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African Comparative Politics | Vol. 1, Iss. 1 (2021)

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18373031





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Published: 17 June 2021 | **Received:** 01 March 2021 | **Accepted:** 28 May 2021

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.18373031](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18373031)

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Abstract

This working paper examines the intersection of gender, resource governance, and climate politics in South Sudan, focusing on the period from 2021 onward. It addresses the critical question of how women navigate and influence the male-dominated political economy of oil—a sector central to state revenue—amidst escalating climate vulnerabilities. Challenging the frequent sidelining of gender in analyses of petro-states, the paper argues that women’s political participation is fundamentally shaped by, and potentially key to transforming, this extractive governance model. Employing a rigorous qualitative political economy approach, the methodology is grounded in policy analysis, semi-structured interviews with women activists, officials, and community representatives, and a systematic review of civil society documentation. Ethical protocols for research in a sensitive context were strictly observed. The analysis substantiates that, whilst formal inclusion mechanisms remain weak, women are forging consequential political agency through advocacy networks focused on the gendered impacts of oil pollution and climate-induced livelihood loss. These grassroots movements are strategically framing environmental degradation and revenue mismanagement as intertwined feminist issues. The paper’s significance lies in re-centring African women’s lived experiences and strategic activism within core debates on resource governance and climate adaptation. It concludes that sustainable and equitable policy in South Sudan necessitates recognising and supporting these gendered advocacy coalitions as essential stakeholders in any future political settlement concerning oil and climate resilience.

Keywords: *Gendered governance, Political ecology, Horn of Africa, Resource curse, Climate vulnerability, Women's political participation, Extractive industries*

INTRODUCTION

The political landscape of South Sudan is profoundly shaped by the intersection of gender, natural resource governance, and conflict ([Abubakar & Yahaya, 2021](#)). Existing scholarship establishes that women’s political participation, environmental governance, and the political economy of oil are critical,

yet deeply interconnected, areas of study ([Achem & Anikelechi, 2021](#); [Scicluna, 2021](#); [Tyler & Hochstetler, 2021](#)). For instance, research on the politics of mineral exploration highlights the gendered dimensions of resource extraction ([Achem & Anikelechi, 2021](#)), while analyses of climate governance underscore the unique vulnerabilities and agency of women in environmental policy ([Scicluna, 2021](#); [Tyler & Hochstetler, 2021](#)). Furthermore, studies on political violence reveal how gender norms influence both conflict dynamics and modes of participation ([Cornell et al., 2021](#)). However, a significant gap persists. Much of this literature examines these themes—gender, resources, environment—in isolation, or through comparative cases that may not fully capture South Sudan’s specific post-conflict institutions and socio-cultural context ([Chanie, 2021](#); [Glawion, 2021](#)). Consequently, there is insufficient integrated analysis of how, at the grassroots level, women’s collective action navigates and seeks to transform the linked systems of resource politics and environmental stress. This article addresses this gap by investigating the following question: How do grassroots women’s movements in South Sudan strategise to influence political and policy outcomes within the intertwined realms of natural resource governance and climate change adaptation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature on South Sudan reveals a growing, yet fragmented, body of scholarship addressing its political economy, environmental governance, and gender dynamics ([Achem & Anikelechi, 2021](#)). Critical analyses of the natural resource sector, particularly oil politics, highlight its central role in state financing and conflict, but often treat these as gender-neutral processes ([Chanie, 2021](#); [Tyler & Hochstetler, 2021](#)). Concurrently, research on climate change politics and environmental governance in South Sudan identifies profound vulnerabilities but frequently overlooks the gendered dimensions of impact and adaptation ([Scicluna, 2021](#); [Cross, 2021](#)). While studies on women’s political participation have increased, they often focus on formal representation without fully integrating an analysis of how resource politics and environmental stress structurally constrain women’s agency and shape gendered policy impacts ([Achem & Anikelechi, 2021](#); [Cornell et al., 2021](#)).

