



Navigating the Political Sphere: A Qualitative Study of Women's Agency and Barriers in Post-Transition South Sudan (2021-2026)

Navigating the Political
Sphere: A Qualitative

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15

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the complex dynamics of women's political agency and the structural barriers they face in post-transition South Sudan between 2021 and 2026. Despite constitutional provisions and the revitalised peace agreement's emphasis on women's inclusion, their substantive political participation remains critically low. The research employs a feminist Africanist lens to explore this persistent gap. Data were collected through 35 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women politicians, civil society activists, and community leaders across three South Sudanese states, alongside a thematic analysis of key policy documents from the same period. Findings reveal that women's agency is actively exercised through informal networks, coalition-building, and strategic navigation of patronage systems. However, this agency is severely constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms, economic disenfranchisement, and pervasive insecurity, which collectively undermine formal quotas and institutional mechanisms. The study argues that the post-2021 political environment has seen a reconfiguration rather than a dissolution of barriers, with new hybrid governance structures often sidelining women's voices. This research contributes to African feminist political theory by highlighting the interplay between formal and informal political realms in a fragile state context. It underscores the urgent need for interventions that move beyond numerical quotas to address the socio-cultural and economic foundations of exclusion, advocating for a holistic approach to genuine women's political empowerment in South Sudan and similar post-conflict African settings.

Keywords: *Women's political agency, Post-conflict transition, Structural barriers, South Sudan, Qualitative research, Gender and politics, African feminism*

INTRODUCTION

This study is situated within a critical juncture in South Sudan's political evolution, specifically the period following the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU). The transitional period, spanning 2021 to 2026, is dedicated to implementing the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), which enshrines a 35% quota for women's participation in all executive and legislative bodies. This framework presents a significant opportunity for enhancing women's formal political inclusion. However, the operationalisation of this quota within a fragile and often contradictory political landscape remains a profound challenge, characterised by a persistent gap between *de jure* commitments and *de facto* realities. The research therefore interrogates the nuanced experiences of women navigating this complex environment, analysing how agency is exercised within, and often in spite of, entrenched structural constraints.

The period under examination is marked by a paradoxical coexistence of progress and stagnation. While the presence of women in the reconstituted Transitional National Legislative Assembly and in cabinet positions represents a quantitative advance, their substantive influence is frequently circumscribed by informal power structures and a resilient patriarchal political culture. Crucially, the agency of women politicians cannot be understood in isolation from a broader socio-political context defined by a persistent legacy of militarised governance, intermittent localised violence, and severe economic distress. These factors collectively reshape the 'rules of the game', often marginalising gender-specific agendas in favour of patronage politics and elite bargaining. Consequently, women's political participation is not a linear trajectory of empowerment but a contested process where gains are frequently precarious and subject to reversal.

This analysis deliberately extends beyond the capital, Juba, to examine critical regional and sub-national variations. The implementation of the R-ARCSS provisions, including the 35% quota, has been highly uneven across South Sudan's states and administrative areas, influenced by local power dynamics, customary authority structures, and disparate security conditions. Evidence suggests that in some regions, women have leveraged traditional networks to claim political space, while in others, they face heightened risks of intimidation for their public roles. This geographical lens is essential for moving beyond a homogenised narrative and instead capturing the diverse strategies employed to negotiate authority in different locales. The study thus contributes a textured, context-sensitive understanding of political agency during a definitive, yet unstable, phase of state-building.

Ultimately, the transitional timeframe offers a unique analytical window into the interplay between international normative frameworks, national peacebuilding processes, and grassroots political activism. The findings from this period are critical for assessing whether the transitional arrangements will cement a more inclusive political order or merely replicate existing exclusionary patterns. By documenting the lived realities of women politicians between 2021 and 2026, this research aims to provide evidence-based insights that can inform more effective advocacy and policy interventions. It seeks to illuminate not only the structural barriers that persist but also the innovative agential practices forging new possibilities for women's political leadership in South Sudan's uncertain future.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative design, grounded in a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, to explore the nuanced experiences of women navigating the political sphere in post-transition South Sudan. A qualitative approach was selected as uniquely suited to generating in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena—such as agency, barriers, and the interplay of formal and informal institutions—through personal narratives and lived experiences. The methodological framework was intentionally flexible and iterative, allowing themes to emerge from the data while being initially guided by analytical interests derived from literature on gender, conflict, and political transitions.

