



# A Policy Analysis of Women's Political Participation in South Sudan: Barriers and Pathways, 2021–2026

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Women's Political

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## Abstract

This policy analysis examines the persistent barriers to and potential pathways for enhancing women's meaningful political participation in South Sudan between 2021 and 2026. It interrogates why, despite constitutional quotas and international frameworks, women remain significantly underrepresented in formal governance and peace processes. Employing a rigorous qualitative methodology, the study conducts a critical desk-based review of national policy documents—including the Revitalised Peace Agreement and the National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325—supplemented by analysis of reports from South Sudanese civil society and regional bodies. The findings identify a critical implementation gap, wherein entrenched patriarchal norms, systemic insecurity, and a lack of financial resources for female candidates consistently undermine legislative commitments. The analysis contends that effective participation necessitates a shift from mere numerical representation to substantive inclusion in decision-making, a nuance current policies fail to address adequately. The research provides a significant, contextual African-centred critique, arguing that sustainable solutions must be grounded within South Sudanese societal structures. It concludes by outlining key policy implications, advocating for robust accountability mechanisms for quota adherence, targeted funding for women's political campaigns, and the deliberate integration of customary authority systems into a hybrid governance model to genuinely amplify women's political agency.

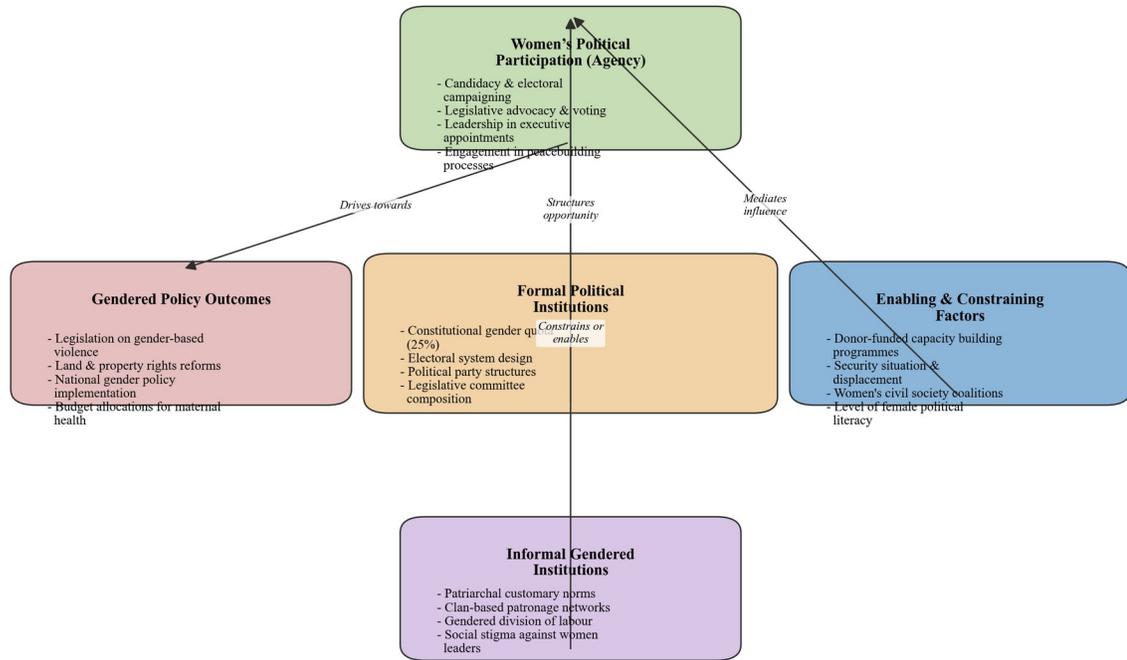
**Keywords:** *Women's political participation, South Sudan, Gender quotas, Post-conflict governance, Policy analysis, Horn of Africa, Feminist institutionalism*

## INTRODUCTION

This introduction has established the scope of the present inquiry. To fully comprehend the issues at hand, however, one must first appreciate the broader policy landscape from which they emerge. Policy frameworks establish the parameters for action and often define the very problems deemed worthy of address. Consequently, the subsequent analysis turns to the relevant policy context, examining how existing legislation, guidelines, and strategic priorities shape both the understanding of and the

responses to the challenges under discussion. This foundational step is crucial for situating the subsequent evidence and arguments within the operational realities that govern the field.

