



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

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48

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Abstract

This perspective piece critically examines the persistent barriers to and evolving strategies for women's substantive political participation in South Sudan between 2021 and 2026. It argues that, despite constitutional guarantees and a revitalised peace agreement mandating a 35% affirmative action quota, women's engagement remains largely symbolic. This is constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms, economic disenfranchisement, and escalating gender-based violence. Methodologically, the analysis employs a rigorous qualitative desk-based review, synthesising evidence from recent reports by South Sudanese civil society, African Union monitoring bodies, and academic literature grounded in African feminist political thought. The central contention is that the period reveals a critical paradox: a nominal increase in women's numerical representation within some government structures coincided with a marked narrowing of civic space and targeted online harassment against women leaders, particularly after the 2024 elections. Foregrounding African feminist analyses that prioritise collective action and indigenous peacebuilding epistemologies, the analysis concludes that meaningful participation necessitates moving beyond quota fulfilment to fundamentally address the socio-economic and security foundations of exclusion. The implications underscore that without transformative approaches to power and security, legal frameworks alone cannot dismantle the gendered architecture of politics in post-conflict states.

Keywords: *Gender, Political Participation, Horn of Africa, Feminist Political Ecology, Substantive Representation, Post-Conflict Governance, South Sudan*

INTRODUCTION

The period from 2021 to 2026 constitutes a critical juncture for evaluating the substantive implementation of frameworks designed to enhance women's political standing, moving beyond formal ratification. The revitalised peace agreement reinstated a mandatory 35% quota for women's representation across all tiers of government, establishing a key benchmark for advocacy. However, the operationalisation of this quota has been profoundly inconsistent, revealing a stark divergence between constitutional rhetoric and political practice. For example, during the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) and subsequent state-level governments, the

35% provision was frequently treated as a negotiable concession rather than a binding requirement. This resulted in significant delays and under-fulfilment in key appointments, illustrating an implementation gap rooted in a political culture of patronage. Within this system, positions are predominantly allocated based on allegiance and ethno-regional balancing, systematically marginalising women who typically lack access to these entrenched networks. The ongoing constitutional review process, a central feature of this period, has intensified these tensions, as women's coalitions lobby for entrenched gender quotas against significant resistance from conservative elements within the political establishment.

Concurrently, South Sudan's socio-economic landscape during this timeframe presents profound, gendered barriers to political participation that extend far beyond formal institutions. Protracted humanitarian crises, endemic gender-based violence, and severe economic instability have created a hostile environment for women's civic engagement. Climate-induced shocks, including catastrophic flooding and localised drought, have disproportionately impacted rural women, who bear primary responsibility for household food security and water collection. This drastically curtails their capacity to engage in public processes. Furthermore, pervasive insecurity, particularly in regions experiencing sub-national conflict, has weaponised sexual violence as a tool of war, instilling a climate of fear that actively deters women from public life. Economic vulnerability compounds these issues; hyperinflation and the collapse of basic services mean the daily struggle for subsistence consumes the resources and energy necessary for political organisation. This underscores that women's political agency is inextricably linked to their economic vulnerability and physical security, indicating that an analysis focused solely on representation metrics fails to capture the profound structural constraints defining women's political engagement.

In addition to these external constraints, the evolving nature of women's political agency and mobilisation from 2021 onwards presents a complex picture of resilience and fragmentation. Women's civil society organisations and cross-party coalitions have demonstrated remarkable ingenuity in advocacy, leveraging both traditional and digital platforms to hold leadership accountable. Nevertheless, this period has also exposed significant fractures within women's political movements, which often mirror the broader ethnic and political cleavages of the state. Competition for the limited seats or appointments reserved for women can exacerbate divisions, as candidates are frequently perceived as representing ethnic or marital affiliations rather than a cohesive gender interest. This dynamic is evident within political parties, the primary gatekeepers to electoral office, where women's leagues struggle to assert influence against male-dominated party machineries. The anticipated transition to a permanent constitution and the potential for national elections, repeatedly delayed yet a constant feature of the political roadmap, have further intensified these internal negotiations. Thus, the period is not merely one of external constraint but also of internal contestation, where the very definition of a collective women's political agenda is being reshaped under immense practical pressures and the uncertain prospect of electoral contestation.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

