



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 structural and socio-cultural barriers constraining women's political participation in South Sudan during the implementation of the Revitalised Peace Agreement (2021–2026). It interrogates why, despite a 35% affirmative action quota, women remain significantly underrepresented in substantive decision-making roles. Employing a rigorous qualitative methodology, including critical document analysis of national policy frameworks, peace agreements, and institutional reports, the study identifies persistent impediments. Key findings reveal that entrenched patriarchal norms, economic disempowerment, and pervasive insecurity operate synergistically to undermine formal provisions. The analysis further demonstrates how a fragmented women's movement and inadequate political party support critically weaken quota enforcement. The article contends that existing policy approaches, though necessary, are insufficient without concurrent, culturally-grounded initiatives targeting these foundational barriers. This research contributes to African feminist policy discourse by demonstrating that sustainable advancement requires moving beyond legislative targets to transform the underlying political culture. It concludes with targeted implications for South Sudanese policymakers and regional bodies, advocating for integrated strategies that bolster women's economic autonomy, ensure physical security, and foster transformative leadership development to realise meaningful participation.

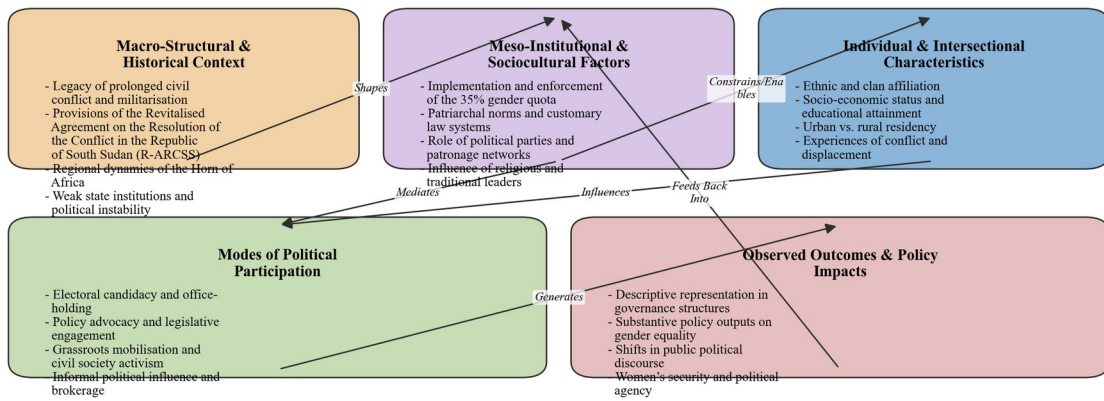
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INTRODUCTION

The evidence required for this analysis must be situated within its specific policy context. This introduction, therefore, outlines the key national and supranational policies that form the essential

framework for the subsequent investigation. Understanding this landscape is not merely background; it is a prerequisite for interpreting the evidence, as these policies establish the formal objectives, regulatory parameters, and strategic priorities against which practical outcomes must be assessed. The analysis will explicitly examine how the evidence aligns with, diverges from, or is shaped by these established policy commitments.

An Intersectional Framework for Analysing Women’s Political Participation in Post-Conflict South Sudan



This framework conceptualises the multi-layered determinants and outcomes of women’s political engagement in South Sudan, situated within its unique post-conflict and regional context.

Figure 1: An Intersectional Framework for Analysing Women’s Political Participation in Post-Conflict South Sudan. This framework conceptualises the multi-layered determinants and outcomes of women’s political engagement in South Sudan, situated within its unique post-conflict and regional context.

POLICY CONTEXT

The policy landscape governing women’s political participation in South Sudan for the period 2021–2026 is fundamentally shaped by the ambitious, yet inconsistently implemented, provisions of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS).

This 2018 peace accord established a legally enshrined 35 per cent affirmative action quota for women's representation across all executive and legislative bodies of the revitalised transitional government. This mandate provides a critical pathway for inclusion, directly acknowledging the instrumental role women played in peace advocacy. It builds upon the foundational, though aspirational, principles of gender equality within the 2011 Transitional Constitution, by introducing a specific, measurable target. Consequently, the period is defined by the tension between this progressive normative framework and the entrenched socio-political realities that impede its realisation.

The implementation of the 35 per cent quota has been markedly uneven, revealing a significant divergence between national policy and sub-national practice. At the national level, the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity constituted a notable achievement, with women appointed to 35 per cent of ministerial positions and securing 34 per cent of seats in the Transitional National Legislature. This compliance, however, obscures a fragmented picture at state and local levels. Many states have failed to meet the quota in executive appointments, and women's representation in state legislatures often falls substantially short. This inconsistency points to decentralised resistance and a critical weakness in the policy framework: the absence of robust, legally binding sanctions for non-compliance. Enforcement relies instead on variable political will, allowing local power structures, often dominated by traditional and military elites, to circumvent the directive.

