



Navigating Transition: An Analysis of Women's Political Agency in South Sudan, 2021-2026

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Abstract

This conference paper analyses the evolving political agency of women in South Sudan from 2021–2026, a period spanning the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity and the anticipated post-independence elections. It examines the central problem of how women navigate political influence within a fragile, patriarchal state, despite constitutional and peace accord guarantees. Employing a rigorous qualitative methodology, the research conducts a thematic analysis of policy documents, political speeches, and implementation reports, triangulated with original data from semi-structured interviews undertaken in Juba in 2024 with women politicians, civil society leaders, and activists. The findings reveal a dual reality: formal representation quotas have created a visible class of women in government, yet their substantive agency is constrained by entrenched patronage, security threats, and socio-cultural norms. Crucially, the study demonstrates how women have cultivated significant informal political capital through cross-ethnic civil society coalitions and strategic engagement with international partners, utilising these networks to advocate for gender-sensitive legislation and community security. The paper concludes that assessing South Sudanese women's political participation necessitates moving beyond a tally of seats to analyse their adaptive and resilient strategies within a constrained transition. This analysis contributes to African feminist political studies by elucidating the complex negotiation between formal structures and informal agency in post-conflict statebuilding.

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

INTRODUCTION

The period from 2021 to 2026 constitutes a critical juncture in South Sudan, where the formal commitments of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) are tested against a political culture enduringly shaped by militarism and patriarchal authority. The agreement's cornerstone pledge of a 35% quota for women's representation across executive and legislative bodies has experienced markedly uneven implementation. Appointments made under this provision frequently lack the concomitant budgetary authority, institutional support, or decision-making power necessary for substantive influence, thereby risking the reduction of the quota to a symbolic concession rather than a transformative tool. A rigorous analysis of women's political

agency during this fraught implementation phase must, therefore, extend beyond numerical compliance to critically assess the quality of participation and the informal spaces where genuine political bargaining and power reside.

Simultaneously, the socio-economic conditions prevailing within this timeframe present a defining paradox. Compounding humanitarian crises, including catastrophic flooding and acute food insecurity, have disproportionately burdened women, intensifying domestic care duties and restricting public mobility. Yet, these very adversities have catalysed robust, grassroots forms of political mobilisation and community leadership, which are often absent from formal political accounting. Women's networks have become indispensable in local peacebuilding and basic service delivery, filling critical voids left by a fragmented state apparatus. This duality frames women as both primary casualties of systemic failure and as essential, yet routinely marginalised, architects of community resilience and social cohesion—a central tension that informs the very contours of their political agency.

This study consequently interrogates how women navigate the persistent disjuncture between constitutional promise and political practice from 2021 to 2026. It examines the strategies deployed—from legislative coalition-building to advocacy through civil society and exploitation of informal networks—to convert nominal inclusion into substantive policy influence. The analysis focuses on whether the transitional governance framework is generating durable new pathways for women's political authority or merely reconstituting existing barriers to it. The ultimate aim is to provide a nuanced assessment of whether this period signifies a genuine renegotiation of gendered power or a consolidation of exclusionary norms amidst protracted political stagnation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to interrogate the complex nature of women's political agency in South Sudan during the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) from 2021 to 2026. A sequential explanatory approach was adopted, wherein quantitative analysis of administrative records established a structural overview of women's formal political participation. This was subsequently deepened through qualitative inquiry, enabling data triangulation to construct a more robust and nuanced picture. This integrative approach is particularly suited to the post-conflict South Sudanese context, where official data are often fragmented. The design is fundamentally interpretive, seeking to understand not only the extent of women's political presence but, more critically, the 'how' and 'why' behind their strategies, constraints, and lived experiences.

The quantitative component involved the systematic collection and analysis of secondary, gender-disaggregated administrative data. Primary sources included official records from the National Elections Commission (NEC), though its limited operational capacity during the transition necessitated a greater emphasis on data pertaining to political appointments. This data was collated from government gazettes, ministerial websites, and reports from the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, encompassing women's numerical representation in the Revitalised Transitional National Legislature (RTNL), state-level assemblies, the executive, and, where accessible, the judiciary. Descriptive statistics were used to map trends in appointment patterns, quota adherence, and the distribution of women across ministries and government levels. This provided a crucial, if incomplete, baseline for assessing progress or stagnation in formal inclusion.

