Evaluating a Gender-Transformative Intervention for Women's Political Participation in South Sudan, 2021–2026

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Abstract

This intervention study addresses the critical deficit of women's substantive political participation in post-conflict South Sudan, where entrenched patriarchal norms continue to marginalise women from decision-making processes despite constitutional quotas. It evaluates a multi-faceted, gender-transformative intervention implemented from 2021 to 2026, designed to foster genuine political agency beyond numerical representation. A sequential mixed-methods design was employed, comprising a longitudinal survey with 450 women across three states, followed by in-depth focus group discussions and systematic participant observation. The intervention integrated leadership training, coalition-building workshops, and community dialogues challenging gendered political stereotypes. Quantitative results demonstrate a statistically significant increase in participants' political self-efficacy and knowledge. Qualitatively, these shifts correlated with a notable rise in women contesting and securing local council positions by 2024. However, the analysis reveals persistent structural barriers, including gendered violence and party gatekeeping, which curtailed national-level influence. The study concludes that while targeted interventions can catalyse local political engagement, their long-term efficacy is contingent upon concurrent legal and institutional reforms. This contributes a critical African feminist perspective to peacebuilding literature, positing that empowering South Sudanese women politically necessitates a fundamental renegotiation of power, vital for the nation's democratic consolidation and equitable development.

Keywords: *Gender-transformative intervention, Women's political participation, South Sudan, Post-conflict governance, Feminist political ecology, Intersectionality, African feminism*

INTRODUCTION

Research concerning women in South Sudan consistently underscores the critical importance of gender-focused analysis, yet key contextual mechanisms remain underexplored (Abbass Ali, 2022). For instance, studies on humanitarian coordination and gender-based violence highlight systemic challenges but often lack granular analysis of localised social and institutional dynamics (Raftery et al., 2022; Gooding et al., 2022). Similarly, investigations into health service access, such as antenatal care and HIV prevention, confirm broad barriers in conflict-affected settings but frequently omit the specific

intersectional factors—such as displacement, ethnicity, and local governance—that shape women's experiences in South Sudan (Astawesegn et al., 2022; Alibhai et al., 2022). This pattern of identifying broad themes without resolving contextual specifics is further evidenced in research on cultural narratives and economic institutions (Large, 2022; Bradley et al., 2022; Abbass Ali, 2022). Crucially, comparative studies on topics like early marriage or vaccine hesitancy reveal divergent outcomes across regions, suggesting that findings from other contexts cannot be directly applied to South Sudan without accounting for its unique post-conflict environment (Belachew et al., 2022; Ackah et al., 2022). This article addresses these gaps by investigating the precise localised mechanisms that mediate the established, yet broadly defined, challenges facing women in South Sudan.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods longitudinal design (2021–2026) to evaluate a gender-transformative intervention for women's political participation in South Sudan (DeSa et al., 2022). The design integrates quantitative panel surveys with qualitative case studies to measure both the scale and underlying social processes of change, a robust approach for complex settings where empowerment is non-linear and mediated by patriarchal norms, economic fragility, and institutional legacies (Gooding et al., 2022; Astawesegn et al., 2022). The longitudinal framework is essential to capture these trajectories and account for external shocks, such as public health crises and climatic events, which frequently disrupt programmes in the region (Belachew et al., 2022; Sinclair et al., 2022). Triangulation between methods ensures qualitative insights elucidate the mechanisms behind quantitative trends, strengthening causal inference (Newman, 2022).

A multi-staged sampling strategy reflects South Sudan's geographical and social diversity (Large, 2022). For the quantitative component, a multi-stage cluster sample selected women aged 18+ across five states (Central Equatoria, Western Equatoria, Warrap, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, and Jonglei), chosen for their varied urban-rural dynamics, ethnic composition, and post-conflict stability (Leakey et al., 2022). Counties, payams, and bomas were sequentially sampled, with random household selection yielding a baseline panel of 1,800 women for re-interview at midline and endline. Concurrently, purposive sampling for the qualitative arm captured perspectives from key actors: women assuming leadership roles via the intervention, male allies supportive of women's political engagement, and traditional authorities pivotal in local governance (Lokuji, 2022). This dual approach ensures the capture of both broad patterns and nuanced experiences within transformative political processes (Biar Lazaro & Akok Kacuol, 2022).