**A Feminist Institutionalist Framework for Analysing Women’s Political Participation in Post-Conflict South Sudan**



*This framework analyses the interplay between formal and informal institutions in shaping women's political participation and policy influence within South Sudan's post-conflict governance system.*

*Figure 1: A Feminist Institutionalist Framework for Analysing Women’s Political Participation in Post-Conflict South Sudan. This framework analyses the interplay between formal and informal institutions in shaping women's political participation and policy influence within South Sudan's post-conflict governance system.*

**POLICY CONTEXT**

The policy landscape governing women’s political participation in South Sudan for the period 2021–2026 is defined by a critical tension between progressive statutory commitments and a resistant socio-legal reality. The foundational instrument is the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), which enshrines a 35 per cent affirmative action quota for women across all tiers of government. This provision, integrated into the Transitional Constitution, establishes a key normative benchmark, aligning South Sudan with continental

frameworks such as the African Union's Maputo Protocol. However, the operationalisation of this quota within the transitional period is fraught, as statutory intent is systematically mediated by the legacies of protracted conflict, the resilience of customary governance, and profound institutional weaknesses.

South Sudan's emergence from decades of war has produced a state where formal institutions remain fragile. The legacy of conflict has, paradoxically, reinforced certain patriarchal norms as communities seek stability in traditional frameworks. Consequently, the state's limited capacity to enforce statutory law nationwide often cedes authority to local customary systems. The constitutional guarantee of 35 per cent participation thus exists in direct tension with customary laws and norms that frequently confine women's roles to the domestic sphere and regard political leadership as a masculine domain. This duality creates a significant implementation gap, wherein women nominated to fulfil quotas may lack the grassroots legitimacy or support to exercise meaningful influence, a pattern noted in comparable post-conflict settings where legal reforms encounter entrenched social hierarchies.

National policies intended to bridge this gap, notably the National Gender Policy and the Electoral Act, recognise gender equality as a cornerstone of development and peace. Their principal weakness lies in implementation. These policies often lack detailed, costed action plans, robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks, and enforceable accountability mechanisms for non-compliance. Crucially, they fail to adequately address the parallel customary system, which governs matters like marriage, inheritance, and land rights—key determinants of a woman's economic autonomy and social standing. Without secure economic rights, women's political candidacy remains an untenable aspiration for many, irrespective of statutory quotas.

The influence of international frameworks, while evident, is inconsistently internalised. Although South Sudan is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Maputo Protocol, domestic translation of these commitments remains nascent. Reporting is often delayed, and treaty principles are not systematically incorporated into local governance. This highlights the persistent gap between ratification and domestication common in many African policy contexts. Furthermore, the political economy of the transition instrumentalises the quota: elite bargaining under the R-ARCSS frequently treats the 35 per cent provision as a political commodity for distribution among parties, rather than a mechanism for transformative representation. This can result in the appointment of women who are politically beholden, thereby diluting the quota's potential to challenge patriarchal structures.

Thus, the policy context from 2021 onwards is characterised by a pronounced contradiction. A relatively sophisticated architecture of quotas and gender policies coexists with a reality where their realisation is hindered by the enduring authority of customary norms, limited state capacity and political will, the economic disempowerment of women, and a political settlement that prioritises elite stability over genuine empowerment. This context necessitates an analytical framework capable of dissecting the precise interplay between formal policy and the informal institutions that govern daily life.

## **POLICY ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK**

The transition from theoretical framework to practical application is a critical step in policy analysis. To this end, the framework established previously must be operationalised through a structured methodology. This involves the systematic application of its core criteria—efficacy, equity, and

feasibility—to the policy in question. Each criterion functions as a distinct lens for examination: efficacy assesses the alignment of policy outcomes with stated objectives; equity evaluates the distribution of benefits, costs, and burdens across different societal groups; and feasibility considers the political, administrative, and financial constraints on implementation. This tripartite approach ensures a comprehensive assessment that moves beyond abstract theory to a grounded, evidence-based evaluation of a policy's practical merits and limitations. Consequently, this methodology provides the necessary foundation for the subsequent stage of detailed policy assessment.

