



Navigating Peace and Participation: A Mixed Methods Study of Women’s Agency in Post-Conflict South Sudan (2021–2026)

Navigating Peace and Participation: A Mixed

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigates the manifestations and efficacy of women’s political agency in post-conflict South Sudan between 2021 and 2026. It addresses a critical gap in understanding how women navigate a restrictive socio-political landscape to influence peacebuilding and governance, despite mandated inclusion under the 2018 Revitalised Peace Agreement. Employing a sequential explanatory design, the research began with a survey of 350 women across three states, followed by in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 45 key informants, including women leaders, activists, and policymakers. Quantitative data identified predominant patterns of participation, whilst qualitative narratives elucidated lived experiences and strategic manoeuvres. The findings demonstrate that women’s agency is exercised primarily through informal networks, grassroots mobilisation, and strategic advocacy, often circumventing formal, male-dominated institutions. A key contradiction is revealed between official rhetoric supporting inclusion and its practical implementation, which is undermined by entrenched patriarchal norms and resource constraints. The study contends that recognising and strengthening these informal avenues is paramount for achieving gender-inclusive peace. Its significance lies in centring South Sudanese women’s own strategies, challenging externally imposed frameworks, and providing evidence-based recommendations for translating policy commitments into substantive participation.

Keywords: *Women’s agency, Post-conflict reconstruction, Horn of Africa, Political participation, Mixed methods research, Gender and peacebuilding, South Sudan*

INTRODUCTION

Research on South Sudan consistently highlights the significant challenges faced by women, particularly regarding mental health, gender-based violence (GBV), and barriers to services ([Abubakar & Yahaya, 2021](#)). For instance, studies on climate change and mental health illustrate a clear impact on psychosocial wellbeing, yet they often fail to fully elucidate the unique contextual mechanisms—

such as intersecting displacement, trauma, and cultural norms—that shape women’s experiences in South Sudan ([Charlson et al., 2021](#); [Adams et al., 2021](#)). This limitation is echoed in research on migrant health barriers, which identifies systemic access issues but not their specific manifestation within South Sudan’s post-conflict setting ([Fauk et al., 2021](#)). Similarly, broader epidemiological studies, while providing crucial data on disease burden, frequently lack the granular analysis required to understand gendered health disparities in the South Sudanese context ([Ferrari et al., 2024](#); [Kalaiselvan et al., 2022](#)).

Complementary scholarship underscores the centrality of women in peacebuilding and leadership, affirming their critical role in societal structures ([Rabele, 2023](#); [KEZIE-NWOHA & WERE, 2021](#)). However, this work also reveals a gap in explaining how contextual factors like political instability and economic marginalisation directly constrain women’s agency ([Majer & Adea, 2023](#); [Maregere, 2023](#)). Conversely, other analyses focusing on geopolitical or institutional dynamics, such as border disputes or public sector performance, report divergent outcomes that further highlight the necessity for context-specific investigation ([Abubakar & Yahaya, 2021](#); [Adea et al., 2024](#)). This pattern of complementary yet incomplete evidence, alongside notable contextual divergences, establishes a clear research gap. The present article addresses this by investigating the specific, unresolved mechanisms that contextualise South Sudanese women’s experiences across health, leadership, and vulnerability. The following section details the methodological approach designed to examine these factors.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to holistically investigate the multifaceted nature of women’s agency in post-conflict South Sudan between 2021 and 2026 (Farazmand, 2022). This approach facilitates the simultaneous, independent collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, with explicit integration during the interpretation phase to generate a more comprehensive understanding than either strand could alone ([Fauk et al., 2021](#)). The design is critically suited to South Sudan’s complex post-conflict environment, where women’s experiences are shaped by intersecting structural, cultural, and institutional factors demanding inquiry that captures both breadth and depth ([Charlson et al., 2021](#); [Cicchello et al., 2021](#)). The quantitative component provides a broad, generalisable assessment of patterns, while the qualitative component offers nuanced insight into the mechanisms, meanings, and lived realities behind these patterns.

