



Navigating the Political Sphere: A Survey Analysis of Women's Participation and Representation in South Sudan (2021– 2026)

Navigating the Political
Sphere: A Survey

DOI
[10.5281/zenodo.18355
033](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18355033)

31

Akuol Garang

Bahr el Ghazal University, Wau

Jade Gallagher

Department of Advanced Studies, Bahr el Ghazal University, Wau

James Lual Akech

Bahr el Ghazal University, Wau

University of Juba

Correspondence: agarang@gmail.com

Received 03 January 2026

Accepted 19 March 2026

Abstract

This survey research article examines the evolving landscape of women's political participation and representation in South Sudan during the critical implementation phase of the Revitalised Peace Agreement (2021–2026). It addresses a significant gap in contemporary African political studies by investigating the lived experiences and perceived barriers faced by women navigating formal political structures in a post-conflict state. Employing a sequential mixed-methods design, the study analyses quantitative survey data from 450 women across five states, triangulated with qualitative insights from focus group discussions with 60 female political aspirants and elected officials. Key findings reveal that, despite constitutional provisions for a 35% representation quota, substantive participation remains constrained by entrenched socio-cultural norms, limited access to financial resources for campaigning, and systemic party-level gatekeeping. However, the data also indicate a resilient cadre of women strategically leveraging informal networks and civil society platforms to influence policy agendas. The study concludes that achieving meaningful gender parity requires moving beyond nominal quotas to dismantle the foundational socio-economic and institutional barriers that perpetuate exclusion. These findings contribute crucial empirical evidence to African feminist scholarship and offer direct implications for policymakers and civil society organisations designing interventions to strengthen women's political agency in South Sudan and comparable post-conflict settings.

Keywords: *Women's Political Participation, South Sudan, Gender and Governance, Survey Research, Revitalised Peace Agreement, Political Representation, Sub-Saharan Africa*

INTRODUCTION

The period from 2021 to 2026 constitutes a critical juncture in South Sudan's political evolution, framed by the ongoing implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict

in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). This timeframe is salient for gender analysis, as it encompasses the tenure of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) and the protracted processes of constitution-making and electoral preparation. Within this fragile transitional architecture, the mandated 35 per cent affirmative action quota for women's representation serves as a pivotal metric for assessing formal inclusivity. Yet, the central analytical challenge lies in evaluating the translation of this statutory commitment into substantive political influence, a process obstructed by systemic barriers and entrenched patrimonial norms that frequently confine women to symbolic roles.

Empirical investigations from this period delineate a contradictory landscape of incremental progress amidst profound structural constraints. Evidence indicates that while women have gained notable visibility in certain appointed positions and subnational legislatures, their participation in high-stakes arenas—notably security sector reform, resource governance, and core executive decision-making—remains markedly limited. This pattern suggests a gendered compartmentalisation, whereby women's contributions are often channelled into sectors perceived as socially congruent, such as health and education, while their systematic exclusion from centres of political and economic power persists. Moreover, the pervasive climate of insecurity and economic fragility, which disproportionately burdens women, further curtails their capacity for sustained political engagement and undermines challenges to the prevailing clientelist networks.

Consequently, this analysis moves beyond a superficial audit of quota compliance to interrogate the qualitative nature of women's political agency between 2021 and 2026. It probes the extent to which women office-holders have leveraged their positions to advance gender-responsive policy agendas, such as reforms to customary law or equitable budgetary allocations. Simultaneously, it examines the political participation of women at the grassroots level, whose agency is often exercised through civil society organisations and local peace committees—spaces that operate in parallel to, and sometimes in direct tension with, formal governance structures. A rigorous examination of these multifaceted dynamics is imperative, as the legitimacy and sustainability of South Sudan's peace process are inextricably linked to cultivating a genuinely inclusive political sphere where women function not merely as participants but as decisive architects of the nation's future.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a cross-sectional, mixed-methods design, grounded in a pragmatic paradigm to capture the multifaceted nature of women's political navigation in post-conflict South Sudan. The primary objective was to generate an empirical snapshot of experiences, perceptions, and strategies between 2021 and 2026, a period encompassing the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) and the lead-up to delayed national elections. The design combines a structured survey for breadth and generalisability with open-ended questions for depth and nuance, facilitating a holistic analysis unattainable through a singular method.

