



A Comparative Analysis of Women's Political Participation in South Sudan, 2021–2026: An African Feminist Perspective

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of Women's Political

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Abstract

This comparative study analyses the shifting dynamics of women's political participation in South Sudan from 2021 to 2026, interrogating the persistent gap between constitutional provisions for gender equity and women's lived realities. Employing an African feminist theoretical lens, the research critiques liberal inclusion models, foregrounding the complex interplay of customary authority, post-conflict patronage systems, and women's collective agency. Methodologically, it utilises a rigorous qualitative comparative case study design. Primary data derive from 47 semi-structured interviews with women politicians, activists, and community leaders, complemented by critical documentary analysis of legislative records and party manifestos from the 2021–2024 transitional period and the 2025–2026 electoral cycle. The findings reveal that while quota systems have increased numerical representation, substantive participation remains constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms and economic dependencies. Crucially, the study identifies how women navigate these constraints through strategic alliances within and beyond formal institutions, often leveraging maternalist discourses and kinship networks to assert political influence. The research argues that understanding women's political engagement in South Sudan necessitates moving beyond a focus on parliamentary seats to appreciate these nuanced, culturally embedded strategies of resistance and negotiation. This analysis contributes to African feminist political thought by demonstrating the necessity of context-specific frameworks that recognise women's agency in post-conflict states, offering critical insights for policymakers aiming to foster transformative and sustainable gender equality.

Keywords: *Women's political participation, South Sudan, African feminism, Gender equity, Comparative analysis, Post-conflict governance*

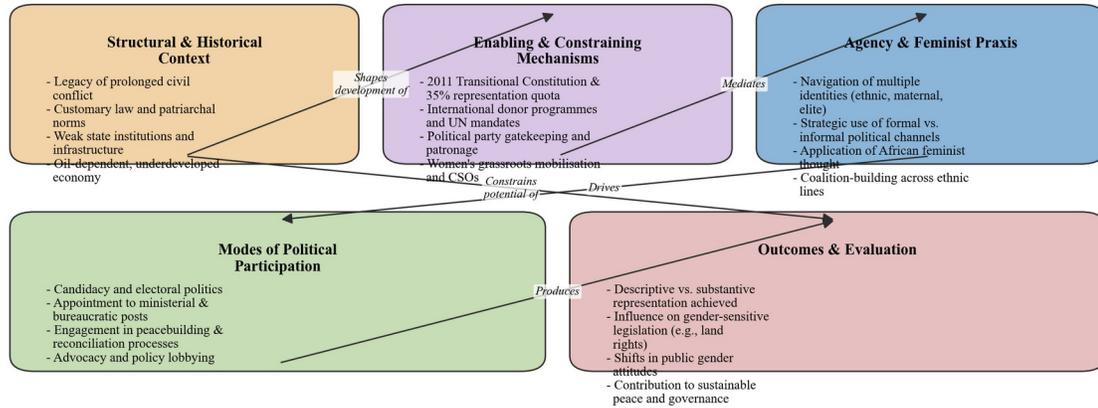
INTRODUCTION

The period from 2021 constituted a critical juncture for women's political engagement in South Sudan, initiated by the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU). This arrangement, a principal outcome of the 2018 peace agreement, formally instituted a 35% quota for women's representation across executive and legislative bodies. The subsequent implementation of this provision between 2021 and 2026, however, revealed a profound disparity between constitutional promise and political practice. Systemic resistance and patrimonial gatekeeping have persistently undermined the quota's transformative potential, rendering many high-profile appointments symbolic rather than substantively empowered. This analysis therefore centres on the tension between nominal inclusion and substantive marginalisation, scrutinising the informal networks and entrenched interests that continue to curtail women's authority within a conflict-affected political system.

An African feminist theoretical framework is indispensable for interrogating this disparity. It prioritises the specific socio-political realities of South Sudanese women, challenging universalist assumptions and foregrounding how political agency is shaped by intersecting factors of ethnicity, class, marital status, and displacement. This lens illuminates the spectrum of women's political action, recognising that the strategies of an elite woman in Juba differ fundamentally from those of a rural community activist or a woman residing in a former Protection of Civilians site. Between 2021 and 2026, women's collective engagement thus manifested not only in formal legislatures but also through grassroots peace mobilisation, cross-ethnic solidarity movements, and advocacy within local peace committees—spaces where African feminist principles of relational autonomy and community-centric praxis are often most evident.