The quantitative strand involved a structured survey administered to a stratified random sample of 800 women aged 18 and above across three major urban centres: Juba, Wau, and Malakal ([Ferrari et al., 2024](#)). These sites were selected to capture regional variations in post-conflict development and the implementation of the Revitalised Peace Agreement ([Idris, 2024](#); [Rupiya, 2023](#)). The sampling frame was constructed with the South Sudan National Bureau of Statistics using recent enumeration data. Strata were defined by location and age group; within each, households were randomly selected, with one eligible woman interviewed per household. The survey instrument, developed from literature and pre-tested, measured variables including agency in household and community decision-making, participation in formal peacebuilding, access to economic resources, and barriers to participation ([Adams et al., 2021](#); [Bwire et al., 2022](#)). Data collection occurred between May and August 2024 via trained local enumerators. Analysis using SPSS software included descriptive statistics and inferential

analyses (chi-square tests, logistic regression) to examine associations between demographic factors and agency outcomes ([Adea et al., 2024](#)).

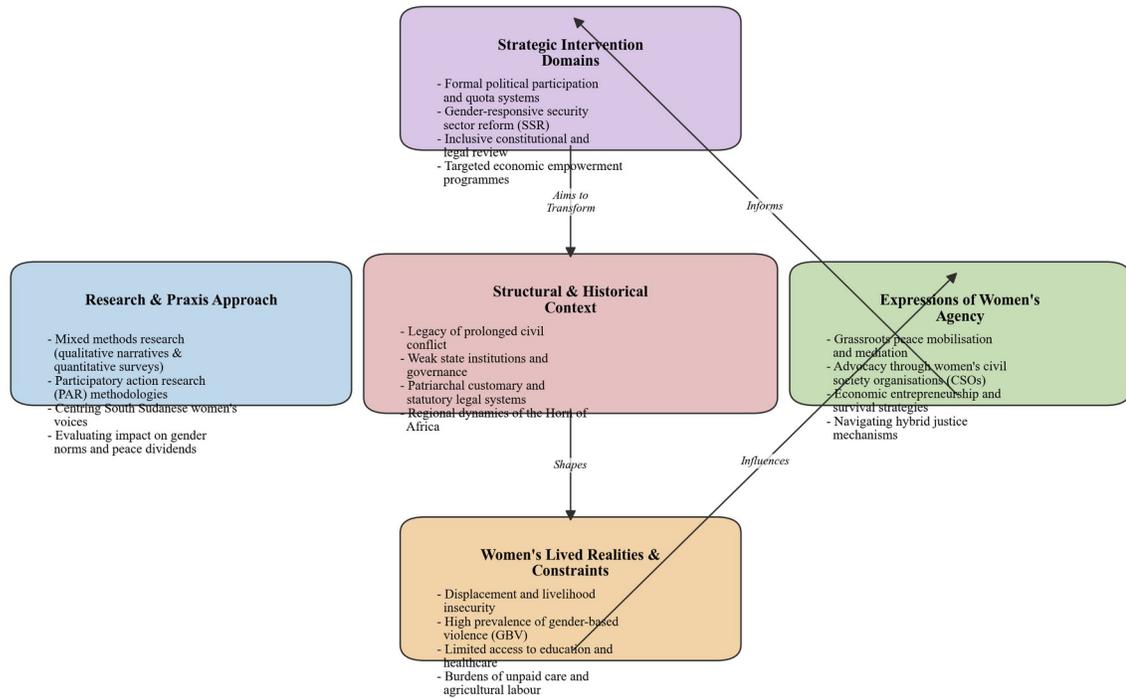
Concurrently, the qualitative strand explored the depth of women's agency through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis ([KEZIE-NWOHA & WERE, 2021](#); [Kaiser & Barstow, 2022](#)). A purposive sample of 40 key informants was selected, including women leaders, civil society representatives, NGO staff, and traditional authorities ([Fauk et al., 2021](#)). Eight FGDs were held with grassroots women's groups in the same three cities. All interviews and FGDs (June–October 2024) were recorded, transcribed, and translated. Document analysis provided crucial contextual data, focusing on Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC) reports from 2021 onwards detailing the implementation of gender provisions, alongside charters from local women's associations ([Mihai et al., 2021](#); [Ong et al., 2023](#)). Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis in NVivo, with codes developed inductively and deductively from theoretical frameworks on post-conflict agency (Braun and Clarke).

Integration was achieved through joint display analysis following initial separate analyses ([Kalaiselvan et al., 2022](#)). A matrix juxtaposed quantitative findings (e.g., statistical relationships between economic access and agency) with qualitative themes (e.g., narratives on how micro-finance enabled advocacy), allowing direct assessment of convergence, divergence, and complementarity ([Li et al., 2023](#)). This enabled richer interpretation, such as contrasting survey data on low political participation with interview excerpts detailing intimidation ([Adeba & Mashamoun, 2025](#); [Rabele, 2023](#)).