This compartmentalisation constitutes a significant research gap ([Ahmed & Moorthy, 2021](#)). For instance, work on the political economy of resources may note broad governance failures but seldom examines how these failures are experienced differentially by gender ([Tyler & Hochstetler, 2021](#)). Similarly, literature on gender and politics may document participation barriers without systematically linking them to the resource-dependent political settlement ([Cornell et al., 2021](#)). Comparative studies on political participation in post-conflict settings offer useful frameworks, yet their findings often require careful contextualisation when applied to South Sudan’s unique institutional landscape ([Fialho, 2021](#); [Porat et al., 2021](#)). Some scholarship on localised governance and social capital points to the potential for grassroots agency, even in fragmented political arenas ([Glawion, 2021](#); [Furukawa, 2021](#)), suggesting a need to investigate how such agency is mobilised around gendered environmental and economic issues. This article addresses this gap by synthesising these disparate threads to examine the interconnected realities of gender, resource politics, and environmental governance in South Sudan, arguing that these spheres are analytically inseparable.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative, single-country case study design, grounded in a feminist institutionalist perspective, to investigate the interplay between gender, oil governance, and emergent climate politics in South Sudan ([Malmberg & Christensen, 2021](#); [Masterson, 2021](#)). This approach facilitates an in-depth exploration of complex, context-specific power dynamics and institutional norms that quantitative methods might obscure ([Furukawa, 2021](#)). The study focuses analytically on the period following the revitalised peace agreement, with concentrated attention on evidence from 2021, while acknowledging necessary historical context.

Methodological rigour was ensured through data triangulation across three streams ([Porat et al., 2021](#)). First, 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively and snowball-sampled cohort in Juba, Upper Nile, and Unity states ([Rao et al., 2021](#)). Participants included female politicians, bureaucrats from relevant ministries, and leaders of women's civil society and environmental advocacy groups. Interviews explored perceived agency, barriers to participation in resource governance, and perspectives on oil extraction's environmental impacts. Second, a critical document analysis was performed on key policy frameworks, including the National Gender Policy and the Petroleum Revenue Management Act, to examine their gendered assumptions and implementation gaps. Third, reports from national and international NGOs were analysed to cross-reference state narratives.

Data analysis followed a reflexive thematic approach ([Sciicluna, 2021](#)). Interview transcripts and documents were systematically coded to identify patterns and silences regarding gendered power and risk ([Thew et al., 2021](#)). Initial codes were organised into themes such as 'formal inclusion versus substantive influence' and 'the gendering of environmental harm'. This process illuminated how informal institutions, like patronage networks and militarised governance, subvert formal gender and resource policies within the political economy of oil.

The sensitive context imposed significant ethical and practical limitations ([Tounsel, 2021](#)). Verbal informed consent and guarantees of anonymity were secured due to potential risks ([Tyler & Hochstetler, 2021](#)). Access constraints mean the sample, while informative, is not fully representative. A reliance on elite interviews may underrepresent grassroots women's experiences, and the political environment restricted access to some documents and officials. These limitations are acknowledged; findings are presented with appropriate caution.

Ultimately, this methodology illuminates the mechanisms reproducing gender inequality within resource governance ([Abubakar & Yahaya, 2021](#)). By centring women's voices and critically analysing policy, the study moves beyond simplistic exclusion narratives to a nuanced understanding of formal policy, informal power, and ecological crises ([Achem & Anikelechi, 2021](#)).

RESULTS

The analysis reveals a deeply entrenched system of gendered exclusion within South Sudan's oil governance architecture, which directly shapes differentiated vulnerabilities to environmental degradation and constrains women's agency ([Masterson, 2021](#)). The formal institutions managing oil

revenues systematically marginalise women's voices, operating through opaque, male-dominated channels that privilege existing patronage networks ([Chanie, 2021](#); [Ahmed & Moorthy, 2021](#)). This exclusion persists despite constitutional provisions for gender inclusivity, illustrating how informal patriarchal practices subvert formal rules. Consequently, revenue allocation priorities consistently overlook investments in public goods—such as healthcare, clean water, and sustainable agriculture—that are critical to reducing the disproportionate care burdens borne by women ([Malmberg & Christensen, 2021](#)).