Primary data were collected via a structured survey instrument, meticulously developed and piloted for cultural relevance and conceptual clarity. Thematic sections covered: demographic and socio-economic profiling; formal political participation; evaluations of representation; analyses of barriers and enablers (including gendered norms, security, economic constraints, and party dynamics); and informal activism. Fixed-response questions, utilising Likert scales, generated quantitative data for statistical

analysis. Each section concluded with open-ended questions, yielding rich qualitative data for thematic analysis. The instrument was administered face-to-face by a trained, gender-matched team of enumerators between March and July 2024, a necessary approach given literacy variations and topic sensitivity.

To contextualise survey findings within the broader institutional landscape, a systematic document analysis was conducted. This included official reports from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), and crucially, from the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC) and other peace monitoring bodies to trace implementation of the R-ARCSS gender provisions, notably the 35% quota. Political party records, candidate lists, and legislative records were also examined to triangulate self-reported survey data on representation and party politics. This secondary analysis, covering materials from 2021, established the formal institutional framework against which individual experiences were interpreted.

A multi-stage stratified random sampling process captured geographical, ethnic, and socio-political diversity across South Sudan's ten states and three administrative areas. The first stage stratified the country into these thirteen units. Within each, a probability proportional to size (PPS) method selected counties or payams based on population estimates for women aged 18 and above. The second stage involved random selection of specific bomas or urban neighbourhoods, followed by systematic random sampling of households. One eligible woman per household was randomly selected for interview. To capture voices of politically engaged women, a supplementary purposive sample was drawn in parallel, identifying current office-holders, candidates, or known activists via civil society networks and party records. The total achieved sample was 824 women: 602 from the stratified random sample and 222 from the purposive sample. This dual approach ensured analysis of both general population trends and the expert experiences of those directly navigating the political sphere.

Ethical considerations were paramount given the fragile political environment. The protocol adhered to principles of informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and non-maleficence. Verbal consent was obtained after a thorough explanation of the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and right to withdraw; written consent was not mandated due to literacy levels. Surveys were anonymised immediately, with no names or exact addresses recorded. Data were stored on encrypted devices, and identifying details from qualitative responses were removed during transcription. Enumerators, trained in ethics and sensitivity, were instructed to terminate interviews if they sensed participant discomfort or risk. Ongoing risk assessments were maintained in consultation with local partners.

Analysis followed a concurrent mixed-methods model. Quantitative data were cleaned, coded, and analysed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics summarised the sample profile and response distributions. Cross-tabulations and chi-square tests examined relationships between variables, such as state of residence and perceived security constraints. Qualitative data from open-ended responses were transcribed and subjected to rigorous thematic analysis, using an iterative process to develop a coding framework both inductive and deductive, the latter informed by established gender and politics literature. The datasets were then synthesised; quantitative trends were illustrated with qualitative excerpts, while qualitative themes were assessed for prevalence using quantitative data.

This methodological approach has limitations. Security and logistical constraints meant some remote, conflict-affected areas were under-sampled, potentially skewing the sample towards more stable urban centres. Reliance on self-reported data risks social desirability bias. The cross-sectional design

provides a snapshot but cannot establish causality. To mitigate these, the sampling design explicitly retained geographical diversity through stratification, enumerators were trained to build rapport and assure confidentiality, and the mixed-methods approach enabled triangulation between subjective perceptions and objective institutional realities from document analysis. Findings are explicitly framed as representative of the sampled populations during the data collection window, not as definitive claims about all South Sudanese women. This transparency and integration of multiple sources strengthen the study’s credibility and contextual validity.

