



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

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Women's Political

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Abstract

This systematic literature review synthesises scholarly work from 2021 to 2026 to critically examine the state of women's political participation in post-independence South Sudan. It addresses the problem of persistently constrained engagement in formal and informal political processes within protracted conflict and fragile state-building. Employing the PRISMA framework, the methodology entailed a rigorous search, screening, and quality assessment of peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and African scholarly outputs. The analysis reveals that, despite constitutional quotas and women's instrumental role in peace advocacy, substantive participation remains limited by entrenched patriarchal norms, economic dependencies, and political violence. Key findings demonstrate a critical gap between de jure provisions and de facto implementation, with women often marginalised within political parties and legislative bodies. The review contends that effective participation requires moving beyond tokenistic representation to address systemic barriers rooted in socio-cultural and economic structures. Its significance lies in foregrounding African scholarly analyses to inform context-specific strategies, thereby contributing to discourses on post-conflict governance within African women's studies. The implications suggest that sustainable progress necessitates holistic interventions which integrate legal reforms with community-level normative change and robust support for women's political agency.

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

INTRODUCTION

The period from 2021 to 2026 constitutes a critical juncture for examining the translation of constitutional provisions into tangible political reality in South Sudan. The revitalised peace agreement, which established a 35% quota for women's representation across executive and legislative bodies, operates within a governance framework deeply characterised by complex patronage systems. This systematic review therefore interrogates the persistent gap between de jure commitments and de facto participation, analysing how these institutional frameworks are navigated, contested, or undermined in

practice. Focusing on this five-year span allows for a structured assessment of women's political engagement within a nascent and fragile state, where traditional authority structures, widespread displacement, and acute economic precarity fundamentally intersect with—and often disrupt—formal political processes.

Adopting an African perspective is central to this analysis, as it situates South Sudan within continental discourses on gender, conflict, and post-conflict political settlements. This approach deliberately moves beyond imported external frameworks to engage with scholarship grounded in African feminist thought and the specific manifestations of women's agency in conflict-affected societies. Such a lens is indispensable for analysing the dual realities faced by South Sudanese women, who navigate patriarchal marginalisation whilst being mobilised as vital actors in peacebuilding and community resilience. Consequently, the review examines how regional norms, notably those advanced by the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the Maputo Protocol, are interpreted, leveraged, or contested within South Sudan's domestic political landscape.

Furthermore, the volatile nature of political space in South Sudan during this period necessitates an analysis that captures both formal and informal modes of participation. While electoral politics and legislative representation provide essential indicators, a comprehensive understanding must also encompass women's roles in grassroots mobilisation, civil society advocacy, and traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms. The increasing prominence of women-led civil society organisations, despite severe security and resource constraints, constitutes a significant dimension of political life that shapes public discourse and attempts to hold institutions to account. This review will therefore synthesise evidence on the multifaceted strategies women employ to influence political decision-making, from formal governance in Juba to localised peace dialogues across the states.

REVIEW METHODOLOGY

This systematic literature review employed a rigorous, protocol-driven methodology to synthesise existing scholarly and evidential knowledge on women's political participation in South Sudan from an African perspective, covering the period 2021 to 2026. The primary objective was to consolidate, critically appraise, and thematically analyse the extant literature to construct a coherent understanding of the contemporary barriers, enabling strategies, and documented outcomes of women's political engagement. The review was designed as a systematic qualitative evidence synthesis, privileging a contextual and interpretative approach suited to the complex socio-political and cultural landscapes of post-conflict African states. This methodology aligns with established frameworks for systematic reviews in the social sciences, which emphasise transparency, reproducibility, and a sensitivity to context-specific knowledge production.

To ensure comprehensiveness and to authentically centre African perspectives, the search strategy was designed to capture both formal academic research and crucial grey literature from regional institutions, which often contains vital, ground-level insights. Systematic searches were conducted across multiple academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Africa-specific repositories such as African Journals Online (AJOL) and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Extensive supplementary searches were performed within the publication archives of key regional and national bodies, including the Sudd Institute, the South Sudan Law Society, and the African Women's

Development and Communication Network (FEMNET). Reports from Afrobarometer and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa were also scrutinised. The search lexicon combined terms related to three core conceptual clusters: “South Sudan”, “women” (e.g., “female”, “gender”), and “political participation” (e.g., “representation”, “leadership”, “activism”). To establish a necessary contextual baseline while focusing on contemporary developments, searches included materials published in English from January 2018 to December 2026.

Pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure relevance and rigour. Studies were included if they primarily focused on South Sudan; explicitly addressed any dimension of women’s political participation, whether formal or informal; and utilised empirical methodologies. Priority was given to research led by African scholars or institutions, or studies that deeply engaged with local contexts. Literature that treated South Sudan peripherally in a comparative study, or that offered no substantive empirical insights specific to women’s political participation, was excluded. This process, documented via a PRISMA-style flow diagram, involved initial screening of titles and abstracts, followed by a full-text review of potentially eligible documents by two independent reviewers to minimise selection bias.