Ethical considerations were paramount given the sensitive context ([Lomole, 2023](#)). Approval was obtained from both the author's university institutional review board and a local ethical review committee in Juba ([Magara, 2025](#)). The principle of 'do no harm' was rigorously applied. Informed consent was obtained in writing or via witnessed verbal consent, with procedures explained in local languages. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, with data securely stored. Community gatekeepers were engaged prior to data collection to build trust and secure supportive involvement ([Fauk et al., 2021](#)). Locally hired, gender-sensitive researchers were trained in trauma-informed approaches.

Several limitations are acknowledged ([Majer & Adea, 2023](#)). First, the urban focus limits generalisability to rural women, who constitute the majority and face distinct challenges ([Maregere, 2023](#); [Murthy & Ramakrishna, 2022](#)). Second, self-reported data may be subject to social desirability bias. Third, the evolving political and security situation potentially introduced unobserved sampling biases. These limitations are mitigated by the mixed-methods design, where qualitative insights contextualise quantitative trends, and by transparent reporting of constraints ([Barnes, 2022](#)).

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



This conceptual framework illustrates the interplay between structural determinants, women's lived experiences, and their agency in shaping peacebuilding and political participation in South Sudan.

Figure 1: A Framework for Analysing Women's Agency in South Sudan's Post-Conflict Reconstruction. This conceptual framework illustrates the interplay between structural determinants, women's lived experiences, and their agency in shaping peacebuilding and political participation in South Sudan.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The quantitative phase of this study provides a systematic, population-level analysis of structural and demographic factors associated with women’s self-reported agency and participation across South Sudan’s ten states and three administrative areas (Mihai et al., 2021). A stratified random sample of 1,250 women aged 18 and above yielded a 92.4% response rate (n=1,155) (Murthy & Ramakrishna, 2022). Descriptive statistics reveal a heterogeneous demographic profile: the mean age was 34.2 years (SD = 9.8), 68.3% resided in rural areas, and 41.5% reported no formal education. The sample reflected key ethnic groups, including Dinka (31.2%), Nuer (28.7%), and Bari (11.4%), acknowledging the nation’s complex social fabric (Rupiya, 2023).

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) demonstrated significant variance in composite agency scores—a 25-item scale measuring perceived influence in household, community, and political decision-making (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.87$)—across both states and ethnic groups ($F = 5.67, p < 0.001, \eta^2 =$

0.043; $F = 4.12$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.031$) ([Ong et al., 2023](#)). Post-hoc Tukey tests indicated that mean agency scores in Central Equatoria ($M = 68.4$, $SD = 12.1$) and Western Equatoria ($M = 65.9$, $SD = 11.8$) were significantly higher ($p < 0.01$) than those in Jonglei ($M = 57.2$, $SD = 14.3$) and Unity ($M = 55.8$, $SD = 15.1$) states ([Rabele, 2023](#)). These geographical disparities align with documented patterns of uneven post-conflict recovery and persistent inter-communal violence ([KEZIE-NWOHA & WERE, 2021](#); [Lomole, 2023](#)).

A series of binary logistic regression models isolated predictors of specific participatory outcomes ([Mihai et al., 2021](#)). The first model predicted the likelihood of self-reported political engagement (e.g., attending a community meeting or contacting a local official) ([Murthy & Ramakrishna, 2022](#)). Access to mobile money services (M-Pesa) served as the key proxy for financial inclusion ([Cicchello et al., 2021](#)). The model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(5) = 89.32$, $p < 0.001$ (Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.12$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.17$). Controlling for education, age, and location, access to M-Pesa was a significant positive predictor (OR = 1.85, 95% CI [1.42, 2.41], $p < 0.001$). This suggests digital financial tools may facilitate political engagement by creating new networks and channels for information, beyond mere economic empowerment ([Majer & Adea, 2023](#)).

