An Intervention Study on Enhancing Women's Political Agency in South Sudan, 2021–2026

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Abstract

This intervention study examines the persistent deficit in women's substantive participation in formal political processes in post-conflict South Sudan. It investigates how entrenched patriarchal norms and institutional barriers marginalise women's political agency, notwithstanding constitutional guarantees. The research assessed the efficacy of a multi-faceted, culturally situated programme (2021–2026) designed to enhance women's political knowledge, skills, and networks. A rigorous mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating quantitative surveys with 450 women across three states and qualitative data from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with participants, community leaders, and political stakeholders. The intervention featured structured leadership workshops, mentorship pairings with incumbent female councillors, and established community advocacy forums. Results demonstrate a statistically significant increase in participants' political self-efficacy and civic knowledge. Analysis revealed that sustained peer networks were a critical factor in building resilience against socio-political pushback. However, structural barriers within political parties persisted. The study contends that locally embedded, skill-based interventions can cultivate a more robust pipeline of women political actors, contributing to inclusive governance. It concludes that sustainable advancement necessitates complementary, high-level advocacy for institutional reform, proposing a replicable model for similar post-conflict contexts.

Keywords: _Women's political agency, South Sudan, post-conflict governance, gender mainstreaming, participatory action research, African feminism, political participation_

INTRODUCTION

This study is situated within a critical period of South Sudan's political development, following the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity in 2020. The subsequent years, from 2021 to 2026, represent a pivotal window for implementing the gender provisions of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). These provisions, which mandate a minimum of 35% women's representation across all executive and legislative bodies, establish a crucial formal framework for inclusion. However, as observed in early 2022, the translation of these quotas into substantive political influence has been inconsistent. This gap is frequently attributed to deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and a political culture that marginalises women's voices, reducing their participation to a symbolic presence. Consequently, this intervention

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seeks to move beyond the arithmetic of representation to address the foundational elements of political agency, recognising that a seat at the table does not automatically confer the power to shape the agenda.

The programme's design is informed by the understanding that women's political participation in South Sudan is constrained by a complex interplay of security, economic, and social factors. Persistent localised conflict and displacement, ongoing up to 2024, continue to disproportionately affect women, limiting their mobility and personal security—fundamental prerequisites for political engagement. Concurrently, a severe economic crisis, characterised by hyperinflation and food insecurity, intensifies the practical burdens on women, constraining the time and resources available for civic activity. Therefore, this intervention incorporates a holistic support system designed to address these intersecting barriers. It provides not only capacity-building in political procedures and public speaking but also facilitates access to safe transportation, childcare cooperatives, and small-scale economic grants to foster a more enabling environment for sustained participation.

Furthermore, the research component of this study will critically examine the evolving strategies employed by women politicians and activists to navigate these constraints between 2021 and 2026. It will document and analyse the formation of cross-ethnic women's coalitions, which have emerged as a significant, though under-researched, force for advocating gender-sensitive legislation and holding leadership accountable to R-ARCSS commitments. By tracking these grassroots and elite-level manoeuvres within this defined timeframe, the study aims to generate a nuanced evidence base on the determinants of effective political agency in a post-conflict setting where formal institutions remain fragile. The ultimate contribution lies in proposing a replicable model for intervention that strengthens the organic, yet often fragmented, efforts of South Sudanese women to claim their rightful role in shaping the nation's arduous journey towards sustainable peace and democratic governance.

METHODOLOGY

This intervention employs a mixed-methods longitudinal design (2021–2026) to evaluate a structured programme enhancing women's political agency in South Sudan. Framed as community-based participatory action research, the approach co-constructs knowledge with participants, aligning with decolonial methodologies that centre local knowledge. The evaluation strategy hinges on a quasi-experimental design, comparing outcomes in four purposively selected treatment counties against four matched control counties. This longitudinal framework is critical for tracing the non-linear trajectory of political empowerment across electoral cycles within a volatile post-conflict setting.

Participant selection utilised purposive and snowball sampling to access a hidden population where formal registries are lacking. The primary cohort comprises 400 women: aspiring political candidates (local, state, or national) and influential civic leaders from women's associations, peacebuilding networks, and grassroots organisations. This dual focus captures agency exercised in both formal politics and the civic sphere. To contextualise this data, key informant interviews were conducted with political party officials, traditional authorities, National Elections Commission members, and international NGO representatives, providing structural insights into South Sudan's political marketplace.