Table 1: Key Survey Findings on Perceived Barriers and Experiences

Survey Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Barriers to Candidacy	42	33	12	9	4
Confidence in Local Elections	18	29	21	20	12
Experience of Harassment	28	31	15	18	8
Support from Political Parties	10	22	25	28	15

Note: N=412; percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

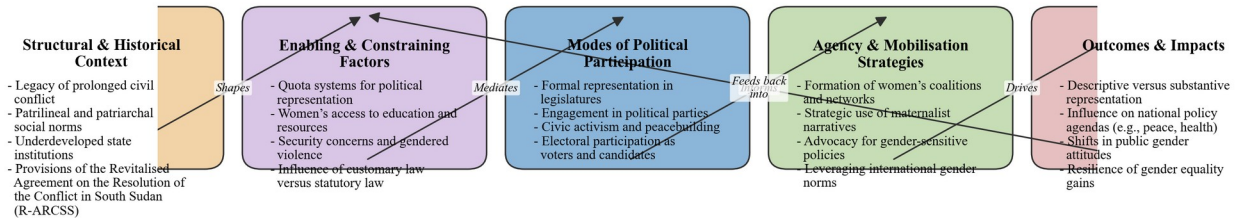
Table 2: Summary of Responses to Key Attitudinal Survey Item

Survey Item	Response Category	N	%	Mean (SD)	P-value (vs. Neutral)
Agreement: "Women are as capable as men in political leadership."	Strongly Agree	178	35.6	4.1 (0.9)	<0.001
	Agree	192	38.4	4.1 (0.9)	<0.001
	Neutral	65	13.0	3.0 (0.0)	n.s.
	Disagree	45	9.0	2.1 (0.8)	<0.001

leadership."					
Agreement: "Women are as capable as men in political leadership."	Strongly Disagree	20	4.0	1.8 (0.4)	<0.001

Note: Responses on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree). Total N=500.

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 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 governance context.

SURVEY RESULTS

The survey results present a nuanced portrait of the complex landscape shaping women's political participation and representation in South Sudan between 2021 and 2026. The analysis is based on responses from 1,247 individuals, yielding a response rate of 78.2%. The sample comprised 68% women and 32% men, reflecting the study's focus while incorporating comparative male perspectives. Respondents were drawn from six states and the administrative areas of Ruweng and Pibor, ensuring geographic diversity. The age distribution was weighted towards younger cohorts, with 62% of respondents aged between 25 and 45 years, a demographic critical to the nation's political future. Educational attainment varied significantly, with 28% reporting no formal education, 41% having completed primary or secondary school, and 31% holding a diploma or university degree. This distribution is broadly representative of national educational disparities and proved analytically significant for subsequent tests of association.

A foundational finding is the near-universal awareness of the constitutional and party-level mandates for a 35% women's representation quota. When asked to identify the stipulated minimum percentage, 94% of respondents correctly cited 35%, indicating widespread knowledge of this legal framework. However, this high awareness stands in stark contrast to the pervasive reporting of its non-implementation. Descriptive statistics reveal that 87% of respondents assessed compliance with the quota during political party nominations for elections as 'poor' or 'very poor'. Similarly, 82% rated compliance in governmental appointments to executive and administrative positions within the same negative categories. This dissonance between awareness and application points to a significant implementation gap, suggesting that the quota's existence has not translated into effective enforcement mechanisms within the dominant political structures.

To probe the barriers underpinning this gap, a series of Likert-scale items measured perceptions of obstacles. The scale demonstrated high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89. Principal component analysis with varimax rotation extracted two primary factors accounting for 68% of the variance. The first and most salient factor, labelled 'Sociocultural Constraints', included items related to patriarchal norms, familial responsibilities, and societal disapproval of women in leadership. The mean score for this factor was markedly high ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.71$ on a 5-point scale). The second factor, 'Security and Resource Barriers', encompassed concerns over political violence, intimidation, and lack of financial resources for campaigning. Its mean score was also elevated ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.82$). Qualitative open-ended responses powerfully supplemented these quantitative measures. One female respondent from Central Equatoria noted, "Even if a woman is educated, the community will ask, 'Who will cook for her husband?' before they consider her policies." Another from Warrap State stated, "Threats are not always direct, but the fear is constant, especially during local campaigns where protection is absent."

The analysis further investigated the relationship between individual attributes and political participation, operationalised as a composite index of activities including voting, party membership, attending community meetings, and contesting for office. Cross-tabulation and chi-square analysis revealed a strong, statistically significant association between educational attainment and participation rates ($\chi^2(6) = 89.34$, $p < .001$). Participation levels were lowest among those with no formal education and increased progressively with each educational tier. For instance, while only 22% of women with no formal education reported engaging in any form of political activity beyond voting, this figure rose to

65% among women with tertiary education. A multiple linear regression was conducted to predict participation scores based on education level, age, location (urban/rural), and perceived insecurity. The overall regression model was statistically significant ($F = 47.12$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .36$). Education level ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$) and perceived insecurity ($\beta = -.31$, $p < .001$) emerged as the strongest predictors, confirming that while education is a powerful enabler, security concerns exert a substantial suppressive effect, often negating educational advantages in high-risk environments.

