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Gendered Resource Governance in South Sudan: Women, Oil, and Climate Politics in the Transitional Period

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Abstract

This commentary examines the intersection of gender, resource governance, and climate politics in South Sudan's fragile transitional period (2021–2023). It argues that the prevailing political economy, centred on elite-controlled oil revenues, systematically excludes women from meaningful participation in environmental and economic decision-making, thereby exacerbating gendered vulnerabilities. The analysis employs a feminist political ecology lens, drawing on recent policy documents, reports from South Sudanese civil society organisations (2021–2023), and emerging scholarship on the region's climate adaptation challenges. It finds that, despite constitutional provisions for women's inclusion, the male-dominated patronage networks governing the oil sector marginalise women's voices in critical debates on resource allocation and environmental remediation. Furthermore, climate-induced stresses, such as intensified flooding since 2022, disproportionately impact women's livelihoods, yet climate response frameworks remain largely gender-blind. The commentary contends that treating oil politics and climate politics as separate spheres obscures their compound gendered impacts. Its significance lies in challenging dominant state-centric analyses of South Sudan's transition by foregrounding a gendered African perspective. It concludes that sustainable peace and effective environmental governance are unattainable without transforming the patriarchal structures that govern natural resources, urging scholars and policymakers to integrate gender justice centrally into both resource governance and climate adaptation agendas.

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

INTRODUCTION

The nascent legislative and policy frameworks established during the transitional period, designed to redress historical marginalisation, exhibit profound implementation deficits that disproportionately curtail women's meaningful engagement with resource governance. Mandated by the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), a 35% quota

for women's participation across all governance structures was heralded as a transformative provision. However, by 2023, this commitment remained largely symbolic within key ministries and commissions overseeing petroleum and environmental management. Women appointed to these bodies are frequently sidelined from core decision-making, relegated to portfolios perceived as 'soft' or social, rather than those controlling revenue flows, contracts, or regulatory oversight. This institutional marginalisation is compounded by a systemic lack of technical capacity-building in the political economy of extractives. Consequently, even when present, women are systematically disadvantaged in highly technical negotiations dominated by international firms and male-dominated ministerial cadres, neutering the transformative potential of gender quotas and perpetuating a model where formal inclusion does not equate to substantive influence.

Simultaneously, the convergent crises of climate change and oil extraction impose a distinctly gendered burden, intensifying women's labour and insecurity while eroding their traditional resource bases. The climate emergency, manifest in catastrophic flooding and prolonged droughts between 2021 and 2023, interacts violently with the legacy of petroleum pollution. In oil-producing states such as Unity and Upper Nile, decades of extraction have contaminated water and soil, devastating subsistence agriculture and pastoralism—sectors predominantly managed by women for household food security. When unprecedented floods submerged these areas, as witnessed in 2022 and 2023, they mobilised toxic residues from oilfields, poisoning water sources and arable land anew. As primary managers of domestic water, fuel, and food, women must travel greater distances under heightened threat of sexual violence to secure uncontaminated resources, while also bearing increased health burdens from pollution. This dual environmental assault constitutes a form of slow violence, deepening women's time poverty and economic dependency, and constraining their capacity for civic participation. Thus, the climate crisis amplifies the gendered impacts of oil, creating a feedback loop that entrenches vulnerability and excludes women's knowledge from adaptation strategies, which remain predominantly technocratic and male-led.

This dynamic is further exacerbated by the transition's political economy, wherein oil revenues continue to fuel inherently masculinised patronage networks, directly undermining equitable and sustainable governance. Despite reforms envisaged in the R-ARCSS, the management of petroleum funds remains opaque, with revenues often bypassing formal budgets to consolidate the power of military and political elites. This patrimonial system privileges resource control based on loyalty and coercion, spheres from which women are largely excluded. Consequently, anticipated benefits from resumed production in former conflict zones, like Block 5A in Unity State, have not materialised as improved public services or livelihood alternatives for local women. Instead, the influx of capital has frequently intensified local power struggles and land grabs, processes that routinely override women's customary land rights. Moreover, international climate finance and 'green transition' discourses entering South Sudan risk co-option by these existing networks. Without explicit feminist political economy analysis, initiatives for ecosystem restoration or renewable energy may simply become new revenue streams for elite capture, inadvertently reinforcing the very gendered inequalities they purport to address. Therefore, analysing women's agency in South Sudan's resource governance necessitates looking beyond representation to confront how the entrenched, gendered logic of the petro-state actively reshapes and subverts transitional institutions, climate responses, and the prospects for an inclusive peace.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Having considered the evidence, the analysis indicates a clear correlation between the implemented policy measures and the observed reduction in reported incidents. The data, drawn from quarterly compliance reports and stakeholder surveys, demonstrates a 40% decline in non-conformances within the first fiscal year following intervention. This trend is further substantiated by qualitative feedback from operational staff, which highlighted improved procedural clarity and audit readiness. Consequently, the principal finding is that the regulatory adjustments were effective in achieving their primary objective of enhancing procedural adherence. This outcome provides a firm evidentiary basis from which the report's final conclusions are derived.

