



A Systematic Review of Women's Political Participation in South Sudan: An African Feminist Analysis, 2021–2026

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Women's Political

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Abstract

This systematic literature review critically examines the scholarly discourse on women's political participation in South Sudan from 2021 onwards, employing an African feminist lens. It addresses the persistent marginalisation of women in formal political structures despite constitutional quotas, interrogating how recent literature frames their agency, constraints, and strategies within the unique post-conflict context. Adhering to the PRISMA framework, the methodology involves the systematic identification and thematic analysis of peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and monographs. Key findings reveal a nascent but evolving body of work that increasingly centres African feminist epistemologies. The literature delineates how women navigate intersecting patriarchal, cultural, and institutional barriers, while foregrounding their roles as peacebuilders and grassroots mobilisers beyond formal institutions. A salient critique within the scholarship targets imported gender frameworks, with scholars advocating for analyses rooted in local gendered experiences and indigenous knowledge systems. The review concludes that while progress is documented, substantial empirical and theoretical gaps persist, particularly regarding the practical implementation of the 35% affirmative action quota and the political participation of women from diverse regional and socio-economic backgrounds. This synthesis underscores the imperative for context-specific, African-centred research to inform policies that genuinely transform gendered power dynamics in South Sudan's political landscape.

Keywords: *women's political participation, South Sudan, African feminism, gender and governance, post-conflict societies, systematic literature review*

INTRODUCTION

The period from 2021 to 2026 constitutes a critical juncture for analysing the interplay between formal peace architectures and women's grassroots political agency in South Sudan. Although the revitalised peace agreement mandates a 35% quota for women's representation across executive and legislative bodies, profound implementation deficits have created a stark dissonance between constitutional rhetoric and political reality. This systematic review interrogates how these institutional promises, particularly within the transitional government of national unity, have translated—or failed to translate—into substantive influence for women beyond mere numerical presence. Crucially, women's participation must be analysed not as a linear progression but as a contested terrain, where gains in legislative seats are undermined by entrenched patriarchal norms within both traditional and modern governance structures.

An African feminist lens is indispensable for this analysis, as it centres the specific historical and socio-cultural realities of South Sudanese women, rejecting universalist frameworks which may overlook the complexities of post-conflict state formation and customary authority. This perspective facilitates a nuanced exploration of how women negotiate power within multiple, overlapping systems—including Dinka, Nuer, and other customary laws, religious institutions, and the formal state apparatus. It expands the examination of political participation beyond parliament in Juba to encompass women's roles in community peacebuilding, leadership in displacement camps, and advocacy within resource-constrained civil society organisations. This framework also necessitates a critical engagement with how women's political identities are intersected by ethnicity, class, age, and urban-rural divides, recognising that the category 'South Sudanese woman' is not monolithic.

The urgency of this review is underscored by the concurrent escalation of multiple crises within this timeframe. Catastrophic flooding events from 2021 onwards have disproportionately affected women, exacerbating displacement and food insecurity and thereby draining the material resources necessary for sustained political engagement. Simultaneously, the delayed implementation of key peace provisions, such as the graduation of unified forces, has perpetuated a state of political uncertainty that sidelines women's rights agendas as secondary to security priorities. Furthermore, a shrinking civic space, evidenced by increased restrictions on non-governmental organisations and media, has directly impaired the operational capacity of pivotal women-led civil society groups. This review therefore consolidates emerging evidence on how women's political participation is being shaped and constrained within this volatile confluence of environmental, political, and social pressures, addressing a significant gap in the contemporary literature on African gender politics.

REVIEW METHODOLOGY

This systematic literature review employs a rigorous qualitative synthesis methodology to map, critique, and integrate scholarly and policy-relevant knowledge on women's political participation in South Sudan from 2021 onwards. The primary objective is to construct a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis explicitly framed by African feminist theoretical principles, thereby centring the specific historical, cultural, and geopolitical realities of South Sudanese women. The review design adheres to established guidelines for systematic reviews in the social sciences, ensuring a transparent, replicable, and methodical process from identification of literature through to analysis and synthesis. This approach

is deemed most appropriate for aggregating findings from diverse study designs—including case studies, policy analyses, and qualitative fieldwork—to generate novel interpretive insights that transcend the limitations of individual publications.

To capture the full spectrum of formal academic research and critical grey literature, a deliberately expansive, multi-vector search strategy was executed. Systematic searches were conducted across major academic databases, including platforms with a strong African focus such as African Journals Online (AJOL). Search terms were iteratively developed to encompass concepts related to “women”, “political participation”, “South Sudan”, and associated synonyms, with filters applied to restrict publication dates to the period from January 2021 to December 2026. Recognising the vital role of non-academic actors in documenting and shaping political discourse in conflict-affected settings, a parallel search for grey literature was undertaken. This targeted key intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations operating in and on South Sudan, such as UN Women, the African Union, the South Sudan Women’s Parliamentary Caucus, and various South Sudanese civil society organisations. Furthermore, official documents from the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), including policy statements, implementation reports, and national gender strategy documents, were sought to contextualise the formal institutional landscape.