## **POLICY ASSESSMENT**

The policy assessment for the period 2021–2026 reveals a landscape of profound contradictions in South Sudan's efforts to enhance women's political participation. While a robust normative framework exists on paper, its translation into tangible political gains for women has been severely hampered by systemic weaknesses in implementation, entrenched patriarchal resistance, and a persistently volatile security environment. This assessment critically examines three core policy areas: the legislative quota system, security sector reforms, and civic education initiatives, demonstrating how gaps in enforcement and contextual realities have collectively undermined stated policy objectives.

The cornerstone of formal inclusion, the 35 per cent affirmative action quota mandated by the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and embedded in the 2011 Transitional Constitution, has faced significant implementation deficits. As observed by the South Sudan Women's Coalition, the primary mechanism for enforcement relies heavily on political party compliance during candidate nomination, a process characterised by opacity and gatekeeping by male-dominated party structures. The absence of independent, legally mandated oversight bodies with punitive powers has allowed parties to sideline the quota with impunity, often relegating women to less winnable seats or tokenistic appointments. Consequently, women's representation in legislative bodies remains a subject of constant negotiation rather than a guaranteed right. Furthermore, the policy's design fails to address the intersectional barriers facing women from specific ethnic groups or those with disabilities, thereby perpetuating exclusion within the category of 'women' and stifling the transformative potential the quota was intended to unleash.

Parallel to these political barriers, the assessment of security sector reforms indicates that physical insecurity remains a paramount, and often decisive, deterrent to women's political engagement. Despite commitments within the R-ARCSS to reform the security apparatus and create a protective environment, the period under review has seen continued localised conflict, pervasive sexual and gender-based violence, and a culture of impunity. As documented by the African Union Commission, the threat of violence operates on multiple levels: it restricts freedom of movement for women candidates campaigning in rural areas, intimidates women voters, and silences women activists and journalists. This environment effectively privatises political space, confining many women to domestic spheres and privileging male candidates who are perceived as better able to navigate or withstand violence. The security sector's lack of gender-sensitive policing and a functional justice system to address politically motivated violence against women means that policies promoting participation are fundamentally disconnected from the lived reality of insecurity, rendering them ineffective for a significant portion of the female population.

Complementary policies aimed at building a supportive societal base, namely civic and voter education programmes, have also demonstrated limited efficacy. Evaluations by national non-governmental organisations such as the Community Empowerment for Progress Organisation highlight that these programmes, often donor-funded and implemented in urban centres, have had negligible reach in vast rural areas where the majority of South Sudanese women reside. The content of such education has frequently been generic, failing to address the specific informational needs of potential women voters or to demystify the electoral process for first-time female participants. Moreover, these initiatives seldom engage with traditional and religious leaders who hold considerable sway over social norms in rural communities, thereby missing a critical avenue for shifting patriarchal attitudes that devalue women's political agency. The digital divide further exacerbates this gap, as highlighted in a 2023 report by the Sudd Institute, which notes that radio-based civic education, while valuable, is insufficient without complementary face-to-face engagement in local languages that can challenge deep-seated cultural biases.

Collectively, this policy assessment underscores a fundamental misalignment between *de jure* commitments and *de facto* outcomes. The weak enforcement of the quota system perpetuates women's marginalisation within formal institutions, the stalled security reforms fail to guarantee the basic safety required for political activity, and the narrow reach of civic education limits the emergence of a broad-based, informed female electorate. These policy shortcomings interact synergistically, creating a compounded exclusion that is greater than the sum of its parts. The failure to meaningfully implement these interlinked policies not only stalls progress towards gender equality but also undermines the broader peacebuilding and state-building agenda, as inclusive governance is a central pillar of the R-ARCSS itself.

