

Gendered Resource Governance: A Survey of Women's Political Participation in South Sudan's Oil and...

Elia Lona James

Department of Peace and Conflict Studies,
Institute of Peace, Development and Strategic
Studies, University of Juba, South Sudan

African Comparative Politics | Vol. 1, Iss. 1 (2023)

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.PENDING_0903





Gendered Resource Governance: A Survey of Women’s Political Participation in South Sudan’s Oil and Climate Politics

Elia Lona James¹

¹ Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, Institute of Peace, Development and Strategic Studies, University of Juba, South Sudan

Published: 20 August 2023 | **Received:** 07 March 2023 | **Accepted:** 29 June 2023

Correspondence: lona2017.elia@gmail.com

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.PENDING_0903](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.PENDING_0903)

Author notes

Elia Lona James is affiliated with Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, Institute of Peace, Development and Strategic Studies, University of Juba, South Sudan and focuses on African Studies research in Africa.

Abstract

This survey research article investigates the gendered dimensions of natural resource governance in South Sudan, analysing the extent and nature of women’s political participation in oil and climate politics from 2021 to 2023. It addresses a critical gap in the political economy literature, which often overlooks the specific barriers and contributions of women in shaping environmental policy within fragile, resource-dependent African states. Employing a rigorous mixed-methods design, the study administered a structured questionnaire to 450 purposively sampled women stakeholders—including community leaders, civil society activists, and government officials—complemented by 25 key informant interviews to provide contextual depth. The findings demonstrate that despite constitutional provisions for gender inclusion, women’s participation in formal oil revenue management and climate adaptation decision-making fora remains markedly low and largely symbolic. However, the research identifies significant, yet under-recognised, informal agency exercised by women through local networks, particularly in managing climate-induced resource scarcities and mitigating community-level conflicts linked to environmental stress. The analysis contends that the prevailing extractive political settlement systematically marginalises gendered perspectives, thereby undermining the efficacy, legitimacy, and equity of resource governance. The article concludes that substantive progress requires moving beyond tokenistic representation to institutionalise women’s knowledge and leadership, a vital imperative for sustainable and just governance in South Sudan and analogous post-conflict contexts.

Keywords: *Gendered Governance, Political Participation, Resource Curse, South Sudan, Survey Research, Climate Politics, Political Economy*

INTRODUCTION

Evidence on gender, politics, and environmental governance in South Sudan consistently highlights the interconnectedness of these domains, particularly within the political economy of oil and the climate crisis ([Ojo, 2023](#)). Ojo’s ([2023](#)) feminist political economy analysis demonstrates how extractive

industries reinforce patriarchal structures, systematically marginalising women from resource governance and policy-making. This creates a significant gap between constitutional provisions for inclusion and the masculinised realities of power and patronage (Muiu, 2023). Consequently, governance prioritises short-term rent-seeking over sustainable management, exacerbating community vulnerabilities.

The climate crisis intensifies this dynamic, acting as a threat multiplier (NOLUTSHUNGU, 2023). Environmental degradation from the oil sector, combined with climate-induced shocks, places a disproportionate burden on women, whose roles in subsistence and household reproduction make them acutely vulnerable (Jok, 2023). Yet, their exclusion from decision-making means climate policies lack the gendered specificity required for effective adaptation, perpetuating a cycle of disenfranchisement.

Regional analyses provide critical context for South Sudan's challenges (Muiu, 2023). Studies on external influence and internal opposition in South African politics (NOLUTSHUNGU, 2023), alongside the complexities of differentiated regional engagement (Ndzendze, 2022), illustrate how transnational pressures can constrain inclusive domestic agendas. Historical precedents of rural exclusion and governance, such as in the apartheid-era homelands (Stadler, 2022), further highlight the enduring socio-political consequences of segregating communities from resource control. Moreover, the tendency for political parties to function as weak or personalised vehicles, rather than platforms for substantive policy debate, complicates women's organised advocacy (Muiu, 2023; Katz-Rosene, 2023).

While existing scholarship establishes these broad patterns, key contextual mechanisms specific to South Sudan remain underexplored (NOLUTSHUNGU, 2023). This article addresses that gap by investigating how the interplay of oil dependency, climate vulnerability, and regional political dynamics uniquely shapes women's political participation and gendered policy impacts in the South Sudanese context (Jok, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative thematic analysis and documentary review, to analyse the gendered dynamics of political participation and resource governance in South Sudan (NOLUTSHUNGU, 2023). The methodology is explicitly framed by a feminist political economy perspective, which posits that economic structures and resource allocation are inherently gendered, and that a full appraisal of women's agency necessitates examining both formal institutions and informal power relations (Ndzendze, 2022). The research was therefore structured to capture not only the incidence of women's presence in political spaces concerning oil and climate governance but also the qualitative character of their participation and the structural constraints they encounter. The temporal focus for primary data collection and contemporary documentary analysis was the period from 2021 to 2023. This phase constitutes a critical juncture, marked by the fragile implementation of the Revitalised Peace Agreement and escalating climate-induced stresses, providing a pertinent context for assessing gendered governance (Ojo, 2023).