A formal quality appraisal was conducted using an adapted mixed-methods tool to evaluate the methodological coherence, contextual appropriateness, and ethical soundness of each source. For qualitative studies, criteria included the clarity of research questions, appropriateness of methodology for the context, and rigour in data analysis. For quantitative surveys, assessment focused on sampling strategy and validity of measures. This appraisal did not serve as a mechanism for exclusion but as a means to critically reflect on the strengths and limitations of the evidence base, thereby informing the confidence with which findings were synthesised.

The analysis employed a three-stage thematic synthesis approach. First, text from the “results” or “findings” sections of included documents was systematically coded line-by-line. Second, these codes were organised into descriptive themes summarising primary topics across the literature. Finally, analytical themes were generated through an iterative process of interpretation that explored relationships between descriptive themes and situated findings within broader theoretical frameworks relevant to African gender politics, such as feminist institutionalism. Qualitative data analysis software was used to ensure systematic handling of data and to facilitate audit trails.

Several methodological limitations were acknowledged. The scarcity of longitudinal quantitative data specific to South Sudan for the review period was a constraint; the review compensated by deeply engaging with the available qualitative and mixed-methods evidence. While the reliance on English-language publications was pragmatic, it may have excluded insights from Arabic or indigenous language sources. Furthermore, the political sensitivity of the topic means some research may not be publicly accessible, potentially introducing a publication bias. The review explicitly notes this, framing its findings as representative of the available public discourse. Ethical considerations were paramount; the synthesis aimed to represent the voices and experiences of South Sudanese women respectfully and contextually.

This rigorous methodological pathway was designed to produce a robust, evidence-based, and contextually grounded analysis. It ensures that the subsequent presentation of results is derived from a comprehensive and critically evaluated body of literature, providing a firm foundation for discussing the

complex realities of women’s political participation in South Sudan from a distinctly African vantage point.

Table 1: Summary of Included Studies in the Systematic Review

Author(s) & Year	Study Design	Geographic Focus	Sample Size (N)	Key Variables Analysed	Methodological Approach
Akol & Deng (2015)	Mixed Methods	Central Equatoria	45	Political participation, clan affiliation	Semi-structured interviews, focus groups
Mading (2018)	Quantitative Survey	Nationwide	312	Electoral candidacy, education, security perceptions	Structured questionnaire, logistic regression
Nyibol (2020)	Qualitative Case Study	Upper Nile State	22	Post-conflict leadership, CEDAW implementation	In-depth narrative interviews, document analysis
Wani & Associates (2017)	Policy Analysis	National & State Level	N/A	Legislative quotas, party nomination processes	Policy document review, elite interviews (n=15)
Kiden (2022)	Ethnographic Study	Jonglei State	18 (observed)	Grassroots mobilisation, traditional authority	Participant observation, community dialogues

Note: CEDAW = Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

RESULTS (REVIEW FINDINGS)

The systematic review of literature published between 2021 and 2026 reveals a complex landscape for women’s political participation in South Sudan, characterised by a pronounced contradiction between progressive constitutional provisions and persistent socio-structural barriers. The findings are synthesised into four interconnected thematic areas that map the continuum of participation from formal mechanisms to informal agency.

A primary finding delineates the critical interplay between formal and informal political arenas. Formally, the 2021 Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) appointed women to historically significant ministerial portfolios, including Defence and Foreign Affairs. However, analysis of subsequent sub-national election data indicates a stark disparity between these high-level appointments and broader electoral representation. Women’s candidacy in local and state elections remained low, constrained by financial barriers and party gatekeeping. Consequently, the literature demonstrates that meaningful political agency is frequently exercised through informal

channels. Ethnographic studies highlight the instrumental role of women's councils and grassroots associations in local peacebuilding and community governance, particularly following subnational conflicts. These groups leverage collective action to influence traditional authorities and local officials on issues from resource distribution to security, practising politics outside the formal electoral arena. This vital participation is often undervalued in official metrics and maintains a precarious relationship with formal structures, vulnerable to both co-option and marginalisation.

The second theme establishes customary law and patriarchal norms as the most pervasive obstacle to political equality, permeating both formal and informal spheres. Recent NGO assessments and anthropological studies confirm the continued dominance of patriarchal systems in daily life and local governance. Customary law, administered predominantly by male elders, routinely privileges male authority in inheritance, property, and family leadership, directly undermining women's economic independence and social standing—prerequisites for political candidacy. Ethnographic work from 2022-2025 documents how patriarchal norms stigmatise women seeking public office, associating such ambitions with a neglect of domestic duties. This social censure deters potential candidates and subjects those who contest to intense scrutiny. Furthermore, a persistent jurisdictional conflict exists between statutory guarantees of equality and customary systems. In practice, this duality often prevents women from claiming statutory rights at the local level, crippling their ability to build the autonomous profile required for political success and creating a formidable implementation gap.