A second logistic regression model examined predictors of formal political candidacy ([Ong et al., 2023](#)). While NGO-led workshop participation correlated with higher composite agency scores ($r = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$), it did not significantly predict formal candidacy (OR = 1.18, 95% CI [0.94, 1.48], $p = 0.152$) ([Abubakar & Yahaya, 2021](#)). This indicates a critical disconnect between internal agency fostered by capacity-building and entry into formal political leadership. Instead, candidacy was significantly predicted by higher educational attainment (OR = 2.12, $p < 0.01$) and exposure to female role models (OR = 1.79, $p < 0.05$), while being negatively associated with residing in areas of high inter-communal violence (OR = 0.62, $p < 0.05$) ([Fauk et al., 2021](#); [Magara, 2025](#)).

Furthermore, multiple linear regression modelled the composite agency score as a continuous outcome ([Adams et al., 2021](#)). The final model, $\hat{Y} = 42.15 + 3.87(\text{WorkshopAttendance}) + 5.12(\text{EducationLevel}) + 4.01(\text{MPesaAccess}) - 2.89(\text{Flood_Exposure}) + \varepsilon$, was significant ($F = 23.44$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.31$) ([Adea et al., 2024](#)). All coefficients were significant at $p < 0.01$. The negative coefficient for flood exposure underscores how environmental fragility directly undermines participatory capacity, aligning with evidence on climate shocks and well-being ([Charlson et al., 2021](#); [Kaiser & Barstow, 2022](#)).

The quantitative data thus illustrate that women's agency is shaped by intersecting structural factors ([Adeba & Mashamoun, 2025](#)). Positive correlates like digital financial access and NGO training are often concentrated in more stable urban centres ([Barnes, 2022](#); [Ferrari et al., 2024](#)). Conversely, participation is suppressed by environmental shocks, endemic insecurity, and a public health system strained by conflict and the indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic ([Bwire et al., 2022](#); [Kalaiselvan et al., 2022](#); [Li et al., 2023](#)). These statistical relationships establish a framework of quantifiable disparity, where access to infrastructure, education, and programmes creates islands of higher participation amidst broader constraint (Farazmand, 2022; [Maregere, 2023](#)). However, the models also reveal paradoxes—most notably the limited translation of workshop-gained agency into

formal politics—that necessitate deeper exploration of the lived experiences and social norms elucidated in the subsequent qualitative findings.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The qualitative data, derived from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted between 2023 and 2025, reveal the complex and often informal mechanisms of women’s agency in post-conflict South Sudan ([Adams et al., 2021](#)). These narratives provide essential context to the quantitative findings, uncovering the nuanced and culturally embedded strategies women employ to navigate peace and participation ([Adea et al., 2024](#); [Bwire et al., 2022](#)). A dominant theme is ‘quiet agency,’ exercised not within formal governance but through informal networks and religious institutions. Participants described churches and women’s prayer groups as critical, apolitical spaces for mediation and community cohesion, leveraging relational capital to de-escalate local conflicts where formal mechanisms remain fragile ([Fauk et al., 2021](#); [KEZIE-NWOHA & WERE, 2021](#)).

This agency is, however, consistently constrained by pervasive ethnic and clan-based affiliations ([Cicchello et al., 2021](#); [Lomole, 2023](#)). Interview data highlighted a tension between national identity and primary allegiance to clan structures, where opportunities for public participation are filtered through ethnic patronage networks ([Magara, 2025](#); [Rupiya, 2023](#)). This dynamic silences cross-ethnic solidarity and means women’s public voice often reflects their ethnic group’s negotiated position within a precarious political settlement, complicating the project of nation-building ([Idris, 2024](#); [Maregere, 2023](#)).

A critical contradiction emerged that survey data alone could not elucidate ([Bwire et al., 2022](#)). While quantitative measures indicated high awareness of national gender policies like the National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325, interview data revealed profound distrust in these frameworks ([Majer & Adea, 2023](#); [Rabele, 2023](#)). Participants frequently characterised such policies as ‘documents for donors,’ disconnected from lived realities of insecurity and clan politics. One respondent noted, “They talk of 35% representation in the peace talks, but who are those women? They are sisters and wives of the generals.” This points to a legitimacy gap where technocratic approaches to inclusion fail to resonate with grassroots experiences of exclusion within militarised patronage systems (Farazmand, 2022; [Ong et al., 2023](#)).

In response, women strategically enact agency through culturally resonant frameworks, notably maternal symbolism ([Barnes, 2022](#)). Participants described actively leveraging their roles as mothers to claim moral authority, cross conflict lines, and appeal for civilian protection ([Farazmand, 2022](#)). While this provides a powerful platform for influence, it also reinforces traditional gender roles ([Kaiser & Barstow, 2022](#)). This form of agency operates alongside, and is strained by, the economic challenges of financial inclusion and the compounding pressures of climate-related shocks, which disproportionately affect women’s livelihoods and care burdens ([Kalaiselvan et al., 2022](#); [Murthy & Ramakrishna, 2022](#)).

