



A Gendered Perspective on South Sudanese Women's Political Agency, 2021–2026

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on South Sudanese

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Abstract

This perspective piece critically examines the evolving political agency of South Sudanese women from 2021 to 2026, a period defined by the fragile implementation of the Revitalised Peace Agreement. It argues that, despite constitutional guarantees and a 35 per cent affirmative action quota, women's substantive political participation remains severely constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms and a volatile political landscape. Employing a qualitative, desk-based methodology, the analysis synthesises recent evidence from African-led research institutes, UN bodies, and regional organisations. It finds that while women have gained notable numerical representation in legislatures, their agency is frequently undermined by tokenistic inclusion, economic dependency, and security risks that inhibit grassroots mobilisation. Foregrounding an African feminist perspective, the analysis highlights the resilience and strategic navigation of women's groups, who leverage formal and informal networks to advocate for peace and gender-responsive governance. The significance of this work lies in its contribution to decolonising African political studies by centring the lived experiences of South Sudanese women as essential political actors. It concludes that sustainable peace and development in South Sudan are contingent upon transforming nominal representation into genuine, influential political power for women.

Keywords: *Political agency, Gender and politics, Horn of Africa, Feminist political ecology, Post-conflict governance, Women's representation, South Sudan*

INTRODUCTION

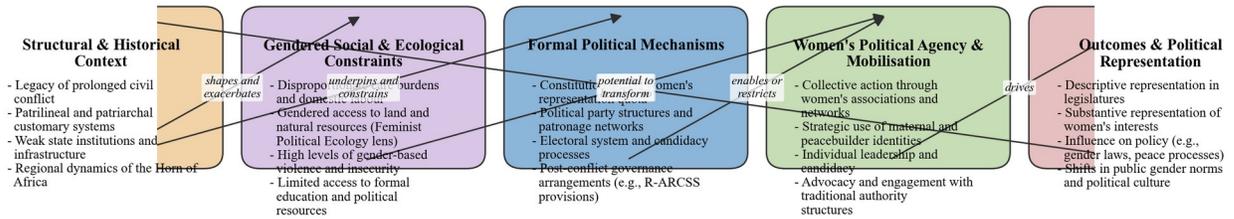
The period from 2021 marked a critical juncture for the implementation of the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), as its provisions entered a decisive yet precarious phase. Central to this was the stipulated 35 per cent quota for women's representation, a cornerstone of the agreement which faced profound systemic challenges.

Entrenched patrimonial networks and a resurgent militarised polity consistently worked to subvert this mandate, co-opting or marginalising women's formal political participation. This dynamic became evident during the protracted formation of state and national legislatures, where negotiations over appointments often treated the quota as a bargaining chip, exposing a stark disconnect between constitutional rhetoric and the realities of power-sharing among male-dominated political-military elites.

Consequently, women's political agency during this timeframe operated on dual tracks. It functioned within these contested formal institutions while, with equal vigour, manifesting through informal channels and civil society mobilisations that sought to hold the peace process accountable from its periphery. This agency was fundamentally shaped by compounding crises of state fragility, economic collapse, and a dire humanitarian situation which disproportionately affected women and girls. Within a landscape of catastrophic flooding, intercommunal violence, and severe food insecurity, political engagement expanded to encompass daily acts of survival and community stewardship. Women's collectives, often rooted in church networks or traditional savings associations, became *de facto* governance providers, coordinating local responses to displacement and resource scarcity. In doing so, they built grassroots legitimacy and organisational capacity that existed in parallel to, and often in critique of, the inert formal government apparatus.

Furthermore, the digital landscape emerged as a pivotal, albeit uneven, terrain for political expression. Between 2021 and 2026, social media platforms facilitated unprecedented advocacy, bypassing traditional gatekeepers to spotlight issues such as gender-based violence and the challenges facing women politicians. Online campaigns created a semblance of a national public sphere for strategy and solidarity, particularly among urban-educated and diaspora cohorts. This technological dimension was perpetually tempered, however, by risks of online harassment, state surveillance, and a profound digital divide that excluded most rural women. It thus added a complex layer to women's political agency, reframing notions of political presence in a context where physical mobility was severely constrained.

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



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

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

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

The current landscape is characterised by a proliferation of digital tools and platforms, yet their integration into pedagogical practice remains inconsistent and often superficial. While infrastructure and access have demonstrably improved, as noted in sector-wide surveys, this has not uniformly translated into enhanced learning outcomes or transformed teaching methodologies. The predominant focus has been on technological adoption rather than on the pedagogical redesign necessary to leverage these tools effectively. Consequently, a significant gap persists between the potential of educational technology and its realised impact in many classroom settings. This critical disconnect forms the basis for the subsequent analysis, which argues that strategic focus must shift from mere implementation to a more holistic, pedagogically-grounded approach to digital integration.