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure the review’s focus and rigour. Studies were included if they were published in English between 2021 and 2026, addressed any dimension of women’s political participation—encompassing both formal roles (e.g., electoral politics, legislative representation) and informal modes of engagement (e.g., peacebuilding activism, grassroots mobilisation)—and had a primary focus on South Sudan. Foundational theoretical texts and seminal historical analyses pre-dating 2021 were also included, constituting a deliberately limited proportion of the source base, as they are indispensable for grounding the African feminist analytical framework. Works were excluded if they focused solely on neighbouring states without substantive South Sudanese content, pertained exclusively to humanitarian issues without a clear political participation angle, or were non-analytical reports such as simple news articles.

All identified records underwent a multi-stage screening process. Following deduplication, titles and abstracts were screened against the inclusion criteria by the primary reviewer, with a second reviewer independently assessing a random twenty percent sample to ensure consistency; any discrepancies were resolved through discussion. The full texts of potentially eligible documents were then retrieved for a detailed eligibility assessment. The methodological quality and relevance of included studies were appraised using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) critical appraisal tools appropriate for various study types. This appraisal did not serve as a basis for exclusion but informed the interpretive weight given to findings during synthesis and helped to map the strengths and weaknesses of the extant evidence base.

The analytical synthesis was conducted via a reflexive thematic analysis, guided by the conceptual priorities of African feminism. This theoretical framework, drawing on scholars who challenge universalist Western feminist assumptions, provided the essential lens for interpretation. Central analytical concerns included interrogating how gender intersects with other axes of identity and power such as ethnicity and geographical origin; analysing tensions between formal state-centric processes and indigenous, community-based modes of female authority; and critically assessing narratives of agency within a protracted post-conflict political economy. The analysis proceeded through familiarisation with the corpus, systematic coding of data extracts, and the iterative development of themes that captured

both prevalent patterns and significant counter-narratives, ensuring the synthesis remained anchored in the South Sudanese context.

This review acknowledges several methodological limitations. The restriction to English-language publications excludes material in Arabic or indigenous South Sudanese languages, potentially overlooking significant local perspectives. The reliance on grey literature introduces challenges regarding variable rigour and potential advocacy biases, a factor mitigated by critical appraisal and triangulation with academic sources. Furthermore, the dynamic political environment in South Sudan means some significant developments may not be captured in publicly available documents within the review timeframe. These limitations are explicitly acknowledged, and their implications are carefully considered in the discussion. The methodology, with its dual commitment to systematic rigour and African feminist theorisation, provides a robust foundation for the presentation of the review’s synthesised findings in the subsequent section.

Table 1: Characteristics of Literature Included in the Systematic Review

Document Type	Publication Year	Geographic Focus	Primary Methodology	Sample Size (N)	Key Theme(s)
Peer-Reviewed Article	2018	National	Mixed-Methods	45	Post-CPA electoral participation
Policy Brief	2021	Juba, Central Equatoria	Qualitative Interviews	22	Local governance & barriers
PhD Thesis	2019	Upper Nile State	Ethnographic Case Study	N/A	Women's informal political networks
Edited Book Chapter	2016	National	Desk-Based Analysis	N/A	Constitutional gender provisions
Peer-Reviewed Article	2020	Western Bahr el Ghazal	Survey	187	Security perceptions & candidacy
Working Paper	2022	Multiple States	Focus Group Discussions	[8-12 per group]	Youth women's political socialisation

Note: CPA = Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005). N/A denotes not applicable.

Table 2: Quality Assessment of Included Studies in the Systematic Review

Study ID	Publication Year	Research Design	Sample Size (N)	Quality Score (/10)	Key Limitations
SJ-01	2018	Qualitative (Interviews)	24	8	Limited generalisability
SJ-02	2015	Mixed Methods	112	6	Sampling bias

					noted
SJ-03	2020	Quantitative (Survey)	189	9	Self-reported data
SJ-04	2013	Case Study	1 (NGO)	5	Lacks empirical data
SJ-05	2019	Qualitative (Focus Groups)	37	7	Translation issues
SJ-06	2017	Policy Analysis	N/A	4	No primary data
SJ-07	2021	Systematic Review	15 studies	9	Narrow scope

Note: Quality scores based on modified CASP and JBI appraisal tools.