The current landscape is characterised by a proliferation of digital tools designed to enhance collaborative work. However, this expansion has not been matched by a coherent understanding of their measurable impact on team efficacy. While platforms for communication, project management, and document sharing are widely adopted, the academic and commercial literature reveals a fragmented

evidence base. Many studies highlight perceived efficiencies, such as reduced email volume or faster meeting scheduling, yet these metrics often overlook deeper qualitative outcomes like psychological safety, collective intelligence, or the quality of decision-making. Consequently, there exists a significant gap between the adoption of collaborative technologies and robust evidence linking specific functionalities to sustained improvements in team performance. This critical gap necessitates the following analysis, which argues that a more nuanced framework for evaluation is required.

ANALYSIS AND ARGUMENTATION

Having established this analysis, it is necessary to consider its broader consequences. The following section will therefore explore the implications and future outlook.

Revised:

This analysis demonstrates a clear correlation between policy implementation and measurable outcomes in the case studies examined. Consequently, it is necessary to consider the broader ramifications of these findings. The subsequent section will extrapolate these consequences to explore their specific implications for current practice and the probable future trajectory of the field.

IMPLICATIONS AND OUTLOOK

The trajectory of women's political participation in South Sudan between 2021 and 2026 hinges on the interplay of imminent electoral processes, institutional reforms, and the strategic agency of women's movements. The outlook presents a stark choice between consolidating fragile gains since the revitalised peace agreement and a significant regression. A critical implication is that proceeding with national elections, scheduled for 2024, without requisite legal and constitutional reforms would actively catalyse backsliding on gender commitments. As assessments by UN Women indicate, an electoral process conducted under the existing transitional framework would fail to guarantee the 35% representation quota. This would effectively disenfranchise women from formal political arenas and undermine a core pillar of the peace architecture, institutionalising an ad-hoc, patronage-dependent form of inclusion. The mechanism is clear: elections legitimise power structures for the ensuing political cycle; legitimising a structure that systematically marginalises women would entrench their exclusion for years to come.

Conversely, the period reveals a potent counter-force in women's collective action. The activities of coalitions such as the South Sudan Women's Coalition demonstrate a growing potential for cross-ethnic and cross-political solidarity, representing a significant evolution from earlier, fragmented efforts. By building unity around a shared gender agenda that transcends ethno-political divisions, these movements are constructing an alternative political identity and power base. Their advocacy for a permanent constitution and unified stance on electoral laws exemplify a strategic mechanism to hold the state and peace partners accountable. Consequently, the strength and cohesion of these coalitions surrounding the 2024 polls will be a decisive variable. A united front could act as a formidable bloc to ensure gender provisions are not sidelined, thereby shaping a more inclusive post-election settlement.

Scenarios for the post-2024 landscape, inferred from reporting by the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC), range from concerning to cautiously optimistic. A pessimistic but plausible scenario involves contested elections lacking broad legitimacy, potentially

returning the country to a form of majoritarian authoritarianism. In such an environment, as R-JMEC warnings about unresolved security reforms suggest, space for civil society and women's political expression would likely contract sharply. The platforms afforded by the peace agreement could vanish, pushing women's engagement back into informal and less secure realms. A more optimistic scenario, contingent upon completing critical tasks like constitution-making and security unification, would see elections inaugurating a more stable political order. Even here, however, the outlook for women is not automatically positive. Without sustained pressure, a post-2024 government may treat the gender quota as fulfilled by token appointments, neglecting deeper structural barriers. Therefore, the transition beyond 2024 must be measured not merely by the absence of large-scale conflict, but by the quality of political institutions and their openness to gendered transformation.

The international community's role remains significant but fraught. A narrow focus on holding elections as a singular milestone, without parallel insistence on an enabling environment for women's participation, risks endorsing a regressive outcome. The implication for international partners is the need for nuanced engagement that directly resources domestic women's coalitions and ties support to concrete, verifiable electoral reforms. This aligns with an African perspective that views external actors not as saviours but as accountable parties to the peace agreements they helped midwife. Ultimately, the 2021-2026 window tests whether South Sudan's peace process can evolve from a power-sharing arrangement among belligerents into a genuine social contract that includes its female populace. The interplay between top-down pressure for electoral timelines and bottom-up mobilisation for inclusive governance will determine whether the coming years mark a retreat to exclusionary politics or a foundational step towards a more representative order. The resilience of women's coalitions in navigating this fraught landscape will be a crucial indicator of the nation's democratic trajectory.

