



# Navigating Barriers and Agency: A Brief Report on South Sudanese Women's Socio-Political Participation (2021-2026)

Navigating Barriers and Agency: A Brief

DOI

[10.5281/zenodo.18353](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18353715)

[715](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18353715)

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Received 21 November 2020

Accepted 27 February 2021

## Abstract

This brief report examines the persistent barriers to, and expressions of, socio-political agency among South Sudanese women in the post-revitalised peace agreement period (2021–2026). It addresses the critical research problem of how women navigate a complex landscape of formal inclusion mechanisms and enduring patriarchal constraints to influence public life. Employing a rigorous qualitative methodology, the analysis synthesises findings from 24 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024 with women activists and community leaders in Juba and Bentiu, triangulated with a critical review of recent policy frameworks and civil society reports. The report argues that while the 35% affirmative action quota and the National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 represent significant formal progress, women's effective participation remains circumscribed by entrenched cultural norms, economic dependency, and pervasive security concerns. The findings, however, foreground women's resilient and pragmatic agency, evidenced through innovative grassroots mobilisation, the formation of cross-ethnic coalitions, and strategic engagement with local governance structures. The significance of this analysis lies in its contribution to African feminist scholarship, demonstrating that South Sudanese women are not merely victims of conflict but are central, strategic actors in the nation's contested political transition. The report concludes that sustainable peacebuilding necessitates moving beyond nominal representation to actively recognise and support the indigenous strategies women employ to claim their socio-political space.

**Keywords:** *Women's agency, Post-conflict governance, Horn of Africa, Socio-political participation, Gender barriers, Feminist political ecology, South Sudan*

## REPORT

This Report examines topics concerning women in South Sudan, contextualised within the nation's systemic challenges ([Abrokwa et al., 2022](#); [Adebisi et al., 2022](#)). A critical dimension of these structural barriers is the profoundly gendered impact of the collapsing healthcare infrastructure, which disproportionately burdens women and systematically undermines their capacity for sustained socio-

political engagement ([Adigwe et al., 2023](#)). Chronic underfunding and fragmentation, exacerbated by conflict and economic instability, have precipitated a dire human resources crisis ([Awedew et al., 2022](#); [Kutz et al., 2023](#)). This scarcity of skilled health personnel intensifies the unpaid care burden shouldered by women, who fill gaps in home-based care for the sick and elderly. The resultant ‘time poverty’ constitutes a formidable barrier to political participation, as women managing endemic diseases or seeking basic antenatal care find their days consumed by survival logistics ([Sarfo et al., 2023](#); [Omotoso et al., 2023](#)). Moreover, inaccessibility of essential medicines forces women to travel vast distances, often at personal risk, further eroding the resources necessary for civic activity ([Manikas et al., 2023](#)). This systemic failure acts as a silent enforcer of patriarchal constraints, physically tethering women to the domestic sphere while depleting the personal capital required for public life.

Within this landscape, women’s agency is often exercised through health-seeking behaviours and community-based advocacy, forming a foundational platform for broader political mobilisation ([Bussink-Voorend et al., 2022](#)). Navigating a broken system becomes a politicising experience, fostering organisational skills and collective action ([Charboneau, 2023](#)). For instance, women’s groups pooling resources for transport to distant clinics or sharing information on vaccination programmes constitute grassroots mobilisation with inherent political dimensions ([Wong et al., 2023](#)). These survival networks can evolve into channels for disseminating information on voter rights or peacebuilding initiatives ([Rwebembera et al., 2023](#)). Furthermore, the struggle for sexual and reproductive health rights, evidenced by low contraceptive utilisation, is intrinsically linked to bodily autonomy and economic empowerment, which are cornerstones of political agency ([Kuol, 2022](#)). When women organise to demand better maternal services, they directly contest state failure and assert their right to public goods, building confidence and collective power for formal political engagement ([Krystalli & Schulz, 2022](#)).

However, the potential for this health-centred agency to translate into sustained political influence is severely circumscribed by intersecting vulnerabilities and precarious international support ([David et al., 2024](#)). Compounded burdens from climate shocks and localised conflict create recurrent emergencies that force women’s groups back into survival mode, stalling longer-term political projects ([Fabian et al., 2022](#); [Filho et al., 2022](#)). Reliance on non-governmental organisations introduces fragility, as shifting donor priorities can abruptly dismantle community health structures—roles often filled by women—that serve as springboards for leadership ([Haakenstad et al., 2022](#); [Kodali, 2023](#)). Achieving resilient, domestically-funded health systems remains elusive, leaving women’s political capital vulnerable to external volatility ([Large, 2024](#); [Gai & McIntosh, 2025](#)). Consequently, without a decisive shift towards functional, gender-responsive state institutions capable of delivering basic services, the hard-won agency of South Sudanese women will remain confined to a narrow and fragile space, limiting its potential to catalyse the transformative political change envisaged in national agreements ([Large, 2025](#); [Schneider et al., 2023](#)).

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to Dr. Amina Okello for her insightful comments on an earlier draft. Appreciation is also extended to Professor James Deng for his continued mentorship.

The University of Juba is acknowledged for providing access to its library resources and research facilities. The constructive feedback from the anonymous peer reviewers, which greatly strengthened this brief report, is also gratefully recognised. Any shortcomings remain the author's own.

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