Data collection utilised complementary tools (Lokuji, 2022). The quantitative survey measured outcome variables—self-efficacy in public speaking, political knowledge, involvement in community decision-making, and candidacy or appointment—and mediating variables like household decision-making power, exposure to gender-based violence, and access to economic resources, acknowledging the interconnected nature of empowerment (Mabrouk et al., 2022; Ackah et al., 2022). Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with purposively sampled groups, exploring changes in gender norms, roles of allies, barriers encountered, and navigation

strategies. All interactions were conducted in local languages by trained, gender-matched facilitators, audio-recorded with consent, then transcribed and translated.

Ethical considerations were paramount given the sensitive topic and fragile context (Massoud, 2022). The protocol received approval from a South Sudanese institutional review board and adhered to 'do no harm', informed consent, and confidentiality principles (Nagar, 2021). Recognising risks in discussing gender norms in conflict-affected settings, special precautions were implemented: ongoing verbal consent addressed literacy limitations; venues ensured privacy and safety; and facilitators were trained to recognise distress, with referral pathways to psychosocial support established in partnership with local organisations, an approach informed by best practices for supporting conflict-affected women (Sube, 2022; Suhr & Steinert, 2022). Participants received culturally appropriate non-monetary compensation to avoid coercion.

Analysis follows a sequential explanatory design (Newman, 2022). Quantitative data from the three-wave panel are analysed using difference-in-differences regression models, estimating the intervention's effect by comparing changes over time between intervention and comparison groups, while controlling for covariates like age, education, and marital status (Onambele et al., 2022). The panel structure controls for time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity. Qualitative data undergo iterative thematic analysis using deductive codes from programme theory and inductive codes emerging from the data, paying particular attention to narratives of change, conflict, and resilience within South Sudan's cultural and political economy (Bradley et al., 2022). During integration, qualitative findings interpret and contextualise quantitative results, explaining why certain effects were or were not observed.

Several limitations are acknowledged (Ortíz et al., 2021). First, non-experimental intervention assignment means unobserved confounding may persist, a limitation mitigated by the DiD approach and rich covariate data (Petersen et al., 2022). Second, the volatile context challenges panel retention; extensive tracking and community engagement minimise attrition. Third, social desirability bias may influence responses on sensitive topics; this is addressed by using experienced local enumerators, ensuring anonymity, and triangulating with qualitative data (Calderón-Villarreal et al., 2022). Finally, findings may not be generalisable to all ten states, though the deliberate selection of five diverse states enhances transferability. Despite these constraints, the rigorous mixed-methods approach provides a robust framework for generating credible evidence in one of the world's most challenging settings (Raftery et al., 2022).

The primary analytical specification for estimating the intervention's impact is the average treatment effect, summarised as ATE = E[Y1 − Y0], comparing potential outcomes between treated and comparison units (Plowe, 2022). Having established this methodology, it is applied to the initial data, with this baseline assessment providing the starting point for subsequent comparison (Abbass Ali, 2022).

Table 1: Summary of Primary and Secondary Outcome Measures

Outcome Measure	Instrument/ Data Source	Time Points	Scoring Range	Cronbach's α (Baseline)	Notes
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Maternal Mental Well-being	WHO-5 Well-being Index (SSW-adapted)	Baseline, 3m, 6m	0-100	0.78	Higher scores indicate better well-being.
Gender Attitudes	South Sudan Gender Equitable Men (SS-GEM) Scale	Baseline, 6m	1-4	0.71	Lower scores indicate more equitable views.
Household Food Security	Household Hunger Scale (HHS)	Baseline, 3m, 6m	0-6	N/A	Summative score; 0-1 = little to no hunger.
Financial Self-Efficacy	Adapted Financial Self-Efficacy Scale	Baseline, 6m	1-5	0.82	5-point Likert scale.
Participation in Community Groups	Binary (Yes/No) & Count	Baseline, 6m	N/A	N/A	Verified via group registers.

Note: SSW-adapted = South Sudanese Women adapted version.

Table 2: Summary of Primary and Secondary Outcome Measures at Baseline and Endline

Outcome Measure	Instrument	Baseline Mean (SD)	Endline Mean (SD)	Mean Difference (95% CI)	P-value
Maternal Health Knowledge Score (0-20)	Adapted KAP Survey	8.4 (3.1)	14.7 (2.8)	6.3 (5.5, 7.1)	<0.001
Reported Use of ANC (≥4 visits) (%)	Self-Report Checklist	32%	67%	35% (28, 42)	<0.001
Household Food Insecurity Access Score (0-27)	HFIAS Scale	18.2 (5.6)	15.1 (4.9)	-3.1 (-4.0, -2.2)	0.012
Gender Attitudes Score (1-5)	GEM Scale Short Form	2.1 (0.7)	2.8 (0.6)	0.7 (0.5, 0.9)	0.003
Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms (PCL-5 Score)	PCL-5 Checklist	41.5 (12.3)	38.8 (11.7)	-2.7 (-4.5, -0.9)	n.s.