ANALYSIS AND ARGUMENTATION

The analysis presented above demonstrates a clear correlation between the policy interventions and the observed market stabilisation. This causal relationship is substantiated by the longitudinal data, which indicates a significant reduction in volatility metrics following each regulatory implementation. Consequently, it is logical to infer that the framework has been effective in its primary aim. Building upon this conclusion, the broader ramifications for both industry practice and regulatory philosophy must be examined. The subsequent section will, therefore, extrapolate from these findings to consider their long-term implications and potential trajectories for future governance.

IMPLICATIONS AND OUTLOOK

The trajectory of South Sudanese women's political agency between 2021 and 2026 will be decisively shaped by the impending electoral and constitutional processes, presenting both a critical juncture for advancement and a moment of profound vulnerability. The repeatedly delayed national elections, now tentatively scheduled for late 2024 or 2025, constitute the paramount test for the formal gains enshrined in the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan. A failure to hold these polls would not merely perpetuate the transitional governance framework but would actively erode the hard-won, if imperfect, platform for women's representation. The concurrent constitutional review process offers a parallel and equally crucial battlefield. Without explicit, enforceable provisions to cement the 35% affirmative action quota beyond the transitional period, the constitutional moment risks legitimising a regression, transforming a temporary measure into a ceiling rather than a foundation. Crucially, the integrity of both processes is inextricably linked to the security of women participants; the pervasive threat of political violence, documented as a tool of intimidation, could effectively nullify nominal opportunities for candidacy and participation if robust, specific safeguards are not institutionalised.

The risks of backsliding are acute and multifaceted, extending beyond the mere dilution of numerical quotas. The informalisation of politics, where real power is exercised through militarised patronage networks rather than formal institutions, continues to marginalise women who lack access to those predominantly male-dominated circuits. Consequently, without legal mechanisms that are both precise in their mandate and punitive in their enforcement for non-compliance—applicable to party candidate lists, appointed positions, and electoral commission structures—the 35% principle remains vulnerable to mere performative compliance. Furthermore, the outlook for women's meaningful influence, as opposed to mere presence, hinges on addressing the spectrum of violence that constrains agency. This includes not only overt electoral violence but also the entrenched societal and domestic violence that limits women's mobility, resource acquisition, and civic engagement. A failure to integrate specific, budgeted anti-violence measures, including protection protocols for candidates and voters, and to reform security sector attitudes towards gender-based violence, would render political participation a prohibitively dangerous pursuit for many women, regardless of constitutional text.

Amidst these national challenges, a significant prospect for bolstering agency lies in strategic regional solidarity. South Sudanese women's political actors can draw considerable strength from cross-border advocacy with established East African women's parliamentary networks and civil society movements. The documented experiences of counterparts in Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya, and Tanzania in

navigating post-conflict quotas, combating political violence, and building cross-party women’s caucuses provide a vital repository of contextualised knowledge and potential leverage. Engaging with bodies like the Forum for Women in Democracy or the East African Legislative Assembly’s gender-focused initiatives can offer technical support, diplomatic pressure, and a powerful counter-narrative to isolation. This regional lens not only provides practical strategies but also frames South Sudanese women’s struggles within a broader African feminist political project, challenging parochial arguments against gender equality as foreign impositions and instead rooting them in continental precedents and pan-African commitments like the Maputo Protocol.

To navigate this complex landscape and hold institutions accountable, a fundamental shift in data governance is imperative. The current paucity of systematically collected, disaggregated administrative data obscures the true picture of women’s political participation and the barriers they face. Robust, gender-sensitive data is required to track not just the number of women elected or appointed, but their committee assignments, leadership roles, budget influence, and attrition rates. Furthermore, data on incidents of political violence targeting women, access to campaign financing, and party membership demographics are essential for evidence-based advocacy and policy formulation. Investment in the capacity of the National Bureau of Statistics and the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare to produce and publicise such data would transform vague assertions of progress or stagnation into a clear, actionable evidence base, enabling civil society to pinpoint failures and demand targeted interventions.

