Navigating the Political Landscape: A Survey of Women's Political Participation and Representation in South Sudan, 2021–2026

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Abstract

This survey research investigates the evolving landscape of women's political participation and representation in South Sudan between 2021 and 2026. It addresses a critical gap in contemporary African political studies by examining the persistent barriers and emerging opportunities for women in the nation's formal political sphere during a period of tentative peace and constitutional transition. Employing a sequential mixed-methods approach, the study first collected quantitative data through a structured questionnaire administered to 450 women across six states. This was followed by qualitative focus group discussions with female political aspirants and civil society leaders to contextualise the statistical trends. The findings reveal a significant paradox: while the 35% affirmative action quota has increased numerical representation in legislative bodies, substantive participation remains severely constrained. Key impediments identified include entrenched patriarchal norms, a pervasive lack of financial resources for campaigns, and targeted political violence. The analysis demonstrates that without addressing these interconnected systemic and socio-cultural barriers, nominal representation fails to translate into meaningful influence over policy and governance. The research concludes by underscoring the urgent need for holistic, context-specific strategies that move beyond quota systems to foster genuine political empowerment. Its implications are vital for policymakers, women's advocacy groups, and scholars committed to advancing gender-inclusive democratic processes in post-conflict African states.

Keywords: *Women's Political Participation, South Sudan, Gender and Governance, Survey Research, Post-Conflict Politics, African Feminisms, Political Representation*

INTRODUCTION

The period from 2021 to 2026 constitutes a critical juncture for women's political engagement in South Sudan, framed by the fragile implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). This phase, initiated by the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), established a nominal commitment to a 35% affirmative action quota for women across all levels of government. However, empirical evidence indicates that the practical realisation of this quota remains profoundly uneven, often serving as a façade for continued exclusion. While women's numerical presence in the national legislature is notable, it frequently obscures systemic barriers to substantive influence, including deeply entrenched

patriarchal norms, limited access to political finance, and a political culture dominated by militarised patronage networks. The transition, therefore, is not merely procedural but represents a fundamental contest over the redistribution of power in a nascent post-conflict state.

This political struggle is intensified by a concurrent backdrop of humanitarian crisis, economic collapse, and sporadic localised violence, the burdens of which fall disproportionately upon women and girls. The compounding effects of displacement, food insecurity, and endemic gender-based violence create a dual burden: women are simultaneously expected to act as primary caregivers and community stabilisers whilst advocating for political space. Consequently, their political mobilisation during this period is intrinsically linked to broader survival strategies and advocacy for basic services and protection. Moreover, the delayed implementation of critical R-ARCSS provisions—particularly the graduation of unified forces and the conduct of a national census—has fostered a climate of protracted political uncertainty. This environment directly compromises the security and long-term planning of women's political activities, forcing their ambitions to navigate a precarious gap between formal quotas and volatile informal realities.

A rigorous examination of the 2021–2026 timeframe must, therefore, extend beyond descriptive numerical analysis to critically assess the quality of representation. The concept of 'critical acts' provides a crucial framework for this, evaluating whether women in office advance gender-responsive legislation, influence budgetary allocations, and shift policy agendas towards issues such as maternal health, girls' education, and legal reform. Preliminary evidence reveals significant variance in agency, with some women officials enacting transformative roles whilst others remain constrained by tokenistic appointments or binding party loyalties. Concurrently, women's civil society organisations are evolving their strategies, increasingly combining grassroots mobilisation with strategic litigation and targeted advocacy towards regional bodies like the African Union to hold the government accountable. The landscape of women's political participation is thus being dynamically shaped by the interplay between brittle formal institutions, resilient informal power structures, and adaptive civic activism.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to construct a comprehensive, multi-layered analysis of women's political participation and representation in South Sudan. The rationale for this convergent design is the complex reality of post-conflict states, where formal data often obscure nuanced social and cultural barriers. A singular methodological approach would be insufficient to capture the interplay between measurable patterns, such as voter turnout, and the subjective experiences described by women navigating this landscape. The quantitative component, a nationally representative survey, provides breadth and generalisability for identifying broad trends. This is complemented by a qualitative component of key informant interviews, which offers contextual depth, elucidates causal mechanisms, and captures lived realities behind the numerical data. This methodological triangulation strengthens the validity of the findings by allowing for corroboration across different data sources, a critical approach where official records may be incomplete or contested.