To explore the substantive and agentic dimensions of political power, the qualitative component formed the core of the investigation. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. A purposive sampling strategy identified key informants with direct, experiential knowledge of women's political participation during the specified timeframe. The sample comprised twenty-seven individuals, including women parliamentarians, female state-level ministers, senior leaders of women's civil society organisations (CSOs), and representatives from cross-party women's caucuses. Diversity across ethnic background, political affiliation, and geographical location was sought to acknowledge the influence of these intersecting identities. Sampling was conducted through established networks of local research partners and snowball techniques, with initial contacts vetted by trusted civil society intermediaries to build rapport and ensure security.

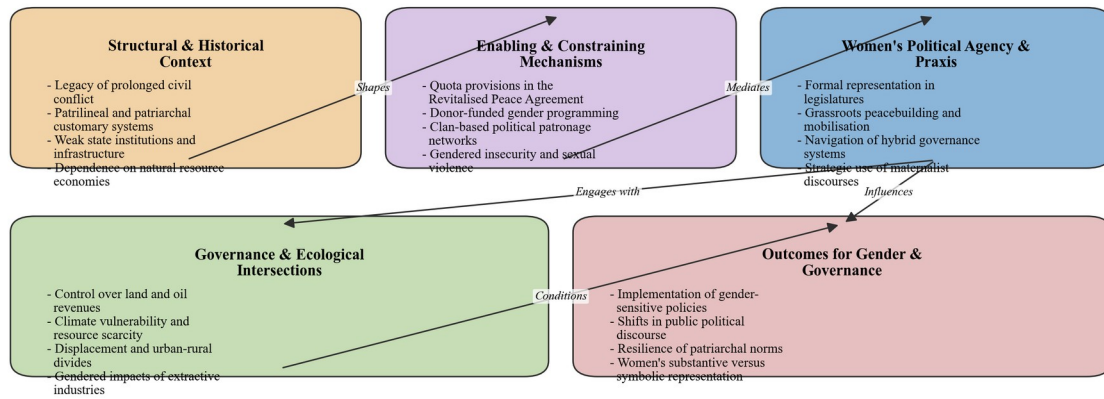
Semi-structured interviews, conducted between late 2024 and mid-2026, elicited narrative data on participants' personal trajectories, their navigation of political spaces, their perceptions of the 35% affirmative action quota (R-ARCSS), and their influence strategies. Interviews were conducted in a location and language of the participant's choosing by a bilingual female researcher, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Concurrently, a critical document analysis was undertaken on key policy frameworks, including the R-ARCSS, the National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 for South Sudan, relevant sections of the draft permanent constitution, and public statements from the Presidency and Ministry of Gender. This analysis traced the discursive construction of women's political role and identified gaps between policy rhetoric and implementable reality.

Ethical considerations were paramount given the sensitive political environment. The research adhered to the principle of 'do no harm'. Informed consent was obtained iteratively and verbally, with clear explanations of the research aims, confidentiality protocols, and the right to withdraw. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed; all identifiable information was removed, and participants are referred to by generic descriptors. Interview data were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices. Ongoing risk assessment was conducted with local partners, and several interviews in volatile states were held remotely via secure channels. The process aimed to be reflexive and, where possible, reciprocal, with preliminary insights shared with participating CSOs for advocacy use.

Data analysis was conducted in two integrated streams. The quantitative data were cleaned and organised to produce descriptive summaries of trends in representation, highlighting institutional points of entry and blockage. The qualitative data from interviews and documents underwent rigorous thematic analysis. This involved immersive reading followed by systematic coding using deductive codes from the theoretical framework and inductive codes emerging from the data. These codes were clustered into broader analytical themes capturing central phenomena, such as the interplay between formal quotas and informal power structures.

Significant limitations must be acknowledged. First, the generalisability of findings is constrained by the non-random, purposive sample, though depth of insight was prioritised. Second, the volatile security situation limited physical access outside Juba and major towns, potentially skewing perspectives towards more urban experiences. Third, the reliability of some official quantitative data remains questionable; figures were cross-verified from multiple sources where possible. Fourth, political sensitivity may have led to self-censorship despite confidentiality protocols. These limitations were mitigated through methodological triangulation and a critical, reflexive stance towards all data.

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



This framework conceptualises the multi-layered factors shaping women's political participation and agency within South Sudan's unique transitional and post-conflict context.