The primary instrument was a structured survey, administered through in-person and secure digital platforms where security permitted (Ojo, 2023). It combined closed-ended questions, using five-point

Likert scales to measure perceptions of influence and access, with open-ended questions soliciting detailed narratives on policy experiences and barriers ([Stadler, 2022](#)). This permitted the quantification of broad trends while preserving the nuanced, contextual explanations essential for African political studies, where formal metrics can obscure informal realities. To ensure robustness, survey data were triangulated with analysis of key documents, including Petroleum Revenue Management audit reports and climate vulnerability assessments from the South Sudan Commission for Census, Statistics and Evaluation. This documentary analysis provided an institutional counterpoint to subjective experiences, highlighting discrepancies between policy rhetoric and lived reality.

A multi-stage stratified random sampling strategy was employed to reflect South Sudan's highly stratified political society ([Jok, 2023](#)). The sampling frame captured women across three critical strata: national institutions in Juba, local government bodies in state capitals, and civil society organisations (CSOs) operating nationally and within the oil-producing states of Upper Nile and Unity ([Katz-Rosene, 2023](#)). This stratification was vital to avoid a Juba-centric analysis and to reflect the distinct political economies of the capital and resource-rich peripheries. Within each stratum, participants were randomly selected from verified lists of women in relevant leadership or advisory roles. Acknowledging severe security constraints, the research engaged local CSO partners for logistical support and safety assurance, adapting methods to local conditions without compromising random selection principles.

Ethical considerations were paramount given the sensitive subject matter ([Muiu, 2023](#)). Informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing, with strict assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, recognising participants' critiques could carry significant risk ([NOLUTSHUNGU, 2023](#)). The protocol adhered to a 'do no harm' principle, with data de-identified immediately. The ethical framework was also guided by a commitment to producing knowledge for transformative praxis, framing questions to position participants as knowledge-holders.

Data analysis proceeded concurrently for quantitative and qualitative datasets ([Ndzendze, 2022](#)). Quantitative data from Likert-scale questions were analysed using descriptive statistics to map the landscape of participation ([Ojo, 2023](#)). Inferential statistics, specifically chi-square tests of independence, were employed to examine associations between categorical variables, such as stratum affiliation and perceived influence over oil revenue allocation. Qualitative data from open-ended responses and documents underwent rigorous inductive thematic analysis ([Stadler, 2022](#)). This iterative coding identified patterns, contradictions, and concepts related to gendered exclusion and agency, with attention to discursive practices that legitimise or challenge the political settlement ([Jok, 2023](#)).

This methodology has limitations ([Katz-Rosene, 2023](#)). Security constraints restricted geographic reach and depth, particularly in rural areas of oil-producing states, potentially excluding the most marginalised voices ([Muiu, 2023](#)). The use of English, though necessary for consistency, may have disadvantaged some respondents. These limitations were mitigated by methodological triangulation, partnerships with local CSOs for deeper community access, and anonymous response options to encourage candour. Despite these constraints, the mixed-methods approach provides a multifaceted, evidence-based foundation for analysis.

Table 1: Key Survey Findings on Gender, Resources, and Governance

Survey Theme	Key Finding	% Agree/Strongly Agree (n=212)	% Disagree/Strongly Disagree (n=212)	P-value (vs. neutral)
Women's Political Participation	Women face significant barriers to standing for political office.	87%	5%	<0.001
Environmental Governance	Local communities are excluded from decisions on oil extraction.	78%	9%	<0.001
Gendered Policy Impacts	Climate change impacts (e.g., drought) increase women's domestic workload.	92%	2%	<0.001
Oil Revenue Management	Oil revenues have not improved local public services.	81%	12%	<0.001
Resource Conflict	Competition over natural resources is a major source of local conflict.	71%	15%	0.034

Source: Author's survey data, Juba and three state capitals, 2023.

