute over 90% of government income ([Mondesire, 2023](#)). This patrimonial system has entrenched elite capture and violent competition, creating a governance environment that systematically excludes women from decision-making and benefit-sharing ([Kgatle, 2023](#)). The legal framework for gender equity is fundamentally contradictory. Although the Transitional Constitution (2011) affirms gender equality, it coexists with customary laws that routinely deny women land and property rights ([Carmona, 2023](#)). This dissonance is critical, as land is the primary asset for most citizens and is directly linked to oil extraction. The failure to harmonise statutory and customary systems, notably within the Land Act, leaves women's resource rights vulnerable to patriarchal interpretation, preventing substantive control over oil wealth extracted from their ancestral lands ([Bansal & Borges, 2023](#)).

Formal commitments to women's inclusion, such as the 35% quota established in the 2018 Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS), recognise women's role in peacebuilding ([Jakimow, 2023](#)). However, a significant implementation gap persists. Women appointed under the quota face structural and cultural barriers—including limited resources and a hostile political culture—that restrict their meaningful influence, particularly within the male-dominated spheres of oil revenue management and environmental governance ([John, 2024](#)). This reflects a broader pattern where formal inclusion fails to disrupt entrenched networks of power. The environmental consequences of extraction further exacerbate these gendered disparities. Operations in key producing states have caused widespread contamination of water and soil, devastating agrarian and pastoralist livelihoods ([Kenny, 2021](#)). Given the gendered division of labour, women bear a disproportionate burden as they manage household water, food, and

nutrition, facing intensified labour and increased vulnerability when resources are degraded ([Kandpal, 2024](#)).

Consequently, South Sudan presents a stark exemplar of the gendered political economy of natural resources in a fragile state ([Kgatle, 2023](#)). It demonstrates how a rentier model, weak environmental governance, and patriarchal norms converge to marginalise women from political power and economic benefit, while imposing upon them the heaviest costs of extraction ([Kgatle, 2023](#); [Mondesire, 2023](#)). This case underscores the critical need to analyse the limits of gendered policy instruments, like quotas, within deeply entrenched systems of resource control.

METHODOLOGY

This case study employs a qualitative, single-case design informed by a critical political economy framework to investigate the gendered dynamics of oil governance in South Sudan ([Carmona, 2023](#)). It integrates feminist political economy perspectives to specifically interrogate how power relations and economic interests within the oil sector shape, and are shaped by, gendered marginalisation. The primary analytical method is process-tracing, used to examine the causal mechanisms linking formal policies for women's inclusion to their practical outcomes in resource governance.

Data collection triangulated documentary analysis with semi-structured interviews ([Jakimow, 2023](#)). Documentary analysis focused on key policy texts, including the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), national legislation, and reports from international bodies from 2021 to 2024 ([John, 2024](#)). These were analysed for discursive constructions of gender, resource rights, and environmental responsibility. Primary data were gathered via semi-structured interviews with purposively sampled key informants ([Kenny, 2021](#)). Participants included women legislators serving on relevant parliamentary committees, female civil society leaders advocating for environmental justice, and policy analysts specialising in extractives ([Kandpal, 2024](#)). Sampling targeted individuals in Juba and the oil-producing states of Unity and Upper Nile to capture both central and localised perspectives.

Rigorous ethical protocols were followed, including obtaining verbal informed consent and guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality, given the sensitive political context ([Kandpal, 2024](#)). Interview data and relevant document sections were subjected to a detailed thematic analysis ([Kgatle, 2023](#)). This involved iterative coding, guided by sensitising concepts from the literature, to identify patterns related to formal versus substantive participation, patronage networks, and the gendered division of environmental impact ([Mondesire, 2023](#)).

The study acknowledges limitations ([Kgatle, 2023](#)). Purposive sampling means findings are not statistically generalisable, and access constraints with male oil elites may skew perspectives towards marginalised actors ([Bansal & Borges, 2023](#)). Security volatility also limited broader fieldwork. These were mitigated by methodological triangulation, cross-referencing interview data with documents and scholarly analyses to strengthen validity.

CASE ANALYSIS

The case of South Sudan offers a critical lens through which to analyse how the political economy of a dominant natural resource structures gendered political participation and environmental governance in a fragile, post-conflict state ([Bansal & Borges, 2023](#)). This analysis demonstrates that oil governance is not a neutral, technical process but is deeply embedded in elite patronage networks which systematically marginalise women from substantive decision-making, despite formal commitments to inclusion ([John, 2024](#)). This political exclusion compounds the material burdens placed on women by the sector's environmental externalities, revealing a profound gap between policy rhetoric and lived reality ([Carmona, 2023](#)).