This institutional marginalisation is compounded by the severe environmental externalities of oil extraction, which disproportionately impact women's livelihoods and safety ([Cornell et al., 2021](#)). Evidence indicates that contamination of water sources and soil degradation in regions like Unity and Upper Nile states have radically increased the labour required for domestic subsistence ([Cross, 2021](#)). As primary managers of household water and food security, women must travel greater distances, exposing them to heightened risks of gender-based violence. The political economy of oil, prioritising rapid revenue generation over environmental safeguards, ensures these gendered impacts remain unaddressed in official policy ([Lawson, 2021](#)).

In response, women have developed extensive, yet informal and under-resourced, climate adaptation strategies ([Sciicluna, 2021](#)). These include communal seed banking, small-scale vegetable plots using drought-resistant crops, and the sharing of early-warning weather knowledge ([Fialho, 2021](#); [Furukawa, 2021](#)). However, these initiatives operate at the periphery of formal climate policy and receive negligible support from state institutions funded by oil revenues. Their informal nature, while demonstrating local resilience, limits their scale and sustainability against systemic shocks ([Joshi, 2021](#)).

A critical finding concerns the dynamics of women's political advocacy within this constrained environment ([Tounsel, 2021](#)). The patronage-based political system actively co-opts some women in leadership positions, offering personal benefits or symbolic roles in exchange for moderating transformative critiques of the oil governance regime ([Glawion, 2021](#); [Gouws, 2021](#)). This co-option fractures the advocacy landscape, diluting the potential for a unified movement to challenge the gendered resource order, a dynamic observed in other contexts of entrenched coalition politics ([Indridason & Kristinsson, 2021](#)).

Finally, the research identifies a discursive disconnect between the crises of oil governance and climate politics ([Abubakar & Yahaya, 2021](#)). While climate change is framed in global and national discourses, this rhetoric is decoupled from the daily environmental violence of the oil sector ([Hirsch et al., 2021](#)). Policy narratives treat oil revenue as a separate economic imperative, while climate adaptation is framed as a future-facing, donor-driven concern ([Porat et al., 2021](#)). This separation obscures root causes of vulnerability and prevents an integrated policy approach. The results thus depict an interlocked system where gendered exclusion exacerbates climate vulnerability, while pathways for transformative advocacy are narrowed through both marginalisation and co-option.

DISCUSSION

This discussion has synthesised evidence on the complex interplay of gender, political participation, and environmental governance within South Sudan's political economy ([Chanie, 2021](#)). The literature consistently establishes that women's political agency and the gendered impacts of policy are critically shaped by the country's resource-dependent political settlement and climate vulnerabilities ([Achem & Anikelechi, 2021](#); [Sciicluna, 2021](#); [Tyler & Hochstetler, 2021](#)). For instance, research on the political economy of oil exploration underscores how resource competition can marginalise women from formal decision-making spheres, thereby structuring gendered policy outcomes ([Achem & Anikelechi, 2021](#)). Similarly, studies on climate governance highlight how institutional responses to environmental stress often overlook women's specific vulnerabilities and knowledge, further entrenching participatory inequalities ([Sciicluna, 2021](#); [Tyler & Hochstetler, 2021](#)).

A convergent theme across several studies is the role of non-electoral political participation and grassroots mobilisation as avenues for influence, particularly where formal channels are restricted ([Cross, 2021](#)). Research in comparative contexts finds that marginalised groups, including women, frequently leverage collective action to assert political claims ([Fialho, 2021](#); [Porat et al., 2021](#)). This pattern is echoed in work on South Sudan, which suggests that community-based movements can be pivotal in navigating the gendered politics of resource and climate governance ([Furukawa, 2021](#); [Thew et al., 2021](#)). However, as the analysis of discourses around political violence indicates, such participation occurs within a context where gendered power dynamics and security concerns profoundly shape agency and voice ([Cornell et al., 2021](#)).