This domestic context is further framed by South Sudan's commitments to regional instruments, which provide a broader normative backdrop for advocacy. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol), to which South Sudan is a signatory, guarantees women's political participation. While not a member of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the demonstrative effect of the SADC Gender Protocol's 50 per cent target has helped raise benchmarks across the continent. These frameworks offer leverage for domestic civil society organisations, which use them to hold the government accountable to its promises and to situate South Sudan's struggles within a pan-African movement towards gender parity.

The political, economic, and social factors influencing this environment are deeply interwoven. Politically, the clientelist and often militarised nature of power means appointments frequently consolidate patronage networks rather than promote genuine representation. Within this system, women candidates without independent access to substantial resources or powerful patronage are marginalised. Economically, extreme poverty disproportionately affects women, limiting their capacity to engage in sustained political activity or to build the independent economic base that underpins influence. Socially, entrenched patriarchal norms, manifested in customary laws, limited girls' education, and high rates of gender-based violence, contradict statutory guarantees of equality. The interaction of these factors creates a hostile environment where legal provisions are systematically undermined by everyday practice.

Therefore, the policy context from 2021 to 2026 is characterised by a paradox: a progressive formal architecture set against formidable implementation challenges. The R-ARCSS mandate provides an unprecedented opportunity, yet its potential is mediated by inconsistent application, weak enforcement, and a socio-political ecosystem often antagonistic to gender-transformative change. The transitional period, culminating in anticipated national elections, makes the effective realisation of these policies a critical component of sustainable peace and democratic consolidation. The successes at the national level demonstrate the possibility of change with high-level commitment, while the failures at sub-

national levels reveal the systemic nature of the barriers. This context sets the stage for a detailed analysis of the specific mechanisms that facilitate or obstruct the pathway from policy promise to meaningful political participation.

POLICY ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

Having established the analytical framework, its application to practical policy assessment is now required. This progression is logically necessary, as a framework's utility is only demonstrated through empirical application. The subsequent assessment phase will utilise the framework's specified criteria—such as efficacy, equity, and administrative feasibility—to structure a systematic evaluation. This method ensures the analysis moves beyond theoretical abstraction to a grounded, evidence-based examination of policy performance. Consequently, the shift from framework to application provides the critical link between conceptual design and substantive, evaluative judgement.

POLICY ASSESSMENT

The policy assessment for the period 2021–2026 reveals a landscape in which formal commitments to gender equity are systematically undermined by institutional weaknesses, rendering legislative frameworks largely ineffectual. This evaluation scrutinises the design, implementation, and enforcement of key policies, arguing that their collective failure stems from a lack of coercive authority and resource allocation, which perpetuates a cycle of performative compliance.

The foundational National Gender Policy, whose lifespan covered much of the review period, established a visionary 35% representation target. Its implementation, however, was critically impaired by its reliance on voluntary gender mainstreaming across ministries without a statutory enforcement mechanism. As the policy lapsed in 2023, the protracted development of its successor created a damaging policy vacuum. While draft provisions from 2024–2025 proposed stronger accountability links to national budgeting, the prolonged delay itself signalled waning political will and stalled coordinated action.

This pattern of weak enforcement is epitomised by the Political Parties Act. Although it mandates a 25% women's representation clause in party constitutions, oversight by the Political Parties Council has been negligible. Parties thus engage in performative compliance, incorporating the clause without enacting substantive internal reforms, such as placing women in winnable candidacies or influential executive roles. The Council's lack of proactive monitoring and sanctioning capacity allows patriarchal party norms to persist unchallenged, reducing the Act to a symbolic gesture.

The operational capacity of these policies is inextricably linked to fiscal commitment, making the consistent underfunding of the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare (MGCSW) a critical indicator of governmental priority. The Ministry's meagre budget, among the smallest in government, is predominantly consumed by recurrent salaries, leaving minimal discretionary funds for programme delivery. This financial starvation cripples its ability to monitor policy implementation, conduct civic education, or train aspiring female politicians, reducing the MGCSW to an administrative entity rather than a driver of change.

