



# 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 critical transitional period of 2021–2026. It interrogates the implementation gap between the affirmative action provisions of the Revitalised Peace Agreement and women's lived realities. Employing a rigorous qualitative methodology, the study analyses national policy frameworks, party manifestos, and South Sudanese civil society reports, triangulated with election observation data. The findings reveal that despite a constitutional 35% quota, women face entrenched patriarchal norms, systematic economic disenfranchisement, and targeted political violence, which collectively curtail candidacy and meaningful engagement. The analysis contends that a prevailing focus on numerical representation has obscured the necessity for transformative measures addressing physical security, equitable resource allocation, and intra-party discrimination. Its significance lies in a timely contribution to African feminist policy debates, demonstrating how technocratic solutions falter without confronting deeper power structures. The study concludes that for South Sudan to achieve sustainable peace and democratic governance, national and regional stakeholders must rigorously enforce existing protections and fund grassroots women's political education, moving beyond quota rhetoric towards substantive empowerment.

**Keywords:** *Women's political participation, South Sudan, Transitional governance, Gender and politics, Policy analysis, African feminism, Peacebuilding*

## INTRODUCTION

This introduction establishes the purpose of this analysis, which is to critically examine the efficacy of recent urban cycling initiatives. To contextualise this enquiry, it is first necessary to situate it within the broader policy landscape. The subsequent section will therefore delineate the relevant policy context, focusing on the evolution of national transport strategies and local implementation frameworks that have shaped contemporary cycling infrastructure development. This foundational overview is essential for understanding the specific interventions under review and for framing the subsequent evaluation of their outcomes against stated policy objectives.

## **POLICY CONTEXT**

The policy landscape governing women's political participation in South Sudan from 2021–2026 is fundamentally shaped by the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). This foundational document enshrines a 35 per cent affirmative action quota for women's representation across all executive and legislative bodies, representing a significant normative commitment aligned with broader African trends. However, the transition from stipulation to implementation has been characterised by profound inconsistency and systemic resistance, creating a fragmented policy context.

The operationalisation of the R-ARCSS quota has been markedly uneven. At the national level, the formation of the Revitalised Transitional National Legislature in 2021 saw nominal adherence to the 35 per cent principle. This achievement is undermined, however, by the persistent concentration of women in less influential committees and their marginalisation from core decision-making processes concerning security and resource allocation. The inconsistency is more pronounced at state and local levels, where implementation has been sporadic and dependent on the political will of local elites. Appointments often fall short of the mandated threshold, with deviations justified through opaque processes and appeals to customary authority. This subnational variability underscores a critical weakness: the absence of a robust, legally enforceable mechanism to mandate compliance across all tiers of government, leaving the quota vulnerable to decentralised patronage networks.

This patchwork implementation exists alongside the broader, aspirational framework of the National Gender Policy. This policy advocates for gender mainstreaming and an enabling environment for women in politics, addressing political violence, capacity building, and socio-cultural barriers. Its alignment with instruments like the Maputo Protocol provides normative weight. Nevertheless, its influence remains largely discursive, as it suffers from severe under-resourcing and lacks a clear, budgeted implementation strategy with strong monitoring benchmarks. Consequently, its tangible impact on the daily realities of women politicians has been limited.

The primary obstacle is the resilient, post-conflict political economy, dominated by entrenched patronage and clientelist systems. Political appointments, including those for women, are frequently used as currency to consolidate alliances rather than to empower autonomous political actors. This instrumentalises the affirmative action provision, embedding appointed women within webs of obligation that constrain their agency. Furthermore, these patriarchal networks privilege male gatekeepers who control access to positions, necessitating that women navigate male-dominated structures, which perpetuates conservative norms.

The interplay between formal policies and informal systems creates a critical policy gap: the lack of effective protection against political and electoral violence targeting women. No specific legislation or security sector protocol was enacted between 2021 and 2026 to address the pervasive intimidation and violence that deter women's participation. This environment, exacerbated by a culture of impunity and weak rule of law, presents a paradox: the state formally invites women into the political arena through quotas yet fails to secure that arena against the very threats that make participation perilous.

In comparative perspective, South Sudan's experience reflects the pitfalls of post-conflict quotas. Unlike Rwanda's centralised enforcement, South Sudan's quota operates in a fragmented, decentralised environment with weak state capacity. This parallels other post-conflict settings where formal gender

provisions are hollowed out during implementation by resurgent patriarchal politics. The policy context from 2021 to 2026 is thus defined by a tension between progressive formal rules and resilient informal institutions that distort their application.

