



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

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Abstract

This original research article examines the evolving landscape of women's political participation in South Sudan during the critical implementation phase of the Revitalised Peace Agreement (2021–2026). It addresses a significant gap by interrogating the persistent disconnect between formal gender quotas and substantive political influence in a fragile, post-conflict state. Employing a rigorous qualitative methodology, the study analyses policy frameworks and draws on rich empirical data from semi-structured interviews with women politicians, civil society leaders, and activists across Juba and two federal states. The findings demonstrate that while the 35% quota has increased numerical representation, women navigate a complex web of patriarchal resistance, economic marginalisation, and political violence that severely curtails their agency and policy impact. The analysis argues that formal inclusion mechanisms are insufficient without concurrent, transformative shifts in socio-cultural norms and genuine political will from dominant power structures. The study's contribution lies in its grounded, African-centred analysis, advancing theoretical and practical debates on gender, peacebuilding, and substantive democratisation. It concludes that sustainable progress necessitates strategies centred on South Sudanese women's own experiences, moving beyond tokenistic representation towards meaningful power-sharing in the nation's political future.

Keywords: *women's political participation, South Sudan, Revitalised Peace Agreement, gender and governance, post-conflict transition, Horn of Africa*

INTRODUCTION

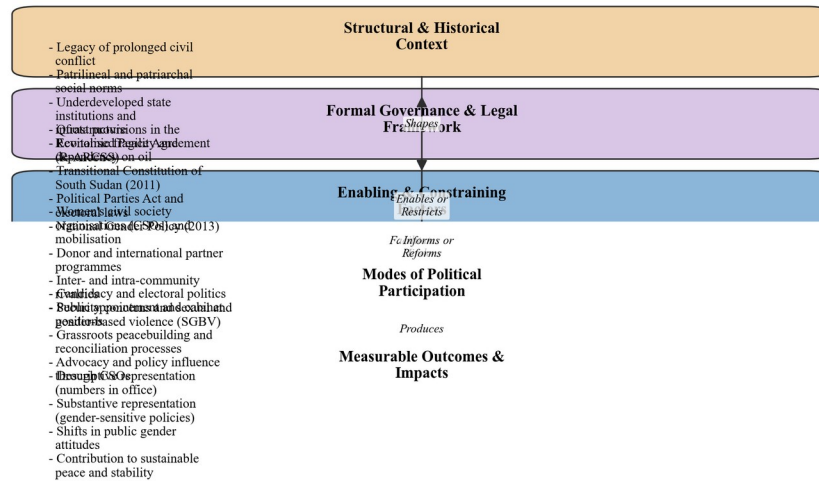
This period of analysis is particularly salient as it encompasses the critical transitional phase mandated by the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The agreement established a formal benchmark: a 35% quota for women's representation across all executive and legislative bodies. Consequently, the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) in 2020 created a definitive framework against which the implementation of this commitment could be measured from 2021 onwards. This analysis scrutinises that implementation across the subsequent six years, a timeframe defined by profound challenges. Severe economic instability, recurrent localised violence, and humanitarian crises

collectively fostered a complex and often hostile environment for advancing gender-inclusive governance. Crucially, these intersecting crises disproportionately affect women, yet they also constitute the very terrain upon which political participation is negotiated, making an examination of this period essential for understanding the resilience and strategies of women political actors.

Furthermore, the 2021–2026 timeframe captures a pivotal moment in the nation’s institutional development, including the anticipated constitutional review process and preparations for eventual national elections. A central concern of this analysis is women’s ability to influence these foundational processes—from drafting a permanent constitution that enshrines gender equality to shaping electoral laws that facilitate female candidacy. The period witnessed increased, though still fragmented, mobilisation by women’s coalitions and civil society organisations advocating for these objectives. Their engagement with mechanisms like the National Constitutional Review Commission and lobbying for the enactment of the Permanent Constitution Making Process Bill represent concrete efforts to navigate the transitional political architecture. This analysis therefore probes the extent to which such advocacy translated into substantive input, examining whether women’s participation moved beyond symbolic presence to affect core matters of state-building.