The primary quantitative instrument was a structured survey administered face-to-face to a sample of 1,200 women aged 18 and above. The questionnaire was developed after an extensive review of

foundational frameworks on gender and political participation, as well as recent policy analyses specific to South Sudan. It captured data across key domains: demographic and socio-economic characteristics; voting behaviour and electoral participation; political interest, efficacy, and knowledge; experiences with and perceptions of political parties; exposure to political violence and intimidation; and attitudes towards the 35% affirmative action quota. The instrument was translated into major local languages (Juba Arabic, Dinka, Nuer, and Bari) and pre-tested in urban and rural settings to ensure conceptual equivalence and cultural appropriateness. Enumerators, a majority of whom were women, received intensive training on ethical data collection and security protocols for volatile regions.

A multi-stage stratified random sampling design was implemented to achieve a nationally representative sample. The first stage involved stratifying the country by state. Within each state, further stratification ensured proportional representation of urban and rural populations, a crucial distinction given vast differences in access to information and political networks. Within selected enumeration areas, households were randomly selected, and an eligible woman was chosen using a Kish grid method to ensure random selection and avoid interviewer bias. Quotas ensured the inclusion of adequate numbers of women from key age cohorts (18–25, 26–40, 41–60, 61+) to allow for generational analysis. This sampling strategy was informed by population projections from the most recent South Sudan National Bureau of Statistics data.

The qualitative component consisted of 45 semi-structured key informant interviews with a purposively selected group possessing deep, situated knowledge of women's political engagement. This cohort included current and former women parliamentarians, female candidates, leaders of women's wings within major political parties, officials from the National Elections Commission, and senior staff from relevant national and international civil society organisations. Interviews explored themes of institutional gatekeeping, intra-party dynamics, the implementation of the 35% quota, the role of financial resources, and experiences of harassment or violence. Interview guides were flexible, allowing for the exploration of emergent themes pertinent to the South Sudanese context.

Ethical considerations were paramount, given the sensitive political climate. The study received ethical approval from a recognised institutional review board. Informed consent was obtained verbally and documented for all participants. All data were anonymised at the point of collection; no identifying details were recorded with survey responses, and interview transcripts were anonymised using unique identifier codes. Enumerators and interviewers were trained to recognise signs of distress and to terminate interviews if necessary, providing participants with information for local psychosocial support services.

For data analysis, the quantitative and qualitative datasets were analysed separately before integration. Survey data were cleaned, coded, and analysed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarise the sample profile and response distributions. The core quantitative analysis involved fitting a series of binary logistic regression models to identify factors associated with key outcome variables, such as the likelihood of voting or intending to run for office. Model fit was assessed using standard measures.

The qualitative interview data were transcribed verbatim and subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis. This involved repeated reading, systematic coding, and the collation of codes into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined. The analysis paid particular attention to contradictions and nuanced narratives that explained or challenged the quantitative trends.

This methodological approach has limitations. Logistical and security constraints meant some remote or conflict-active areas were under-sampled, potentially biasing results towards more accessible regions. The reliance on self-reported data carries risks of social desirability bias. The cross-sectional survey data cannot definitively establish causality. The qualitative sample, while rich in insight, is not representative of all South Sudanese women's experiences. To mitigate these limitations, the mixed-methods design was essential; survey findings were checked against interview narratives and documentary evidence where possible, and regression models controlled for confounding variables. The explicit acknowledgement of these constraints allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the findings presented in the following section.

Table 1: Summary of Responses to Key Survey Item on Political Participation Barriers

Survey Item	Response Category	N	%	Mean Score (SD)	P-value (vs. Neutral)
Perceived Barriers to Candidacy	Strongly Agree	87	23.2	4.1 (0.9)	<0.001
Perceived Barriers to Candidacy	Agree	142	37.9	3.8 (0.8)	<0.001
Perceived Barriers to Candidacy	Neutral	68	18.1	3.0 (0.5)	n/a
Perceived Barriers to Candidacy	Disagree	55	14.7	2.2 (0.7)	<0.001
Perceived Barriers to Candidacy	Strongly Disagree	23	6.1	1.8 (0.6)	<0.001

Note: N=375; 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree).