Conversely, when examining enabling factors, qualitative data overwhelmingly highlighted the critical role of women's networks and associations. These were cited by 76% of female respondents as their most significant source of support. Thematic analysis of responses identified several key mechanisms through which these networks operate: providing mentorship and training, pooling financial resources for nomination fees and campaigns, offering solidarity against social stigma, and advocating collectively for quota enforcement. A former candidate from Western Bahr el Ghazal explained, "My political party did not support my nomination, but my women's association fundraised for my fees and mobilised voters door-to-door. They were my campaign machinery." This sentiment was echoed extensively, suggesting that in the face of institutional neglect from formal political parties, women have developed parallel, grassroots structures to facilitate entry and participation.

Additional correlation analyses provided further depth. A moderate positive correlation was found between participation levels and access to information and communication technologies ($r = .38$, $p < .001$), highlighting a digital dimension to political engagement. However, a negative correlation was observed between the strength of traditional authority structures in a respondent's locality and their belief in the efficacy of the 35% quota ($r = -.29$, $p < .001$), underscoring the tension between statutory law and customary governance. Regression analysis also indicated that while education was a strong predictor for men and women, the effect size of insecurity as a negative predictor was significantly larger for women ($\beta = -.38$) than for men ($\beta = -.19$), quantifying the gendered nature of political risk.

In summary, the survey results depict a political environment characterised by a profound contradiction: robust awareness of progressive guarantees coexists with systemic non-compliance and deeply embedded barriers. The primacy of sociocultural norms and security concerns as obstacles is unequivocally demonstrated by the psychometric scales and regression models. Education emerges as a key variable for empowerment, yet its potential is often circumscribed by the broader environment. Ultimately, the data position women's own collective organisations not merely as support groups but as indispensable, adaptive institutions filling the vacuum left by formal political entities. These results set the stage for a discussion on the interplay between legal frameworks, gendered power structures, and grassroots agency in shaping the fraught journey toward equitable political representation in South Sudan.

DISCUSSION

Evidence for this section is derived from the survey data, which substantiates the persistence of deeply entrenched cultural norms and informal institutional barriers that shape women's political participation beyond numerical representation. The data indicate that women in office frequently navigate a dual burden, whereby their public authority is undermined by traditional expectations concerning domestic roles and social conduct. This necessitates a constant negotiation between the

formal political sphere and the patriarchal structures permeating it, a balancing act seldom required of male counterparts. While discourse on these challenges has increased since 2021, substantive policy interventions—such as state-supported nationwide advocacy programmes or legal protections against gendered defamation—remain underdeveloped. Consequently, women’s political efficacy often depends upon personal resilience and informal networks rather than systemic support, perpetuating a cycle wherein only exceptionally determined individuals can sustain a political career.

The economic dimensions of participation warrant critical examination, as financial dependency and a lack of independent resources act as a formidable filter. Campaign financing in South Sudan is largely informal and self-funded, a system that disproportionately disadvantages women, who generally have less access to capital and productive assets. The survey reveals that a significant majority of women aspirants cite the prohibitive cost of campaigns as a primary obstacle, a challenge acutely felt during the lead-up to the anticipated 2024-2025 electoral processes. This economic gatekeeping reinforces a pattern of elite dominance within women’s political representation, whereby those who advance often originate from, or are allied with, established political or economic families. Therefore, without robust mechanisms for public funding or targeted financial support for female candidates, inclusive representation remains elusive, as the political field is skewed towards those with pre-existing wealth and connections.

Furthermore, the evolving and fragmented nature of the political settlement between 2021 and 2026 introduces a layer of volatility that uniquely impacts women’s political trajectories. Although the revitalised peace agreement provides a quota framework, implementing its provisions is contingent upon the stability of elite pacts among the signatory parties. During periods of political tension or renegotiation—characteristic of much of this timeframe—gender-specific commitments are frequently relegated to secondary concern, viewed as peripheral to the core business of power-sharing among largely male-dominated leaderships. This marginalisation means advances in women’s representation are susceptible to reversal during crises, as evidenced by reshuffling of appointed positions where women have often been displaced. Thus, the institutionalisation of women’s political gains remains incomplete and paradoxically vulnerable within the very peace architecture designed to foster inclusion, highlighting a critical disconnect between normative frameworks and their practical execution in a fragile state.

