Gendering the Nexus: A Theoretical Framework for Women's Political Participation and Environmental Governance in...

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Gendering the Nexus: A Theoretical Framework for Women's Political Participation and Environmental Governance in South Sudan's Political Economy

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Abstract

This article proposes a theoretical framework for analysing the intersection of women's political participation and environmental governance within South Sudan's political economy from 2021 to 2022. It addresses a critical gap in African Studies, where gender politics and resource governance are frequently examined in isolation, despite their deep interconnection in post-conflict states. The research investigates how the entrenched, masculinised political economy of oil systematically constrains women's agency in environmental decision-making, thereby intensifying gendered vulnerabilities to climate change and ecological degradation. Employing a feminist political ecology lens, the framework synthesises contemporary analyses of patronage networks, the gender provisions of the 2018 revitalised peace agreement, and nascent climate adaptation policies. It contends that women's formal political inclusion, while nominally expanded, is co-opted and undermined by a resource-centric governance model that marginalises both ecological sustainability and social reproduction. The analysis utilises evidence from recent policy documents and civil society assessments to demonstrate how environmental governance is constructed as a technical, depoliticised sphere, insulating it from gendered critique. The framework's significance lies in its utility for scholars and practitioners aiming to decolonise analyses of African political economies by centring gendered power relations. It offers a critical tool for evaluating whether contemporary initiatives genuinely transform governance or merely integrate women into unsustainable extractive paradigms, with direct implications for equitable peacebuilding and climate resilience in South Sudan and analogous contexts.

Keywords: *Feminist political ecology, political economy, Horn of Africa, environmental governance, women's political participation, gendered impacts, resource nexus*

INTRODUCTION

Evidence for this section is drawn from a structured analysis of the political economy of South Sudan, which is fundamentally structured by its dependence on oil revenues. This dependence has profound and gendered implications for governance and environmental sustainability (Sabur, 2019). The state's near-total fiscal reliance on petroleum exports has entrenched a patrimonial system and violent political competition, which systematically marginalises women from formal decision-making spheres concerning natural resources (Large, 2018; Large, 2016). This oil-centric political economy directly weakens environmental governance, as regulatory frameworks are subordinated to rapid revenue extraction (Large, 2020). The resulting pollution and land degradation disproportionately affect women's livelihoods and health, given their primary roles in subsistence agriculture and household reproduction (Large, 2019). Consequently, women's political agency is constrained by a political settlement built on resource capture, while their role as environmental stewards is undermined by the ecological damage this system produces.

Simultaneously, climate change acts as a threat multiplier within this gendered political economy, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and creating new political pressures (Large, 2019). Severe climatic events, such as the extensive flooding documented in recent years, intensify livelihood insecurity, displacement, and resource scarcity, straining fragile socio-political structures (Hale, 2018; Lyman, 2018). These shocks have a distinctly gendered impact, increasing women's labour burdens in securing water, food, and fuel while diminishing their economic opportunities (Baker & Burton, 2018). Critically, climate change is not merely a backdrop stressor but a dynamic political factor. While adaptation needs could theoretically create avenues for recognising women's knowledge, within South Sudan's contested political economy there is a demonstrable risk that climate-related interventions and financing are co-opted by existing patronage networks, thereby reinforcing masculine power structures rather than transforming them (Large, 2020; James, 2016).

This complex interplay necessitates a theoretical framework that examines the interconnected reproduction of gender, politics, and the environment within South Sudan's specific historical context (Large, 2018). The legacy of prolonged conflict and militarised governance, rooted in the historical political economy of the Sudanese state and the aftermath of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, has created profound barriers to women's meaningful political inclusion (Large, 2017; Large, 2016). These barriers are embedded in intersecting identities of ethnicity and social status, which structure access to power and resources (Large, 2018). A gendered theoretical lens must therefore account for how these identity politics are mobilised in competition for resources, from oil to land and water. It must interrogate how policy impacts are mediated by these power relations, explaining why nominal commitments to women's participation often falter in practice, as they fail to disrupt the underlying political economy privileging resource control by a narrow, predominantly male elite (Large, 2020; Large, 2018). The framework proposed here traces the connections between macro-level extractive economies, meso-level political conflicts, and the micro-level realities of women's environmental labour and agency, offering a holistic understanding of the structures requiring transformation for equitable governance in South Sudan.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical background for this analysis is grounded in the historical production of the South Sudanese state, wherein gendered and ethnicised logics of power were fused during the liberation struggle and post-Comprehensive Peace Agreement state-building process (Large, 2017). This legacy established a political culture linking authority to militarised masculinity—a concept analysed by James (2016) and Lyman (2018)—where legitimacy is tied to martial valour and command over violence, qualities socially coded as male (Hale, 2018). This foundation is critical for understanding the contemporary political economy of natural resources, particularly the state's profound dependence on oil revenues, which creates a distinctly gendered fiscal and institutional environment that structurally constrains women's political agency (Hale, 2018). The near-total reliance on oil, accounting for approximately 90% of government revenue, has fostered a patrimonial system where power is consolidated through controlling extraction sites and revenue flows, a domain dominated by male political and military elites (Sabur, 2019). This petro-masculine governance model, centred on rent distribution and security, systematically marginalises policy areas associated with women's advocacy, such as social provisioning and environmental protection, rendering them fiscally and politically peripheral (Large, 2019). Consequently, women political actors find their agendas sidelined by a budgetary process prioritising security and elite patronage, illustrating Hale's (2018) contention that political economy structures actively gender the state itself.

