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Abstract

This theoretical framework article addresses a critical lacuna in African political studies: the absence of a cohesive analytical lens for examining the intersection of gender, state power, and natural resource governance in fragile, resource-dependent states. Focusing on South Sudan from 2021 to 2025, it interrogates how the political economy of oil extraction and climate-induced environmental stress are fundamentally gendered, shaping women's political participation and policy influence. Employing a feminist political ecology methodology, the analysis synthesises contemporary data on South Sudan's transitional governance, environmental degradation, and patterns of women's formal and informal political mobilisation. It posits that the state's patrimonial control over oil revenues and its under-resourced response to climate shocks, such as the catastrophic floods of 2021–2024, co-produce distinct 'gendered ecologies of power'. These ecologies systematically marginalise women from resource decision-making whilst exacerbating their burdens in ecological reproduction and community resilience. The framework challenges androcentric analyses of the resource curse and state fragility by centring African feminist perspectives on power and ecology. Its scholarly and practical contribution lies in providing a rigorous analytical tool to critically assess how environmental and economic governance reforms, including those under the revitalised peace agreement, may either entrench or transform gendered inequalities in South Sudan and analogous post-conflict African states.

Keywords: *Gendered political ecology, post-conflict governance, Horn of Africa, extractivism, feminist institutionalism, environmental justice, petro-masculinity*

INTRODUCTION

Evidence for this section is required. Please supply a structured evidence file to proceed.

Furthermore, the intricate relationship between gender, resource governance, and state formation in South Sudan must be situated within the acute environmental and climatic pressures that have intensified markedly since the early 2020s. The nation faces some of the world's most severe climate

impacts, with recurrent, catastrophic floods—particularly across the Nile basin and Sudd region—displacing hundreds of thousands annually. These environmental shocks are profoundly gendered, exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities rooted in patriarchal control over assets and labour. As floodwaters destroy farmland and livestock, women, who constitute the majority of subsistence agriculturalists and bear primary responsibility for household food and water security, experience a multiplied burden. Their coping strategies, which often involve travelling greater distances for diminishing resources, increase their exposure to gender-based violence and deepen their time poverty. This systematically undermines their capacity to participate in communal or political decision-making. This environmental precarity intersects directly with a political economy centred on oil, where state revenues are routinely prioritised for security and elite patronage over climate-resilient infrastructure or agricultural support. Consequently, the state’s persistent failure to implement substantive adaptation strategies, reflected in negligible budgetary allocations to these sectors, constitutes a form of gendered ecological dispossession. Here, women’s livelihoods are effectively sacrificed to the compounded failures of environmental and political governance.

This dynamic is critically reflected in formal political participation. Although the 35% affirmative action quota for women in the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity increased numerical representation, the period from 2021 has revealed a pattern of substantive marginalisation within key economic and resource decision-making bodies. Women ministers and legislators are frequently excluded from the informal networks where consequential decisions on oil contracts, revenue allocation, and land concessions are made. Their participation is often channelled into social and cultural portfolios, while powerful ministries overseeing finance, petroleum, mining, and infrastructure remain overwhelmingly male-dominated. This institutional sidelining ensures that women’s perspectives on ecological management are absent from high-stakes policy formulation. For instance, debates concerning environmental remediation in oil-polluted areas of Upper Nile or large-scale agricultural land concessions rarely integrate a gendered analysis of livelihood impacts. This omission perpetuates policies that reinforce male-centric control over resources. The political economy thus functions on a dual track: a performative inclusion of women that satisfies international benchmarks, alongside a substantive exclusion from the levers of resource power that define the South Sudanese state.

Moreover, a theoretical lens of gendered ecologies of power must account for the complex position of women as both agents and casualties within this system. Amidst state incapacity and environmental stress, women have developed sophisticated, if often overlooked, networks for resource management and community resilience. These include informal credit associations, collective farming on marginal lands, and cross-border petty trade, which sustain households during crises. However, these spaces of agency are increasingly co-opted or constrained by a militarised patronage system. As competition over scarce arable land and water intensifies, local power brokers—often aligned with state security apparatuses—extend their control, frequently manipulating customary authority to dispossess widows or female-headed households. Simultaneously, the state’s dependence on oil rents fosters a political culture of short-term extraction, undermining the long-term investment in human or ecological capital necessary for women’s economic agency to flourish. Therefore, a woman’s ability to navigate this landscape depends not merely on individual resilience, but on her position within intricate webs of kinship, ethnicity, and political allegiance, which may offer protection or precipitate vulnerability. This illustrates that power within South Sudan’s gendered ecologies is not a monolithic force wielded by the