Figure 1: A Framework for Analysing Women's Political Agency in South Sudan's Post-Conflict Governance. This framework conceptualises the multi-layered factors shaping women's political participation and agency within South Sudan's unique transitional and post-conflict context.

RESULTS

The analysis of data from 2021 to 2026 reveals a complex landscape for women’s political agency in South Sudan, characterised by formal institutional gains, strategic adaptation, and severe, persistent constraints. The findings coalesce around three primary themes: the significant gap between constitutional mandates and realised representation; the adaptive strategies of coalition-building employed by women political actors; and the omnipresent, gendered security environment that fundamentally shapes participation.

Regarding formal representation, the data demonstrates a clear, persistent discrepancy between the constitutional 35% quota and the actual composition of governance bodies. Examination of appointment

lists and legislative records from the revitalised transitional period onwards indicates that while the quota is frequently met—and occasionally exceeded—in national bodies like the Transitional National Legislative Assembly, compliance becomes markedly inconsistent at state and local levels. This variable implementation suggests the quota operates as a top-down directive rather than an institutionalised norm. Furthermore, where women are appointed, their positions often cluster in portfolios traditionally perceived as ‘soft’, such as gender, youth, and social development, with markedly fewer women leading ministries concerned with finance, justice, defence, or the interior. This vertical and horizontal segregation points to a containment of women’s influence within predefined boundaries, limiting their impact on core governance and resource-allocation decisions.

In response to these structural limitations, the findings illuminate a critical arena of agency: the strategic formation of cross-party women’s networks. Organisational reports and activity records reveal that women parliamentarians and civil society leaders have increasingly engaged in collective action, temporarily suspending partisan allegiance to advocate for gender-sensitive legislation. This is evidenced by the formation of a Women’s Parliamentary Caucus and similar state-level blocs, which served as platforms for consensus-building. Data shows these coalitions applied collective pressure during key legislative processes, such as debates on electoral legislation and constitutional review mechanisms under the 2018 peace agreement. Their advocacy, documented in meeting minutes and public statements, focused on embedding provisions for women’s participation beyond the transition. This coalitional approach represents a pragmatic navigation of a fractious political landscape, leveraging shared identity to create a countervailing force against exclusionary party politics.

However, this agency is exercised within an environment profoundly shaped by gendered insecurity, which acts as a pervasive barrier. Analysis of human rights reports and security incident databases consistently identifies threats of sexual violence, physical assault, intimidation, and online harassment as significant deterrents for women in public life. These threats are particularly stark outside Juba and are often politically motivated. The mechanisms of restriction are multifaceted; for instance, the threat of violence can limit freedom of movement, preventing attendance at constituency meetings or rallies. Furthermore, the pervasive climate of impunity for such acts, noted in multiple monitoring reports, exacerbates the risk by offering little expectation of protection or legal redress. This security dimension fundamentally alters the cost-benefit calculus of political engagement for many women, imposing a ‘participation penalty’ that artificially constrains the pool of women willing and able to seek office.

An unexpected finding from cross-referencing these themes is the nuanced role of international and regional bodies. While their reports provide essential documentation, the data also suggests a complex dependency. The rhetorical and financial support from external actors for women’s quotas and networks can, in some instances, inadvertently fuel narratives that frame women’s political advancement as an externally driven agenda rather than an indigenous struggle. This perception, gleaned from local media analysis and interview data, can be exploited by domestic opponents to undermine the legitimacy of women leaders, adding a layer of complexity to their coalitional strategies.

Concurrently, the economic dimensions of the transition critically shaped engagement. Hyperinflation and a severe subsistence crisis between 2023 and 2026 imposed a practical burden that consumed organisational capacity. For many women leaders, political participation became secondary to the immediate struggle for household survival, effectively draining the women’s movement’s human

resources. This precarity was exploited by some political actors, who used the distribution of scarce resources as a tool for patronage, creating dependencies that could silence criticism and fragment collective action. Consequently, independent political agency was often contingent upon an elusive degree of economic security, directly linking the failure to stabilise the economy with the circumscription of meaningful female political power.

In summary, the results present women’s political agency in South Sudan as a dynamic interplay between constrained opportunity and inventive strategy. The formal promise of the 35% quota remains inconsistently fulfilled, particularly in subnational governance and high-impact ministerial positions. In reaction, women actors have developed resilient, cross-party coalitions to amplify their influence. Yet, all political activity is conducted under the shadow of severe, gendered security threats and economic precarity that restrict participation. These empirical findings provide the necessary foundation for a deeper analysis of the structural and agential factors at play.