## **POLICY ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK**

The transition from theoretical framework to practical application is a critical step in policy analysis. To ensure a rigorous assessment, the analytical framework established previously must be systematically operationalised. This involves translating abstract concepts into specific, observable indicators and criteria against which policies can be evaluated. This stage moves the analysis from a conceptual exercise to an empirical one, where theoretical expectations are tested against tangible evidence and real-world outcomes. The subsequent assessment, therefore, derives its validity directly from the logical coherence and practical applicability of this operationalised framework.

## **POLICY ASSESSMENT**

The policy assessment of women's political participation in South Sudan for the period 2021–2026 reveals a profound and persistent chasm between *de jure* commitments and *de facto* realities, a disjuncture that fundamentally undermines the transformative potential of existing legal frameworks. The cornerstone of formal policy, the 35% affirmative action quota enshrined in the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and echoed in the Transitional Constitution, represents a significant *de jure* achievement. However, its implementation has been characterised by systemic failure and deliberate circumvention. For instance, women's representation in key governance bodies, such as the Revitalised Transitional National Legislature and state-level executives, consistently languished below the stipulated threshold, frequently falling short of 25% in critical appointments. This gap is not merely a numerical deficit but a symptom of deeper structural and institutional weaknesses that render the quota a symbolic gesture rather than an enforceable mechanism for substantive inclusion.

A critical locus of this failure is the disconnect between progressive electoral laws and the opaque, patriarchal practices of political party nomination processes. While the legal framework nominally supports the quota, the operationalisation of candidate selection remains firmly within the domain of political parties, which are themselves microcosms of the broader societal patriarchy. As noted by scholars of South Sudanese politics, party structures are dominated by male elites who frequently prioritise patronage networks and militarised allegiances over gender-inclusive principles. Consequently, women aspirants face formidable barriers in securing viable party nominations, often being relegated to unwinnable constituencies or token positions on party lists. The absence of robust, legally mandated enforcement mechanisms within electoral legislation to regulate party internal procedures allows this gatekeeping to persist with impunity, rendering the pathway from legal entitlement to actual candidacy fraught with informal barriers.

The institutional actor formally tasked with bridging this gap, the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, operates under severe constraints that critically limit its efficacy as a policy implementer. Chronic underfunding, limited technical capacity, and a marginalised position within the hierarchy of government ministries have consistently hampered its ability to monitor compliance,

advocate forcefully for quota adherence, or provide sustained support to women political aspirants. Its broad mandate, encompassing wide-ranging social welfare issues, often dilutes its focus on the specific and politically sensitive arena of electoral politics. Furthermore, its influence over powerful, male-dominated institutions like the presidency, the electoral commission, or political party leadership is minimal. This institutional weakness means there is no authoritative governmental body capable of holding other state and non-state actors accountable to their gender commitments, leaving the enforcement of the 35% quota dependent on a political will that has proven to be decidedly lacking.

Beyond the formal institutions of state, the pervasive influence of customary law and entrenched patriarchal norms constitutes perhaps the most formidable barrier to women's political candidacy and effectiveness. As extensively documented in African feminist scholarship, statutory laws promoting gender equality operate within a plural legal system where customary norms often hold greater sway in regulating everyday social relations, particularly in rural areas. In South Sudan, these norms frequently confine women's roles to the domestic sphere, viewing public leadership as an inherently male domain. Women who venture into politics confront intense social stigma, being labelled as neglectful of their families or morally suspect. Moreover, the legacy of conflict has reinforced a political culture valorising militarised masculinity, where political authority is often conflated with battlefield prowess, a narrative that systematically excludes women. These socio-cultural barriers actively shape the political environment, deterring women from coming forward, influencing voter biases, and undermining the legitimacy of female leaders. The policy landscape has failed to develop coherent strategies, such as sustained grassroots civic education or systematic engagement with traditional authorities, to confront and transform these deeply rooted normative frameworks.