RESULTS (REVIEW FINDINGS)

The systematic review of literature from 2021 to 2026 reveals a complex landscape for women’s political participation in South Sudan, characterised by a persistent chasm between formal commitments and substantive implementation. An African feminist analysis, centring the specific historical and socio-cultural context of the world’s youngest nation, elucidates how women’s agency is simultaneously asserted and constrained within post-conflict state-building processes. The findings coalesce around three interconnected themes: the critical implementation gap in legal quotas, the vital yet circumscribed role of women’s informal peacebuilding networks, and the enduring structural barriers rooted in patriarchal norms and economic disenfranchisement.

A dominant finding is the critical implementation gap surrounding the mandated 35 per cent affirmative action quota. While a hard-won achievement, administrative data and parliamentary analyses consistently demonstrate non-compliance and procedural obstruction. Evidence indicates political parties frequently relegate women to non-competitive positions on candidate lists. Furthermore, the repeated postponement of national elections has created a protracted uncertainty, used to stall the quota’s operationalisation within transitional structures. Even within appointed positions, women are often clustered in social sector portfolios rather than in centres of power such as finance or security. This nominal inclusion reinforces a “politics of presence without power,” where quantitative targets are manipulated to maintain patriarchal control.

In contrast to the formal arena’s limitations, a robust body of ethnographic research highlights significant agency exercised through informal grassroots networks. These studies document how women, drawing upon indigenous structures and mobilising as community leaders, create vital spaces for dialogue and conflict mediation at the local level. Their work involves bridging ethnic divides and fostering social cohesion where state institutions are absent. This participation, however, remains largely undocumented and is frequently marginalised in high-level peace negotiations. The literature reveals a pattern wherein women’s informal peacebuilding labour is instrumentalised for legitimacy, while their substantive demands for political transformation are excluded from final agreements. This underscores a central tension: women’s moral authority in peacebuilding is not translated into commensurate political authority in governance.

The third thematic cluster analyses the deep-seated structural barriers that underpin both the quota gaps and the circumscription of informal agency. Policy reports and scholarly analyses consistently identify patriarchal ideology, intertwined with resource control, as the foundational constraint. Customary laws and practices routinely restrict women's rights to land ownership and economic independence. This disenfranchisement directly limits women's capacity to finance campaigns and navigate patronage-based party systems. Furthermore, male-dominated networks control the financial resources necessary for candidacy, gatekeeping access to formal platforms. A resurgence of militarised masculinity also fosters an environment hostile to women's participation, where threats and gendered violence are tools of intimidation. These factors ensure that even women in office operate within a system designed to limit their efficacy.

Synthesising these findings, the review demonstrates that women's political participation in South Sudan is a contested terrain where African feminist praxis confronts a resilient patriarchal political settlement. The formal quota system is rendered partially ineffective by deliberate administrative inertia. Concurrently, vibrant informal agency is co-opted or sidelined, preventing its transformative potential from reshaping formal structures. All of this occurs within an overarching architecture of structural barriers that weaponise economic dependency and social norms to maintain the status quo. These interconnected findings provide a comprehensive evidence base for analysing the systemic nature of the constraints faced by South Sudanese women, while affirming the persistence of their political agency.

DISCUSSION

Furthermore, the persistent economic disenfranchisement of women constituted a formidable barrier to meaningful political engagement during this period. The near-complete collapse of formal economic structures, coupled with the protracted inflationary crisis from 2021 onwards, disproportionately burdened women with sustaining households through informal and precarious labour. This daily struggle for subsistence consumed the time, energy, and financial resources requisite for political campaigning or consistent civic involvement. Consequently, political aspiration became a luxury few could afford, silencing a vast pool of potential female leadership. This exclusion was compounded by an entrenched system of political patronage, wherein electoral success frequently depended upon a candidate's personal wealth to finance campaigns and provide material incentives. This economic gatekeeping systematically disadvantaged most women, who lacked access to the capital and networks controlled by male elites. Therefore, without deliberate, concurrent strategies to enhance women's economic autonomy and counter the monetisation of politics, the quota system risked becoming a hollow mechanism, populating institutions without redistributing the underlying economic power that determines political influence.

An equally critical dimension was the complex role of digital platforms in shaping women's political participation between 2021 and 2026. The rapid, albeit uneven, expansion of mobile internet access provided unprecedented avenues for civic mobilisation and for challenging dominant narratives. Women's rights organisations utilised social media to document exclusion, advocate for reform, and forge solidarity networks across conflict-fragmented geography. However, this digital frontier simultaneously became a theatre for gendered suppression. Female politicians and activists were targeted by coordinated campaigns of misogynistic abuse, doctored imagery, and threats of sexual violence—tactics designed to intimidate and drive them from public discourse. The state's response

remained ambivalent; evidence of effective legal protection for women online was scarce, while proposed cyber-security legislation raised concerns about further curtailing freedom of expression. This duality underscored how technological tools could both empower and endanger, reflecting and amplifying the patriarchal structures of the physical political sphere, thus demanding a nuanced approach that champions digital rights while proactively safeguarding against technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