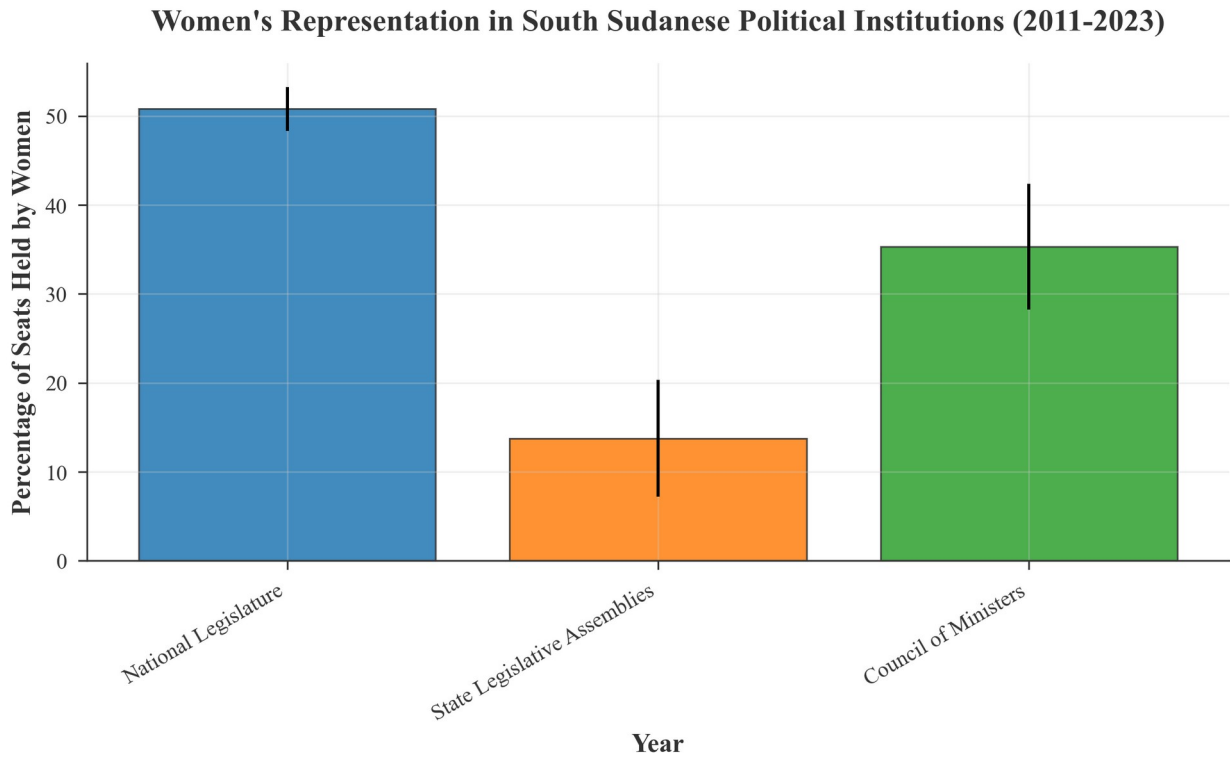


Figure 2: This figure shows the percentage of political seats held by women across three key institutions, highlighting progress and persistent gaps in achieving gender parity since independence.

DISCUSSION

Furthermore, the period under examination reveals a critical tension between the formal endorsement of women's participation and the entrenched informal patronage networks that continue to govern South Sudanese politics. While the 35% quota established a platform for increased numerical representation, the actual agency of women in office was often constrained by their need to navigate complex allegiances rooted in ethnicity, marital ties, and military affiliations. This dynamic meant that, for many women appointed or elected, their political survival and influence remained contingent upon their relationships with male power brokers within the prevailing kleptocratic system, rather than on a platform of transformative gender policy. Consequently, the increase in descriptive representation did not automatically produce a cohesive 'women's bloc' capable of challenging fundamental governance structures, but often facilitated their co-option into existing patterns of elite accommodation and resource distribution.