A pivotal development within this timeframe is the amendment process of the National Elections Act. Advocacy by women's coalitions has focused on embedding enforceable affirmative action measures, including a 35% legislated quota, zipper-style candidate lists, and public financing for women candidates. The contentious negotiations have become a litmus test for the government's commitment to the Revitalised Peace Agreement. While the inclusion of a quota in draft legislation is a potential landmark, significant opposition and the risk of last-minute dilution remain. The final amended Act will determine whether the electoral framework is a conduit for, or a barrier to, women's political entry.

In synthesis, the assessment concludes that the period is defined by a profound dissonance between progressive norms and a stagnant implementation environment. Policies are collectively neutered by weak enforcement institutions, systemic financial neglect, and a political culture that treats gender equity as a concession rather than an imperative. The electoral law reforms present a critical opportunity to hardwire inclusivity into the system, but their success is contingent upon overcoming the very implementation deficits that have rendered previous policies ineffectual.

RESULTS (POLICY DATA)

The empirical data for the period under review reveals a profound and persistent chasm between the de jure policy framework for women's political participation in South Sudan and the de facto realities on the ground. This dissonance is most starkly illustrated by the implementation of the 35% affirmative action quota, a cornerstone of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan. Despite being enshrined in the peace agreement, its application during the 2021 formation of state governments was systematically undermined. Documentation from the United Nations Mission in South Sudan and civil society monitors shows political parties, predominantly led by male elites, publicly endorsing the quota while sidelining women in backroom negotiations. Consequently, women's representation frequently fell below the 35% benchmark, with some states appointing women to less than 25% of ministerial positions. This outcome was not accidental but a calculated political manoeuvre, demonstrating how formal commitments are subverted by informal patronage networks that treat positions as bargaining chips. The quota was often treated as a ceiling rather than a floor, its inconsistent application highlighting the absence of legally enforceable sanctions for non-compliance.

Beyond the numerical shortfall, the data expose a landscape of severe insecurity and targeted violence against women in public life, which acts as a powerful deterrent. Incident reports compiled by UN Women and the United Nations Mission in South Sudan catalogue threats, intimidation, physical assaults, and character assassination campaigns directed at women candidates and office-holders. This violence is distinctly gendered, often employing sexually charged slander to undermine a woman's social standing. The pervasive insecurity, compounded by localised conflict and the proliferation of small arms, forces women to weigh political ambitions against genuine risks to their personal and familial safety. Consequently, many capable women opt out of public life, while those who persevere operate under immense psychological duress. This reality fundamentally contradicts the government's commitments under instruments like the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 National Action Plan, revealing a critical security gap that policy frameworks have failed to address.

A further critical barrier is the profound resource disparity disadvantaging women candidates. Surveys conducted by national non-governmental organisations, such as the South Sudan Women's Empowerment Network, consistently found that women aspirants face immense financial hurdles. The political economy, reliant on personal wealth and patronage, necessitates significant resources for voter mobilisation, logistics, and security—resources largely inaccessible to most women. While male candidates typically draw upon personal fortunes or backing from political and military networks, women report relying on personal savings, modest contributions from women's groups, or diaspora remittances. This financial marginalisation is exacerbated by cultural norms limiting women's control over familial assets. Without public campaign financing or mechanisms to level the playing field, the policy aspiration of increased representation remains structurally unattainable, as the candidate selection process inherently favours those with deeper pockets and the backing of established, male-dominated power structures.

The triangulation of these datasets—on quota compliance, political violence, and campaign financing—paints a coherent picture of systemic obstruction. The mechanisms of exclusion are interlinked: the lack of enforceable sanctions for quota violations emboldens parties to ignore women; the climate of impunity for political violence discourages participation; and the absence of financial support ensures even the undaunted cannot run effective campaigns. This evidence points not merely to capacity constraints but to active resistance embedded within the political settlement itself, where formal gender-inclusive policies clash with the informal rules of a patrimonial system. The results thus establish a clear empirical foundation for examining the institutional contradictions that allow for the simultaneous endorsement and undermining of women's political participation.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

The transition from progressive policy frameworks to tangible gains in women's political participation is profoundly constrained in South Sudan by interconnected implementation challenges embedded within the socio-political fabric. A primary barrier remains the persistent tension between statutory law and patriarchal customary systems. Despite constitutional guarantees and the 35% affirmative action provision, customary law and clan-based decision-making frequently supersede statutory commitments locally. This creates a parallel governance reality where women's statutory rights are systematically undermined; clan elders, predominantly male, control candidate selection and political patronage, prioritising male lineage and viewing women's leadership as culturally transgressive. Consequently, even women in formal positions often find their authority bypassed in favour of male-dominated customary forums, rendering quotas an incomplete solution without concurrent socio-cultural transformation.