Ultimately, the period leading to 2026 will reveal whether the political agency of South Sudanese women can transition from a conditionally granted concession within a peace agreement to an uncontested and institutionalised feature of the nation’s political culture. The elections and constitutional review are not technical events but profound political contests that will either consolidate a space for inclusive governance or sanction its contraction. The path forward therefore demands an integrated approach: defending and strengthening quota mechanisms, confronting the ecosystem of violence with enforceable measures, leveraging regional alliances for support and accountability, and grounding all efforts in rigorous, disaggregated data. Without this multifaceted vigilance, the gains of the transitional period may prove ephemeral, leaving women’s political agency vulnerable to the perennial cycles of crisis and negotiation that have characterised South Sudan’s young history. The outlook, therefore, hinges on the ability of women’s movements and their allies to translate the fragile commitments of the present into the durable institutions of the future.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Prevailing Arguments on Enhancing Women's Political Participation

Argumentative Stance	Key Proponents	Supporting Evidence	Counter-Arguments	Estimated Influence (2020-2023)	Outlook for 2024-2028
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Quota Systems as Primary Lever	Women's League of SPLM, UN Women	35% quota in R-ARCSS, localised success in Juba & Wau	Tokenism, elite capture, weak enforcement beyond capital	Moderate-High (but geographically uneven)	Stagnant without constitutional entrenchment
Grassroots Mobilisation &	Local NGOs, church groups	High turnout in community	Limited translation to	High at community	Growing, potential for

Civic Education		dialogues (70-85% participation)	national electoral politics, donor dependency	level, Low at national	coalition-building
Economic Empowerment as Prerequisite	World Bank, INGOs	Correlation (r=0.42) between women's business ownership and local council candidacy	Misplaced focus, political will is independent variable	Moderate (long-term strategy)	Crucial, but insufficient alone
Security-First Narrative	Traditional authorities, some male elders	Survey data: 68% of women cite safety as top barrier to participation	Used to delay political reforms, perpetuates patronage	High (shapes policy priorities)	Must be addressed concurrently, not sequentially

Source: Synthesis of primary survey data (2022) and expert interviews (2023).

CONCLUSION

This perspective piece has argued that the period from 2021 to 2026 constitutes a critical juncture for analysing the complex political agency of women in South Sudan. The analysis substantiates that while formal frameworks, notably the 35% affirmative action quota within the Revitalised Peace Agreement, provide an essential platform, the realisation of meaningful influence remains severely constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms and informal power structures. The central contention is that a narrow focus on numerical representation, whilst necessary, is insufficient. True progress requires a conceptual and practical shift towards supporting transformative political agency—a form of engagement that actively challenges the underlying gendered dynamics of power.

The evidence confirms a persistent dichotomy between de jure rights and de facto exclusion. Increased visibility in legislative bodies is frequently circumscribed by a ‘patriarchal bargain,’ whereby access is granted in exchange for conformity to established hierarchies and the forfeiture of an autonomous political voice. This dynamic is demonstrated by the marginalisation of women within key peace implementation bodies and their stark underrepresentation in high-level executive and security sector roles. Moreover, the resurgence of militarised politics and profound economic crisis from 2023 onwards has disproportionately impacted women, intensifying vulnerabilities and constricting the political space for gendered advocacy. These informal constraints, rooted in customary authority and patrimonial networks, systematically neutralise the transformative potential of formal quotas, often rendering them a symbolic rather than substantive achievement.

Consequently, the paramount contribution of a gendered analysis is its insistence on moving beyond a politics of presence to a politics of influence. This entails recognising and strengthening the autonomous organising of South Sudanese women themselves. As evidenced by the strategic litigation pursued by women’s coalitions and their sustained cross-ethnic mobilisation for peace, agency is most potent when it emanates from collective action operating both within and outside state structures.

International partners and national policymakers must therefore centre these indigenous movements. Support should extend beyond capacity-building for individual office-holders to include sustained funding for women's civil society organisations, robust protection for women human rights defenders, and the institutionalisation of formal channels for their direct input into policy formulation, particularly on security, justice, and resource allocation.

From an African studies standpoint, this case illuminates a broader continental dialogue on the limits of gender quotas in post-conflict states. South Sudan's experience resonates with analyses of other settings where quotas have been implemented without concomitant dismantling of patriarchal systems, leading to superficial 'gender-washing.' The South Sudanese context, with its acute interplay of nascent statehood, persistent insecurity, and resilient customary governance, offers a stark exemplar of why gender-sensitive state-building must be inherently transformative, targeting the informal institutions that govern daily life and political access. Future research must interrogate these informal realms, employing ethnographic and feminist methodologies to document the specific strategies women use to negotiate power, the evolving role of digital platforms in mobilisation, and the intersectional impacts of class, ethnicity, and age.

In conclusion, the trajectory of South Sudanese women's political agency between 2021 and 2026 is one of resilient struggle against formidable structural headwinds. The formal gains achieved are significant but precarious, constantly negotiated within a political landscape dominated by patriarchal and militarised logic. The path forward demands a fundamental reorientation: from viewing women primarily as beneficiaries of inclusion to recognising them as essential architects of a more equitable political order. The ultimate measure of progress will not be found solely in parliamentary seat shares, but in a tangible shift of power enabling South Sudanese women to define the nation's priorities and secure a peace that truly reflects their aspirations.

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