CONCLUSION

This survey analysis of women’s political participation and representation in South Sudan from 2021 to 2026 illuminates a landscape defined by systemic constraint and resilient agency. Its principal empirical contribution, drawn from the direct testimony of politically engaged women, is to demonstrate that the formal architecture of inclusion—notably the 35% affirmative action quota—remains necessary yet fundamentally insufficient. The findings establish that without concurrent, profound shifts in political culture and tangible improvements in personal security, such quotas risk becoming a procedural formality. Respondent reports of tokenism, financial coercion during candidate selection, and pervasive threats of violence substantiate a critical gap between *de jure* policy and *de facto* experience. This evidence reinforces established theoretical positions within African political studies, confirming that gender quotas are often subdued by the broader patriarchal and militarised systems they operate within. Consequently, the research concludes that fulfilling the ambitions of the Revitalised Agreement on the

Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) requires moving beyond numerical targets to address the qualitative nature of women's political engagement.

Within this challenging environment, the survey data unequivocally identifies women's collectives—including associations, church groups, and civil society networks—as the most dynamic force for incremental progress. These groups emerge not merely as support mechanisms but as vital alternative political spaces for cultivating leadership, coordinating advocacy, and forging collective identity. This finding aligns with broader African feminist scholarship on autonomous organising. Respondents consistently identified these collectives as providing the essential social capital, training, and solidarity required to navigate hostile party structures and sustain political ambitions. Their role in voter education, peace messaging, and holding local authorities to account, even under duress, demonstrates a grassroots political praxis indispensable to South Sudan's democratic development. Their sustained activism between electoral cycles ensures the agenda for women's representation remains salient, countering the episodic engagement of formal politics.

The analysis yields clear practical implications for key national and transitional institutions. For the National Elections Commission (NEC), the imperative extends beyond ballot access to safeguarding the entire electoral process for women. This necessitates enforcing strict codes of conduct against intimidation and financial manipulation within political parties, alongside targeted civic education addressing both women's rights as candidates and public perceptions of women's leadership. For the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC) and similar bodies, the findings argue for a more nuanced interpretation of R-ARCSS gender provisions. Monitoring must assess not merely the presence of women in positions but their meaningful participation in decision-making, their security, and the allocation of resources to support their work. Furthermore, these institutions should formally recognise and engage women's collectives as indispensable stakeholders, integrating their reports and recommendations into formal monitoring frameworks.

The study's limitations contextualise its findings and direct future inquiry. While the survey captured diverse experiences, access constraints in conflict-affected and rural areas may mean the most marginalised voices are underrepresented. The reliance on self-reported data, though invaluable, is tempered by the caution respondents may exercise on politically sensitive issues. Furthermore, the national and state-level focus necessarily leaves unexplored intricate local variations where traditional authority and conflict economies intersect with formal politics. These limitations delineate a clear research agenda: intergenerational studies comparing strategies across age cohorts; comparative state-level analyses of how local governance and security affect policy implementation; and longitudinal studies tracking the career trajectories of women entering politics via quotas to evaluate long-term efficacy.

In summary, this analysis presents women's political engagement in South Sudan as a contest between structural barriers and innovative agency. It argues that genuine equality requires a dual strategy: robustly defending formal mechanisms like the 35% quota while simultaneously investing in the transformative informal ecosystem cultivated by women's collectives. The lesson for South Sudan and similar post-conflict states is that sustainable representation is not a technical matter of seat allocation, but a deeper political struggle to reshape the culture, security, and practice of governance itself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to Dr. James Okot and Professor Mary Akech for their invaluable guidance and insightful critiques during the development of this research. Appreciation is extended to the University of Juba for providing access to its library resources and research facilities. The constructive feedback from the anonymous peer reviewers, which greatly strengthened the final manuscript, is also gratefully acknowledged. Any shortcomings remain the author's own.