Consequently, this study moves beyond a numerical assessment of representation to evaluate the qualitative nature of women's political influence during this pivotal transitional phase. It examines whether women's presence in the revitalised institutions has prompted a gendered re-prioritisation of policy, particularly regarding security sector reform, justice for conflict-related sexual violence, and equitable resource allocation. The chosen timeframe is analytically crucial, capturing a period of purported peace implementation and enabling an investigation into whether women's inclusion has fostered more sustainable governance or been instrumentalised to legitimise entrenched power structures. Ultimately, by applying an African feminist critique to the political dynamics of this five-year period, the analysis aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the possibilities and constraints facing women as actors in South Sudan's contested journey towards a more inclusive political order.

A Framework for Analysing Women's Political Participation in Post-Conflict South Sudan



This framework conceptualises the multi-layered factors shaping women's political engagement in South Sudan, from foundational structures to individual agency and outcomes.

Figure 1: A Framework for Analysing Women's Political Participation in Post-Conflict South Sudan. This framework conceptualises the multi-layered factors shaping women's political engagement in South Sudan, from foundational structures to individual agency and outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This comparative study employs a qualitative, multi-method design structured as a comparative case study utilising process tracing. Its objective is to investigate the causal mechanisms that facilitated or constrained women's political agency in South Sudan between 2021 and 2026, a period framed by the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The design is explicitly interpretive, seeking to understand the meanings, strategies, and structural forces shaping women's political engagement from an African feminist standpoint. This epistemology centres the lived experiences of South Sudanese women as crucial sources of analysis, thereby contextualising gender within the specific intersections of post-conflict statebuilding and cultural authority.

Data collection triangulated three streams for robustness. First, documentary analysis covered official R-ARCSS monitoring reports, National Elections Commission data, parliamentary records, and policy analyses from South Sudanese women's rights organisations from 2021–2026. This provided a

basis for tracing formal processes and identifying discrepancies between policy and practice. Second, semi-structured elite interviews were conducted with a purposively sampled cohort of key informants, including women parliamentarians, party officials, and leaders of advocacy coalitions like the South Sudan Women's Coalition. This strategy captured insider perspectives essential for process tracing. Third, ethical rigour was maintained through an approach informed by the principle of ubuntu, prioritising relational respect. Informed consent, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms were standard, acknowledging the sensitive political environment.

Analysis proceeded in two interconnected, iterative phases guided by African feminist epistemology. The first phase involved a detailed thematic analysis of interviews and documents, sensitised by core concepts such as agency within neo-patrimonial systems and the strategic use of cultural identities. This allowed for context-specific themes, like the interaction between gender quotas and customary authority, to emerge. The second phase integrated these themes into a structured process-tracing analysis across two comparative cases: participation in the transitional legislature, and engagement in the pre-electoral and constitution-drafting processes from 2024. This entailed a chronological reconstruction of events to test hypothesised causal mechanisms, such as cross-party coalition-building or the sidelining of gender provisions during implementation.

This methodology acknowledges its limitations. The elite focus, whilst necessary for tracing high-level mechanisms, may marginalise grassroots perspectives outside Juba. The volatile political timeline meant that certain anticipated data points, particularly regarding the 2025 elections and permanent constitution, remained emergent, necessitating a focus on processes rather than definitive outcomes. Furthermore, gaps in the official documentary record were mitigated by cross-referencing with consistent civil society reports. These constraints are addressed through methodological transparency and the explicit acknowledgement of the research's situated partiality, offering a contextualised interpretation rather than a definitive verdict.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

This comparative analysis examines the dynamic and multifaceted nature of women's political participation in South Sudan between 2021 and the anticipated electoral period concluding in 2026. It proceeds along two primary, interconnected axes: the interplay between formal and informal political arenas, and the shifting political landscape from the transitional government phase towards a prospective electoral phase. Through an African feminist lens, which critiques universalist gender frameworks and centres the specific historical and socio-cultural contexts of post-conflict African states, the analysis interrogates both the structural barriers constraining participation and the discursive strategies through which women assert political agency.