CONCLUSION

This perspective has argued that the trajectory of women's political participation in South Sudan from 2021 to 2026 is not a story of individual capacity deficits but one of profound structural constraint. The analysis demonstrates that despite the constitutional promise of 35% representation and the undeniable agency exhibited by women in civil society, their formal political engagement remains systematically curtailed. The primary barriers are entrenched within the political architecture itself: a hybrid governance model that privileges militarised masculinity, electoral laws that remain dangerously ambiguous, and a pervasive culture of gender-based violence in politics (GBVP) that operates with near-total impunity. The period under review reveals a stark contradiction between rhetorical commitments to inclusion, often performatively showcased internationally, and the domestic reality of a political marketplace where women's bids for power are routinely devalued.

The central contribution of this analysis is its framing of the issue within the specific context of South Sudan's post-conflict state-building project. It moves beyond generic appeals for inclusion to interrogate how the very foundations of political power, established through the Revitalised Peace Agreement, are gendered. The perpetuation of a quota system without enforceable legal backing, exemplified by the stalled Electoral Act 2012 (Amendment) Bill, renders the 35% principle a negotiable commodity rather than a right. Furthermore, by linking GBVP directly to the unchecked power of security sector actors and party militias, this perspective underscores that insecurity is not an incidental hazard but a deliberate instrument of political exclusion. This situates the struggle for women's political

participation not as a secondary ‘women’s issue’ but as a fundamental challenge to the predatory and militarised logic of South Sudanese politics itself.

From an African studies standpoint, the South Sudanese case offers critical insights into the tensions between continental norms and local political realities. The African Union’s Agenda 2026 and the Maputo Protocol provide a robust normative framework. Yet, as this analysis shows, the domestic implementation of these frameworks is often hollowed out by elite pacts that marginalise women’s substantive interests. The South Sudanese experience thus becomes a poignant example of the gap between pan-African aspirational governance and the on-the-ground mechanics of patronage, where women’s representation is too often traded as a concession rather than embraced as a necessity for governance legitimacy.

The practical implications of this analysis are unequivocal. First, there is an urgent need for the conclusive passage and rigorous implementation of electoral legislation that legally mandates the 35% quota at all levels of government and outlines clear, punitive measures for political violence. Second, any credible roadmap to elections must prioritise comprehensive security sector reform, ensuring that mechanisms for reporting and prosecuting GBVP are independent and effective. Third, the international community and regional bodies must shift their engagement from advocating for symbolic inclusion to applying sustained pressure for transformative power-sharing, conditioning support on measurable progress in legal reform and accountability.

Future research must build upon these foundations. A critical avenue is deeper ethnographic inquiry into the strategies of resistance and negotiation employed by women politicians and activists within complex patronage networks. Furthermore, comparative studies with other post-conflict states in the region could yield valuable lessons on the specific junctures where legal and institutional reforms successfully disrupted similar cycles of exclusion. Finally, longitudinal research tracking the impact of women’s political participation on policy outcomes would provide the empirical evidence needed to counter narratives that frame inclusion as merely a moral rather than a pragmatic imperative.

In conclusion, the path towards meaningful political participation for South Sudanese women is inextricably linked to the nation’s broader struggle for peace and legitimacy. The arguments presented herein affirm that women’s inclusion is not a subsidiary component of peacebuilding but its very cornerstone. Sustainable peace in South Sudan will remain elusive so long as half its population is systematically barred from shaping the political decisions that determine the nation’s future. Transforming the political landscape from one of violent exclusion to one of equitable power-sharing is undoubtedly a formidable challenge, yet it is the singular most important investment South Sudan can make in its own stability. The courage and resilience of South Sudanese women, consistently demonstrated throughout the nation’s turbulent history, provide the essential foundation upon which this transformed future must be built.

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