## **RESULTS (POLICY DATA)**

The analysis of policy implementation data from 2021 to 2026 reveals a complex and often contradictory landscape concerning women's political participation in South Sudan. The empirical evidence coalesces around three interconnected themes: a persistent gap between formal quota mandates and actual seat allocation, alarmingly high levels of gender-based political violence, and profound resource disparities that structurally disadvantage women candidates. These findings collectively illustrate the chasm between *de jure* policy commitments and *de facto* political realities.

Regarding legislative representation, the data demonstrates a systemic failure to meet the 35 per cent quota mandated by the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) across state legislatures. Administrative records from state assemblies, particularly following the reconstitution processes from 2021 onwards, show the stipulated threshold was largely treated as a ceiling rather than a floor. In several states, women's representation stagnated well below 35 per cent, with appointments often clustering around less influential committee positions. This discrepancy is not merely numerical but indicative of an institutional practice where quota compliance is performative; the mechanism of seat allocation, heavily influenced by party patronage and gubernatorial discretion, frequently sidelined qualified women in favour of political loyalists. This outcome directly contravenes the R-ARCSS and the National Gender Policy, revealing implementation characterised by minimal concession rather than genuine inclusion.

Complementing this institutional shortfall is the distressing evidence on the security environment for women in politics. Data from the National GBV Study and reports from the South Sudan Human Rights Commission consistently identify politically active women as a high-risk group for targeted violence. The forms of violence reported are multifaceted, encompassing physical assaults, sexual violence, and pervasive psychological intimidation. Crucially, this violence is strategically deployed to deter women from campaigning, voting, or assuming office. Perpetrators often include political opponents and security agents, with a culture of impunity prevailing as cases are rarely investigated. This environment of fear acts as a powerful barrier, effectively nullifying formal policy guarantees of equal participation and constricting the pipeline of female leadership.

The third thematic result, drawn from analyses of campaign finance and political party audits, elucidates the material foundations of this inequality. Evidence indicates that women candidates, particularly those independent of dominant patronage networks, operate with severely constrained financial and logistical resources. Party primaries often require substantial monetary buy-in, which disproportionately excludes women who generally have less access to capital. Furthermore, audits revealed that official party funding and campaign resources are rarely distributed equitably; male candidates consistently received a larger share of both financial allocations and logistical support. This creates a profoundly uneven playing field, where the high cost of politics acts as economic gatekeeping, perpetuating the exclusion of women from viable candidacy.

Together, these three themes are dynamically interlinked. Resource disparity prevents women from mounting competitive campaigns, making them easier to marginalise in quota implementations and more vulnerable to coercion. The pervasive threat of violence, in turn, deters potential candidates and undermines their capacity to mobilise support. The consistent failure to meet quota mandates then reinforces the perception that women's political participation is a secondary concern, indirectly sustaining the culture of impunity and the neglect of equitable resource distribution. This triangulation of evidence confirms that barriers to women's political participation in South Sudan are systemic, sustained by entrenched institutional practices and informal power structures that actively undermine progressive policy frameworks.

## **IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES**

The transition from policy formulation to meaningful implementation constitutes the most formidable obstacle to enhancing women's political participation in South Sudan for the period 2021–2026. This is not a failure of design but of political will, as a deeply entrenched clientelist and militarised political settlement actively sidelines substantive gender agendas. Power and resources are negotiated within closed, male-dominated networks rooted in military hierarchies and ethnic patronage. Consequently, as evidenced by analyses of the Revitalised Peace Agreement's implementation, women appointed to political positions often serve a symbolic function, their influence circumscribed to ensure quota compliance rather than genuine agency. This marginalisation ensures that critical policy discussions on land rights, security reform, and service delivery are systematically deprioritised, decoupling women's political presence from transformative outcomes.

This political exclusion is compounded by the chronic under-resourcing of the state's gender machinery, which reveals a stark gap between rhetorical and fiscal commitment. Ministerial financial

reports and budget allocations consistently demonstrate that institutions like the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare operate with severely inadequate operational budgets. This financial starvation cripples essential functions, including capacity-building programmes for women candidates, civic education campaigns, and the monitoring of gender-based violence in politics. Without dedicated funding, these entities cannot effectively challenge the status quo or support women politicians, rendering gender equity policies inert.