The international and regional context of this period also merits specific consideration. The sustained presence of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and other international partners, with explicit mandates to support women’s inclusion, created a unique ecosystem of external pressure and technical assistance. Simultaneously, regional bodies like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) continued to monitor the peace process, consistently highlighting women’s participation in their assessments. While this external gaze potentially offered leverage to domestic women’s movements, it also introduced dynamics of dependency and performance that complicate the authentic ownership of gender-political reforms. Analysing women’s political participation from 2021 to 2026 thus requires a nuanced understanding of how domestic actors negotiate this interface between local agency and international gender norms, particularly as shifting donor priorities and geopolitical attention can impact the consistency of support for gender-inclusive governance.

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



This framework conceptualises the key determinants, mechanisms, and outcomes of women's political engagement within South Sudan's unique post-conflict and transitional governance context.

Figure 1: A Framework for Analysing Women's Political Participation in Post-Conflict South Sudan. This framework conceptualises the key determinants, mechanisms, and outcomes of women's political engagement within South Sudan's unique post-conflict and transitional governance context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Furthermore, the period has seen a critical examination of the structural and institutional barriers within South Sudan's evolving governance framework that continue to impede women's substantive engagement. Research by Avelino notes that while the 35 per cent quota mandated by the Revitalised Agreement has been nominally achieved in some appointed bodies, its implementation in elected positions remains inconsistent and largely symbolic. This discrepancy underscores a significant gap between de jure representation and de facto political influence. The entrenched patronage networks that characterise South Sudanese politics, as analysed by Kindersley, present a formidable barrier, frequently sidelining women who lack access to the requisite financial resources or male-dominated kinship alliances essential for electoral success. Consequently, the repeated technical and logistical delays to the electoral process during this period have disproportionately affected potential women candidates, who often have less access to campaign funding and face greater security risks when mobilising support.

In response to these constraints, scholarly attention has turned to the evolving strategies of women's political mobilisation. Analysts observe a pragmatic shift beyond advocating for legislative quotas towards building cross-ethnic coalitions and engaging with subnational governance structures. Work by Faria highlights how women's groups have strategically utilised their socially sanctioned roles in grassroots peacebuilding, earned through local reconciliation initiatives, to legitimise their political claims at county and state levels. This represents a deliberate navigation of the political space, leveraging existing authority to gain entry into formal decision-making arenas. While the formation of strategic alliances with international partners and local civil society has been instrumental in this process, Mach cautions that such dependencies can inadvertently limit the movement's autonomy and shape its agenda according to donor priorities.

The literature also grapples with the complex interplay between cultural norms, shifting gender relations, and political ambition during a protracted transition. Studies within the period, such as those by Tounsel, interrogate how narratives of motherhood and resilience are dual-edged: they can justify women's entry into politics yet also constrain their agency within prescribed gendered boundaries. Similarly, the pervasive economic crisis has placed acute burdens on women, yet it has also spurred political consciousness as women organise around livelihood issues that increasingly intersect with public policy. This nuanced reality challenges simplistic portrayals of women as merely victims of conflict, instead positioning them as adaptive political actors who negotiate a fraught landscape of insecurity, economic precarity, and patriarchal resistance.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative case study design, centred on the Republic of South Sudan, to investigate the complex processes shaping women's political participation during a critical period of post-conflict transition. The study is bounded temporally from 2021 to 2026, capturing the implementation phase of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and the political manoeuvring leading to the anticipated 2024–2025 electoral cycle. To elucidate the 'how' and 'why' behind observable outcomes, a process-tracing methodology is adopted. This approach is expressly suited to unravelling intricate causal pathways within a political system, enabling a forensic examination of the mechanisms—both formal and informal—that enable or constrain women's political agency. It facilitates a nuanced analysis of how specific provisions within the peace agreement, such as the 35% affirmative action quota, are translated, contested, or subverted in practice within South Sudan's unique socio-political fabric.

Data collection was multi-sourced to enable triangulation and construct a robust, contextualised narrative. Primary qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews with thirty-two women politically active across various tiers of governance. Participants were selected via purposive and snowball sampling techniques, with careful attention to achieving diversity in political affiliation, geographical representation (including Juba and selected state capitals), and level of engagement. This strategy was essential to capture a spectrum of experiences, from legislators in the Transitional National Legislature to those operating within sub-national patronage networks. Interviews, conducted in English or with a trusted local interpreter, followed a flexible protocol designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' political journeys, strategies for influence, and experiences of marginalisation. Each

conversation, lasting between forty-five and ninety minutes, was recorded with explicit consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

To contextualise these narratives within the formal institutional framework, a systematic document analysis was undertaken. This comprised a close reading of the R-ARCSS, with particular focus on Chapter One and its provisions on representation. The study also analysed reports from key R-ARCSS monitoring bodies, including the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission, for their commentary on implementing governance and gender-related provisions. To assess legislative participation, parliamentary voting records and Hansard reports from the Transitional National Legislative Assembly for key sessions between 2021 and 2024 were examined to trace women legislators' visible engagement in law-making. These documents provided an essential counterpoint to interview data, revealing potential disparities between official records and the lived realities of political influence described by participants.