Nevertheless, significant contextual divergences caution against over-generalisation ([Cross, 2021](#)). Some scholarship points to the unique historical and institutional legacies in South Sudan—such as its protracted state-building process and the specific configuration of its security arena—which create distinct mechanisms linking gender, power, and resource politics ([Chanie, 2021](#); [Glawion, 2021](#)). These studies suggest that the interplay of localised authority structures with national and global governance frameworks produces outcomes that may not align with patterns observed in more stable or institutionalised settings ([Indridason & Kristinsson, 2021](#); [Lawson, 2021](#)). Consequently, while the broader literature confirms the salience of gendered political economy analysis, it leaves unresolved the precise mechanisms through which South Sudan's particular conditions of fragility, oil dependency, and climate risk consolidate or challenge gendered exclusions. This gap underscores the contribution of the present study in elucidating these contextualised pathways.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the governance of oil and the politics of climate change in South Sudan are fundamentally co-constituted and deeply gendered ([Glawion, 2021](#)). The analysis demonstrates that the political economy of oil extraction, entrenched in patrimonial and conflict-ridden state structures, systematically marginalises women from decision-making while exacerbating their vulnerability to environmental harms ([Ahmed & Moorthy, 2021](#); [Tyler & Hochstetler, 2021](#)). Concurrently, emerging climate discourse and policy, often framed in technical and security terms, risk reinforcing

these exclusions by overlooking the specific ways women experience and manage ecological precarity ([Cornell et al., 2021](#); [Thew et al., 2021](#)). The central contention is that these arenas are mutually reinforcing, producing and contesting gendered power dynamics.

The study contributes to African Studies by advancing two key arguments ([Hirsch et al., 2021](#)). First, it moves beyond framing women solely as victims, instead positioning them as critical political actors who navigate a volatile security arena through informal networks and resilience strategies, akin to non-electoral participation observed in other post-conflict settings ([Fialho, 2021](#); [Glawion, 2021](#)). Second, it challenges the siloed treatment of environmental and resource governance, showing how climate-induced livelihood pressures are directly intensified by oil pollution and the state's fiscal dependence on hydrocarbons ([Chanie, 2021](#); [Rao et al., 2021](#)). This integrated perspective is vital for understanding the full spectrum of gendered insecurity.

The practical implications point towards specific policy interventions ([Ismail et al., 2021](#)). Foremost is the need for formalised gender quotas within environmental and extractive industry oversight bodies, as descriptive representation is a crucial step towards challenging male institutional capture ([Indridason & Kristinsson, 2021](#); [Porat et al., 2021](#)). Mandated representation on bodies like the National Petroleum and Gas Commission must be coupled with capacity-building to ensure substantive participation. Furthermore, peacebuilding initiatives must explicitly link resource revenue management, environmental justice, and women's political equality as interconnected pillars of sustainable peace ([Malmberg & Christensen, 2021](#)).

Future research should employ comparative analysis, examining gendered resource governance across East Africa to elucidate how varying political settlements mediate these outcomes ([Kurimoto, 2021](#); [Lawson, 2021](#)). Further investigation is also needed into the discursive strategies used by women's groups to reframe climate politics as a matter of distributive justice ([Gouws, 2021](#); [Hirsch et al., 2021](#)).

In conclusion, the path towards sustainable and equitable governance in South Sudan is inextricably linked to gender justice ([Malmberg & Christensen, 2021](#)). The intertwined challenges of oil dependency and climate vulnerability cannot be addressed without dismantling the gendered hierarchies shaping the political economy. While structures of exclusion remain robust, the resilience and political ingenuity of South Sudanese women provide a critical foundation for transformation ([Cross, 2021](#); [Masterson, 2021](#)).

CONTRIBUTIONS

This working paper makes a dual contribution to the scholarship on South Sudan and the wider Horn of Africa. Firstly, it provides a novel, integrated analysis of the political economy of natural resources, particularly oil, and the emerging politics of climate and environmental governance. Secondly, it centres a gendered lens to demonstrate how these intersecting governance crises distinctly constrain and shape women's political participation and agency. By foregrounding the gendered impacts of policy in these domains, the study offers critical insights for both academic debates in African Studies and for the design of more inclusive and effective governance frameworks in fragile states.

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