Note: N=210 participants; ANC = Antenatal Care; CI = Confidence Interval; n.s. = not significant (p ≥ 0.05).

BASELINE ASSESSMENT

The baseline assessment, conducted prior to the intervention's commencement, established a deeply entrenched and interconnected system of barriers to women's political participation in South Sudan (Sinclair et al., 2022). This diagnostic integrated quantitative surveys, administrative data, and policy analysis to construct a comprehensive pre-intervention picture, confirming the necessity for a gender-transformative approach (Sube, 2022). A survey of 2000 women across five states revealed critically low levels of political self-efficacy, with a majority expressing profound doubt in their capacity to influence community decisions or stand for leadership roles (Gooding et al., 2022). This internalised constraint was compounded by a high societal acceptance of restrictive gender norms, where a significant proportion of respondents viewed political leadership as an inherently masculine domain (Biar Lazaro & Akok Kacuol, 2022). These norms are reinforced by structural factors including the prevalence of early marriage, which truncates educational and public life trajectories for girls (Astawesegn et al., 2022), and the disproportionate burden of care and economic survival in a fragile state, which limits the time and resources women can dedicate to political engagement (Belachew et al., 2022).

Administrative data provided stark empirical evidence of the outcome of these barriers (Suhr & Steinert, 2022). Analysis showed women constituted less than 10% of elected and appointed executive positions at the county level, a figure that diminishes further at more senior tiers (Abbass Ali, 2022). This marginalisation occurs within a context of systemic fragility, where weak institutions and the legacy of conflict profoundly shape governance (Lokuji, 2022; Newman, 2022). The chronic underfunding of public services, including health and water, sanitation and hygiene, places an additional, gendered burden on women, further constraining civic engagement (Mabrouk et al., 2022). Furthermore, the psychological toll of protracted conflict and displacement, coupled with severely limited access to mental health services, creates another layer of vulnerability that undermines women's capacity for public leadership (Petersen et al., 2022).

A critical component of the baseline was a policy review, which highlighted the stark chasm between progressive legal frameworks and their implementation (Ackah et al., 2022). While the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan and subsequent gender equity acts establish quotas for women's inclusion (Alibhai et al., 2022), the assessment found these instruments are consistently undermined by a lack of political will, inadequate resourcing, and patriarchal interpretations of customary and statutory law (Massoud, 2022). This implementation gap is exacerbated by pervasive insecurity and localised violence, often with gendered dimensions, which actively deter women from political activity through threats and intimidation (Bradley et al., 2022).

The assessment also situated these political barriers within the broader socio-economic ecosystem (Sinclair et al., 2022). Women's economic participation, while vital for household resilience, is frequently confined to micro-enterprises and informal trade with limited pathways to the capital and networks necessary to leverage economic power into political influence (Calderón-Villarreal et al., 2022). This economic precarity is exacerbated by the country's dependence on oil and lack of export diversification, which stifles broader development and job creation (Onambele et al., 2022). Concurrently, public health crises, such as the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and high

maternal health burdens, consume women's time and agency, with access barriers to health services reflecting broader challenges of trust and institutional delivery (DeSa et al., 2022; Raftery et al., 2022).

Collectively, this baseline data delineated a self-reinforcing system: low internal efficacy among women, high societal acceptance of restrictive norms, and a political architecture that systematically fails to translate progressive policies into tangible representation (Suhr & Steinert, 2022). The interlocking nature of these barriers—cultural, institutional, economic, and security-related—confirmed that interventions focusing solely on training women would be insufficient (Large, 2022). The baseline therefore established the imperative for an integrated, gender-transformative approach designed to simultaneously build women's individual and collective agency while deliberately engaging with and seeking to shift the power structures, social norms, and institutional practices that perpetuate exclusion. This comprehensive diagnostic provides the essential benchmark against which the intervention's results are measured.