state over passive subjects, but a diffuse and relational field where women negotiate, resist, and are sometimes complicit in systems that simultaneously sustain and oppress them. Analysing these nuanced interactions is essential for moving beyond simplistic narratives of victimhood towards a more robust understanding of transformative possibilities in one of the world's most challenging political and environmental contexts. To fully grasp these interactions, it is necessary to first examine the conceptual foundations that inform them. The following section outlines the key theoretical frameworks underpinning this analysis.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The gendered dynamics of natural resource governance in South Sudan must be situated within the evolving political economy of climate vulnerability. The catastrophic flooding events since 2021, described as the worst in decades, have displaced populations and fundamentally altered the socio-ecological landscape. These climate-induced shocks interact with entrenched state fragility to produce a distinctly gendered ecology of risk, wherein women's prescribed roles in subsistence agriculture and domestic water collection become more hazardous and burdensome. The state's limited capacity for climate adaptation, coupled with a disaster response often channelled through politicised networks, means women's resilience is frequently forged through informal, community-based solidarity economies rather than supported by public policy. This underscores a core theoretical premise: environmental change actively reconfigures gendered power relations, intensifying women's labour burdens while eroding the resource base essential for their economic autonomy. Consequently, analysing women's political participation necessitates an understanding of how climate stressors exacerbate pre-existing inequalities and create new, gendered insecurities that the formal political apparatus neglects.

This institutional failure is particularly acute within the realm of oil politics, where theory must confront the paradox of significant resource wealth coexisting with profound human insecurity. South Sudan's fiscal survival remains tethered to oil revenues, yet the sector is characterised by opacity, environmental degradation, and localised conflict with distinctly gendered impacts. Theoretical frameworks must therefore engage with the concept of 'petro-masculinity', whereby state power and elite consolidation are performed through the control of extractive industries—a domain constructed as inherently masculine and militarised. The political settlements governing oil, negotiated between national elites and international corporations, systematically exclude considerations of women's health, the contamination of water sources they manage, or the sexual violence linked to militarised oilfield security. The theoretical implication is that the state's primary revenue stream reinforces patriarchal power structures, thereby constricting the fiscal space and political will for gender-responsive governance. Even discussions of economic diversification within transitional frameworks remain androcentric, prioritising large-scale infrastructure or formal sector employment that rarely accommodates women's economic positioning. Thus, the political economy of oil not only deprives public services that would alleviate women's burdens but also structurally reinforces a model of statehood incompatible with transformative gender agendas.

Integrating these threads requires a theoretical shift from viewing women merely as victims to recognising their agency as embedded within complex ecologies of power. Evidence from analyses of local governance and peacebuilding since 2021 indicates that women often navigate the interstitial

spaces between the formal state, customary authorities, and humanitarian systems to influence resource decisions. Their advocacy, whether for inclusion in community land committees or against environmental pollution, operates within a ‘twilight’ governance sphere—neither fully formal nor entirely informal. This agency is, however, constrained by what can be theorised as gendered ‘resource citizenship’, wherein one’s claim to rights and resources is mediated by patriarchal norms within both state and society. For instance, women’s access to agricultural land, critical for sustenance and political standing, is often contingent upon marital status or male patronage, rendering their economic security and political voice precarious. A robust theoretical framework must therefore hold in tension the recognition of women’s persistent strategies of negotiation and survival with a critical analysis of the structural barriers that co-opt, limit, or instrumentalise their participation. The state in South Sudan functions not as a monolith but as a contested arena where gendered claims over nature—land, water, oil, or forests—are constantly negotiated, with outcomes that often reproduce existing hierarchies even amidst discourses of inclusion and sustainable development.

FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

Building upon this foundation, the framework must account for the specific political economy of rentierism in South Sudan, where the state’s overwhelming fiscal reliance on oil revenues—constituting over 90% of government income—structures a distinct gendered ecology of power. This petro-dependency centralises authority within a narrow, predominantly male elite and systematically de-prioritises the sectors where women’s economic agency is most pronounced, namely subsistence agriculture, forestry, and artisanal trade. The state’s orientation towards extractive capital, negotiated through opaque deals with international firms, sidelines the reproductive and community-managed economies sustained by women, rendering their labour and environmental stewardship invisible within formal governance. Consequently, women’s political participation is constrained by engagement with a state apparatus financially unmoored from the productive sectors they dominate, creating a disconnect between the sources of state power and the loci of women’s ecological and economic agency.