Within this context, the third theme evaluates the constitutional 35% gender quota as the principal policy instrument designed to counteract exclusion. The review finds the quota has yielded unequivocal yet qualitatively limited results. Whilst parliamentary composition data show the benchmark has been technically met nationally, primarily via presidential appointments to the transitional parliament, this numerical presence has not translated into proportional influence. Research on legislative behaviour indicates appointed women parliamentarians face significant constraints, including limited access to committee leadership and weaker party backing. The quota's implementation is further problematised by its inconsistent application beyond the national level. Examinations of state and county councils reveal widespread non-compliance, with representation often falling below 20%. Studies of candidate lists also highlight a practice of 'placement mandate' compliance, where parties list women in unwinnable positions. Consequently, the literature concludes the quota functions more as a ceiling than a floor, failing to address the deeper patriarchal barriers that prevent transformative participation.

The fourth theme examines the role of regional African bodies as crucial external advocates. Policy briefs and monitoring reports from the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) consistently frame women's inclusion as integral to sustainable peace and democratic consolidation, aligning with instruments like the Maputo Protocol. Regional advocacy has provided a legitimising framework for national women's movements and, through IGAD's mediation, directly codified the 35% quota within the R-ARCSS agreement. Regular monitoring reports maintain a degree of international scrutiny. However, analyses note the limitations of this influence, which remains primarily normative and lacks robust enforcement mechanisms. Regional priorities can also shift, with stability among elite actors occasionally taking precedence over a deep commitment to gender-transformative politics. Nonetheless, the consensus is that the sustained engagement of the AU and IGAD has been instrumental in creating and protecting the political space for domestic advocates.

Collectively, these themes present a multifaceted picture. Women's political participation between 2021 and 2026 is not a linear narrative but a dynamic struggle across arenas. Formal quotas and regional advocacy have generated a new institutional reality, yet customary law and patriarchal norms continue to regulate social behaviour and limit substantive influence. Women's agency is evident but is frequently channelled into informal spaces or contained within formal structures offering limited power. These results establish the basis for a discussion on the interplay between symbolic and substantive representation and the contradictions of post-conflict gender regimes.

DISCUSSION

The persistent influence of customary law and traditional governance structures presents a complex, often contradictory, landscape for women's political agency. While the national legal framework, notably the 2018 Revitalised Peace Agreement, mandates inclusion, localised power dynamics frequently undermine these provisions. In many communities, male-dominated customary courts and traditional authorities remain the primary arbiters of social and political life, often relegating women's voices to domestic spheres. This creates a significant disconnect between *de jure* national policies and *de facto* local practices, particularly in rural areas where state presence is weak. Consequently, women aspiring to political office must navigate a dual system, appealing to formal electoral mechanisms while also seeking legitimacy within traditional hierarchies that may be inherently sceptical of their public role. This duality exhausts resources and perpetuates a form of political gatekeeping that fundamentally limits the practical implementation of quota systems.

The period under review has also witnessed the strategic use of digital platforms by women's advocacy groups to mobilise support and articulate political agendas, albeit within a constrained digital environment. Organisations such as the South Sudan Women's Coalition have utilised social media to campaign for policy reforms, share success stories, and foster solidarity networks that transcend ethnic and geographic divides. However, this digital engagement operates within a context of low internet penetration, frequent state-imposed shutdowns, and online harassment targeting outspoken women. The digital divide thus mirrors broader societal inequalities, where urban, educated women gain a platform while those in remote regions remain largely excluded from this new form of political discourse. Nonetheless, these digital spaces have provided a crucial, alternative public sphere for challenging patriarchal narratives and documenting instances of political exclusion.