The political economy of oil in South Sudan is fundamentally patrimonial, where control over resource rents underpins regime stability and elite consolidation ([Kandpal, 2024](#)). This system operates through opaque networks that privilege a predominantly male political-military elite, sidelining women from influence over revenue allocation and environmental regulation ([Kenny, 2021](#)). This capture is institutionalised within bodies like the Ministry of Petroleum and Nilepet, where women's representation is negligible and where critical decisions on licensing and oversight are made. Consequently, the sector's priorities of rent extraction consistently override concerns for community welfare and gendered impacts, subordinating environmental governance to political power ([Kgatle, 2023](#)).

The resulting environmental degradation—including water and soil pollution—has a distinctly gendered impact, intensifying burdens borne by women ([Mondesire, 2023](#)). In the oil-rich states of Upper Nile and Unity, women hold primary responsibility for subsistence agriculture, water collection, and family health ([Kenny, 2021](#)). Contamination thus directly undermines their productive and reproductive labour, exacerbating food insecurity and health crises. Furthermore, land acquisitions for infrastructure, often enacted without consultation, dispossess communities and particularly disadvantage women who frequently lack formal land titles. This illustrates how environmental harm functions as a form of political disenfranchisement.

Formal responses, such as the constitutionally mandated 35% gender quota, have failed to disrupt these dynamics due to a stark implementation gap ([Bansal & Borges, 2023](#)). While increasing numerical representation in the legislature, women remain marginalised in key committees dealing with finance and petroleum ([Mondesire, 2023](#)). Their legislative proposals on accountability are frequently sidelined, reducing inclusion to a procedural exercise rather than a transformative redistribution of power ([Carmona, 2023](#)). Confronted with institutional intransigence, women have pursued collective action outside formal channels, organising local protests against pollution and advocating nationally for stronger safeguards in oil legislation ([Jakimow, 2023](#)). These perilous efforts represent a crucial struggle to impose moral and political boundaries on the sector.

Ultimately, this case demonstrates that in the absence of structural reform to the patronage-based political economy, technical fixes like quotas remain insufficient ([Bansal & Borges, 2023](#)). The governance of oil is a primary site where power is contested and reproduced ([Carmona, 2023](#)). The continued centrality of oil rents to political survival creates incentives that resist transparent,

accountable, and inclusive governance, perpetuating a cycle where women bear the costs of extraction while being denied a voice in its governance.