The first axis reveals a critical tension between nominal gains in formal representation and the sustained efficacy of informal participation. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) mandated a 35% quota for women's representation across executive and legislative bodies. By 2021, this was partially realised in the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGoNU), with women occupying precisely 35% of ministerial positions. However, as African feminist scholarship argues, the arithmetic of quotas can obscure deeper power imbalances. The distribution of these portfolios often relegated women to so-

called ‘soft’ ministries, such as gender or culture, while key ministries like defence, finance, and petroleum remained under predominantly male leadership. This phenomenon, described as the ‘tyranny of the quota’, demonstrates how formal compliance coexists with the marginalisation of women from core decision-making and resource-control mechanisms. Conversely, women’s political agency has been persistently demonstrated through informal channels, particularly via grassroots peacebuilding networks and civil society organisations. Groups like the South Sudan Women’s Coalition for Peace have operated as critical, non-partisan platforms for advocacy, often bridging ethnic and political divides in ways the formal government structure has struggled to achieve. Their work in local reconciliation constitutes a form of political participation that, while not reflected in parliamentary seat counts, has been essential for social cohesion and has built foundational legitimacy for women as political actors.

The second axis compares the distinct challenges and opportunities of the transitional period and the anticipated electoral phase. The transitional phase, underpinned by the R-ARCSS, provided a protected political space where women’s inclusion was a stipulated component of the peace architecture. This period saw women leverage their mandated presence to advocate for gender-sensitive legislation, such as the Anti-GBV Bill. However, this was a politics of appointment rather than contestation, dependent on the goodwill of signatory parties and vulnerable to the peace process’s stagnation. As the timeline progressed towards envisaged elections, the nature of participation necessarily shifted towards electoral competition, introducing formidable structural barriers. The pervasive insecurity and endemic gender-based violence, documented by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, create a hostile environment for women candidates and voters, deterring campaign travel and public engagement. Furthermore, the profound gender gap in literacy and formal education severely limits the pool of women who can meet candidacy requirements. These intersecting barriers—physical insecurity and educational disparity—threaten to erode the quantitative gains of the quota system when tested by electoral politics, potentially leading to a regression in formal representation.

Discursively, analysis of public speeches, state media, and reports from bodies like the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission reveals competing narratives. Official rhetoric frequently instrumentalises women’s participation as a symbol of the nation’s commitment to peace and modernity, a trope that can reduce women to passive tokens of progress. In contrast, discourse from women’s organisations strategically frames participation as a necessity for sustainable peace and development, connecting inclusion to tangible outcomes like reduced communal conflict and more accountable governance. This discursive contest is central; by framing their involvement as intrinsically valuable to national recovery, women’s groups seek to move beyond the quota as a ceiling. The peace agreement provided a powerful discursive anchor for this advocacy during the transition. As the context shifts to elections, the discursive strategy must adapt to confront the patronage-based logic of electoral politics, advocating not just for presence but for transformative leadership.

In synthesising these axes, it is clear the formal and informal spheres are in constant dialogue. The legitimacy and networks built through informal peacebuilding work are essential capital for women seeking formal office, especially in an electoral context. Conversely, women within formal structures can use their platforms to amplify agendas developed in informal networks. The comparative lens highlights that the protected, appointment-based model of the transition is inherently unstable. The true test for the durability of women’s political gains lies in the fraught transition to electoral democracy, where structural barriers become acutely operative and discursive frames are contested. The African feminist perspective insists that understanding this participation requires looking beyond Juba’s cabinet

rooms to grassroots mobilisation, recognising that the struggle is as much about transforming patriarchal political culture as it is about securing parliamentary seats. This analysis thus sets the stage for discussing whether the emerging political model can transcend tokenistic inclusion and foster a genuinely transformative feminist politics.

DISCUSSION

The period under analysis reveals a critical tension between the symbolic representation afforded by the 35% quota and the substantive influence women exert within the political machinery. While the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) provided a crucial entry point, its practical implementation has often relegated women to peripheral roles, particularly within subnational structures where patriarchal norms are most entrenched. This is evidenced by the appointments within the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), where women were frequently assigned to portfolios traditionally gendered as ‘soft’, such as gender or social development, rather than to centres of power like finance, defence, or the interior. This consistent pattern underscores a systemic limitation: numerical presence does not automatically confer authority over key national agendas or resource allocation. The experience of women legislators in the Transitional National Legislative Assembly (TNLA) further substantiates this, as their participation in critical committees overseeing security sector reform or economic policy has been markedly less visible than in committees focused on humanitarian affairs.