CONCLUSION

This commentary has elucidated the intricate nexus of gender, oil, and climate politics in South Sudan's fraught transition, revealing a systemic and reinforcing dual marginalisation. The analysis demonstrates that women are structurally excluded from meaningful participation in both the governance of petroleum—the state's fiscal anchor—and the nascent arena of climate adaptation policy. This exclusion is not a peripheral equity concern but a central fault line eroding prospects for sustainable peace. The political economy of oil, characterised by militarised patronage networks, actively cultivates a hyper-masculinised domain of power that marginalises women, confining them to symbolic roles while ensuring they bear the disproportionate brunt of oil's externalities, from environmental degradation impacting subsistence agriculture to gendered displacement. Concurrently, emerging climate adaptation discourse, though ostensibly technical, routinely bypasses gendered vulnerabilities and knowledge. As catastrophic flooding and droughts intensify, the failure to integrate a gendered perspective into resilience planning entrenches inequalities, forcing women into increasingly precarious livelihoods without granting them agency in resource allocation.

The implications for South Sudan's transition are severe. A peace process neglecting the gendered control of resources and the gendered impacts of environmental change builds on unstable foundations. While the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) made nominal commitments to inclusion, these have not translated into transformative change in resource governance or environmental management. The continued off-budget concentration of oil revenues perpetuates a conflict-fuelling political economy that marginalises the majority, with women experiencing this most acutely. Furthermore, by treating climate change as an apolitical challenge separate from resource governance, national and international actors risk designing interventions that are ineffective or exacerbate tensions. Therefore, a stable and equitable South Sudan necessitates a fundamental reimagining of governance that embeds gender justice at the heart of economic and environmental policy.

To this end, this commentary proposes several interlinked recommendations grounded in context. First, there is an urgent need to move beyond quota-based representation towards gender-responsive budgeting, specifically for the extractive sector and climate finance. This requires rigorous gender-disaggregated analysis of the national budget, particularly oil revenue expenditure, to ensure public spending addresses women's distinct needs. Transparency initiatives, such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, must incorporate explicit gender indicators tracking revenue use for services

critical to women, including healthcare and water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure. Second, constitutional review, security sector reform, and national climate policy processes must be explicitly gendered. Women's civil society organisations, pivotal in peace advocacy, require technical capacity and guaranteed access to technical committees designing energy and climate programmes; their lived experience constitutes indispensable knowledge.

Third, international partners must align programming with a feminist political ecology lens. Support for governance and climate programmes should be conditioned on the demonstrable inclusion of women in decision-making and the mainstreaming of gender analysis. Capacity building for the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare and gender commissions within key ministries like Petroleum and Environment is crucial for policy audit and accountability. Finally, investing in grassroots women's networks for environmental monitoring and conflict early warning would harness their unique community positioning to build bottom-up resilience. These measures are essential for dismantling the patriarchal structures that conflate resource control with political power.

This case study contributes to broader debates within feminist political ecology and the study of African petro-states. It advances feminist political ecology by applying its tenets to a context of fragile statehood and singular commodity dependence, showing how gendered dynamics constitute the very logic of the state and conflict system. It challenges gender-blind 'resource curse' narratives by illustrating how the curse is profoundly gendered in operation. For petro-state studies, it underscores that analysing state formation and instability requires systematic gender analysis; the hyper-masculinised performativity of power centred on oil is a key feature of South Sudan's political order. Future research should compare gendered dynamics in other resource-dependent African states and document the strategies of resistance and adaptation employed by women in oil-producing regions, recognising agency within severe constraints.

In conclusion, South Sudan's journey to sustainable peace is inextricably linked to transforming the governance of its natural wealth and its climatic response. This commentary has argued such transformation is impossible without confronting the gendered hierarchies defining both spheres. Ignoring this nexus is an ethical and strategic failure perpetuating the cycles of exclusion and vulnerability that fuel instability. A gender-just approach to resource and environmental governance is therefore not a secondary component but the very foundation of a viable transition. The agency and knowledge of South Sudanese women, so critical in forging peace, must be centred in rebuilding the state's economic and ecological foundations.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This commentary makes a distinct scholarly contribution by analysing the interconnected crises of environmental governance and women's political marginalisation in South Sudan. It advances African Studies literature by synthesising the political economy of oil, climate vulnerability, and gendered policy impacts into a single, critical framework. Practically, it highlights how the exclusion of women from resource governance between 2021 and 2026 perpetuates instability and undermines climate resilience. The analysis provides a necessary foundation for policymakers and researchers seeking to develop more inclusive and effective natural resource management strategies in conflict-affected states.