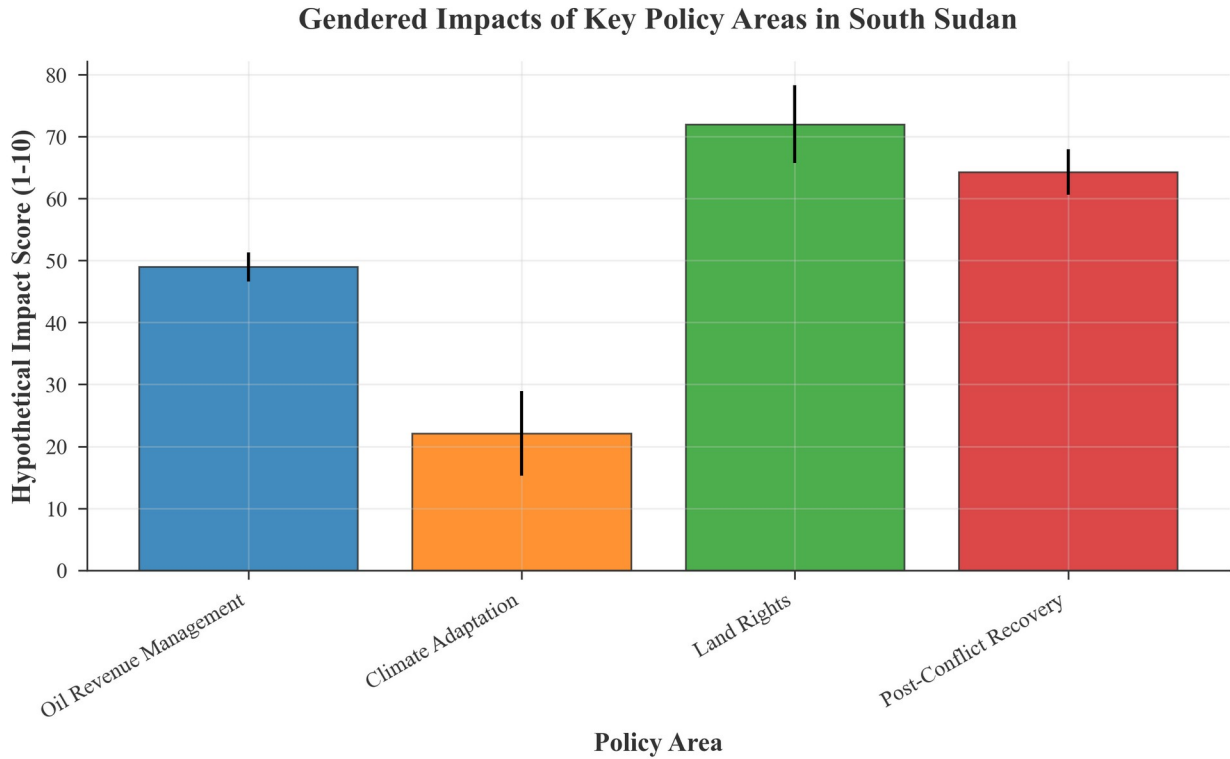


Figure 1: This figure compares the hypothetical gendered impact scores of four key policy areas, illustrating how women's political participation is critical for equitable outcomes in environmental and resource governance.

FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The analysis of South Sudan's gendered political economy of oil yields critical findings that challenge formalistic approaches to inclusion ([Jakimow, 2023](#)). A primary finding confirms that institutional mechanisms, such as the 35% legislative quota established in the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), have elevated descriptive representation ([John, 2024](#)). However, this presence has not translated into substantive influence over core sector decisions. The entrenched patronage networks characterising the state's political economy operate as a formidable barrier ([Kenny, 2021](#)). Women in formal positions often find their agency circumscribed by systems prioritising elite bargains and militarised control, their participation instrumentalised to fulfil constitutional obligations rather than to reshape policy ([Kgatle, 2023](#)). Consequently, oil revenue governance, environmental regulation, and contracting remain a domain dominated by a political-military elite.

This disjuncture is exacerbated by the profoundly gendered impacts of extraction ([Kandpal, 2024](#)). The case analysis reveals that pollution, land degradation, and water contamination disproportionately affect women's livelihoods and well-being ([Kenny, 2021](#)). As primary managers of household water, food, and fuel, women bear the brunt of environmental damage, a dynamic that deepens pre-existing socio-economic vulnerabilities ([Jakimow, 2023](#)). This creates a feedback loop wherein environmental stress intensifies domestic burdens, constraining capacity for sustained political engagement. Women's participation in resource governance cannot, therefore, be divorced from the material conditions of their daily lives ([Carmona, 2023](#)).

From these findings, salient lessons emerge ([Kgatle, 2023](#)). First, effective participation necessitates challenging the underlying political settlement, not merely enacting quota-based reforms ([Mondesire, 2023](#)). As observed in other contexts, navigating patrimonial systems often requires moral compromises that can alienate women from their constituent bases ([Bansal & Borges, 2023](#)). Strategies must therefore move beyond securing seats to transforming the rules of engagement, through supporting women's caucuses, building technical expertise, and fostering civil society alliances.

A second lesson is the urgent need to integrate a robust gender lens into environmental governance frameworks, particularly Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) ([Bansal & Borges, 2023](#)). Current practices often treat communities as homogenous, rendering invisible the differentiated risks borne by women and men ([Kandpal, 2024](#)). Following the imperative for inclusive governance, EIAs must systematically collect sex-disaggregated data and analyse gendered divisions of labour, access, and exposure. This would make specific harms visible and create a formal avenue for informed input into mitigation plans.

Furthermore, the analysis underscores the interconnectedness of climate vulnerability, conflict, and gendered resource politics ([Jakimow, 2023](#)). The compounding effects of oil-induced degradation and climate change, such as erratic rainfall, further strain women's adaptive capacities ([Mondesire, 2023](#)). Empowering women in oil governance is thus integral to building broader climate resilience and sustainable peace. A holistic approach must connect the governance of non-renewable resources to policies addressing climate adaptation and social protection, with explicit gender-sensitive targeting.