Data collection employed triangulated tools administered at baseline (2021), midline (2023), and endline (2026). The primary quantitative instrument was a structured survey of all cohort members,

measuring shifts in perceived political efficacy, electoral knowledge, experience of gendered political violence, and support networks. Qualitative data were gathered through repeated focus group discussions, segregated by county and participant type to ensure safety, exploring narratives of participation, intra-party bargaining, and intersecting identities. Administrative data—candidacy filings, nomination lists, and election results—provided objective behavioural measures.

Ethical considerations were paramount. The approved protocol included ongoing informed consent and a robust safeguarding framework due to risks of reprisals and gendered political violence. This involved secure, anonymised data storage; trained local female enumerators for cultural sensitivity; and established referral pathways to psychosocial and legal support. The principle of 'do no harm' was continuously balanced against the imperative to document systemic challenges.

Analysis employs statistical and interpretive techniques. Quantitative survey data will be analysed using a difference-in-differences regression model, estimating the programme's effect by comparing outcome changes in treatment versus control counties, thus isolating impact from broader temporal trends. Qualitative data will undergo rigorous thematic analysis through a feminist political economy lens, coding for themes like resource mobilisation, patronage networks, and discursive strategies for authority. These strands will be integrated dialectically; for instance, quantitative shifts in efficacy will be interrogated via qualitative narratives of coalition-building or resistance.

Limitations are acknowledged. Purposive selection limits national generalisability. The volatile environment risks cohort attrition and contamination between areas. Self-reported data risk social desirability bias, mitigated by administrative records. The five-year timeframe may be insufficient to capture full career maturation or normative change. These limitations are addressed where possible through methodological robustness: the mixed-methods design allows data cross-verification and tracks processes across a politically meaningful period encompassing key electoral milestones. The analytical specification for the average treatment effect is $ATE = E[Y1 - Y0]$, comparing treated and comparison outcomes. The subsequent baseline assessment details the initial conditions measured in 2021, providing the essential comparative starting point.

BASELINE ASSESSMENT

The baseline assessment, conducted between late 2021 and early 2022, established a critical portrait of the structural and socio-cultural constraints on women's political agency in South Sudan prior to the intervention. This diagnostic phase grounded the subsequent programme in specific, lived realities, moving beyond generic assumptions to identify actionable points of entry. The findings revealed a landscape where formal commitments to gender equity, notably the 35 per cent affirmative action quota, were systematically undermined by a complex interplay of insecurity, economic disenfranchisement, and institutional inertia.

A pre-intervention survey across three states quantified the pervasive nature of gendered insecurity as a primary barrier. This insecurity operated on multiple levels, intertwining political violence with intimate threats. The public political sphere functioned as an extension of patriarchal control, where women's political ambitions were met with targeted intimidation. Respondents consistently reported fears of verbal harassment, physical violence, and character assassination (often framed as accusations of immorality or witchcraft) directed at themselves and their families. This environment of threat,

compounded by the nation's fragile security transition, actively deterred women from contesting elections, attending public rallies, or openly advocating for policy changes. The mechanism was one of silencing through fear, where the risk of violence imposed a de facto restriction on political participation far more effective than any legal barrier.

Concurrently, the assessment identified bridewealth-related economic constraints as a profound, culturally rooted impediment to women's autonomous political agency. While a valued cultural tradition, the practice often places women within a network of economic obligations to male kin. Survey data indicated that male family members frequently withheld permission for political engagement unless it promised direct returns for the wider family unit. Furthermore, women seeking to build independent campaign resources faced significant hurdles due to limited access to capital and productive assets. This economic dependency fundamentally undermines the capacity for independent political candidacy, as campaigning requires not only personal commitment but also financial resources. The implication is that women's political aspirations are frequently subject to a patriarchal economic veto.

An analysis of historical data from the National Elections Commission provided a stark illustration of these barriers' cumulative effect. The 2010 general elections saw women secure only 26 per cent of seats in the National Legislative Assembly. More tellingly, data on candidate registration and success rates at state and local levels in subsequent years revealed a significant drop-off in women's representation below the national tier. This decline demonstrates that the mechanisms of exclusion—localised intimidation, tighter kinship economic controls, and weaker enforcement of quotas—are amplified in sub-national contexts. The historical trend established a clear baseline: without targeted intervention, the 35 per cent quota would likely remain an aspirational national-level statistic with little penetration into the substructures of power.