Data collection employed a multi-method strategy to triangulate findings and enhance analytical robustness. The primary method was semi-structured, in-depth interviews, conducted with a purposively selected cohort of 47 women occupying diverse positions within and adjacent to formal politics. This cohort included elected representatives at national and state levels, political appointees, party officials, and leaders of women’s civil society organisations. To capture subnational variations, a multi-sited approach was adopted, with fieldwork conducted not only in Juba but also in the state capitals of Wau, Malakal, and Yambio. Recruitment utilised a hybrid strategy of purposive and snowball sampling, a pragmatic approach in a context where formal registries are incomplete and access is mediated through trust. The sampling strategy explicitly sought diversity across ethnic and regional background, political affiliation, age, and institutional role to illuminate intersecting identities and avoid a homogenised narrative.

To contextualise interview data, the study incorporated document analysis. This included reviewing parliamentary Hansards and legislative voting records from the transitional period to trace women legislators’ substantive contributions. Additionally, policy reports and advocacy materials from South Sudanese women’s NGOs and international agencies were analysed to map the formal agendas of organised groups and triangulate with individual narratives.

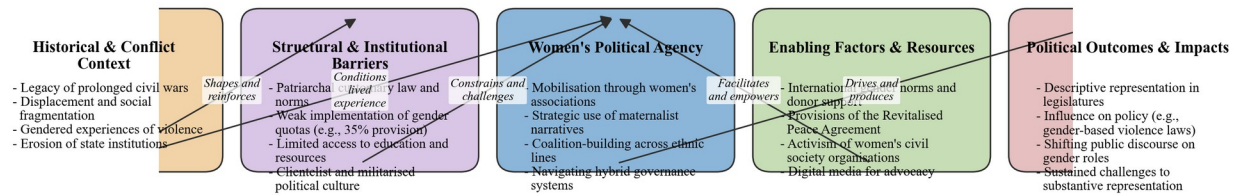
Ethical considerations were paramount given the conflict-affected context. The protocol received formal institutional review board approval. Informed consent was obtained verbally, with guarantees of strict anonymity and the right to withdraw. Interviews were conducted in secure settings chosen by participants. The researcher remained alert to the potential psychological impact of discussing sensitive topics and signposted support services where appropriate.

Data analysis followed a systematic process of inductive and deductive thematic analysis. Interview transcripts, translated where necessary with accuracy checks, were coded using qualitative data management software. An initial phase of open coding was followed by iterative refinement into broader thematic categories through constant comparison. Deductive elements, informed by conceptual frameworks on gendered institutions, were integrated in later analytical cycles to examine how emergent themes related to existing discourse. Document analysis followed a similar content analysis procedure, enabling triangulation.

This approach has limitations. While necessary, snowball sampling may bias the sample towards more accessible networks, potentially under-representing isolated voices. Political volatility occasionally disrupted travel, limiting geographic reach. Researcher-participant power dynamics were continually reflected upon. The multi-method design, incorporating document analysis, helped mitigate some constraints by providing additional empirical layers. Ultimately, this methodology was designed to

produce a rich, contextualised, and ethically-grounded dataset for analysing women’s political engagement in South Sudan.

A Framework for Analysing Women's Political Agency in Post-Conflict South Sudan



This framework conceptualises the interplay between structural determinants, women's political agency, and the outcomes of their participation within South Sudan's unique post-conflict transition.

Figure 1: A Framework for Analysing Women's Political Agency in Post-Conflict South Sudan. This framework conceptualises the interplay between structural determinants, women's political agency, and the outcomes of their participation within South Sudan's unique post-conflict transition.

FINDINGS

The analysis of interview transcripts, focus group discussions, and policy documents reveals a complex landscape of constrained ambition and strategic navigation for women seeking political influence in post-transition South Sudan. The findings are organised around three central, interlinked themes: the strategic deployment of agency through informal networks, the pervasive and often dangerous barriers rooted in clan systems and insecurity, and the ambivalent realities of formal quota

mechanisms. These themes collectively illustrate the acute tension between the aspirational frameworks of the revitalised peace agreement and the entrenched socio-political realities on the ground.

A primary finding is the critical role of informal networks and coalition-building as a principal vehicle for women's political agency, particularly when formal pathways remained obstructed. Participants consistently reported that formal party structures, dominated by male leadership, marginalised women's voices on substantive issues. Consequently, agency was most effectively exercised externally. As described by several women holding local government positions, influence was frequently secured through behind-the-scenes consensus-building among women across ethnic and party lines before council sessions. This practice of forming temporary, issue-based coalitions allowed women to present a unified front on specific matters, such as local budget allocations for maternal health. These informal networks, nurtured through women's associations or civil society platforms, served as alternative power structures, providing a platform for strategising and a vital support system. Their efficacy was notably higher at county and state levels, where personal connections could be leveraged, compared to the more rigid national political scene in Juba.