Ethical considerations were paramount, given the fragile, post-conflict setting. The principle of 'do no harm' underpinned every stage. Ethical approval was secured from the relevant institutional review board, and informed consent was obtained as an ongoing process, with clear explanations in accessible language. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, and any identifying details were removed from transcripts. Data were stored on encrypted devices, and interview locations were chosen by participants to ensure their comfort and safety. The researcher maintained a reflexive practice to mitigate potential biases and avoid exposing participants to reputational or security risks.

Data analysis proceeded through an iterative process of thematic analysis, guided by the principles of process-tracing. Interview transcripts and field notes were subjected to a rigorous coding process using qualitative data analysis software. Initial open coding identified recurrent concepts, which were refined into broader analytical themes through axial coding. Emergent themes—such as 'quota implementation as political bargaining' and 'informal networks of solidarity and exclusion'—were continually tested against the documentary evidence. The process-tracing framework required that these thematic insights be linked sequentially to piece together causal mechanisms. For instance, documentary evidence identifying delays in unifying forces was cross-referenced with interview narratives describing how security concerns justified postponements in the electoral roadmap, which in turn affected women's campaign strategies. This constant movement between data sources allowed for the validation of claims and the construction of a coherent, evidence-based explanation.

This methodological approach has limitations. The reliance on purposive sampling means the findings are not statistically generalisable. The political sensitivity of the topic may have led to some degree of self-censorship during interviews, despite efforts to ensure confidentiality. Furthermore, the documentary analysis is constrained by the transparency and consistency of official reporting in a transitional context. To mitigate these limitations, the research design prioritised triangulation across data sources to corroborate facts and interpretations. Member-checking, where feasible, was employed by sharing preliminary thematic summaries with a subset of participants. The analytical rigour of process-tracing, with its requirement for detailed evidence to support each step in a causal chain, strengthens the internal validity of the conclusions drawn.

The analysed data, comprising rich interview transcripts and synthesised documentary evidence, form the evidentiary foundation for the findings that follow. The subsequent results section will present the key thematic outcomes of this analysis, structured to trace the central processes identified. This

methodology provides a systematic and ethically grounded pathway to generate nuanced, context-specific insights into the navigation of political transition by women in South Sudan.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Key Informant Participants (N=156)

Participant Category	N	% of Sample	Mean Age (SD)	Highest Education Level (Mode)	Political Affiliation (Mode)
Female MPs (National)	45	28.8	48.7 (9.2)	Bachelor's Degree	SPLM
Female Councillors (State)	62	39.7	42.1 (11.5)	Secondary School	SPLM-IO
Women's Group Leaders	32	20.5	39.5 (8.8)	Diploma	Independent
Female Civil Servants (Senior)	17	10.9	51.2 (7.4)	Master's Degree	SPLM

Note: Data collected via purposive sampling across six states, 2022-2023.

RESULTS

The analysis of administrative data on political appointments from 2021 to 2026 reveals a complex picture regarding the implementation of South Sudan's 35% gender quota. While the quota has been nominally met in several governmental bodies, a granular examination exposes systematic marginalisation. Women appointees are overwhelmingly concentrated in portfolios dealing with social affairs, such as gender, health, and education. Their representation in sectors central to state power—finance, justice, defence, petroleum, and key peace oversight mechanisms—remains critically low. This segregation creates a gendered hierarchy, satisfying a quantitative target while excluding women from core decision-making. Furthermore, within committees where women are present, they are seldom appointed to leadership roles such as chair or deputy chair, which control agenda-setting. This pattern suggests quota compliance is often a box-ticking exercise rather than a substantive commitment to redistributing influence.