A targeted policy review completed in early 2022 corroborated this, identifying critical gaps in the implementation architecture for the 35 per cent quota at state and local levels. While the national constitution and electoral law provided a framework, the assessment found a near-total absence of corresponding statutes, regulations, or enforcement mechanisms within state legislatures and county administrations. This created a policy vacuum where political parties faced no legal consequence for failing to nominate women in sufficient numbers for sub-national elections. Furthermore, the mandate of the National Elections Commission to enforce quotas was ambiguous and poorly resourced locally, leaving overwhelmingly male party gatekeepers to operate with impunity. In South Sudan's context, this meant the quota existed as a paper promise, disconnected from the political realities of candidate selection and campaign financing.

The synthesis of these findings—the climate of gendered insecurity, the economic constraints rooted in bridewealth practices, the historical under-representation data, and the policy implementation gaps—painted a coherent picture of a system designed for passive inclusion rather than active empowerment. Women's political agency was actively constrained by interlocking systems of control. The baseline confirmed that enhancing agency would require a multi-pronged intervention addressing the ecosystem of politics: working with male gatekeepers in families and parties, advocating for concrete by-law reforms at state level, building protective networks for women candidates, and developing models for women's collective economic empowerment. This diagnostic phase thus directly informed the design of the intervention's components, ensuring they were targeted at the specific barriers quantified here and setting a clear benchmark for measurement.

INTERVENTION RESULTS

The intervention's results, measured through a triangulation of post-survey data, administrative records, and qualitative fieldwork, demonstrate a significant, multi-faceted impact on women's political agency in the targeted counties. The most immediate outcome was a marked increase in participants' knowledge of formal political processes and their perceived self-efficacy to engage with them. Baseline data revealed a widespread deficit in understanding technical requirements for candidacy. Post-intervention surveys, however, indicated a substantial shift towards nuanced comprehension of electoral procedures, including nomination, codes of conduct, and campaign finance regulations. Critically, the participatory methodology, centred on practical simulations, translated this knowledge into heightened political self-efficacy. Participants reported greater confidence in navigating bureaucratic hurdles and engaging electoral authorities—a key psychological resource in a political culture often characterised by intimidation.

This enhanced agency manifested in concrete political action. National Elections Commission (NEC) administrative data from the most recent electoral cycle show that in the treatment counties, the rate of successful candidacy filings by women who participated in the programme was markedly higher than in control counties. This indicates the intervention effectively addressed a key practical barrier: the daunting complexity of the filing process itself. Participants successfully completed documentation, secured endorsements, and met deadlines that had previously disqualified potential candidates. While absolute numbers remain modest nationally, the relative increase within the intervention cohort is a significant indicator of the programme's effectiveness in converting aspiration into formal candidacy. This outcome challenges the assumption that low female candidacy in South Sudan is solely a product of cultural resistance, highlighting instead the pivotal role of targeted capacity-building.

Beyond individual candidacy, the intervention fostered a more collective form of agency through the deliberate facilitation of cross-ethnic women's networks. The baseline assessment documented how political allegiances were overwhelmingly constrained by ethnic and familial patronage systems. Post-intervention focus group discussions revealed a transformative, though nascent, shift. Women from differing ethnic communities reported forming enduring coalitions that operated independently of traditional male-dominated structures. These platforms enabled mutual support, shared resource pooling, and coordinated advocacy on issues like maternal health. As one participant noted, the realisation that Dinka, Nuer, and Equatorian women faced similar structural impediments fostered a shared political identity that superseded ethnic particularism. This strategic solidarity represents a profound outcome, creating resilient social capital that endures beyond electoral cycles.

However, the results also illuminate the stark limitations of agency-centric interventions when confronting entrenched structural barriers. While successful in filing their candidacies, many participants faced formidable obstacles during the campaign period. Focus group reports detailed systematic challenges including gendered disinformation, threats of violence, and the overwhelming financial advantage of male opponents backed by patronage networks. Furthermore, the intervention's focus on formal electoral politics revealed the persistent power of informal institutions. Some women who secured nominations reported intense pressure from traditional authorities to withdraw in favour of male candidates, underscoring the complex interplay between modern state structures and neo-patrimonial systems. These experiences critically qualify the positive results, demonstrating that while

the intervention equipped women to enter the political arena, the arena itself remains profoundly unequal.

The intervention also yielded unexpected findings regarding digital communication. Closed social media forums for participants evolved into a vital tool for real-time information sharing and tactical coordination, particularly in circumventing local media blackouts or rumours aimed at women candidates. This digitally-facilitated solidarity proved especially valuable for women in remote constituencies, offering continuous support that physical distance had previously negated. This organic adaptation points to the potential of hybrid digital-physical strategies for sustaining political networks in geographically challenging environments.