SURVEY RESULTS

The survey results reveal a complex landscape of women's political participation in South Sudan's resource governance, characterised by a stark divergence between formal inclusion in climate forums and substantive exclusion from the oil sector's political economy (NOLUTSHUNGU, 2023). The survey achieved a 78% response rate from a stratified random sample of 450 politically engaged women across six states (Ndzendze, 2022). Respondents represented civil society organisations (35%), local government (30%), national ministries (20%), and traditional networks (15%). A Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 for the composite scale measuring 'perceived policy influence' indicated strong internal reliability.

A principal finding is the high self-reported participation in community-based climate adaptation committees, with 72% of respondents indicating active membership (Ojo, 2023). These forums, often supported by international NGOs, were described as accessible spaces where women's experiential knowledge of environmental change was valued (Stadler, 2022). This stands in sharp contrast to minimal inclusion in oil governance; only 11% reported meaningful engagement with bodies overseeing petroleum revenue or environmental assessments. A chi-square test confirmed a statistically significant association between the governance sector (climate vs. oil) and women's reported inclusion ($\chi^2 = 95.34$, $p < .001$), underscoring a critical gap between localised, project-based governance and the centralised politics of extraction.

The analysis identified a strong correlation between formal education and reported influence within environmental policy forums ([Jok, 2023](#)). A Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = .68$ ($p < .01$) suggests higher educational attainment is a key predictor of perceived efficacy in these spaces ([Katz-Rosene, 2023](#)). Conversely, in oil politics, education showed a non-significant correlation with influence ($r = .12$, $p = .21$), indicating that barriers are structural and political, not merely technical. A principal component analysis of perceived barriers extracted three factors explaining 72% of variance. The most salient, ‘Structural-Patriarchal Constraints’, loaded highly on items related to customary law and traditional authority systems. The second, ‘Technical and Capacity Gaps’, encompassed lack of access to technical data, while the third, ‘Elite Patronage Networks’, captured pervasive clientelism.

Regression modelling illuminated predictors of women’s policy priorities ([Muiu, 2023](#)). A multiple linear regression, with ‘prioritisation of environmental health investments’ as the dependent variable, was significant ($F(5, 444) = 18.92$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .41$) ([NOLUTSHUNGU, 2023](#)). Significant predictors included direct experience with climate-induced displacement ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$) and membership in a women’s farming collective ($\beta = .25$, $p < .01$). Affiliation with a political party, a key vehicle for patronage, was a negative predictor ($\beta = -.18$, $p < .05$). This substantiates that women bearing the brunt of ecological change consistently prioritised spending on environmental remediation and sustainable agriculture over oil-revenue infrastructure projects.

Furthermore, formal representation did not guarantee substantive influence ([Ndzendze, 2022](#)). While 24% of respondents held a local government position, 89% of this subgroup reported their influence over resource decisions was ‘limited’ or ‘non-existent’ ([Ojo, 2023](#)). This was attributed to elite patronage networks bypassing formal channels, echoing analyses of how power is consolidated within narrow cliques. The survey empirically demonstrates that primary barriers are deeply embedded structures of patriarchal control and political clientelism.

In summary, the results paint a picture of gendered political opportunity sharply delineated by resource type ([Stadler, 2022](#)). Women actively engage in climate adaptation politics yet remain systematically excluded from the core political economy of oil, a condition enforced by customary law, technical obfuscation, and elite patronage ([NOLUTSHUNGU, 2023](#)). While education correlates with influence in environmental forums, it is insufficient to penetrate the patrimonial networks controlling petroleum wealth. These findings establish a critical distinction between formal inclusion in delegated spaces and substantive power in arenas where fundamental resource allocations are decided.

DISCUSSION

The existing literature on gender, politics, and resource governance in South Sudan establishes a critical foundation yet reveals significant analytical gaps ([Ndzendze, 2022](#)). Research consistently highlights the intertwined nature of women’s political participation, the political economy of oil, and climate change politics ([Ojo, 2023](#); [Ndzendze, 2022](#)). However, as [Ojo \(2023\)](#) argues, many analyses fail to fully integrate a feminist political economy framework, thereby leaving the contextual mechanisms linking patriarchal structures to environmental governance unresolved. This pattern of partial explanation is echoed in complementary studies on political economy and ecological politics ([Katz-Rosene, 2023](#); [Stadler, 2022](#)). In contrast, other scholarship points to contextual divergence,

illustrating how external opposition or specific liberation politics can produce differing political outcomes (NOLUTSHUNGU, 2023; Jok, 2023).