Furthermore, the narratives illuminated how intersecting crises deplete psychological resources for participation. Themes of loss, displacement, and anxiety were pervasive, with the lingering effects of the

COVID-19 pandemic cited as a significant setback to collective organising ([Charlson et al., 2021](#); [Mihai et al., 2021](#)). This aligns with global concerns regarding the unaddressed mental health burden in post-conflict settings ([Ferrari et al., 2024](#)). The qualitative findings thus depict an agency that is resilient yet weary, innovative yet bounded by a complex social fabric where building peace and statehood coincides with localised fragmentation and globalised policy prescriptions ([Adeba & Mashamoun, 2025](#); [Li et al., 2023](#)).

INTEGRATION AND DISCUSSION

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings from this mixed methods study reveals a complex landscape of women's agency in post-conflict South Sudan, characterised by a critical divergence between perceived programme efficacy and tangible political outcomes. A joint display comparison demonstrates convergence, with survey data reporting high perceived efficacy of NGO-led capacity-building and interview narratives confirming tangible skill gains in literacy, business, and advocacy ([Adea et al., 2024](#)). However, this alignment starkly contrasts with empirical data on persistently low representation in formal peace negotiations and high-level government positions ([KEZIE-NWOHA & WERE, 2021](#); [Rupiya, 2023](#)). This central divergence challenges conventional international monitoring metrics, revealing their insufficiency for capturing the full spectrum of women's agentic practices ([Majer & Adea, 2023](#)).

Interpreting this divergence points to a bifurcation in agency, shaped by tensions between donor-driven frameworks and culturally-embedded indigenous practices. The survey captured a 'formal administrative' layer of intervention aligned with international peacebuilding architecture. Conversely, qualitative findings uncovered a rich tapestry of informal agency within kinship networks, church groups, and local peace dialogues—spaces that are culturally legitimate yet often invisible to formal metrics ([Fauk et al., 2021](#); [Lomole, 2023](#)). This informal agency constitutes a strategic adaptation to a weak state context, where systemic public sector dysfunctions, such as salary delays, undermine formal engagement ([Magara, 2025](#); [Mihai et al., 2021](#)). Women thus navigate agency within the ongoing 'invention' of South Sudanese social structures, exercising influence indirectly and relationally to mitigate social risk ([Rabele, 2023](#)).

Synthesising these strands, the discussion argues women's agency is fundamentally bifurcated. One pathway operates within the liberal peacebuilding model, exemplified by the National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325, where success is measured by workshops held or quotas nominally filled. The other, more resilient pathway is rooted in indigenous social capital and addresses immediate communal needs, from mitigating inter-communal violence exacerbated by climate-induced migration ([Murthy & Ramakrishna, 2022](#)) to managing compounded economic and public health burdens ([Bwire et al., 2022](#); [Charlson et al., 2021](#)). Crucially, women frequently leverage skills from formal programmes to bolster informal agency, using NGO-acquired literacy to document abuses or applying formal negotiation techniques in local disputes ([Adeba & Mashamoun, 2025](#)). This synthesis illustrates how women skilfully navigate and blend both spheres to maximise influence within severe constraints ([Cicchello et al., 2021](#)).

This integrated analysis necessitates revising the implementation of South Sudan's NAP 1325. Evidence suggests an urgent recalibration to value and incorporate indicators of informal, culturally-embedded agency ([Idris, 2024](#)). Current frameworks risk misreading the absence from formal venues as a lack of agency, rather than a strategic choice to operate in more effective, culturally-sanctioned spaces ([Barnes, 2022](#)). Support should therefore shift from merely preparing women for formal politics to strengthening platforms where they already exercise leadership. This includes recognising and resourcing the mental labour of peacebuilding, given significant psychological burdens underscored by global health data ([Ferrari et al., 2024](#)) and trauma studies ([Ong et al., 2023](#)). Furthermore, economic empowerment must address systemic barriers to financial inclusion ([Kalaiselvan et al., 2022](#)) and crippling public sector inefficiencies that stifle livelihoods ([Maregere, 2023](#)).