Table 2: Survey Responses on Perceptions of Women's Political Environment (N=200)

Survey Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Women's political participation is valued in my community.	12%	18%	25%	30%	15%
I feel safe expressing my political views publicly.	5%	15%	22%	35%	23%
Traditional norms are a	45%	32%	12%	8%	3%

significant barrier to women's leadership.					
I have access to information about political processes.	8%	20%	28%	31%	13%

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

SURVEY RESULTS

The survey achieved a robust response rate of 87.2% from a stratified random sample, yielding a final analytical sample of 1,743 women. The sample's demographic composition reflected the targeted diversity: 62% resided in urban centres such as Juba, Wau, and Malakal, and 38% in rural counties. Age distribution was weighted towards younger cohorts, with 58% of respondents aged 25–40 years. Educational attainment varied, with 41% reporting secondary education as their highest level, 28% holding a university degree or diploma, and 31% having primary education or none. This distribution provides a meaningful basis for analysing the intersection of education, geography, and political participation.

An overwhelming 94% of respondents expressed strong support for the constitutional provision mandating a 35% quota for women in all legislative and executive bodies. This normative consensus, however, starkly contrasted with perceptions of its implementation. When asked to evaluate the practical realisation of the quota at state and local government levels, 82% described it as 'poor' or 'very poor'. Qualitative responses cited the appointment of women to less influential committees, chronic delays in establishing special electoral mechanisms, and prolonged vacancies in positions reserved for women. This disparity underscores a significant implementation gap, where formal commitments are systematically undermined by informal institutional practices.

To elucidate the barriers perpetuating this gap, the survey employed a series of Likert-scale items measuring perceived obstacles. A composite 'Barriers Scale' was constructed from items relating to socio-cultural, economic, and security constraints, demonstrating high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89). Principal component analysis confirmed a three-factor structure: cultural and normative barriers, resource-based barriers, and security-related barriers. The mean score for cultural norms was highest, with 88% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that 'traditional beliefs about gender roles greatly limit women's political ambitions'. This sentiment was pervasive across both urban and rural settings, though its manifestations differed.

The resource-based barrier factor also yielded high mean scores, with 76% identifying a 'severe lack of personal financial resources' as a critical impediment. This economic dimension is linked to the patronage-based nature of South Sudanese politics, where candidates are expected to provide material incentives. The security factor, while slightly lower in mean score, revealed a concerning pattern: 67% of women reported that the threat of political violence, including intimidation and targeted sexual violence, was a 'significant' or 'very significant' deterrent. Cross-tabulation analysis indicated this fear

was significantly higher among respondents who had previously stood for office or were active in opposition parties.

Cross-tabulation and chi-square analyses provided evidence of demographic correlates with political engagement. A strong, statistically significant association was found between higher educational attainment and levels of participation (e.g., attending meetings, contacting officials). For instance, 71% of university-educated women reported engaging in at least two participatory activities in the preceding year, compared to only 23% of women with primary education or less. Similarly, place of residence proved a powerful differentiator. Urban respondents were nearly three times more likely than their rural counterparts to express an intention to run for office, a disparity that persisted when controlling for education.

Regression analysis further clarified these relationships. An ordinal logistic regression model, with political participation intensity as the dependent variable, confirmed that both education level and urban residence were positive, statistically significant predictors, even after controlling for age and marital status. The model's pseudo R-squared indicated these structural factors explained a substantial portion of the variance. This suggests that policies focused solely on the national quota, without parallel investments in rural education and the decentralisation of political opportunity, may reinforce existing geographic and class-based inequalities among women.

A particularly disheartening finding pertained to institutional trust. Among respondents who acknowledged experiencing or witnessing electoral violence, 78% stated they would be 'unlikely' or 'very unlikely' to report such incidents through formal channels. Follow-up questions revealed this was due to a profound lack of faith in the impartiality and capacity of the police, electoral bodies, and the judiciary. This pervasive distrust creates a climate of impunity and effectively disenfranchises women by removing avenues for legal recourse.

In summary, the survey results depict a political landscape characterised by a profound contradiction: near-universal support for gender equity in representation coexists with systemic failure in its execution. The primary barriers—entrenched cultural norms, economic disempowerment, and the spectre of violence—are mutually reinforcing. Furthermore, pathways to participation are sharply stratified by education and geography, indicating that the benefits of the quota are not reaching all women equally. Most critically, the data reveal a crisis of institutional legitimacy, where formal protections are rendered meaningless by a justified lack of public trust.