An additional, critical factor emerging in the post-2021 landscape is the intersection of economic vulnerability and political participation. The protracted economic crisis, marked by hyperinflation and the collapse of basic services, has disproportionately affected women, increasing their care burdens and limiting the time and financial resources available for political engagement. For many women, the opportunity cost of attending a community meeting or campaigning is prohibitive when compared to the immediate necessity of securing food and water for their households. This economic precarity is exploited within political patronage networks, where material incentives are often offered in exchange for political loyalty, potentially co-opting women's participation into reinforcing existing power structures rather than transforming them. Therefore, without concurrent efforts to address women's economic empowerment and social protection, legislative measures for inclusion risk benefiting only a small elite who are already insulated from the country's severe economic hardships.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review has synthesised scholarly literature from 2021 to 2026 concerning women's political participation in South Sudan, offering a critical analysis through an African perspective. The evidence converges to demonstrate that while a formal architecture for inclusion exists, its implementation is systematically undermined by an interconnected web of structural, cultural, and political barriers. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and its 35% affirmative action quota established a pivotal, though fragile, legal foundation. However, this review substantiates that the translation of these provisions into meaningful power has been obstructed by a political settlement that remains deeply patrimonial and resistant to substantive gender reform. Crucially, women's participation is often instrumentalised by political elites to fulfil international obligations and access donor resources, rather than being embraced as a transformative democratic principle. Consequently, women appointed to positions, particularly at sub-national levels, frequently operate without adequate resources, institutional support, or real decision-making authority—a phenomenon accurately characterised as political tokenism. This is compounded by a pervasive insecurity that disproportionately affects women, with targeted political violence and sexual and gender-based violence serving as documented tools of intimidation that suppress civic engagement.

Culturally, patriarchal norms entrenched within both customary and statutory systems continue to legitimise women's exclusion from the public sphere. Discourses framing women's primary roles as mothers and wives, alongside the weaponisation of tradition by male gatekeepers, create significant social sanctions against women in politics. The analysis highlights how these cultural barriers intersect inextricably with structural ones, such as extreme poverty, high illiteracy rates, and limited access to education and independent finance. These factors collectively restrict the pipeline of potential female leaders and ensure that those who do emerge often originate from elite familial networks, which may limit their incentive to advocate for broader gender interests. Furthermore, fragmentation within women's movements themselves, often divided along ethnic, political party, and urban-rural lines, has weakened their collective bargaining power, despite the presence of courageous and strategic activism.

The contribution of this review to African Studies is threefold. Firstly, it provides a focused, contemporary examination of gender politics within Africa's youngest state, enriching the literature on women's agency in post-conflict contexts. It moves beyond a simplistic narrative of victimhood to critically engage with the strategies of negotiation and coalition-building employed by South Sudanese women, aligning with African feminist scholarship that emphasises nuanced agency. Secondly, it underscores the critical importance of analysing formal institutions in tandem with the informal power structures—the clans, patronage networks, and customary authorities—that ultimately determine power distribution in many African political systems. The South Sudanese case illustrates how gender quotas, a common policy prescription, can be hollowed out when they clash with resilient informal governance practices. Finally, this review situates South Sudan's experience within a wider African dialogue on peacebuilding, demonstrating that sustainable peace is inextricably linked to inclusive political processes.

Despite the growing body of work, significant research gaps persist. There is a pressing need for longitudinal studies tracking the trajectories of women who have attained office, assessing their impact on policy and shifts in gender norms over time. Comparative African studies are also vital; systematic

research comparing gender quota implementation in South Sudan with experiences in neighbouring states like Rwanda or Uganda could yield valuable insights into enabling contextual factors. Furthermore, the voices and experiences of women at the grassroots level—in rural communities and across diverse ethnic groups—remain under-documented. Research employing participatory and ethnographic methods is required to better understand the everyday realities of political engagement for non-elite women. Finally, the role of regional African bodies like the African Union in supporting gender-progressive reforms in South Sudan warrants deeper analysis.

In light of these findings, final recommendations for policy and advocacy must be African-led and context-specific. Firstly, African Union mechanisms and Pan-African women’s networks should intensify peer-to-peer support, focusing on strengthening the capacity of South Sudanese women legislators and ensuring the full domestication of continental instruments like the Maputo Protocol. Secondly, donor partners and national governments must prioritise funding for culturally resonant civic education and leadership training beyond Juba, while directly investing in women’s economic empowerment as a foundation for political independence. Thirdly, support for South Sudan’s women’s movement should aim to foster strategic, issue-based coalitions that can bridge internal divides during critical moments of constitutional review and electoral preparation. Advocacy must also pressure for concrete security sector reforms to protect women in public life.

In conclusion, this systematic review affirms that the struggle for women’s political participation in South Sudan is a microcosm of the broader struggle to define the nation’s political character. The period from 2021 to 2026 has been one of contested progress, where hard-won legal gains are perpetually tested against the realities of a fragile state and a resistant political culture. The evidence confirms that numerical presence alone is an insufficient metric for inclusion; the quality of participation and the redistribution of actual power are the true benchmarks of success. From an African perspective, the South Sudanese experience offers a sobering yet instructive case on the limits of institutional mimicry and the enduring power of informal political settlements. Sustainable advancement will depend less on external blueprints and more on the continued evolution of homegrown, resilient strategies that navigate the intricate intersection of patriarchy, patrimonialism, and peacebuilding. The agency demonstrated by South Sudanese women, despite formidable obstacles, remains the most potent source of hope for a more inclusive political future.

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