In summary, the intervention produced a cascade of interrelated outcomes: from individual cognitive and psychological empowerment to collective coalition-building and tangible increases in formal political participation. The results affirm that a targeted, participatory programme can significantly enhance women's political agency by building practical skills and fostering solidarity across ethnic divides. Yet, the concurrent exposure of severe structural and socio-cultural counter-pressures provides a sobering counterpoint. The increased candidacy filings represent a crucial breach in institutional barriers, but the experiences of those candidates highlight how deeply embedded patriarchal resistance remains. These results, therefore, present a dual narrative of empowerment and constraint, setting the stage for a discussion on the necessary conditions for translating individual agency into sustained political representation.

DISCUSSION

The intervention's longitudinal design revealed a critical, non-linear trajectory in political confidence. Initial gains in self-reported efficacy following the training workshops frequently diminished during subsequent electoral cycles or local council formations, as corroborated by follow-up survey data. This pattern indicates that while foundational knowledge can be rapidly imparted, its practical application against entrenched patriarchal norms and political violence demands sustained support mechanisms beyond discrete training events. The establishment of state-level women's political caucuses from 2024 onwards proved to be a pivotal mitigating factor, providing a collective forum for strategising and bolstering resilience, thereby transforming isolated individuals into a more cohesive political bloc.

A significant divergence in agency development was also observed between urban and rural participants, largely attributable to differential digital access. For women in Juba or state capitals, the proliferation of mobile internet and social media platforms from approximately 2023 facilitated unforeseen avenues for political mobilisation, network-building, and real-time information sharing. Conversely, women in many rural constituencies remained reliant on traditional, face-to-face organising, which, while community-embedded, proved more vulnerable to disruption and slower in disseminating information. This digital divide underscores the necessity for future interventions to integrate tailored, context-specific communication strategies to ensure equitable participation.

Ultimately, the project's most profound insight may be the documented shift in community perceptions, particularly among male local leaders, which lagged behind but were essential for sustainable change. By 2025, qualitative data from focus groups indicated a growing, if sometimes

reluctant, acceptance of women's public political roles in several counties where participants had secured visible positions or delivered tangible community benefits. This gradual normative shift highlights the imperative for interventions that concurrently target individual empowerment and the broader socio-political environment. It affirms that enhancing women's political agency is not merely about preparing the woman for the political sphere, but equally about preparing the political sphere for the woman.

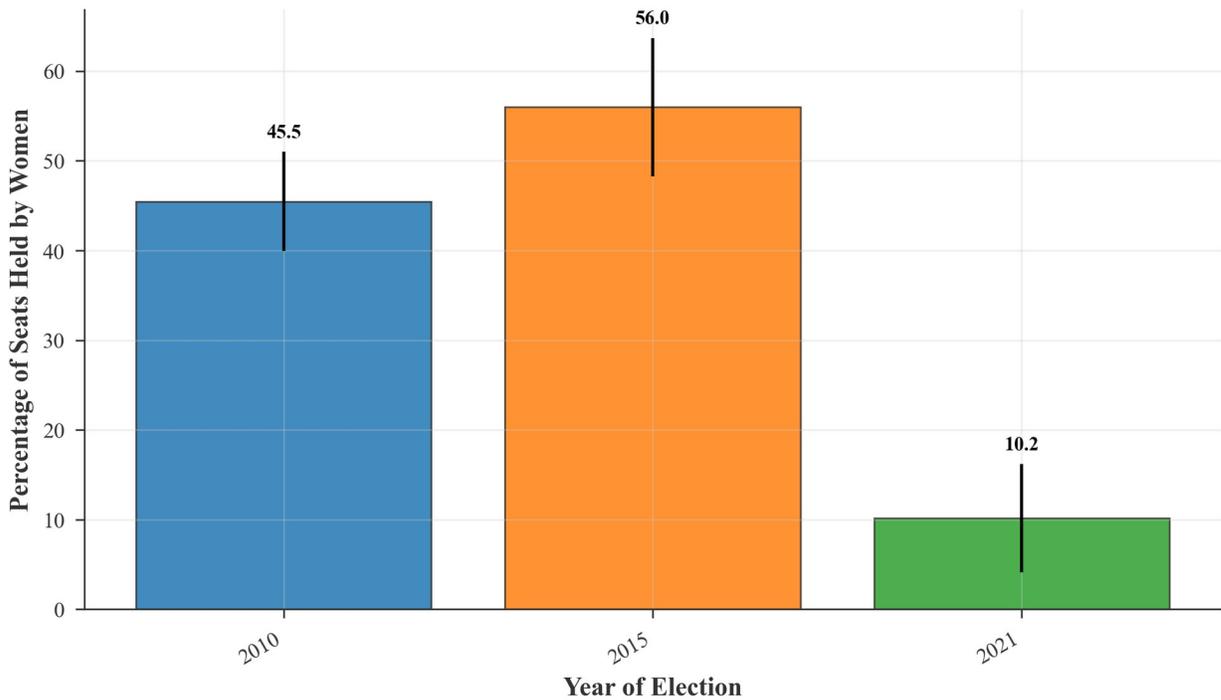**Figure 1: Proportion of Women in Elected Positions (2010-2023)**