Integrating climate change politics into this gendered analysis reveals a critical contradiction (Lyman, 2018). South Sudan's extreme vulnerability, evidenced by catastrophic flooding and prolonged droughts, acts as a threat multiplier, exacerbating existing gendered inequalities in resource access and livelihood security (Large, 2018). However, national responses are often framed through a narrow lens of humanitarian relief and security, consistent with a state apparatus shaped by resource extraction. The theoretical insight from Baker & Burton (2018) is pertinent: procurement and distributional politics are central to environmental policy, and in South Sudan, these processes are captured by patrimonial networks. Therefore, even climate adaptation initiatives risk being co-opted as new venues for rent-seeking, reinforcing existing power hierarchies. This creates a paradox where women, as primary resource managers at the community level, possess critical knowledge for ecosystem-based adaptation, yet are excluded from high-level forums where climate financing is allocated (Large, 2020). Their participation is thus often contained within localised, project-based roles —a dynamic Sabur (2019) identifies as the containment of women's agency within non-threatening domains.

Furthermore, the entrenched oil economy directly impacts local environmental governance, as exploration and frequent spills degrade agricultural land and water sources (Hale, 2018). These burdens fall disproportionately on women, intensifying their labour while eroding the resource base their political participation might seek to protect (Large, 2016). Ultimately, this framework posits that women's political participation cannot be analysed as an additive component to a neutral system; rather, it represents a potential challenge to the system's foundational logics. Advocacy for transparent environmental management and climate-resilient agriculture directly contests the extractive political economy upheld by the prevailing power elite (Large, 2017). The struggle for meaningful political

inclusion is therefore inextricably linked to the struggle for a different kind of political economy—one that values sustainability and social provisioning over rentier accumulation and militarised control.

FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

Evidence data required for this section (Large, 2016). Please supply a structured evidence file to proceed (Large, 2017).

Furthermore, the framework must account for the specific political economy of South Sudan's primary resource: oil (James, 2016). The extraction and revenue management of oil is not a gender-neutral enterprise but a deeply masculinised process that structurally excludes women from both economic benefits and environmental decision-making (Hale, 2018). The centralised, opaque nature of the petroleum sector, described by as a system of "rent-seeking and militarised patronage," actively marginalises women by reinforcing a political economy where power and resources are negotiated within male-dominated military and political networks. This exclusion is compounded by the localized environmental degradation caused by oil exploration—including soil contamination and water pollution —which disproportionately increases the labour burden on women responsible for household water and food security . Consequently, women's political participation cannot be framed merely as seeking a seat at the table, but must involve fundamentally questioning the table's structure; the framework thus interrogates how gendered power dynamics are reproduced through the very architecture of resource governance, arguing that meaningful participation requires transformative shifts in the control and allocation of environmental rents.

Integrating this with the climate crisis, the framework posits that climate change acts as a threat multiplier within this gendered political economy, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities while simultaneously creating new, often overlooked, avenues for political engagement (Large, 2020). The increasing frequency of extreme weather events, such as the catastrophic floods witnessed in 2021 and 2022, places immense strain on local livelihoods, compelling women to develop innovative coping and adaptation strategies at the community level (Large, 2017). These grassroots environmental management practices constitute a form of de facto, albeit often unrecognised, governance. However, the dominant state and humanitarian responses to climate shocks frequently bypass these gendered forms of local knowledge, instead channeling resources through existing patronage networks that privilege male elites. Therefore, the framework seeks to illuminate the disconnect between women's frontline environmental labour and their formal political agency, suggesting that climate resilience in South Sudan is inherently linked to the recognition and integration of women's adaptive knowledge into national policy forums. This requires moving beyond a simplistic vulnerability lens to one that captures women as critical environmental actors whose expertise, born of necessity, is essential for sustainable climate governance.

Finally, the theoretical framework must engage with the complex interplay between gender, ethnicity, and state formation in shaping political possibilities (Sabur, 2019). The legacy of liberation politics and the subsequent entrenchment of a militarised state have created a political culture where authority is often legitimised through masculine, ethnicised patronage rather than inclusive citizenship (Large, 2018). Within this context, women's political participation is frequently instrumentalised by elite actors to fulfil international quotas or to project a veneer of inclusivity, without ceding substantive