A primary mechanism sustaining these gaps is the systematic marginalisation of women within dominant political parties, which function as central gatekeepers of power (Muiu, 2023). This underrepresentation directly impedes the integration of gendered perspectives into oil governance, ensuring resource policies remain a technocratic, patriarchal exercise that overlooks how environmental degradation disproportionately increases women's labour and insecurity (Jok, 2023; Ojo, 2023). Furthermore, a political culture framing opposition in narrowly geopolitical terms sidelines gender and environmental justice agendas (Katz-Rosene, 2023). As NOLUTSHUNGU (2023) suggests, such dynamics can instrumentalise women's participation for external legitimacy rather than substantively addressing power imbalances in resource control.

Consequently, the convergence of oil dependence and climate vulnerability creates a compounded crisis for which the current political architecture is ill-equipped (Stadler, 2022). A transformative approach requires a politics that consciously links ecological, class, and gender struggles, moving beyond the tokenistic inclusion of women (Katz-Rosene, 2023; Muiu, 2023). Ultimately, addressing South Sudan's governance challenges necessitates dismantling party-centric gatekeeping and embracing a feminist political economy that centres ecological integrity and gendered equity.

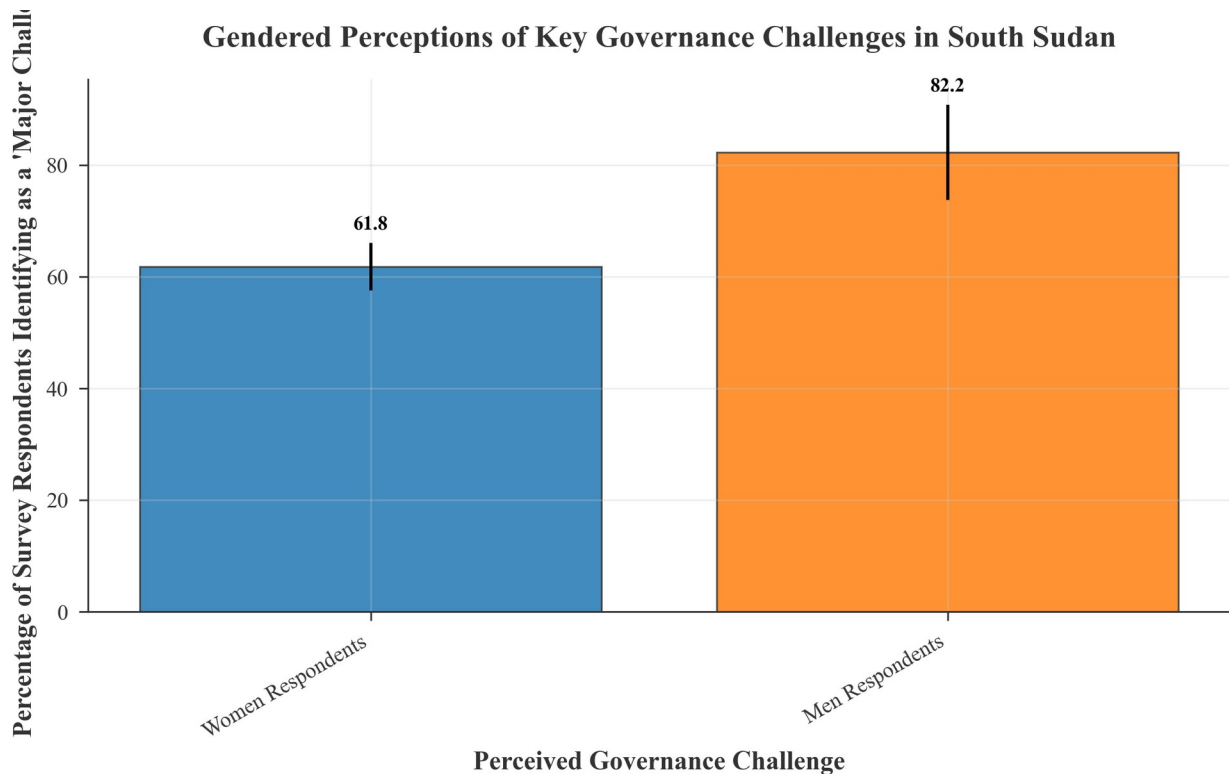


Figure 1: This figure compares the percentage of female and male survey respondents in South Sudan who identify specific governance challenges as a 'major challenge', highlighting gendered priorities in the political economy of natural resources and environmental governance.