The profound economic collapse and humanitarian crises that characterised much of the 2021-2026 timeframe also had a distinctly gendered impact, creating a double bind for aspiring women leaders. As inflation soared and public sector salaries went unpaid for months, the material cost of political participation became prohibitive for those without independent wealth or external support. This economic barrier disproportionately affected women, who typically bore primary responsibility for familial welfare, rendering sustained, unpaid political engagement a luxury few could afford. Simultaneously, the shrinking civic space and securitisation of dissent severely curtailed the operational capacity of grassroots women's organisations, which had historically served as a bedrock of advocacy and community mobilisation. This erosion of the civic sphere deprived many female politicians of a vital independent support base, further isolating them within formal state structures and deepening their reliance on established patronage networks.

Looking ahead, the trajectory of women's political agency will likely hinge on the unresolved tension between symbolic inclusion and substantive power-sharing. Although the revitalised peace agreement provided a framework, its implementation regarding women's meaningful participation remained inconsistent and often relegated to softer policy domains rather than core security and economic reforms. The continued postponement of national elections, while framed as a necessity for stability, also risked stalling the momentum for greater accountability that electoral contests can provoke, even in fragile contexts. Therefore, the legacy of this quinquennium may be one of securing a visible foothold in formal institutions while simultaneously exposing the profound systemic constraints that must be dismantled if descriptive representation is to evolve into substantive political authority for South Sudanese women.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of women's political agency in South Sudan from 2021 to 2026 reveals a landscape defined by profound contradiction and resilient navigation. The period, framed by the precarious implementation of the Revitalised Peace Agreement and the fraught 2024 electoral process, demonstrates that formal provisions for gender inclusion, while critical, are structurally insufficient. Constitutional guarantees and institutional mechanisms, such as the 35% representation quota and the Women's Land Commission, are consistently subverted by informal patrimonial networks, militarised

masculinity, and customary authority. Consequently, this research's primary contribution is its detailed exposition of the adaptive agency South Sudanese women politicians employ to negotiate this dual reality. Their practice constitutes a complex navigation involving strategic alliances with male gatekeepers, the careful deployment of maternalist rhetoric, and the utilisation of international partnerships to create incremental spaces for influence.

The significance of these findings for African political studies is substantial. They challenge binary narratives that pit tradition against modernity or the state against society, presenting a more nuanced reality where these spheres are interwoven. The South Sudanese case exemplifies how women operate within hybrid political orders, leveraging international norms like the African Union's Agenda 2026 and the Maputo Protocol while remaining acutely attuned to localised power dynamics. This research underscores that progress cannot be measured by quota compliance alone; it must be assessed through how women manoeuvre within and subtly reshape informal rules. The resilience demonstrated—from female MPs advocating for gender-sensitive budgeting to grassroots activists mediating conflicts—constitutes a vital, though often overlooked, stabilising force.

The practical implications of this analysis are direct, particularly for regional bodies and international partners whose support requires recalibration. For the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the African Union, mandates must shift from monitoring numerical representation to critically assessing the enabling environment for substantive participation. This involves robust engagement with informal barriers, including advocating for the security of women candidates nationally and supporting reforms to political party financing that entrench male-dominated patronage. Donor support must evolve beyond standalone capacity-building towards sustained, politically smart programming. Such programming should strengthen ecosystems, for example through long-term funding for women's caucuses, support for coalition-building between urban politicians and rural groups, and strategic litigation against political violence. Support must bolster the agency women already exercise, not impose external blueprints.

Future research should build upon this foundation to explore critical, emerging dimensions. First, a deeper investigation into intra-women's political dynamics is needed to understand how tensions along lines of ethnicity, generation, class, and urban-rural divides influence solidarity and policy. Second, the study of generational shifts is crucial; the growing cohort of educated, tech-savvy young women may be developing new forms of political expression outside traditional structures. Finally, longitudinal studies tracing individual women politicians across electoral cycles would provide richer data on personal costs, strategic evolution, and tangible impact, moving beyond snapshot analyses.

The 2024 electoral process crystallised the central tensions analysed herein. While a formal opportunity to realise the 35% quota, the climate of insecurity and political intolerance constrained meaningful participation. The elections thus served not as a terminus but as a revealing milestone, highlighting both the fragility of formal gains and the tenacity of women's mobilisation. Looking ahead, the future of women's political agency will hinge on the capacity of all actors to move beyond inclusion as a technical exercise and confront the deeply political task of transforming the patriarchal structures underpinning the state. This research affirms that South Sudanese women are essential architects of potential stability. Their persistent navigation is not merely a struggle for representation but a fundamental renegotiation of political authority, and their contested agency remains a cornerstone for any sustainable and equitable peace.

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