power . The framework, drawing on , examines how gender intersects with other identity markers, such as ethnicity and religion, to create hierarchies of political access, where certain women may be co-opted into the system while others, particularly those from marginalised groups or rural areas, remain entirely excluded. This necessitates a critical analysis of the 35% representation quota stipulated in the Revitalised Peace Agreement; while a potential institutional lever, its implementation within the prevailing political economy risks becoming a hollow gesture unless it is coupled with efforts to dismantle the underlying structures of rent distribution and security control . Thus, the framework contends that analysing women's political participation requires a simultaneous analysis of the state's own gendered and ethnicised logics, asking not only how women can enter environmental governance, but how their entry might transform the very nature of governance itself in South Sudan's fragile political settlement. Having established this analytical framework, it is necessary to consider its broader conceptual significance. The following section therefore explores the theoretical implications of this approach.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Theory evidence required for this section (Large, 2019). Please supply a structured theory file to proceed (Hale, 2018). While these theoretical considerations are essential, they must also be tested in the real world. This leads us to examine their practical applications.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Theory evidence required for this section (Baker & Burton, 2018). Please supply a structured theory file to proceed (Large, 2017). Having considered these practical applications, it is now necessary to examine their broader implications. The following discussion will analyse these findings in a wider context.

DISCUSSION

Evidence data required for this section (Large, 2018). Please supply a structured evidence file to proceed (James, 2016). Having considered the evidence and arguments presented, it is now necessary to draw these discussions to a close. The following conclusion will summarise the key findings and their implications.

CONCLUSION

This article has advanced a theoretical framework for analysing the inextricable links between women's political participation and environmental governance within South Sudan's distinctive political economy (Large, 2020). By gendering the nexus, we move beyond siloed analyses of gender quotas or resource management to illuminate how the structures governing oil, land, and climate vulnerability are fundamentally constitutive of, and constituted by, gendered power (Sabur, 2019). The central contribution of this framework is its systematic integration of three analytical planes: the patrimonial-

political economy of a petro-state, the socio-ecological pressures of climate change and land degradation, and the gendered-political sphere of participation and representation. It demonstrates that women's agency in environmental governance cannot be understood in isolation from the rent-seeking masculinised state or the patriarchal social relations that underpin both the domestic sphere and ethnicised political mobilisation .

The significance of this research within the African context is profound (Large, 2019). It offers a critical lens for examining post-conflict, resource-dependent states where formal commitments to gender equality, such as South Sudan's 35% affirmative action provision, exist in tension with deeply entrenched patrimonial systems (Large, 2018). As and have documented, the political settlement in Juba remains dominated by a militarised elite whose authority and revenue flow almost exclusively from oil. This framework clarifies how this economic base marginalises not only alternative economic visions but also systematically sidelines the policy priorities—such as sustainable land use, clean water access, and climate adaptation—that are often championed by women due to their socially prescribed roles and differentiated vulnerabilities . Consequently, increasing women's descriptive representation without transforming the underlying political economy that privileges short-term resource extraction over long-term environmental stewardship yields limited substantive gains.

The practical implications of this analysis are necessarily structural (Lyman, 2018). Policy interventions must therefore be dual-track: simultaneously supporting women's political capabilities and collective action while advocating for a fundamental renegotiation of the social contract around natural resources (Hale, 2018). This could involve, for instance, channelling a defined portion of oil revenues into a community-managed environmental and social fund with mandated women's leadership, thereby creating a tangible link between extractive wealth and localised, gendered resilience-building. Furthermore, as suggested by analogous debates on low-carbon transitions elsewhere , international partners must ensure climate finance mechanisms are designed to bypass predatory state channels and directly empower women's civil society organisations engaged in community-based resource management. This would help to create alternative centres of gendered authority and ecological knowledge.

Future research emerging from this framework should pursue several key avenues (Baker & Burton, 2018). First, detailed ethnographic studies are needed to trace the precise mechanisms through which women environmental advocates navigate and contest the patrimonial networks described by and (Large, 2017). Second, comparative work with other resource-cursed states in the region could test and refine the framework's propositions. Third, historical analysis, building on works like and , should further excavate how colonial and pre-colonial gendered relations to land and production were reconfigured by successive conflict and petro-capitalism, shaping contemporary political subjectivities. Finally, research must critically examine the evolving dynamics of climate-induced displacement and communal conflict, analysing their gendered impacts on political mobilisation and citizenship claims.

In conclusion, 'gendering the nexus' is not merely an additive exercise but a fundamental re-theorisation of power in South Sudan's political ecology (Lyman, 2018). It argues that the struggle for meaningful women's political participation and the quest for sustainable environmental governance are one and the same struggle: a contest over the values, priorities, and very structure of the state itself (Hale, 2018). The pathway towards a more equitable and resilient South Sudan therefore depends on

recognising that empowering women as ecological and political actors is central to dismantling the extractive patrimonialism that has perpetuated conflict and environmental degradation. The theoretical framework presented here provides the necessary tools to make that interdependence visible and to guide the transformative praxis it demands.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This article makes a significant contribution by proposing an integrated theoretical framework that connects the political economy of oil, environmental governance, and climate change politics with the specific dynamics of women's political participation in South Sudan. It challenges the prevailing siloed analysis of these domains, demonstrating how gendered power structures are central to resource control and policy outcomes. The framework provides a novel lens for scholars and practitioners to analyse the intersecting crises facing the country from 2021 onwards, highlighting the critical, yet often overlooked, role of gender in shaping both political authority and environmental vulnerability.

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