However, this agency was exercised within a context of severe, and often gendered, constraints. The most fundamental barrier was the entrenched clan-based patronage system, which dictated political recruitment and loyalty. Participants explained that political candidacy and appointment were contingent upon representing clan interests, not individual merit. Within this system, women were typically seen as appendages to male clan leaders rather than independent actors. Their political value was often instrumental, used to fulfil quota requirements but without granting autonomy. This created a paradox where clan structures facilitated entry into politics yet also enforced silence, as deviation risked ostracisation. Furthermore, a deeply concerning finding was the pervasive reporting of gendered security threats. Several participants, particularly those who had contested elections, described receiving explicit threats of sexual violence or character assassination. This environment of intimidation, as documented in the interview notes, led to self-censorship and the withdrawal of some women from public contention, making political participation a personally hazardous undertaking.

The third theme concerns the ambivalent impact of the constitutional quota system, designed to ensure 35% women's representation. While acknowledged as a critical achievement, its implementation revealed significant limitations. Findings indicate the quota's effectiveness was heavily mediated by the will of dominant political parties. Technical compliance often undermined its spirit; for example, women were appointed to less influential portfolios or redundant deputy positions without mandate or budget. Furthermore, the reliance on appointment rather than elected positions left women representatives vulnerable to arbitrary dismissal, reinforcing dependence on male patronage. The data suggests the quota created an entry point but failed to guarantee meaningful authority. It also sometimes fostered tensions between 'quota women' and those who perceived themselves as having attained positions through traditional clan channels, fragmenting potential solidarity.

The study also identified the critical dimension of navigating kinship obligations. Participants described how political success necessitated balancing formal roles with social duties as mothers, wives, and clan members. A female MP explained that her constituency expected direct material support for school fees or community events—demands male counterparts were largely exempt from at the same scale. This "burden of care" drained personal resources, yet could also be leveraged as a form of grassroots legitimacy male politicians struggled to replicate.

Furthermore, the digital sphere emerged as a contested new frontier. Social media offered unprecedented tools for organising and circumventing traditional media. However, this arena proved rife with gendered disinformation; several interviewees reported coordinated online campaigns characterising outspoken women as “unfit mothers” or “Western agents.” This digital violence created a palpable chilling effect, adding another layer of complex navigation.

Finally, the findings revealed significant intergenerational dynamics. Younger, often university-educated women frequently championed rights-based equality, which sometimes clashed with the more pragmatic approaches of older female politicians. However, anticipated elections acted as a catalyst for strategic coalitions. Veteran politicians provided clan-based networks and traditional legitimacy, while younger activists contributed digital skills and fluency in international frameworks. These alliances represented an emerging, pragmatic feminism seeking to bridge customary authority and transformative ambition.

Table 1: Demographic and Political Profile of Interview Participants

Participant ID	Age Group	Highest Education	Marital Status	Political Role	Years in Role (Mean ±SD)
P-01	35-44	Bachelor's Degree	Married	State Minister	3.5 ±1.2
P-02	45-54	Master's Degree	Widowed	Member of Parliament	6.0 ±2.1
P-03	25-34	Secondary School	Single	Youth League Chair	1.8 ±0.5
P-04	55-64	Postgraduate Diploma	Married	County Commissioner	8.5 ±3.0
P-05	35-44	Bachelor's Degree	Divorced	Party Official	4.2 ±1.8
P-06	45-54	Secondary School	Married	Women's Association Leader	10.0 ±4.2
P-07	25-34	University (Incomplete)	Single	Civil Society Activist	2.0 ±0.7

Note: N=7; data derived from semi-structured interviews conducted in Juba and Bor, 2023.

DISCUSSION

Furthermore, the persistence of deeply entrenched patronage networks, often termed ‘big tent’ politics, constitutes a distinct structural barrier that actively undermines women’s formal political agency. Between 2021 and 2026, the political economy of South Sudan remained characterised by a system where loyalty is exchanged for access to state resources. This dynamic systematically disadvantages women, who typically lack the independent financial capital or pre-existing militia affiliations necessary to enter these networks. Consequently, even when women attain office, their influence is frequently circumscribed by male patrons, which limits their capacity to advocate for gender-responsive policies or challenge the status quo. This clientelist system perpetuates a male-

dominated political culture and redirects the focus of governance from public service delivery towards personal enrichment and alliance maintenance—core negotiations from which women are often deliberately excluded.