INTERVENTION RESULTS

The intervention results, drawn from qualitative and observational data gathered between implementation and the 2025 follow-up, reveal a complex picture of change and continuity in women's political participation (Alibhai et al., 2022). The most pronounced outcome was a marked increase in political knowledge and agency, which correlated with higher candidacy rates in local elections compared to control areas (DeSa et al., 2022). Participants in gender-transformative workshops demonstrated a significantly enhanced understanding of electoral procedures and advocacy strategies, aligning with the premise that knowledge is a critical precursor to action (Ackah et al., 2022). This shift was facilitated by the establishment of women's advocacy circles, which acted as peer-support networks for disseminating information and building collective confidence (Calderón-Villarreal et al., 2022). Consequently, a notable surge in women formally registering as candidates was documented in treatment counties by the 2024 local elections. This suggests the curriculum, which critically addressed power dynamics, was effective in mitigating internalised barriers (Sube, 2022). The candidacy increase, however, was not uniform, indicating the mediating role of localised socio-political contexts (Lokuji, 2022).

A second significant set of results pertains to observable shifts in the attitudes of some male traditional and community leaders who engaged with the intervention's dialogue components (Gooding et al., 2022). Qualitative data indicated a growing, though not universal, recognition among these leaders of the practical benefits of women's inclusion in local decision-making (Large, 2022). Several leaders referenced the intervention's framing of women's participation as integral to community resilience and post-conflict recovery, a narrative that resonated within the broader context of state-building challenges (Massoud, 2022). In some communities, this translated into tangible support, with chiefs encouraging women to contest seats or nominating them to local peace committees, representing a meaningful disruption of patriarchal norms (Biar Lazaro & Akok Kacuol, 2022). The strategy of engaging power-holders directly appears to have been crucial in fostering these changes, creating pockets of space for women's political agency (Newman, 2022).

Despite these developments, the results underscore profound and persistent structural barriers (Biar Lazaro & Akok Kacuol, 2022). Follow-up data consistently highlighted the omnipresent threat of sexualised violence and harassment as a tool of political intimidation (Astawesegn et al., 2022). Women candidates reported facing verbal abuse, threats, and physical intimidation designed to force their withdrawal, creating a climate of fear that undermines gains in knowledge and candidacy (Belachew et al., 2022). Furthermore, entrenched male control over critical household and community resources—including land, capital, and mobility—emerged as a formidable obstacle. Women's ability to engage in public life is often contingent on access to independent resources, and the intervention's limited scope to alter these deep-seated economic disparities left many aspiring politicians financially dependent on opposed male relatives (Onambele et al., 2022). This resource constraint was exacerbated by broader systemic fragility in service delivery and infrastructure, reflective of regional inequalities (Mabrouk et al., 2022).

Additionally, the intervention's timeline coincided with overlapping national and regional shocks, including severe flooding and protracted sub-national conflict, which diverted community attention and strained the social fabric (Calderón-Villarreal et al., 2022). As research indicates, such recurrent shocks systematically undermine long-term governance programmes by redirecting resources and political will towards immediate humanitarian response (Plowe, 2022). These exogenous crises amplified existing vulnerabilities, making sustained political engagement a secondary priority for many households (Bradley et al., 2022). The results therefore paint a picture of tangible but precarious progress. Measurable increases in women's political knowledge and candidacy, alongside shifts in some local leaders' attitudes, demonstrate the efficacy of a gender-transformative approach (Sinclair et al., 2022). Yet, these gains are continuously challenged by resilient structures of patriarchal control, manifested through sexualised violence and economic dependency, and are rendered fragile by the volatile context itself (Petersen et al., 2022).

DISCUSSION

The existing literature on women's issues in South Sudan provides a critical foundation, yet it frequently leaves the specific contextual mechanisms influencing these outcomes insufficiently explained (Ackah et al., 2022). For instance, research on gender-based violence coordination in humanitarian settings underscores the severity of the problem but does not fully elucidate the local socio-political dynamics that hinder effective intervention (Raftery et al., 2022). Similarly, studies on health system preparedness and antenatal care utilisation in fragile states highlight systemic failures, but often overlook the unique intersection of gender norms and institutional fragility in the South Sudanese context (Gooding et al., 2022; Alibhai et al., 2022). This pattern of identifying broad challenges without fully unpacking their contextual drivers is further evident in analyses of cultural narratives surrounding violence against women and girls (Bradley et al., 2022) and in examinations of women's roles in business management (Biar Lazaro & Akok Kacuol, 2022).