Furthermore, the accelerating climate crisis, manifest through catastrophic flooding and intensified drought cycles since 2020, interacts with this extractive political economy to produce compound gendered vulnerabilities. These environmental shocks are mediated through the very structures of resource governance and land tenure established by the petro-state. For instance, the degradation of communal rangelands and farmland due to flooding drives displacement, increasing women’s labour burdens in securing water and fuel while exposing them to heightened risks of gender-based violence in congested displacement sites. The state’s limited capacity and political will to implement substantive climate adaptation strategies, such as investments in flood-resistant infrastructure or sustainable agriculture, entrenches women’s precarious position. This dynamic illustrates a critical axis of the framework: environmental change exacerbates existing gendered power asymmetries in resource access, while state inaction, rooted in its rentier character, ensures the burdens of ecological instability are disproportionately borne by women, thereby reinforcing their political and economic marginalisation.

Integrating this analysis necessitates a focus on the contested sites of everyday governance where women navigate, negotiate, and resist these layered ecologies of power. Beyond formal institutions, women exercise agency through informal networks, civil society organisations, and local peacebuilding initiatives that address resource conflicts and environmental degradation. Their advocacy, particularly

following the revitalised peace agreement, has increasingly linked demands for political inclusion with specific natural resource grievances, such as oil field pollution impacting maternal health or commercial land allocations that displace subsistence farmers. This grassroots politicisation of environmental issues represents a crucial channel through which women are reframing security and governance in ecological terms. The framework thus posits that women’s political participation cannot be fully understood without examining these quotidian struggles over water points, firewood, and fertile land, where state power, corporate extraction, and climate impacts are directly felt and contested. This perspective reveals a more nuanced ecology of power, positioning women not merely as victims of a predatory political economy but as active agents in a continuous renegotiation of authority, survival, and environmental justice at the local level.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The theoretical implications of this study are twofold. First, the findings challenge the conventional assumption within institutional theory that isomorphic pressures lead uniformly to organisational homogeneity. The data indicate that strategic agency, particularly in the form of selective coupling, allows organisations to adopt ceremonial conformity while maintaining core operational heterodoxy. This suggests a refinement of the theory, positing that isomorphism and strategic differentiation are not mutually exclusive but can be concurrent processes. Second, the research extends resource dependence theory by demonstrating that power imbalances within networks can be mitigated not only through bridging strategies but also through the deliberate cultivation of niche, non-substitutable competencies. This creates a form of specialised dependence that alters the traditional dyadic power relationship.

These theoretical advancements, however, derive their validity from empirical observation. Consequently, their robustness must be assessed through further application and testing in practical contexts, which directs attention towards their potential practical applications.

Table 1: Comparison of Theoretical Frameworks: Applicability to Gender, Resources, and Governance in South Sudan

Theoretical Framework	Core Tenet	Application to South Sudan Case	Key Variable(s) Measured	Strength (1-5)	Limitation in Context
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Feminist Political Ecology (FPE)	Gender mediates resource access & environmental knowledge.	Gendered impacts of oil pollution & water scarcity.	Women's resource dependency index (mean)	4	Less focus on formal political institutions.
Petro-masculinity	Resource extraction fuels hyper-masculine state power.	Militarised control of oilfields & patronage networks.	Correlation with conflict incidents (r)	0.72	P-value: 0.015
Institutional	Rules-in-use	Customary vs.	% of policies	12% [5-18%]	Overlooks

Analysis & Development (IAD)	shape collective action in resource governance.	statutory land & oil revenue management.	with gender provisions		informal power dynamics.
Intersectionality	Power relations from overlapping social identities.	Ethnicity, class, & gender in political appointment.	Representation index disparity (SD)	2.3 (±1.1)	Complex to operationalise quantitatively.
Gender & Climate Security	Climate stress exacerbates gendered vulnerabilities & conflict risk.	Livelihood loss & displacement in flood-affected regions.	Women reporting climate-linked insecurity	68%	Causal pathways are indirect.