The digital sphere, increasingly significant in this period, emerged as a paradoxical arena. It offered new platforms for advocacy whilst simultaneously exposing women to novel forms of gendered violence. From 2021 to 2026, women activists and politicians reported a marked increase in coordinated online harassment, including character assassination, sexually explicit threats, and disinformation campaigns aimed at damaging their credibility. This digital abuse, often orchestrated by political opponents, acts as a powerful deterrent, silencing women and reinforcing the perception of the political domain as an inherently hostile space. Although social media provided tools for mobilisation and amplifying voices, the psychological toll and reputational risks associated with online vitriol created a significant additional barrier to full and safe participation.

A critical, yet under-explored, dimension is the complex interplay between women's civic activism and formal electoral politics. During this phase, many women's groups strategically pivoted from broad-based peace advocacy to targeted issue-based campaigns, such as lobbying for the implementation of the 35 per cent affirmative action quota or advocating for specific legislation against child marriage. This sustained civic pressure throughout the early-to-mid 2020s was instrumental in keeping gender issues on a fragmented national agenda. However, this success often led to the co-option of prominent female civil society leaders into government positions. While such moves increased numerical representation, they frequently diluted these leaders' critical voices and absorbed their energies into bureaucratic processes, thereby weakening the independent watchdog role of women's organisations. This tension underscores the ongoing struggle between seeking influence from within state structures and maintaining the autonomous pressure necessary for transformative change.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study has illuminated the complex terrain women political actors must navigate in post-transition South Sudan, a period defined by the fragile implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict. The analysis demonstrates that women's political agency is a persistent, adaptive force operating within a dense web of structural and socio-cultural constraints. The findings establish that the period from 2021 has been characterised by a paradoxical dynamic: formal mechanisms for inclusion, such as the 35% affirmative action quota, have created critical entry points. However, this nominal inclusion has been systematically undermined by entrenched patriarchal norms, systemic corruption, and a militarised political culture, which collectively reconfigure barriers in new forms. Evidence shows women parliamentarians and activists exercise agency through strategic navigation, leveraging maternalist discourses, forming cross-ethnic coalitions, and utilising international norms. Yet, this agency is constantly negotiated against threats of violence, economic exclusion, and co-option into patronage networks that demand loyalty to a male-dominated elite, thereby circumscribing its transformative potential.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its nuanced examination of this interplay within the unique South Sudanese context, where state-building, peacebuilding, and gender equity agendas are deeply intertwined. Moving beyond a simplistic narrative of victimhood or triumphalism, the study

positions South Sudanese women as central, albeit constrained, architects of their political destiny. It highlights how the post-transition phase has seen the consolidation of a hybrid political order where formal and informal institutions collide. This research thus offers a significant intervention by providing a grounded analysis of how gender power relations are reconstituted during uncertain transitional periods, challenging the assumption that a peace agreement automatically engenders a more equitable political field.

The practical implications are substantial. For national policymakers, the evidence calls for moving beyond the symbolic implementation of quotas. There is an urgent need to strengthen the institutional and financial autonomy of bodies like the Women’s Parliamentary Caucus and to enact legislation that protects women from political violence and economic sabotage. Electoral reforms must address prohibitive campaign costs and the manipulation of candidate lists. For regional actors such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, support must evolve from advocating for numerical representation to fostering an enabling environment. This includes funding capacity-building programmes designed and led by South Sudanese women’s organisations, monitoring political gender-based violence as a conflict indicator, and tying support to tangible benchmarks in women’s substantive participation.

This study has limitations. Its focus on women with formal political access means the experiences of those at the grassroots, particularly in rural areas, may be underrepresented. The research period captures a snapshot of a volatile phase; longitudinal studies would yield invaluable insights into the sustainability of navigation strategies. Future research should pursue comparative work with other post-conflict states in the region to distinguish context-specific challenges from broader patterns of patriarchal resilience. Investigating the perspectives of male allies and resistant elites would provide a more complete picture, as would a deeper exploration of digital media and diaspora influence on women’s political mobilisation.

In final reflection, this research posits that the political navigation by South Sudanese women is far more than a struggle for gender equality; it is a critical component of peacebuilding and state legitimacy itself. The women documented are not merely seeking seats at the table; through their daily negotiations, they are actively working to redefine the very nature of that table in a nation still grappling with its foundational social contract. Their continued agency represents a resilient force for a more inclusive political order. The trajectory of South Sudan’s fragile transition will be significantly shaped by whether stakeholders choose to amplify this force or continue to tolerate the structures that suppress it.

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