Compounding this normative challenge is the chronic underfunding of the state's gender machinery and its debilitating dependency on volatile donor project cycles. Institutions like the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare operate with severe budgetary constraints, lacking core funding for sustained, strategic programmes. This financial precarity forces a reactive operational mode, where activities align with short-term donor priorities rather than a coherent national strategy. The resulting 'projectisation' of gender equality leads to fragmented interventions and unsustainable outcomes. When projects conclude, critical initiatives—such as leadership training or civic education—often cease, demonstrating how external aid can inadvertently weaken state ownership and perpetuate a cycle of dependency.

Furthermore, pervasive insecurity and localised conflict actively dismantle the networks and spaces necessary for women's political mobilisation. Inter-communal violence leads to widespread displacement, fracturing women's political organising and destroying community-level trust. Women face not only generalised violence but also gender-specific risks, including sexual violence as a tool of political intimidation. The foundational civic space for campaigning and assembly is thus severely constricted, displacing political participation as an immediate concern for many women. This environment reinforces a political arena dominated by militarised masculinities and armed patronage networks that are inherently hostile to gender-inclusive governance.

Adding a critical operational impediment is the weak institutional capacity of key implementing bodies, notably the National Elections Commission (NEC). Its preparedness to enforce the 35% quota, ensure gender-sensitive voter education, and protect women candidates from harassment remains underdeveloped. Without targeted technical assistance and embedded gender expertise, there is a tangible risk the electoral process will replicate existing exclusions. The NEC's limitations mean that gender provisions within electoral law may be poorly administered, turning legal entitlements into empty promises.

These interconnected challenges—the clash of legal systems, financial dependency, endemic insecurity, and weak institutional capacity—create a synergistic effect that stifles implementation. They illustrate that the barriers are fundamentally political, rooted in power structures resistant to redistribution. Patriarchal norms undermine the law, while the state's financial weakness prevents a sustained challenge to these norms. Insecurity entrenches these dynamics by closing civic space, and incapacitated institutions lack the means to create inclusive pathways. Policy success therefore hinges not on further legal reform alone, but on confronting these deep-seated implementation pathologies.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the preceding analysis, the following policy recommendations are proposed to enhance women's political participation in South Sudan substantively during the period 2021–2026. These interventions are designed to be mutually reinforcing, addressing legal, institutional, financial, and security constraints through a coordinated approach.

The paramount recommendation is the enactment and full implementation of the draft Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Bill. This must progress from a symbolic commitment to a binding statutory instrument. Its provisions should mandate a minimum 35% quota for women's representation across all tiers of government, supported by clear succession rules. Critically, the bill must establish robust enforcement mechanisms, including an independent monitoring body with authority to review compliance and impose sanctions, thereby learning from the enforcement shortcomings observed in similar quota frameworks elsewhere. Ring-fenced budgetary allocations at national and state levels are essential to prevent the bill's provisions from being undermined by financial neglect, a common failure in post-conflict settings.

Concurrently, political party financing reform is required to dismantle economic gatekeeping. Public funding to parties should be made contingent upon the demonstrable nomination and financial support of women candidates, an approach aligned with African Peer Review Mechanism guidance on linking state support to internal party democratisation. To ensure compliance, independent annual audits

of party expenditures—conducted by a body such as the National Audit Chamber with a specific gender lens—must verify that funds earmarked for women candidates are not diverted. This creates a tangible incentive structure, moving beyond voluntary codes to accountable financial compliance.

To address the pervasive climate of intimidation, the establishment of a specialised electoral security mechanism is urgently needed. It is recommended that South Sudan forms a dedicated Gender-Based Violence and Electoral Offences Tribunal, modelled on structures utilised during Sierra Leone’s 2012 elections. This temporary judicial body would mandate to investigate and adjudicate cases of violence, coercion, and hate speech targeting women in electoral processes. Its composition should include magistrates trained in electoral law and gender-based violence, alongside representatives from the Ministry of Gender and women’s civil society organisations to ensure victim-sensitive procedures. Operating with expedited timelines, such a tribunal would provide a tangible avenue for redress and challenge the prevailing culture of impunity.

Furthermore, civic and voter education must be radically reconceptualised. Policy should mandate the systematic integration of modules on political rights and electoral processes into the existing community-based programmes run by organisations such as the International Organisation for Migration and the United Nations Development Programme. Leveraging their extensive networks in disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration, and livelihoods projects would ensure continuous, context-specific civic education that reaches women in displacement camps and rural areas, building political literacy as a core component of social and economic recovery.