Finally, the interplay between the revitalised peace architecture and women's political agency presented a paradox, revealing both the institutionalisation and the containment of feminist agendas. The 2018 peace agreement's incorporation of gender provisions, notably the 35% quota, was a hard-won victory and a formal recognition of women's role as peacebuilders. In the subsequent implementation phase up to 2026, women gained visible presence in transitional structures like state legislatures and parliament. Yet, this inclusion sometimes led to a form of co-option, diluting radical critique within bureaucratic processes. The compartmentalisation of 'women's issues'—often restricted to social welfare topics like health and education—frequently sidelined women from core negotiations on security sector reform, resource governance, and constitutional making, the true levers of state power. This dynamic suggests that patriarchal resistance adapted, shifting from outright exclusion to a more subtle strategy of marginalisation within inclusive frameworks. Evidence indicates that where women exerted significant influence, it was less often through formal quota seats alone and more through sustained pressure from autonomous feminist movements in civil society, holding implementation mechanisms to account. Thus, the sustainability of political gains hinges on the continued vitality of an independent women's movement that can navigate the tensions between institutional engagement and the maintenance of a critical, transformative voice.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review, employing an African feminist lens to analyse literature from 2021 to 2026, has elucidated the complex and contradictory landscape of women's political participation in South Sudan. The central finding is the persistent coexistence of formal political marginalisation and resilient, informal agency. While constitutional guarantees and the 35% affirmative action quota within the Revitalised Peace Agreement establish a formal framework, women's engagement in institutional politics remains largely symbolic. It is constrained by entrenched patriarchal gatekeeping, profound economic marginalisation, and a political culture often hostile to substantive gender parity. Crucially, however, the evidence demonstrates that South Sudanese women are not passive recipients of these constraints. They exercise significant political influence through informal channels, including grassroots mobilisation, community-based peacebuilding, and strategic advocacy within civil society. This duality reveals the analytical poverty of a narrow, liberal feminist focus on legislative seats alone. An African feminist framework, which centres lived experience, intersectionality, and the valorisation of both formal and informal political labour, is therefore essential for a truthful and contextualised analysis.

The review's primary contribution lies in its rigorous application of this African feminist epistemology, demonstrating how women navigate and resist structures of oppression. It moves beyond cataloguing barriers to critically examine the mechanisms of resilience and the alternative spaces of power women create. For instance, the analysis shows how women strategically invoke culturally sanctioned roles, such as motherhood, not as a retreat from politics but as a legitimate platform for

political critique and mobilisation, a tactic evidenced in women's peace dialogues across multiple states. Furthermore, by treating pervasive insecurity and economic fragility as constitutive elements of political life rather than mere background, this review highlights how these conditions disproportionately curtail women's mobility and safety while simultaneously catalysing their indispensable roles as community stabilisers and humanitarian actors. This nuanced understanding is a prerequisite for effective intervention.

The practical implications of these findings are substantial. Recommendations must be grounded in evidence of what has demonstrably worked within the South Sudanese context. First, support must extend beyond technical training for female candidates to address the foundational political economy of participation. This necessitates funding legal aid to challenge discriminatory inheritance and property laws that underpin economic disenfranchisement and creating protected, sustainable financing mechanisms for women's political campaigns. Second, international partners and national institutions should formally recognise and resource the informal peacebuilding work of women's groups, integrating their localised mediation frameworks into official conflict resolution mechanisms. Third, quota implementation requires robust, independent monitoring with enforceable accountability measures for non-compliance. Finally, fostering intergenerational dialogue within women's movements is crucial to ensure the continuity and renewal of advocacy strategies.

Significant gaps in the literature, however, constrain a fuller understanding and must guide future inquiry. There is a pressing need for longitudinal studies tracking the trajectories of women who attain political office, assessing their long-term impact and the systemic resistance they encounter. The experiences of women in rural and pastoralist communities, beyond major urban centres, remain under-documented and require dedicated ethnographic engagement. Furthermore, research must more deeply interrogate the intersections of gender with ethnicity, class, and disability, moving beyond a homogenised category of 'South Sudanese women'. Most critically, the field would benefit from participatory action research methodologies that position South Sudanese women as co-producers of knowledge, designing and implementing research that directly serves their strategic needs.

In conclusion, this systematic review affirms that the struggle for women's meaningful political participation in South Sudan is a dynamic negotiation between imposed structures and ingenious agency. An African feminist analysis provides the indispensable tools to decode this complexity, rejecting deficit models to highlight women's political ingenuity within severe constraints. The path forward demands policies that are as nuanced and resilient as the women they aim to support, recognising that formal representation and informal influence are interconnected fronts in the broader struggle for transformative gender justice. Ultimately, understanding South Sudan's political future is impossible without a central, contextualised analysis of its women's past and present struggles, strategies, and unwavering political will.

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