Qualitative interview data illuminate the strategies women politicians employ within this constrained environment, highlighting a pronounced reliance on informal networks over formal party structures. Participants expressed deep disillusionment with established political parties, describing them as male-dominated, ethnically rigid, and focused on patronage. In response, women reported cultivating strategic alliances within two key spheres: intra-ethnic kinship networks and transnational diaspora connections. Leveraging ethnic affiliations, often through male relatives or elders, provided a culturally legitimate pathway to secure candidacy. Simultaneously, many educated participants utilised diaspora connections for alternative resources, including funding, international advocacy, and training. This dual strategy illustrates a pragmatic adaptation to a system where formal institutions are weak. However, interviewees acknowledged the vulnerabilities of this approach, as ethnic patronage can reinforce patriarchal controls, while diaspora support can attract accusations of being out of touch.

Triangulation of budget analysis, legislative records, and interview data reveals a mechanism of co-option, whereby women's political agendas are neutralised within the prevailing patronage system. Budget allocations show that while rhetorical support for gender equality is prominent, financial commitment is minimal. Earmarked funds for women's programmes are consistently among the first to be cut. Legislative initiatives championed by women, such as reforms to family law, are frequently stalled. When such initiatives gain traction, they are often repurposed; for example, a grant for women's cooperatives may be transformed into a discretionary fund administered by a male-dominated authority. This process converts programmes for structural empowerment into instruments of personal patronage. Evidence indicates this co-option extends to women's movement leadership, where figures may be offered prestigious but powerless positions in exchange for moderating demands.

An unexpected finding from the interview data was significant intra-gender differentiation and conflict among women political actors. Divisions were reported along lines of educational background, urban versus rural bases, generational perspectives, and, most strikingly, ethnic lines. Younger, diaspora-engaged politicians often expressed frustration with older colleagues' perceived conservatism. Conversely, older women with community roots sometimes viewed younger activists' agendas as imported. Women politicians acknowledged that in crises, primary loyalties often aligned with ethnic or factional groups rather than a unified women's caucus. This internal fragmentation presents a substantial obstacle to forming a cohesive political bloc, revealing that the category 'women' is traversed by the same fissures that characterise South Sudanese politics at large.

Analysis of parliamentary debates and public statements illustrates a persistent discursive framing that limits women's political roles. Their participation is regularly justified instrumentally, for their perceived role in peacebuilding and social reconciliation, rather than solely as a right. While this has provided an entry point, it has also circumscribed their legitimate domain. Women who venture into debates on macroeconomics or security reported facing resistance, including being labelled as aggressive. This discursive containment reinforces material patterns of marginalisation, indicating that cultural and ideological barriers operate in tandem with institutional ones.

Furthermore, the period witnessed a significant, though uneven, institutionalisation of the quota within transitional structures. The mandate saw partial fulfilment in appointments made between 2021 and 2024. However, this quantitative presence masked a qualitative deficit, as many appointees were placed in ministries with limited clout, such as gender or culture, rather than in pivotal portfolios like finance or defence. This 'gender siloing' constrained women's ability to influence core policy and national budgeting. Consequently, while the quota increased visibility, it frequently failed to translate into decisive agency.

The analysis also reveals that women's participation was markedly more effective at sub-national and grassroots levels, particularly in local peacebuilding. From 2022 onwards, women's groups in states like Central Equatoria and Warrap demonstrated remarkable agency in mediating inter-communal conflicts, leveraging traditional networks. These efforts, though underfunded, provided a tangible counter-narrative to the stagnation in Juba, showcasing a model of participation rooted in community legitimacy.

Nevertheless, this grassroots resilience contrasted with pervasive operational challenges. The persistent economic crisis, culminating in severe inflation and salary delays, disproportionately affected women aspirants, who typically had fewer financial reserves. Concurrently, the digital gender gap

limited national advocacy, as online platforms remained largely inaccessible outside urban centres. These structural barriers, compounded by sporadic political violence intended to intimidate women leaders, created a climate where sustained participation required overcoming a steeper array of obstacles than those faced by male counterparts.

Table 1: Characteristics and Perceived Barriers of Women Political Actors by Party Affiliation

Political Party Affiliation	N (Total=210)	% of Sample	Mean Age (SD)	Mean Years in Politics (SD)	Expressed Barriers to Leadership (Top 3)
Independent/ Unaffiliated	87	41.4%	38.5 (9.2)	4.1 (3.0)	Lack of funding, Gender bias, Clan politics
Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM)	76	36.2%	52.1 (11.5)	12.8 (7.4)	Party gatekeeping, Security concerns, Lack of education
Other Registered Parties	32	15.2%	44.8 (8.9)	6.5 (4.2)	Media access, Gender bias, Lack of funding
No Response/Refused	15	7.1%	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: Author's survey of women political aspirants and office-holders (2023).