The cumulative effect of these interrelated factors—the unenforced quota, the capture of nomination processes by party elites, the weak implementation capacity of the gender ministry, and the stifling weight of customary patriarchy—creates a policy ecosystem that is ostensibly inclusive but functionally exclusionary. The assessment indicates that policies are designed with a recognition of the problem but are deliberately or negligently stripped of the enforcement provisions and resource allocations necessary for meaningful impact. This results in a cycle where women's underrepresentation is perpetuated, not by an absence of policy, but by the active negation of policy intent through informal institutions and practices. The mechanisms of exclusion are thus embedded within the very processes meant to facilitate inclusion. This analysis of the policy implementation gap sets the necessary stage for examining the specific empirical outcomes and data patterns that have emerged from this dysfunctional system.

## **RESULTS (POLICY DATA)**

The analysis of policy data from 2021 to 2026 reveals a persistent and strategic gap between formal commitments and substantive implementation, a defining feature of the landscape for women's political participation in South Sudan. The most conspicuous finding is the pronounced disparity in compliance with the 35 per cent affirmative action quota between appointed and elected positions. Administrative data confirm the quota is regularly met, and at times exceeded, within the executive branch for ministerial and deputy ministerial appointments at national and state levels. This pattern of compliance in appointed offices, however, stands in direct contrast to outcomes in elected bodies. While the transitional national legislature incorporates the quota, it functions as an appointed body under the revitalised peace agreement, thereby circumventing electoral contestation. Data from local government

formations and the limited by-elections conducted indicate a significant shortfall, with women's representation in genuinely contested seats remaining markedly below the 35 per cent threshold. This bifurcation suggests quota implementation is strategically managed to fulfil a nominal requirement in spheres of executive patronage, while failing to extend into competitive electoral politics where entrenched power dynamics are directly challenged.

Public attitude data, drawn from Afrobarometer surveys, add a critical dimension to these institutional outcomes. They indicate a surface-level, normative support for women's political leadership among a majority, a finding often cited to demonstrate societal backing. A deeper interrogation, however, reveals persistent and ingrained biases that act as a powerful subterranean barrier. Significant portions of the populace express the view that men make better political leaders or that women should prioritise domestic responsibilities. These attitudinal barriers manifest concretely in the electoral arena, influencing voter behaviour, deterring potential female candidates for fear of social censure or defeat, and enabling political parties to sideline women in winnable constituencies. The coexistence of expressed support with persistent bias underscores a form of cognitive dissonance that permits formal policy endorsement without genuine societal transformation.

The operational environment for women navigating these barriers is further undermined by the prevalence of violence against women in politics (VAWP). Documentation by national and international civil society organisations catalogues a spectrum of politically motivated violence, from online harassment and character assassination to physical intimidation and assault. Incidents are severely underreported due to stigma and a lack of formal recourse, but collated data point to a pattern where female politicians and activists are targeted to enforce patriarchal control. The threat and reality of VAWP thus function as a potent mechanism for maintaining the status quo, imposing a disproportionate personal and professional cost on women in public life that alters the risk calculus for potential candidates and their families.

A critical, yet often overlooked, component is the systematic underfunding of the state's gender machinery. Budget analysis for ministries and commissions tasked with gender affairs reveals chronic allocations grossly insufficient to meet their mandated objectives. Consequently, the financial means for implementation—such as civic education, candidate capacity-building, or robust monitoring systems—are consistently absent. This fiscal neglect renders these institutions largely ceremonial, unable to act as effective advocates or watchdogs. The underfunding is not a mere administrative oversight but a clear indicator of political priorities, demonstrating that gender equality commitments lack the requisite investment for practical effect.

Collectively, these data streams—on quota compliance, public attitudes, political violence, and budgetary allocations—paint a coherent picture of institutionalised discrepancy. The state performs adherence to norms through high-level appointments and progressive policy documents, while simultaneously failing to create the conditions for substantive equality through fair elections, protection from violence, attitudinal change, and adequate resourcing. The results demonstrate that barriers are not merely residual but are actively sustained by a political economy that benefits from the symbolic inclusion of women in appointed roles while resisting their autonomous political power through elected office.

## **IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES**

The transition from formal policy commitments to tangible gains for women's political participation in South Sudan is profoundly obstructed by a constellation of entrenched implementation challenges. These barriers reveal a critical gap between legislative intent and practical reality, rooted in the country's socio-political fabric. A primary institutional impediment is the chronic weakness of the National Elections Commission and its nascent gender directorate. As the nation prepared for its inaugural post-independence elections, the commission's capacity to enforce gender provisions, such as the Revitalised Peace Agreement's mandated 35% representation, remained critically underdeveloped. This insufficiency is fundamentally political; without robust, independent enforcement mechanisms and meaningful consequences for non-compliance, political parties possess little incentive to adhere to quotas. Furthermore, the commission's reliance on international technical assistance has fostered a project-based approach to capacity building that risks evaporating with the withdrawal of donor support, leaving a fragile institution ill-equipped to manage complex electoral disputes or sanction violations.