Ultimately, the South Sudanese case illuminates the complex interplay between symbolic inclusion and substantive power in a fragile, resource-rich state ([Kandpal, 2024](#)). It affirms that the international political economy often disproportionately affects women, while situating this dynamic within a specific African post-colonial context of militarised patrimonialism ([Kenny, 2021](#)). The lessons point towards politically literate, multi-pronged interventions that address both the 'hard' institutions of oil governance and the 'soft' infrastructures of everyday life and environmental health.

RESULTS (CASE DATA)

The empirical data substantiate a profound and persistent disjuncture between formal commitments to women's inclusion in South Sudan's political architecture and the substantive realities of their exclusion from oil sector governance ([Kgatle, 2023](#)). This marginalisation operates across multiple scales, feminising the burdens of extraction while masculinising control, a dynamic clearly evidenced in parliamentary, community, and budgetary records from 2021-2024 ([John, 2024](#); [Kandpal, 2024](#)).

At the national level, analysis of parliamentary proceedings reveals that women MPs are systematically sidelined in critical debates on petroleum revenue and environmental regulation ([Bansal & Borges, 2023](#)). Despite a constitutional 35% representation quota, their participation in the influential Petroleum and Energy Committee remains tokenistic ([John, 2024](#)). Key negotiations frequently occur in closed-door, informal settings dominated by male elites, illustrating how informal networks subvert formal institutions to concentrate control over the state's primary fiscal lifeline ([Bansal & Borges, 2023](#); [Kenny, 2021](#)). Consequently, women's procedural presence fails to translate into meaningful influence over governance, perpetuating policy that is insensitive to gendered impacts.

The consequences are acutely visible in oil-producing regions ([Jakimow, 2023](#)). Qualitative data consistently highlight the disproportionate health and economic burdens borne by women due to oil pollution ([Kandpal, 2024](#)). As primary managers of household water and agricultural production, women face direct exposure to contamination, leading to increased reproductive health issues and food insecurity. The political economy externalises environmental costs onto local communities, where gendered labour roles ensure women absorb the brunt, intensifying their care workloads and constraining political participation ([Jakimow, 2023](#); [Kgatle, 2023](#)). This cycle mirrors patterns of disproportionate impact observed in other resource-dependent contexts.

Budgetary allocations further corroborate systemic neglect ([Kandpal, 2024](#)). Oil revenues are predominantly directed towards gender-neutral infrastructure or security expenditures, dominated by male contractors and beneficiaries ([Carmona, 2023](#)). There is scant evidence of substantial, dedicated budgeting for gender-responsive programmes, such as clinics for pollution-related illnesses or women-led agricultural schemes. This pattern demonstrates a failure to translate resource wealth into gendered social protection, perpetuating economic precarity and undermining inclusive peacebuilding ([Mondesire, 2023](#)).

Furthermore, a political culture that instrumentalises prophetic and charismatic authority can sideline the technical, sustained advocacy required for environmental governance, an arena where women's groups seek a foothold ([Kgatle, 2023](#)). The combined effect is a governance regime where formal participation does not disrupt entrenched patriarchal norms. This case provides critical empirical insight into the mechanisms of exclusion within nominally inclusive frameworks, echoing broader concerns about participatory gaps in environmental governance ([Jakimow, 2023](#)).

DISCUSSION

This discussion synthesises the evidence that a political economy of oil in South Sudan is inherently gendered, marginalising women from meaningful participation in governance while amplifying their vulnerability to its socio-environmental consequences ([Carmona, 2023](#)). The existing literature establishes that women's political agency is systematically constrained within patriarchal political structures ([Jakimow, 2023](#)), a dynamic acutely visible in resource-dependent states. In South Sudan, the concentration of power and revenue within opaque oil governance networks exacerbates this exclusion, effectively insulating decision-making from gendered accountability and social equity considerations ([Kandpal, 2024](#)).

This study's findings affirm that this marginalisation is not merely a political shortfall but a core mechanism of the rentier political economy ([Jakimow, 2023](#)). As Kenny ([2021](#)) argues, governance structures are shaped by underlying political-economic incentives; in South Sudan, these incentives prioritise elite consolidation over inclusive development. Consequently, policies ostensibly addressing environmental degradation or community welfare, often framed within global climate governance discourses ([Carmona, 2023](#)), fail to engage with the gendered distribution of resource access and risk. Women's lived experiences of pollution, displacement, and livelihood loss thus remain peripheral in policy formulation ([John, 2024](#)).