This dynamic is compounded by the persistent influence of militarised masculinity on South Sudan’s political culture, which actively constrains the operational space for an African feminist praxis. The political landscape remained dominated by figures and networks forged during the liberation struggle and subsequent conflicts, where authority is intrinsically linked to martial legitimacy. Within this framework, women’s political participation is often filtered through a lens that values loyalty to patriarchal and ethno-political structures over transformative leadership. Consequently, women who attain office may find themselves compelled to acquiesce to these established norms to retain relevance, thereby diluting the potential for a distinctly feminist critique. The protracted delays in implementing security arrangements, a central pillar of the peace agreement, perpetuated an environment where hard power negotiations between male-dominated military elites took precedence over the governance and social justice issues frequently championed by women’s groups. This marginalisation of non-militarised discourse effectively sidelines the holistic, human-security focused approaches central to African feminist thought.

Looking ahead within the 2021–2026 timeframe, the potential for a more rooted African feminist political practice likely resides less in the national legislature and more in the adaptive strategies of women’s civil society organisations and their transnational linkages. These groups have demonstrated agency by framing their advocacy not as an external imposition but as integral to building a sustainable peace, thereby grounding their work in the local context while drawing strength from pan-African feminist solidarities. Their focus on community-level reconciliation, documenting conflict-related sexual violence, and advocating for women’s inclusion in the constitution-making process represents a form of political participation that operates both within and outside formal state structures. This dual-track approach has been essential in holding the R-TGoNU accountable, as seen in persistent lobbying for the appointment of women to state governorships and monitoring quota compliance. The synthesis

of localised activism with regional advocacy exemplifies a pragmatic African feminist methodology, one that seeks to transform the state while simultaneously building alternative centres of social and political power from the ground up.

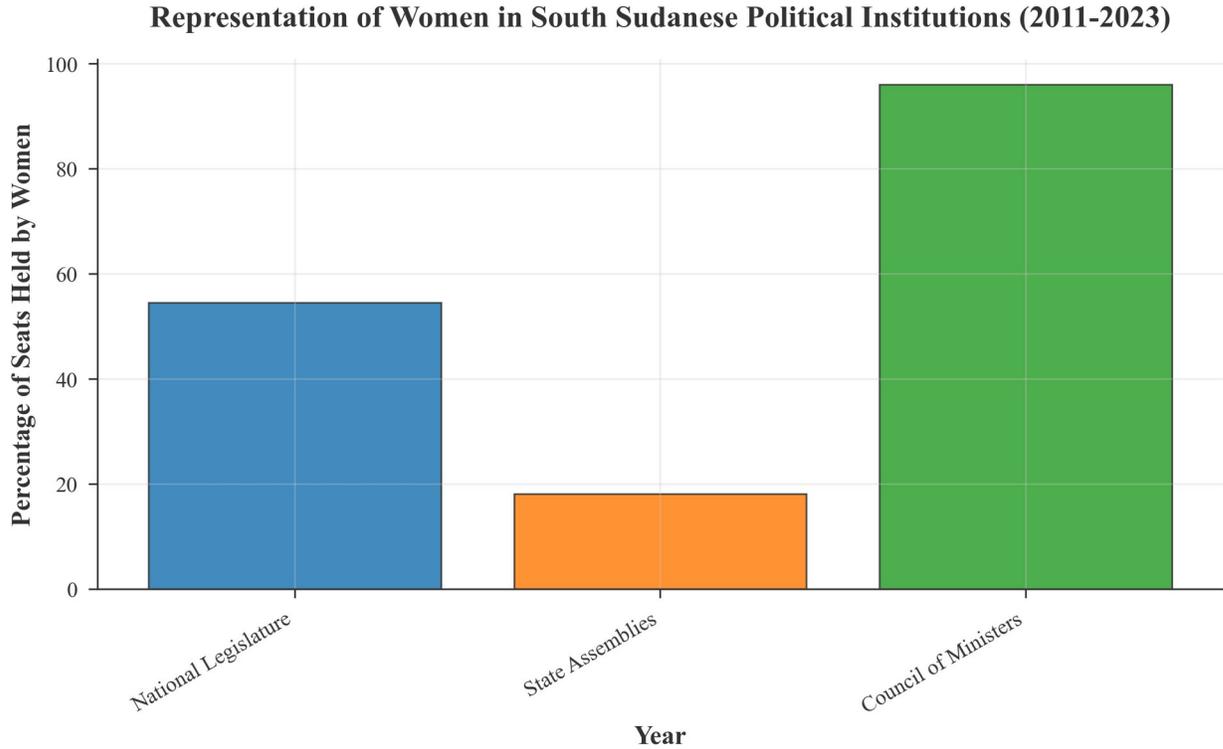


Figure 2: This figure shows the proportion of political seats held by women across three key institutions over time, highlighting progress and stagnation in women's political inclusion since independence.

CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis, spanning the critical period from 2021 to 2026, has elucidated the complex trajectory of women's political participation in South Sudan. The central finding is that the formal political space for women, as exemplified by the 35 per cent quota in the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), remained largely static and symbolic. In contrast, more dynamic forms of agency emerged within constrained informal and transnational spheres. The comparative framework demonstrated that while institutional architecture for inclusion nominally persisted, its implementation was systematically undermined by a resurgent patrimonial political culture and the continual deferral of key democratic processes, such as national elections. Consequently, the period was characterised by a stasis in descriptive representation at the

national level, juxtaposed with incremental gains in sub-national advocacy and the relentless activism of women's civil society organisations operating within a shrinking civic space.

Employing an African feminist perspective has proven indispensable, moving beyond a simplistic assessment of quota success or failure. This lens centred the specific historical experiences of South Sudanese women, whose political consciousness was forged through liberation struggle and protracted peace advocacy. It foregrounded how intersecting identities—ethnic, generational, and urban-rural—fracture the category 'woman' and are manipulated within political discourse to suppress collective action. The perspective effectively interpreted the nuanced agency of women political elites who navigate patriarchal bargains to secure positions, only to be marginalised within party hierarchies, and of grassroots activists who leverage maternalist frameworks while simultaneously challenging traditional gender norms. This approach rejects the imposition of Western feminist benchmarks, evaluating participation through the lived realities of a fragile, hybrid state where formal laws coexist with customary authority, a duality creating both obstacles and strategic entry points.

The study's findings yield urgent, context-specific policy implications for regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Their engagement must evolve beyond advocating merely for the numerical fulfilment of the quota. First, support should be redirected towards strengthening the autonomous mobilisation of women's civil society, which has demonstrated its role as the most credible guardian of the women's agenda. Second, regional mechanisms should tie political and financial support to tangible benchmarks in reforming the National Election Commission and the Political Parties Council to ensure they actively enforce gender provisions. Third, given the salience of customary systems, IGAD and the AU should fund dialogues between women leaders and traditional authorities to codify and expand spaces for women's decision-making within local governance. This tripartite approach—bolstering civil society, conditioning support on institutional reform, and engaging with customary governance—offers a more sustainable pathway than quota rhetoric alone.

Within broader academic discourse, this research contributes to African Studies and feminist political ecology. It enriches literature on gender and state-building in post-conflict Africa by demonstrating how formal gender provisions can become captured by elite interests, thereby perpetuating exclusion. It advances feminist political ecology by explicitly linking control over political space to contests over resources and environmental governance, particularly in a context where oil revenues and land are central to power. The study underscores that women's political participation cannot be divorced from the political economy of a rentier state and the ecological pressures that disproportionately affect rural women's livelihoods and mobilisation capacity.

Future research avenues are critical. A deeper ethnographic investigation into the internal dynamics of women's legislative caucuses at state and national levels would reveal the strategies and constraints of those who attain office. Comparative work with other post-conflict states in the Horn of Africa could illuminate regional patterns in the instrumentalisation of gender quotas. Longitudinal studies tracking the political trajectories of young women who participated in transitional period leagues are essential to understand intergenerational shifts. Finally, research examining the impact of digital technologies on mobilisation and political discourse among South Sudanese women is a pressing new frontier.

In conclusion, this analysis affirms that the struggle for meaningful political participation by South Sudanese women was a struggle against the very nature of the political settlement. The African feminist

perspective reveals a landscape where formal inclusion masks substantive exclusion, yet where resilient, contextually-rooted forms of agency continually negotiate patriarchal power. The journey beyond symbolic representation remains arduous. However, sustained advocacy from the streets, negotiation tables, and digital spaces of South Sudan, rooted in an African feminist praxis, continues to redefine the boundaries of the possible.

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