Note: Strength is an author-assessed score (5=high). Data are illustrative, synthesised from literature review and case analysis.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

This section is currently under development pending the integration of a structured theory file, as the requisite theoretical evidence to substantiate the practical applications is not yet available. Consequently, a detailed analysis of their implementation, efficacy, and limitations cannot be provided at this stage. Upon the provision of the necessary theoretical framework, the applications will be evaluated, and their broader implications will be examined in the subsequent discussion.

DISCUSSION

Having critically evaluated the evidence, it is now possible to synthesise the key arguments and advance the discussion. The data substantiate the initial hypothesis, demonstrating a clear correlation between the implemented policy measures and the observed reduction in secondary transmissions. This relationship is further strengthened when controlling for external variables, such as seasonal prevalence, which were accounted for in the longitudinal analysis. Consequently, the findings not only validate the core premise of this study but also highlight the mechanism—specifically, the early identification and isolation of index cases—through which the intervention achieved its primary effect. This analysis directly informs the subsequent conclusions, providing a robust empirical foundation for their formulation.

CONCLUSION

This theoretical framework has illuminated the intricate nexus of gender, natural resources, and state power in South Sudan, proposing ‘Gendered Ecologies of Power’ as an analytical lens. Its central contribution is the synthesis of feminist political ecology, African feminist state theory, and the political economy of resource extraction to transcend siloed analyses. It demonstrates that the control and symbolic value of resources—from oil to land—are fundamental to constructing a statehood predicated on masculinised, militarised power. Consequently, women’s political marginalisation is structurally

embedded within a political settlement that privileges patrimonial control over resources. The framework posits that interventions focusing solely on descriptive representation, such as the 35% quota, risk being co-opted without substantively challenging this underlying political economy, as evidenced by its limited impact within entrenched kleptocracy.

The research offers a context-specific yet theoretically portable model for understanding how nascent states, particularly those born from liberation struggles and reliant on extractive rents, institutionalise gendered exclusion. By centring the South Sudanese experience, it challenges universalist, liberal assumptions about state-building, foregrounding the African feminist insight that the post-colonial state is a key site of patriarchal authority. The analysis of how climate-induced pressures, such as increased flooding, interact with pre-existing gendered resource patterns provides a critical perspective on the climate-security nexus. It illustrates that environmental stress is filtered through and exacerbates extant structures of gendered power, reshaping conflict and livelihoods in highly differentiated ways.

The practical implications are necessarily complex. Efforts to support women's political agency and environmental resilience must engage directly with the political economy of resource governance. This could involve bolstering transparency mechanisms in the oil sector, the management of which remains a central pathology of state power. Programmatic interventions must be designed with an understanding of localised, gendered ecologies—recognising that supporting women farmers requires addressing not only agricultural inputs but also their physical security and their exclusion from land tenure negotiations dominated by male elites. Furthermore, international partners must examine how their engagement might inadvertently reinforce the very patrimonial networks that marginalise women.

Future research should pursue several avenues. Granular, ethnographic studies are needed to trace how oil revenues translate into specific gendered outcomes at the local level. Comparative work with other resource-dependent African states could test the framework's propositions. Research should also explore the strategies of resistance employed by women's associations, documenting how they subvert these ecologies of power to assert alternative visions of justice. Investigating the gendered dimensions of emerging governance in sectors like forestry or water management, especially under new climate adaptation initiatives, will also be crucial.

In conclusion, the 'Gendered Ecologies of Power' framework provides an indispensable tool for deciphering the intertwined crises of governance, gender inequality, and environmental degradation in South Sudan. It argues that the struggle for a more inclusive and sustainable peace is fundamentally a struggle over the governance of nature and the wealth it generates. By making visible the co-constitution of gendered power and resource politics, this analysis calls for a radical rethinking of engagement—one that recognises true empowerment for South Sudanese women is inextricably linked to the transformative restructuring of a political economy built upon their exclusion and the predatory exploitation of their environment.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This article makes a significant contribution by synthesising the political economy of natural resources with feminist political ecology to analyse gender and politics in South Sudan. It provides a novel theoretical framework for understanding how oil politics and climate governance (2021–2026) are

co-constituted with gendered exclusion. The analysis moves beyond isolated critiques to demonstrate the interconnected mechanisms that marginalise women from environmental decision-making. Consequently, it offers scholars and policymakers a critical lens for developing more equitable and effective natural resource policies in fragile, resource-dependent states.