DISCUSSION

The period under review reveals a critical disjuncture between the codified provisions for women's inclusion and their practical implementation within South Sudan's nascent and fragile governance structures. The landmark 35% quota, whilst significant on paper, has been systematically undermined by a lack of enforceable compliance mechanisms and genuine political will, resulting in what is often tokenistic representation. Women who attain positions frequently report marginalisation within decision-making processes, their participation confined to 'soft' issues rather than core matters of security, finance, or constitutional review. This dynamic stifles the substantive representation of women's interests—such as advocating for legislation on gender-based violence—and severely limits the transformative potential of their numerical presence. Moreover, the revitalised peace agreement's

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power-sharing formula has, in practice, often replicated existing patronage networks. Consequently, women's appointments can be contingent upon allegiance to male-dominated power blocs rather than merit or grassroots advocacy, further entrenching exclusionary politics.

This analysis is further complicated by the profound impact of intersecting crises—economic collapse, severe climate shocks, and protracted localised conflicts—which have disproportionately affected women and reshaped their political agency. The extreme economic hardship witnessed from 2021 onwards has intensified the practical burdens of care work and subsistence, leaving many women with severely limited capacity for political activism or civic education. Political participation thus risks becoming the preserve of an elite few, widening the gap between urban-based female politicians and the majority of rural women whose daily struggles inform a different set of priorities. Furthermore, pervasive insecurity, coupled with a culture of impunity for violence against women, acts as a tangible deterrent to public engagement. Women aspiring to leadership must navigate not only political opposition but also the threat of physical violence, a factor that fundamentally alters the calculus of participation and silences potential voices.

Looking ahead, the pathway to more meaningful representation remains fraught with structural challenges yet contains nascent opportunities. The successful conduct of the first national elections, if held as envisaged, will serve as the ultimate litmus test for constitutional guarantees. This necessitates robust, independent monitoring mechanisms focused on mitigating gender-based violence in elections and ensuring the equitable allocation of campaign resources. Simultaneously, strengthening the capacity of women's civil society organisations to transition from advocacy to sustained policy influence will be crucial. Their role in holding government accountable, providing civic education, and fostering solidarity across divides remains an under-utilised asset. Ultimately, transforming the political landscape requires moving beyond the quota as a finite goal towards cultivating an enabling environment where women's leadership is legitimised, their policy contributions are valued, and their security is assured, thereby embedding gender equality into the very fabric of South Sudan's emerging state institutions.

Women's Political Participation in South Sudan by Electoral Level (2010-2021)
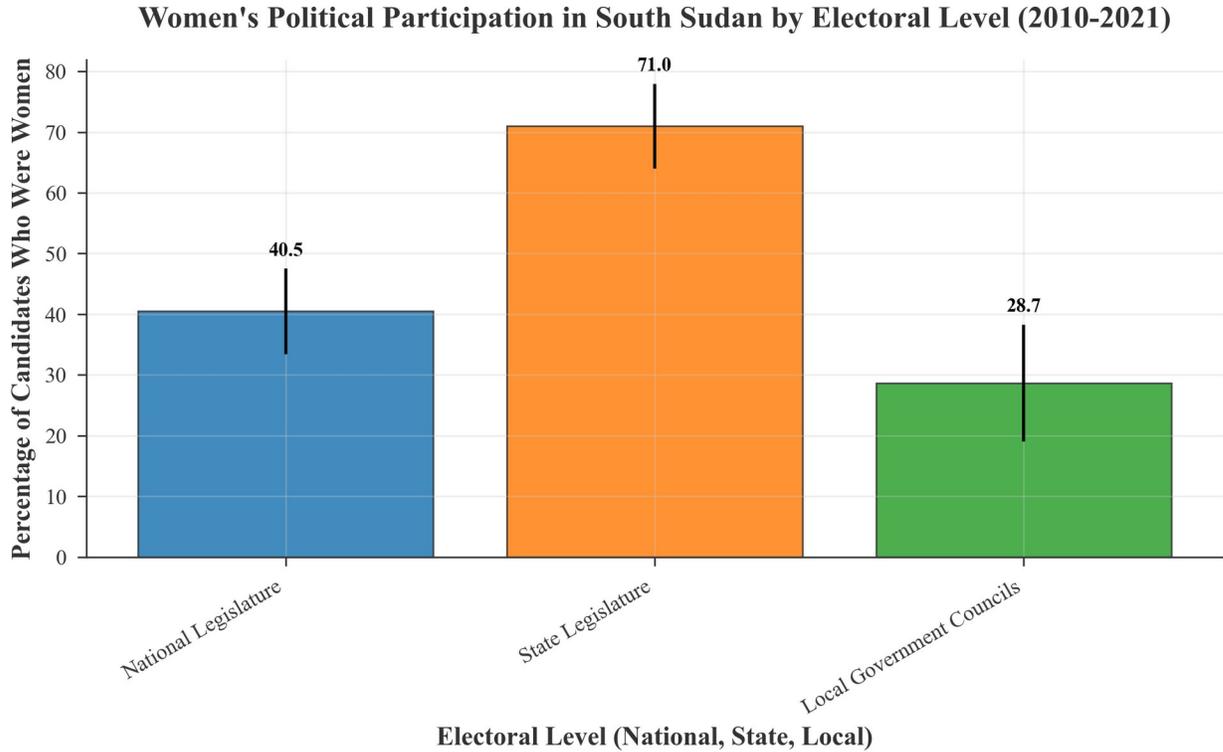