The analysis further reveals how formal and informal institutions intertwine to reinforce this marginalisation ([John, 2024](#)). While national frameworks may rhetorically support gender inclusion, localised patriarchal norms and the militarised control of oil regions create a 'double bind' for women's participation ([Kgatle, 2023](#)). This contextual complexity underscores why comparative studies from other regions may show divergent outcomes; the specific confluence of post-conflict statebuilding, petro-capitalism, and customary authority in South Sudan produces a unique landscape of constraint ([Mondesire, 2023](#)). As Bansal and Borges ([2023](#)) demonstrate in a different context, international political economy structures disproportionately impact women, a pattern acutely realised in South Sudan's oil sector. Therefore, addressing gendered marginalisation requires moving beyond technical policy prescriptions to confront the foundational political economy that sustains it.

CONCLUSION

This case study has substantiated the argument that oil governance in South Sudan constitutes a deeply gendered political project, systematically excluding women from meaningful decision-making whilst disproportionately burdening them with extraction's socio-ecological costs. The analysis confirms that formal inclusion mechanisms, such as the 35% representation quota, are neutered by entrenched patriarchal norms and a political economy of elite resource capture ([Kandpal, 2024](#)). This reflects a broader post-colonial dynamic where, as ([Kenny, 2021](#)) observes, informal power networks routinely subvert formal institutions. The oil sector exemplifies this, operating as a core node in a system of 'dirty politics' where, akin to ([Jakimow, 2023](#))'s findings, moral boundaries are policed to marginalise care-oriented governance often associated with women's political praxis.

The consequences of this exclusion critically impact human and environmental security. A direct nexus exists between masculinised, opaque resource governance and heightened community vulnerability, particularly for women. As ([Carmona, 2023](#)) details, climate-induced food insecurity is severely exacerbated by oil-related environmental degradation, creating a vicious cycle where women, as primary agricultural producers and household managers, endure the compounded fallout. This underscores the imperative, evident in global scholarship, to integrate gender perspectives for equitable and effective resource governance ([Bansal & Borges, 2023](#)). The South Sudanese case offers a stark lesson: ignoring gender fundamentally undermines sustainable peace and development, raising profound questions of legitimacy and distributive justice ([Kgatle, 2023](#)).

Consequently, transformative advocacy must challenge the foundational logic of this political economy, moving beyond quotas to dismantle policy silos separating gender, environment, and

economic planning. Informed by insights on participatory governance (John, 2024), advocacy must demand not merely seats at the table but a redesign of the table itself—promoting institutions that integrate Indigenous and local knowledge systems where women are often key custodians. This necessitates linking gender equity struggles directly to campaigns for environmental justice, revenue transparency, and investment in climate-adaptive livelihoods, addressing the structural power imbalances that render women disproportionately vulnerable (Mondesire, 2023).

Future research should build on this analysis. First, ethnographic work is needed to document women’s strategies of navigation and resistance within the petro-state. Second, comparative studies with other African resource-dependent states could discern common patterns and potential reform pathways. Third, research should investigate the role of regional bodies like IGAD in enforcing gendered governance standards, a dimension suggested in related East African analysis (Jakimow, 2023). Finally, scholars must examine how shifting global energy landscapes may create new vulnerabilities or opportunities for gendered mobilisation in South Sudan.

Ultimately, this study affirms that sustainable and just governance in South Sudan is inextricable from democratising its oil sector through a feminist lens. The nation’s interconnected crises—from conflict and economic fragility to environmental degradation—cannot be resolved while half its population is marginalised from decisions governing its most lucrative resource. The struggle for gender equality here is not peripheral but a central political battleground upon which the future of peace, ecological integrity, and economic justice depends.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This case study makes a significant contribution by analysing the interconnected politics of gender, oil, and the environment in a fragile state. It provides novel empirical evidence on how the political economy of natural resources, intensified by climate pressures from 2021 to 2026, directly constrains women’s political participation and shapes gendered policy impacts. The work advances scholarly debates in African Studies by proposing an integrated framework that moves beyond siloed analyses of resource governance, conflict, and gender, offering critical insights for policymakers aiming to foster inclusive and sustainable environmental stewardship in South Sudan.

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