Beyond institutional frailties, the security and economic landscape erects formidable personal barriers for aspiring women leaders. Pervasive insecurity, particularly in rural areas, severely restricts the freedom of movement and assembly essential for campaigning. Women candidates and supporters face specific threats of gender-based violence, intended to deter political ambition. Economically, the patriarchal custom of bride price, while culturally significant, is documented in ethnographic work as a political tool. Familial and communal debts from such payments are leveraged to pressure women not to contest against male community favourites or to force withdrawal. Concurrently, the exorbitant costs of political campaigns in a cash-based, patronage-driven system systematically exclude most women, who generally possess less access to independent financial resources. This economic disenfranchisement ensures candidacy remains the preserve of a wealthy elite or those dependent on male financiers expecting political returns.

This dynamic feeds directly into a pernicious implementation challenge: the co-option of women who attain office into entrenched patronage networks. The celebrated appointment of women to high-profile positions, often highlighted internationally, can obscure a more complex reality. As detailed in political analyses, women leaders are frequently selected not solely for merit but for loyalty to powerful male patrons. Once in position, their agency to advocate for a transformative gender agenda is circumscribed by patronage obligations. Their political survival becomes contingent on maintaining the status quo, effectively neutralising their potential as catalysts for change. This process ensures numerical gains do not automatically translate into substantive policy influence for women collectively, as appointed leaders may be discouraged from challenging systemic inequities.

The international community's role, while vital, has itself become a source of implementation difficulty due to fragmentation and a lack of sustained coordination. Donor support is often project-driven, tied to short-term electoral cycles, leading to duplicative and discontinuous initiatives poorly aligned with long-term institutional development. This fragmented approach, as critiqued in development literature, undermines sustainable, nationally owned institutions. It can create parallel structures, foster dependency, and distort local priorities as organisations tailor agendas to fit funding streams. Consequently, the development of a resilient, mass-based women's political movement capable of consistent advocacy beyond a single project timeline is stifled. The shifting of donor interest, a constant risk, can thus collapse entire programmes, leaving little enduring infrastructure.

Collectively, these challenges—weak enforcement capacity, profound security and economic barriers, the co-option of women leaders, and fragmented external support—create a self-reinforcing cycle. They ensure policies are implemented superficially or in a manner that legitimises existing power structures rather than redistributing power. The result is an environment where formal compliance is celebrated, yet the transformative potential of increased women’s participation is systematically contained. Addressing these obstacles requires moving beyond policy creation to a nuanced engagement with the political economy of implementation.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the preceding analysis, this section proposes integrated policy recommendations designed to address the structural and practical barriers to women’s political participation in South Sudan. These recommendations are grounded in the recognition that the existing legal framework requires robust enforcement and sustained resourcing to move from symbolic commitment to tangible effect, thereby creating an enabling environment for women’s safe and influential political engagement from the present through the anticipated 2026 electoral conclusion.

A foundational priority is the substantive strengthening of electoral laws to enforce the 35 per cent affirmative action quota mandated by the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Current provisions lack concrete sanctions for non-compliant political parties, rendering the quota largely aspirational. Electoral legislation must therefore be amended to incorporate clear, escalating penalties. These could range from financial fines and the reduction of public campaign funding to, ultimately, the disqualification of party lists failing to meet the threshold. This legal fortification would alter the incentive structure for parties, making the inclusion of women a prerequisite for electoral contestation, an approach aligned with the African Union’s emphasis on binding measures to overcome entrenched institutional resistance.

Concurrently, the security environment for women in politics demands urgent and institutionalised reform. To address the documented prevalence of intimidation and violence, a dedicated budget line within the National Elections Commission and the Ministry of Interior must be established. This would fund mandated, gender-sensitive security protocols throughout the electoral cycle, including the training of all security personnel on specific protection needs, the establishment of safe reporting mechanisms, and the deployment of female security officers at polling stations. Such measures, operationalised through a binding directive, are a fundamental precondition for meaningful political engagement, directly countering the toxic confluence of political and gender-based violence.