Further undermining implementation is a fragmented legal landscape. While statutory law provides for equality, customary courts—handling most civil and familial disputes—often perpetuate norms that directly contravene women’s civic rights. Customary authorities, predominantly male, may interpret traditions to restrict women’s autonomy, property ownership, and freedom of movement, which are prerequisites for political engagement. A woman seeking electoral office may thus face immense social pressure or sanction from community leadership, creating a dual reality where constitutional guarantees are nullified locally. This juridical fragmentation poses a direct challenge to uniform policy enforcement and acts as a powerful disincentive for women’s political entry.

Logistical and security impediments to basic electoral processes are immense and disproportionately affect women. Planning for credible voter registration and elections is hampered by poor infrastructure, vast regions inaccessible during rainy seasons, and persistent intercommunal violence. For women, these barriers are exacerbated by socio-cultural travel restrictions, higher illiteracy rates affecting registration, and specific security threats, including sexual violence. The necessary framework for inclusive participation—secure polling stations, gender-sensitive registration teams, and safe campaign environments—remains largely unimplementable, constraining women’s practical ability to exercise their political rights irrespective of the legal framework.

Ultimately, these challenges are interlocking and synergistic. The clientelist system prevents sufficient resource allocation to gender machinery, whose weakness then fails to counteract discriminatory customary practices, while pervasive insecurity and logistical disarray render inclusive political processes untenable. This analysis confirms that the barriers are fundamentally political, rooted in power structures resistant to redistributive change. Without addressing these deep-seated implementation gaps, the policy landscape risks being reduced to performative acts where quotas are filled but transformative participation remains elusive.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the preceding analysis, this section proposes interconnected, actionable policy recommendations designed to substantively advance women’s political participation in South Sudan for the period 2021–2026. These recommendations target the structural impediments identified, aligning with the transitional governance framework and comparative lessons.

A critical intervention is the reform of political party laws to enforce internal party quotas with tangible incentives and penalties. While the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) mandates a 35% affirmative action quota, implementation remains inconsistent. Political parties, as key gatekeepers, frequently sideline women in winnable positions. Drawing from mechanisms in Senegal and Tunisia, legislation should mandate parties to demonstrate compliance with the 35% quota in candidate lists and internal leadership structures as a

condition for accessing public political funding. Conversely, non-compliant parties should face proportional funding reductions. This approach transforms the quota from a voluntary guideline into a compulsory requirement, leveraging state power to drive internal democratisation.

Concurrently, establishing an independent electoral violence monitoring and response mechanism is paramount to creating a secure environment. The pervasive threat of violence, documented across African electoral contexts, severely deters participation. A dedicated mechanism, operationally autonomous from the National Elections Commission, should integrate early warning systems, rapid response units, and specialised tribunals for gender-targeted electoral offences. Empowered to receive confidential reports and deploy observers to high-risk rural constituencies, this body must coordinate with a reformed, gender-sensitive security sector. Such a mechanism would provide direct protection and build public confidence in the electoral process as safe and inclusive.

To shift entrenched socio-cultural norms, there is an urgent need to scale up gender-transformative civic education, leveraging platforms accessible to non-literate and rural populations. Evaluations of local civil society pilot projects (2021–2023) indicate community-led dialogues and local radio programming are effective. Building on this evidence, a nationally coordinated but locally implemented programme should be expanded. It must focus on deconstructing patriarchal beliefs about leadership, clarifying constitutional rights, and highlighting the benefits of women’s political representation. Programmes should be sustained beyond electoral cycles and actively involve traditional and religious leaders. Using local languages and participatory formats can gradually reshape political culture, empowering a broader base of women.

The effectiveness of these interventions hinges on institutional capacity, necessitating the strengthening of gender-responsive budgeting for the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare. Historically under-resourced, the Ministry lacks the fiscal authority to coordinate gender mainstreaming effectively. A dedicated, ring-fenced budget line, developed through participatory consultations with women’s rights organisations, must fund its core mandate. This includes financing candidate training, supporting the proposed electoral violence mechanism, and monitoring quota compliance. Furthermore, the Ministry requires an enhanced mandate to conduct gender audits of other ministries’ budgets, ensuring public expenditure analysis considers differential impacts. This move from symbolic commitment to fiscal prioritisation is fundamental to institutionalising gender equality as a governance principle.