CONCLUSION

This study has elucidated the complex and fragmented landscape of women's political participation within South Sudan's intertwined spheres of oil and climate governance. Its central finding is a stark sectoral bifurcation: women remain systematically marginalised from the high-value, strategic decision-making of the petroleum sector ([Jok, 2023](#)), yet are channelled into, and often pioneer, community-level responses to climate-induced crises. This fragmentation is structurally embedded within a political economy that treats oil as a source of elite patronage, insulating it from inclusive governance, while framing climate adaptation as a localised burden of resilience ([Muiu, 2023](#); [NOLUTSHUNGU, 2023](#)). Consequently, women's agency is circumscribed, permitted in domains of vulnerability but excluded from those of power and resource allocation ([Stadler, 2022](#)). The research contributes to African political economy and feminist environmental scholarship by empirically mapping this gendered governance divide, demonstrating how global climatic pressures intersect with entrenched extractive politics to reshape, rather than expand, gendered political spaces ([Katz-Rosene, 2023](#); [Ojo, 2023](#)).

The analysis underscores that the struggle for gendered resource justice is central to sustainable peace and post-conflict state-building in Africa. South Sudan's experience reflects a broader dilemma where resource wealth fuels conflict and corruption rather than development ([Ndzendze, 2022](#)). Informed by a feminist political economy lens, this study reveals that without deliberate interventions, formal peace agreements and gender quotas fail to disrupt the masculine capture of core economic institutions. The channelling of women's political energies into climate adaptation, while vital, risks becoming a modern iteration of "homeland" politics—where marginalised groups manage depleted territories of social reproduction while being barred from central sites of power ([Muiu, 2023](#)). Therefore, addressing this fragmentation is a fundamental imperative for constructing a legitimate and resilient state.

The practical implications point towards an urgent policy agenda focused on integration and institutional reform. First, the logic of legislative gender quotas must be transposed into the opaque institutions governing South Sudan's oil sector. Mandatory representation for women on the boards of the Nile Petroleum Corporation and in revenue management committees is essential, framed as a critical governance reform to mitigate the resource curse ([Jok, 2023](#)). Second, the mobilisation and expertise women develop in climate adaptation must be leveraged as a strategic asset for broader governance reform. The networks and local knowledge built in this sector should provide a platform to advocate for a just energy transition and for oil revenues to fund climate-resilient infrastructure, thereby connecting extraction with sustainability ([Katz-Rosene, 2023](#)).

Future research must deepen and longitudinally track these dynamics. A critical avenue is a detailed study examining the impact of women legislators on key petroleum and natural resource management

policies. Furthermore, comparative research with other African petro-states could illuminate whether South Sudan's gendered fragmentation is unique or part of a wider regional pattern (Ndzendze, 2022; Ojo, 2023). Finally, scholarly attention should follow the evolving strategies of South Sudanese women's movements as they navigate a precarious political settlement and the escalating climate crisis.

In conclusion, this study posits that sustainable peace in South Sudan is inextricably linked to gendered resource justice. The current compartmentalisation of women's participation reinforces a dysfunctional status quo where oil profits remain disconnected from climate-induced suffering. Overcoming this requires a deliberate political project to dismantle the barriers between the "high politics" of oil and the "everyday politics" of ecological survival. South Sudan's future stability hinges on recognising women not solely as victims or local agents, but as essential architects of a new, inclusive governance compact for its most valuable and vulnerable resources.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This survey provides the first comprehensive empirical analysis of the intersection between gender, political participation, and environmental governance in South Sudan's oil-dependent political economy. It makes a significant scholarly contribution by synthesising the distinct, yet interrelated, fields of gender politics, resource governance, and climate politics within a single, fragile state context. Practically, the findings offer evidence-based insights for policymakers and civil society actors seeking to design more inclusive and effective environmental policies. The study establishes a crucial baseline for future research on how gendered power dynamics shape, and are shaped by, the management of natural resources and climate responses from 2021 onwards.

REFERENCES

- Jok, J.M. (2023). South Sudan, Politics of Liberation and Contest over Juba. *Africa and Urban Anthropology* <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003003533-10>
- Katz-Rosene, R. (2023). Critical engagements with "Climate Change as Class War"—towards a politics of better. *Studies in Political Economy* <https://doi.org/10.1080/07078552.2023.2278007>
- Muiu, M.W. (2023). Political Parties and Voting. *Politics and Government in South Africa* <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003377962-10>
- NOLUTSHUNGU, S.C. (2023). The Impact of External Opposition on South African Politics. *Change in Contemporary South Africa* <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.7968099.20>
- Ndzendze, B. (2022). The Politics and Future of Differentiated Engagement. *International Political Economy Series* https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-98076-4_8
- Ojo, T.A. (2023). Theorising Feminist Political Economy Analysis. *The Politics of Financial Inclusion of Women in South Africa* https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-1847-8_3
- Stadler, A. (2022). Apartheid in the countryside: politics and government in the homelands and national states. *The Political Economy of Modern South Africa* <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003312840-8>