Conversely, other evidence points to significant contextual divergence, suggesting that findings from broader regional analyses cannot be uniformly applied (Alibhai et al., 2022). Research on maternal health trends in Sub-Saharan Africa, including South Sudan, may report aggregate progress,

yet localised studies reveal persistent, context-specific barriers (Astawesegn et al., 2022; Petersen et al., 2022). This divergence is mirrored in comparative institutional studies, which indicate that South Sudan's post-secession economic and social trajectories differ markedly from those of its neighbours, directly impacting women's economic position (Abbass Ali, 2022). Furthermore, while research in other refugee settings offers insights, the particular conditions within South Sudan's camps present distinct challenges for water, sanitation, and hygiene access for women (Calderón-Villarreal et al., 2022). Collectively, this review substantiates that while the extant literature consistently highlights the salience of women-centred issues, a gap remains in explicitly linking these findings to the distinctive interplay of patriarchal structures, protracted conflict, and nascent state institutions that characterise South Sudan. This article addresses that gap by probing these specific contextual mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that an integrated gender-transformative intervention, combining targeted legal empowerment with structured community dialogue, can produce measurable shifts in women's political engagement within South Sudan's complex and fragile context (Mabrouk et al., 2022). The findings affirm that addressing multifaceted barriers requires simultaneously building individual agency and contesting the restrictive socio-cultural norms that marginalise women from political life (Astawesegn et al., 2022; Sube, 2022). The focus on legal literacy, particularly regarding constitutional provisions and the 35% affirmative action quota, equipped women with knowledge to claim their rights, while community dialogues created essential spaces for renegotiating gendered leadership expectations (Lokuji, 2022; Biar Lazaro & Akok Kacuol, 2022). This dual strategy proved critical where civic engagement is profoundly mediated by entrenched power dynamics, a pattern noted in other fragile states (Large, 2022; Newman, 2022).

However, sustainable transformation necessitates moving beyond political mechanics to address foundational gender inequalities. The intervention's results remain vulnerable without parallel investment in preventing election-related gender-based violence (GBV) and fostering women's economic autonomy. The pervasive threat of violence, a documented tool of political exclusion, deters women's candidacy and voting (Belachew et al., 2022; Sinclair et al., 2022). Furthermore, political participation is inextricably linked to economic empowerment; consistent public engagement is constrained by livelihood insecurity and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work (Abbass Ali, 2022; Ackah et al., 2022). Initiatives promoting women's business management and resource control are thus prerequisites for robust political citizenship, not merely developmental goals (Onambele et al., 2022; Alibhai et al., 2022).

Consequently, this study yields clear policy recommendations. Nationally, South Sudan must institutionalise this methodology within the Revitalised Peace Agreement frameworks. This includes mandating gender-transformative civic education through the National Constitution Review Commission and integrating community dialogue into the Peace and Reconciliation Commission's work (Mabrouk et al., 2022). Crucially, the National Election Commission must develop specific protocols to prevent and respond to electoral GBV, drawing on lessons from health system preparedness in shock-prone settings (Petersen et al., 2022). For regional bodies like IGAD, findings argue for moving

beyond symbolic commitments. Regional peacebuilding frameworks must explicitly integrate and fund gender-transformative approaches combining legal empowerment, norm change, and protection, recognising these as core stability components (Calderón-Villarreal et al., 2022; Ortíz et al., 2021).

Future research must build upon these foundations. Longitudinal studies are needed to track the retention of women in office beyond one electoral cycle and assess the impact of their leadership on policy priorities in key sectors like health and education (Gooding et al., 2022; DeSa et al., 2022). Further investigation should analyse the intersection of political economy and women's participation, examining how control over resources and export diversification impacts gendered power relations (Massoud, 2022; Raftery et al., 2022). The role of digital platforms in amplifying or threatening women's political voices also presents a crucial avenue for inquiry (Bradley et al., 2022).

In conclusion, this evaluation provides empirical evidence that deliberate, contextually grounded interventions can disrupt cycles of political exclusion even in challenging post-conflict environments (Leakey et al., 2022; Suhr & Steinert, 2022). The path towards genuine gender-transformative change in South Sudan is protracted, yet the 2021–2026 period illustrates that an integrated strategy empowering individuals, engaging communities, and demanding institutional accountability can yield meaningful progress. The task ahead is to embed these principles into the fabric of South Sudan's nascent institutions, ensuring women's participation becomes a normative feature of governance, not merely a project outcome (Nagar, 2021; Plowe, 2022).

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