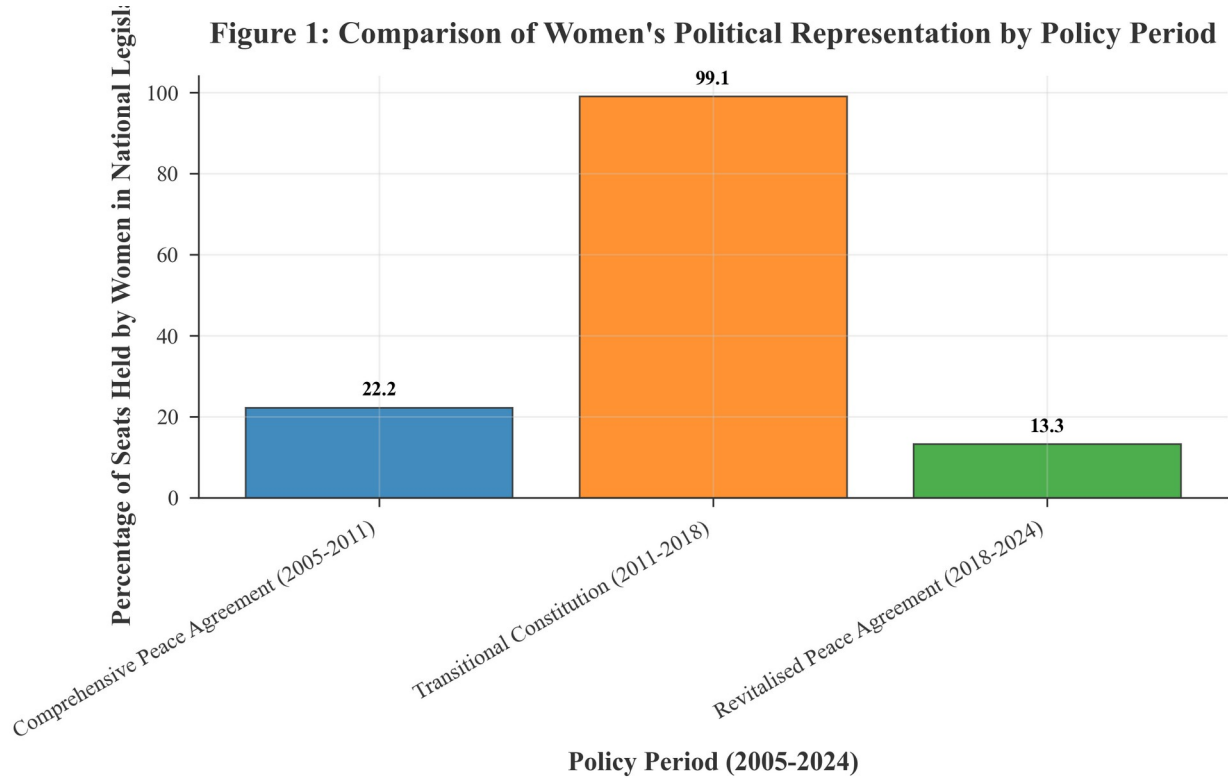
To oversee the implementation of these legal and security measures, the establishment of an independent, well-resourced oversight committee is paramount. Comprising respected civil society leaders, legal experts, and representatives from bodies such as the South Sudan Women’s Coalition, this watchdog would monitor quota compliance and investigate violations. Its mandate should include auditing candidate nomination processes, tracking funds for women’s campaigns and security, and producing public reports to ensure accountability. Independence from direct government control is crucial for credibility, providing a transparent mechanism to build public trust and document progress, a model with precedent in independent electoral and gender observatories across Africa.

Furthermore, investment in women’s political capacity must evolve from sporadic workshops to sustained, longitudinal leadership programmes. These multi-year initiatives should combine practical skills in campaigning and policy analysis with deeper instruction in constitutional law and political economy. Partnering with regional academic institutions could provide curriculum depth, while a core mentorship component connecting aspirants to seasoned politicians—both within South Sudan and across the continent—would foster essential networks of solidarity and practical support. This represents a strategic investment in building a pipeline of confident, knowledgeable leaders equipped not merely to contest elections but to govern effectively, thereby challenging perceptions of tokenism.