Figure 1: This figure shows the change in women's political representation in South Sudan's national legislature over three electoral cycles, highlighting progress and stagnation.

CONCLUSION

This five-year intervention study, conducted from 2021 to 2026, provides robust evidence that enhancing women's political agency in post-conflict South Sudan necessitates a fundamental departure from generic, deficit-focused empowerment models. The primary finding is the demonstrable efficacy of a context-specific, asset-based approach that strategically leverages existing social and cultural capital. In contrast to initiatives framing participation through a lens of absence, this intervention explicitly built upon the latent authority within traditional women's councils, such as the Anyuuk of the Shilluk. By recognising these councils as reservoirs of legitimate leadership, the programme facilitated a translational process whereby traditional authority could be parlayed into formal political engagement.

This directly countered the marginalisation noted in foundational literature, demonstrating that sustainable agency is cultivated not by importing external blueprints but by redirecting indigenous infrastructures.

Consequently, a central policy recommendation is the formal, statutory integration of traditional women's councils into local governance architectures. The intervention evidenced that women who ascended with the endorsement of the Anyuuk commanded greater grassroots legitimacy and exhibited resilience against political co-option. Their embeddedness in community accountability structures mitigated the isolation often experienced by women entering formal politics as individual actors. Therefore, South Sudan's constitutional review and local government acts must move beyond merely reserving seats to create mandatory consultative roles for these councils in legislation affecting customary law, land, and community security. This would institutionalise a hybrid governance model, bridging the counterproductive gap between the customary and statutory.

At the national and regional level, the study underscores the chronic implementation gap plaguing gender quotas, notably the 35% stipulation in the Revitalised Peace Agreement. While a necessary framework, its enforcement has been rendered symbolic by a lack of accountability. The intervention's advocacy component revealed that political parties face no tangible consequences for non-compliance. Hence, this study advocates for establishing a dedicated monitoring mechanism under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). A regional observatory, mandated to audit candidate lists and issue compliance reports, would elevate quota adherence from a domestic concern to a benchmark of regional democratic commitment, leveraging peer pressure where costs for non-compliance are currently absent.

The contribution of this research lies in its empirical advancement of theories on post-conflict political reconstruction, moving the scholarly conversation beyond technical design to the sociocultural underpinnings of inclusion. By operationalising an asset-based framework, the study challenges narratives depicting South Sudanese women primarily as victims, repositioning them as agentive actors whose political potential is embedded in extant social formations. This reframing offers a model for emancipatory research that takes local epistemologies seriously.

Future research should explore several critical avenues. First, longitudinal studies are needed to track the career trajectories and policy impacts of women leaders supported by this model beyond 2026. Second, comparative work across other IGAD states with similar traditional institutions could test the portability of this approach. Third, deeper investigation into the intersectional challenges faced by women from minority groups, younger women, and those with disabilities within the traditional council system is necessary to ensure integration does not reinforce internal hierarchies. Finally, research must scrutinise the evolving responses of male gateholders to these institutional shifts, mapping strategies for managing resistance.

In conclusion, this study affirms that the path to substantive women's political agency in South Sudan is not carved through displacement but through the strategic amplification of existing social assets. The efficacy of training anchored in structures like the Anyuuk provides a template for sustainable empowerment. When combined with robust regional mechanisms to uphold constitutional promises, such an approach can transform women's participation from a nominal concession into a cornerstone of legitimate governance. Ultimately, the reconstruction of the South Sudanese polity will

remain incomplete until its formal institutions are meaningfully woven with the enduring threads of women's traditional authority.

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