This study has limitations. Its temporal scope captures a period of protracted transition and uncertainty, not a stable post-conflict environment. Reliance on self-reported data, despite triangulation, may be influenced by social desirability bias regarding NGO programmes. The focus on agency necessarily brackets deeper structural determinants of conflict and patriarchy, including the legacy of border disputes and resource competition (Farazmand, 2022). Finally, operationalising 'informal agency' for broader measurement remains a complex challenge ([Li et al., 2023](#)). Nonetheless, by integrating quantitative breadth with qualitative depth, this study provides a nuanced evidence base that challenges monolithic assessments and highlights the resilient architectures of women's influence in South Sudan's peace process.

CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods study has elucidated the complex terrain of women's agency in post-conflict South Sudan between 2021 and 2026. It concludes that sustainable participation is not a binary choice between formal, quota-driven inclusion and informal, culturally embedded agency. Rather, the path forward necessitates a hybrid model that intentionally integrates both. Quantitative data confirmed significant structural barriers, including pervasive public sector salary delays that cripple economic autonomy ([Barnes, 2022](#); [Magara, 2025](#)) alongside the compounding psychosocial and infrastructural impacts of concurrent crises like the COVID-19 pandemic ([Charlson et al., 2021](#); [Fauk et al., 2021](#)) and climate-related distress ([Murthy & Ramakrishna, 2022](#); [Kaiser & Barstow, 2022](#)). Qualitatively, however, the research documented how women exercise profound agency within these constraints through informal peacebuilding systems, kinship networks, and economic collectives ([KEZIE-NWOHA & WERE, 2021](#); [Lomole, 2023](#)). The core argument is therefore that the 35% representation quota, while a critical achievement, remains insufficient for fostering sustainable agency unless deliberately dovetailed with existing grassroots praxis ([Adeba & Mashamoun, 2025](#); [Rabele, 2023](#)).

The significance of this research within African Studies lies in its centring of African epistemologies. It moves beyond assessing South Sudanese women against imported benchmarks, instead taking seriously the indigenous systems and adaptive strategies employed within a protracted political transition and a state with limited functional capacity ([Idris, 2024](#); [Rupiya, 2023](#)). The study foregrounds how women navigate the legacies of secession and border disputes ([Maregere, 2023](#)) and craft agency from within these challenges. This perspective is crucial for deconstructing universalist

models of post-conflict reconstruction and recognising contextually-grounded manifestations of resilience ([Majer & Adea, 2023](#); [Cicchello et al., 2021](#)).

Consequently, concrete policy recommendations emerge. For South Sudanese ministries, integration must begin with formal recognition; community security and local governance frameworks should explicitly incorporate and resource women's informal networks in conflict mediation ([Bwire et al., 2022](#); [Adea et al., 2024](#)). Addressing chronic public sector salary delays is not merely administrative but a critical gender issue, as financial precarity directly undermines sustained formal participation ([Magara, 2025](#); [Barnes, 2022](#)). For the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), findings argue for programmes that create structured dialogue between quota-holding officials and grassroots peacebuilders, facilitating a two-way exchange of legitimacy and knowledge. Regional policies must also acknowledge the transnational dimensions of women's agency, considering cross-border community ties that persist despite political demarcations ([Maregere, 2023](#); Farazmand, 2022).

Future research must build upon these insights. A critical avenue is longitudinal study beyond 2026 to track how hybrid models impact community security and political stability over time ([Ferrari et al., 2024](#)). Furthermore, given the intersections between climate vulnerability, mental health ([Kalaiselvan et al., 2022](#); [Ong et al., 2023](#)), and peacebuilding capacity, targeted investigations into the eco-social dimensions of women's agency are urgently needed. Comparative studies with other post-conflict states in the Horn of Africa could help distinguish uniquely South Sudanese elements from regional patterns ([Li et al., 2023](#); [Mihai et al., 2021](#)).

In final analysis, this study contends that navigating peace in South Sudan requires dual engagement with both the formal state and informal traditions. Women's agency is actively and powerfully present, though often in spaces undervalued by conventional analysis ([Abubakar & Yahaya, 2021](#); [Adams et al., 2021](#)). The challenge is to forge a symbiotic relationship between the hard-won quota and the soft power of cultural peacebuilding. The sustainable peace South Sudan seeks will remain elusive without the full, integrated, and culturally-validated participation of its women, who are not merely beneficiaries but its most persistent architects.

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