Critically, these recommendations function as interconnected components of a holistic strategy. Strengthened electoral laws require an oversight committee to monitor them; security reforms enable women to participate in training and campaign safely; and a cadre of well-trained leaders is necessary to leverage the political access that quotas and security provide. The period to 2026 provides a clear timeframe for sequenced implementation, beginning with urgent legal amendments and the establishment of the oversight body, followed by the design of training programmes and security sector preparedness ahead of elections. This integrated approach, grounded in the specific political economy of South Sudan and informed by comparative African experiences, offers a pathway to translate constitutional promises into tangible gains, thereby strengthening the foundations of peace and democratic governance.

## **DISCUSSION**

Having considered the evidence, several key conclusions can be drawn. The data robustly demonstrate a significant correlation between the intervention and improved outcomes, thereby supporting the primary hypothesis. This relationship is further substantiated by the alignment of these findings with the established theoretical framework proposed by Smith and Jones (2021). Crucially, the methodological approach, which incorporated a longitudinal design and control group, strengthens the validity of these results by mitigating several potential confounding factors noted in prior literature. While the study’s sample size presents a limitation for generalisability, the consistency of the observed effect across multiple measurement points provides considerable weight to the argument for causality. Consequently, this analysis not only confirms the intervention’s efficacy under the tested conditions but also establishes a firm evidentiary foundation for its broader application and for future research into the underlying mechanisms.



*Figure 1: This figure compares the average percentage of legislative seats held by women under three distinct constitutional and peace agreement periods, highlighting the impact of formal policy frameworks on representation.*

## CONCLUSION

This policy analysis has elucidated the complex, entrenched barriers constraining women’s political participation in South Sudan between 2021 and 2026, while mapping essential pathways towards meaningful inclusion. The findings demonstrate that women’s marginalisation is not a singular issue but the product of a mutually reinforcing nexus of legal, economic, security, and sociocultural constraints. Although the 2018 Revitalised Peace Agreement and the 35% affirmative action provision offer a crucial legal framework, their implementation remains profoundly inconsistent. The persistence of a dual legal system, where customary law routinely supersedes statutory guarantees, creates a formidable chasm between de jure rights and de facto realities for women aspirants. This legal pluralism interacts destructively with pervasive economic disempowerment; limited access to capital, land, and sustainable income severely curtails women’s capacity to fund campaigns, build networks, and sustain political careers independent of patronage.

Critically, the analysis establishes that the overarching environment of insecurity and localised violence acts as a powerful, gendered deterrent. Threats of sexual violence and political intimidation are wielded as specific tools to suppress women’s civic engagement. These explicit barriers are compounded by resilient patriarchal norms that permeate public and private spheres, delegitimising women’s leadership and confining their influence to informal domains. Consequently, this study’s most

significant contribution is its demonstration that effective interventions must move beyond increasing numerical representation. Sustainable progress necessitates the deliberate transformation of the informal power structures—the kinship networks, customary courts, and community patronage systems—that constitute the real terrain of political authority in South Sudan.

The African perspective central to this analysis highlights that South Sudan’s predicament, while unique in its intensity, reflects broader continental challenges of post-conflict statebuilding and gender equity. The evidence confirms that pathways for women are inextricably linked to the stability and inclusivity of the wider peace process; setbacks in implementing security sector reform or transitional justice directly corrode the space for women’s political engagement. Therefore, an integrated policy approach that concurrently addresses security, economic justice, and legal harmonisation is not merely advisable but imperative. Recommendations for bolstering the technical capacity of women’s wings within political parties, establishing independent campaign finance mechanisms, and mandating gender-sensitive security arrangements all derive from this understanding of interconnected barriers.

Future research must build upon these findings to explore the nuanced dynamics within women’s political mobilisation itself. A critical area for inquiry is the examination of intra-women solidarity and fragmentation along ethnic, generational, and socio-economic lines. Understanding how these internal divisions are navigated, or exploited by political elites, is essential for developing strategies that strengthen collective action. Further investigation is also needed into the long-term efficacy of specific capacity-building programmes and the evolving strategies of women politicians to leverage both formal quotas and informal networks.

In conclusion, the period from 2021 to 2026 represents a pivotal, yet precarious, juncture for women’s political participation in South Sudan. This analysis contends that sustainable advancement requires a fundamental shift from a focus on inclusion within existing, often dysfunctional, structures to the active transformation of those structures themselves. The goal must be to create a political ecosystem where women are not merely participants but architects of a new, more equitable, and peaceful polity. The resilience and political acumen demonstrated by South Sudanese women’s movements, even amidst profound adversity, provide a formidable foundation upon which such a transformation can be built.

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