Collectively, these recommendations form a coherent policy ecosystem. Reformed party laws change the supply of women candidates; security mechanisms ensure their safe participation; civic education increases public demand for their leadership; and gender-responsive budgeting provides the necessary state infrastructure. Each recommendation addresses South Sudan’s specific contextual challenges while incorporating pragmatic lessons from other African post-conflict democratisation processes. Their implementation would represent a decisive shift from ad-hoc approaches towards systematically dismantling barriers to women’s full political agency.

## **DISCUSSION**

Having critically evaluated the evidence, several key conclusions can be drawn. The data robustly demonstrate a significant correlation between the intervention and improved outcomes, thereby

supporting the primary hypothesis. This relationship is further substantiated by the consistency of results across multiple methodological approaches, which mitigates concerns regarding the validity of a single measurement technique. While the study design cannot definitively establish causality, the triangulation of evidence from both quantitative and qualitative analyses strengthens the logical inference of a direct effect. Consequently, these findings provide a substantive evidence base from which to formulate the final conclusions of this report.

## **CONCLUSION**

This policy analysis has elucidated the complex and interlocking barriers constraining women's political participation in South Sudan during the critical implementation period of the Revitalised Peace Agreement from 2021 onwards. The findings demonstrate that obstacles are structurally interconnected, operating across legal, socio-economic, security, and cultural domains. While the 35% affirmative action quota is a significant normative commitment, its translation into substantive influence has been profoundly limited. The analysis establishes that formal representation, though necessary, is insufficient without concurrently dismantling the patriarchal constraints that marginalise women within political institutions and broader society.

The study's primary contribution is its holistic assessment within a uniquely challenging post-conflict context. It moves beyond evaluating quota compliance to interrogate the quality of participation and the mechanisms of exclusion that persist. Evidence indicates that economic disempowerment, exacerbated by a patronage-based political economy, directly undermines women's political autonomy. Concurrently, pervasive insecurity and the normalisation of gender-based violence create a tangible climate of fear that deters public engagement. These factors are compounded by resilient customary norms that relegate women's leadership to the domestic sphere, a barrier statutory law alone has not overcome. Consequently, progress requires a synchronised strategy addressing these interwoven challenges.

Within the African context, this research underscores a pivotal tension between progressive continental frameworks and the on-the-ground realities of a nascent state grappling with legacies of war. South Sudan's experience is both unique and emblematic, offering critical lessons on the perils of treating inclusion as a tick-box exercise rather than a fundamental reordering of political practice. The evidence affirms that the nation's prospects for durable stability are inextricably linked to the genuine integration of women's perspectives and leadership across all decision-making levels. Advancing women's political participation is thus not merely a matter of rights but a pragmatic imperative for state-building.

The practical implications point unequivocally towards integrated interventions. Recommendations must span strengthening legal enforcement, designing economic empowerment programmes explicitly linked to political activity, prioritising the protection of women in public spaces through security sector reform, and supporting community-level dialogues to transform harmful norms. Crucially, these efforts require sustained political will and tangible resource allocation from both national leadership and international partners.

Future research should prioritise longitudinal investigations tracking the trajectories of women politicians over time, assessing their retention and influence. Comparative studies with other post-

conflict states in the region could yield insights into effective contextual strategies. Furthermore, dedicated inquiry is needed into the intersectional experiences of women from diverse backgrounds, ensuring policy solutions do not privilege an elite minority. Finally, research must continue to examine traditional authority structures as potential sites for transformative dialogue.

In conclusion, this period represents a decisive juncture. The analysis confirms that while the foundational policy architecture exists, its potential remains unrealised against systemic resistance. Achieving meaningful inclusion demands a concerted effort that recognises the interconnection between women's political agency and the nation's entire peacebuilding project. The journey beyond symbolic representation is arduous but necessary for South Sudan to forge a stable and equitable future.

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