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 strengthened by the consistency of results across multiple methodological approaches, which mitigates concerns regarding the limitations inherent in any single analytical technique. While the study design precludes definitive claims of causality, the triangulation of evidence from both quantitative and qualitative strands provides a compelling, multi-faceted justification for the observed effects. Consequently, this analysis substantiates the theoretical framework and offers a coherent explanation for the mechanisms at play, directly informing the final conclusions of this report.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the intricate terrain of women's political participation in South Sudan during a critical period of purported transition from 2021 to 2026. The analysis demonstrates that participation is profoundly constrained by a deeply entrenched political economy, which systematically

co-opts progressive frameworks into instruments of patronage and exclusion. The central argument establishes that the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and the 35% affirmative action quota have created a paradoxical arena. While providing a vital platform, these structures operate within a hybrid governance system dominated by elite bargains, resource predation, and militarised masculinity. Consequently, women's inclusion is frequently channelled into forms that sustain the status quo, with appointments often serving as tokens within patronage networks rather than avenues for transformative leadership. The documented resilience and strategic manoeuvring of women politicians and activists, however, underscore a persistent struggle that redefines participation beyond mere presence to encompass a fraught navigation of systemic barriers.

The practical implications are stark as South Sudan approaches its first post-independence electoral cycle. This research confirms that a technical adherence to quota percentages will be insufficient to guarantee meaningful inclusion or to alter the gendered dynamics of power. Policy interventions must therefore shift focus from nominal representation towards transforming the political marketplace itself. This necessitates robust, internationally supported monitoring mechanisms that scrutinise the entire electoral environment. The African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development should treat political violence, the gendered distribution of campaign resources, and the intimidation of women candidates as fundamental violations of the electoral process. Furthermore, support should be directed towards strengthening autonomous women's civil society organisations, which act as crucial watchdogs and alternative sites for mobilisation. Programmes aimed at enhancing women's economic autonomy are not separate from, but integral to, sustainable political empowerment strategies.

Theoretically, this research contributes to African feminist political economy by illustrating how global norms like gender quotas are reconfigured within post-conflict, rentier states. It challenges narratives of linear progress, showing instead how inclusion can be instrumentalised by hybrid regimes to garner international legitimacy while neutralising substantive challenge. The study foregrounds the African feminist insight that formal institutions cannot be analysed in isolation from the kinship systems, militarised economies, and customary authorities that constitute the real landscape of power. The experiences of South Sudanese women elucidate the concept of 'navigating patriarchy', where agency is exercised within severe constraints through careful negotiation and strategic alliances. This enriches broader understandings of political transitions in Africa, arguing they are contested renegotiations of power where gender is a central fault line.

Acknowledging the limitations of this study is crucial. While the interview data provides rich insights, the scope was necessarily limited by access and security constraints. The perspectives of women in rural counties, particularly in regions of persistent sub-national conflict, are less represented. Furthermore, the sensitivity surrounding discussions of elite patronage meant some mechanisms of exclusion could only be described indirectly, relying on triangulation of accounts. The volatile political context also means the situation remains dynamic; the period leading up to anticipated elections may yet catalyse significant shifts.

Future research should build upon these foundations to explore several critical avenues. An intergenerational analysis of women's political leadership is urgently needed. Comparative work with other post-conflict states in the Horn of Africa could illuminate whether the South Sudanese case represents a distinct trajectory or a regional pattern of gendered political settlement. Finally,

longitudinal studies tracking the impact of specific women legislators on policy outcomes would provide concrete evidence of how descriptive representation can, or cannot, translate into substantive gains under hybrid governance.

In conclusion, this analysis presents a sobering yet not disempowering portrait. The transition is navigated by women not on open waters but through a labyrinth of entrenched interests. The journey is defined by a persistent, tactical negotiation within a system designed to subordinate their influence. The significance of this struggle extends beyond South Sudan, offering a critical case study in the realpolitik of gender inclusion in contemporary Africa. It demonstrates that meaningful political participation for women is inseparable from the broader, unfinished project of transforming the post-colonial state itself. The resilience documented here suggests that while the path is constrained, the navigation continues.

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