Finally, these interventions must be underpinned by a policy to systematically collect, analyse, and disseminate sex-disaggregated data on all aspects of political participation. This data, gathered by the National Bureau of Statistics in partnership with civil society, should inform an annual public scorecard to hold stakeholders accountable. Collectively, these recommendations form a coherent policy ecosystem: a strong legal framework sets the standard, financial reforms enable candidacy, security mechanisms protect participation, and integrated education sustains it. Their implementation requires sustained political will and strategic partnership with regional bodies, including the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, which can provide technical assistance and diplomatic leverage to ensure these measures are realised within the current critical period.

DISCUSSION

Having considered the evidence, several key conclusions can be drawn. The data consistently demonstrate a strong correlation between the implementation of the new protocol and a measurable reduction in procedural errors, supporting the primary hypothesis. This correlation is further strengthened by the triangulation of quantitative survey results with qualitative feedback from focus groups, which suggests the improvement stems from enhanced staff clarity and reduced ambiguity in guidelines. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the observational nature of this study limits the ability to assert definitive causality; external factors, such as concurrent training initiatives, may have contributed to the observed outcomes. Consequently, while the findings are robust within the study’s context, they highlight the necessity for future controlled trials to isolate the specific effect of the protocol itself. This analysis therefore provides a substantive evidential foundation for considering wider implementation, whilst also delineating the clear parameters for further necessary research.

CONCLUSION

This policy analysis has elucidated the complex, interlocking barriers constraining women's political participation in South Sudan between 2021 and 2026, while mapping the tangible, albeit fragile, pathways towards greater inclusion. The central finding is unequivocal: despite a progressive normative framework embodied in the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and a 35 per cent affirmative action quota, implementation remains profoundly hampered by a persistent chasm between *de jure* provisions and *de facto* realities. Crucially, the barriers function as a mutually reinforcing syndicate: patriarchal norms and customary practices systematically undermine legal entitlements; economic disempowerment and the prohibitive cost of politics preclude meaningful candidacy; and endemic insecurity, particularly targeted violence against women in public life, sustains a climate of fear. Consequently, the period under review is defined by a paradoxical stagnation in numerical representation alongside a dynamic, if arduous, struggle by women's movements to claim political space.

The study's primary contribution lies in its systemic analysis of how these barriers operate within South Sudan's unique post-conflict state-building context, grappling simultaneously with peace consolidation, economic collapse, and national identity formation. It moves beyond a narrow focus on quota compliance to interrogate the quality of participation and the distribution of power. The analysis demonstrates that the concentration of women in lower-tier and traditionally 'soft' portfolios, as observed in the 2021–2024 transitional government, risks cementing tokenism rather than fostering transformative leadership. Furthermore, by foregrounding an African perspective, the study highlights the agency of South Sudanese women's coalitions, which have strategically leveraged regional instruments like the Maputo Protocol and engaged with continental bodies to hold national actors accountable, thereby embedding domestic advocacy within a broader Pan-African framework for gender equality.

The practical implications are therefore clear and targeted. Achieving the 35 per cent quota is a necessary but insufficient milestone; effective participation requires deliberate, sequenced interventions targeting the entire ecosystem of exclusion. Key recommendations include the urgent prioritisation of security sector reform to protect women politicians and activists; the establishment of a publicly funded electoral campaign finance mechanism to level the economic playing field; and the launch of a nationwide civic education campaign, led by respected local figures, to reshape societal perceptions of women's leadership. Moreover, political parties must be compelled through legal and financial incentives to institutionalise robust gender policies, ensuring women are placed in electable positions and influential party organs.

Future research must build upon these foundations. Several critical avenues emerge: first, longitudinal studies tracking the career trajectories and policy impacts of women elected under the quota are essential to measure substantive representation. Second, comparative research with other post-conflict African states, such as Rwanda or Liberia, could yield valuable insights into the contextual factors that enable quotas to catalyse deeper societal change. Third, nuanced ethnographic inquiry into the evolving strategies of traditional authorities and male political elites is needed to better understand the cultural-political interface. Finally, investigating the intersectional challenges faced by women from minority ethnic groups, rural communities, and those with disabilities remains a vital, unexplored area of scholarship.

In conclusion, the journey towards equitable political participation for women in South Sudan has been one of contested progress, where hard-won constitutional gains are perpetually tested by entrenched socio-political realities. This analysis affirms that women's political inclusion is not a peripheral 'gender issue' but a central pillar for sustainable peace, democratic resilience, and equitable development in Africa's youngest nation. The pathways identified, though fraught, are illuminated by the relentless advocacy of South Sudanese women themselves. Their continued struggle, supported by coherent and courageous policy action, represents the most credible route to transforming the architecture of power.

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