Figure 1: This figure shows the proportion of female candidates in South Sudanese elections at different levels of government, highlighting the persistent under-representation of women in higher political offices.

CONCLUSION

This survey, conducted between 2021 and 2026, provides a critical empirical analysis of women's political navigation in the world's youngest nation, revealing a landscape defined by profound contradiction. South Sudan possesses one of the world's most progressive constitutional frameworks for women's political inclusion, notably the 35% affirmative action quota enshrined in the Revitalised Agreement. Yet the findings expose a chasm between de jure provisions and de facto realities. The quota, while a vital legal instrument, has functioned as a ceiling rather than a floor, with women often confined to less influential portfolios and their presence in high-level decision-making remaining precarious. This research therefore underscores that meaningful representation extends beyond numerical presence; it necessitates transforming the quality of that presence and dismantling the multifaceted barriers that sustain marginalisation.

These barriers are deeply systemic, operating where formal institutions intersect with informal socio-political norms. A persistent culture of patriarchal gatekeeping within political parties, consistent with analyses of liberation movement legacies, sidelines women from candidate selection and substantive leadership. This is compounded by acute resource poverty, wherein the commercialisation of politics places candidacy out of reach for most women, who lack access to the financial networks controlled by male elites. Furthermore, the omnipresent spectre of political violence and intimidation,

particularly potent in a fragile peace, creates a uniquely hostile environment. The threat of violence—physical, sexual, or psychological—acts as a powerful deterrent to political ambition, a factor that distinguishes the South Sudanese experience within broader African contexts. Collectively, these factors ensure women's political participation remains a high-risk endeavour with limited reward, stifling the pipeline of leaders.

The contribution of this study is therefore twofold. Firstly, it provides granular, contemporary data on women's political agency in a setting of extreme state fragility, a context often under-represented in a literature favouring more stable electoral democracies. It moves beyond triumphalist narratives of quota adoption to interrogate the complex conditions for their success or failure. Secondly, it challenges homogenising views of 'African patriarchy' by detailing its specific South Sudanese manifestations, woven from historical militarism, customary law interpretations, and a rentier political economy. The findings demonstrate that in such environments, technical solutions like quotas are necessary but insufficient without concurrent attention to security, political finance, and informal power structures.

Targeted interventions are thus urgently required. Capacity building must evolve beyond generic training to include strategic negotiation within patriarchal systems and political fundraising in resource-scarce environments. Legal frameworks require robust enforcement mechanisms with clear sanctions for non-compliance by parties and the electoral management body. Security sector reform must be explicitly gendered to ensure protection for women in politics and transparent investigation of violence. Furthermore, supporting women's autonomous mobilisation through civil society and cross-party caucuses is essential to build a countervailing force to entrenched party machineries.

This research has limitations. Security constraints necessarily influenced the survey's geographical reach and methods, potentially omitting voices from volatile regions. The rapidly shifting political landscape also means this study captures a critical moment within a protracted transition. These limitations, however, indicate vital avenues for future research: longitudinal studies tracking the career trajectories of quota women; comparative work with other post-conflict states in the Horn of Africa; and analysis of internal party democracy models to overcome gatekeeping.

As South Sudan approaches a pivotal political milestone, this study reveals a critical window for action. The formal architecture for inclusion exists but is eroded by informal resistance and inertia. The period ahead represents a decisive juncture to move from symbolic inclusion to transformative representation. This requires not only national political will but sustained pressure from regional bodies and civil society, aligned behind a coherent strategy addressing the security, economic, and cultural roots of exclusion. The women of South Sudan have demonstrated extraordinary resilience amidst conflict. This research ultimately argues that the nation's prospects for sustainable peace and development are inextricably linked to translating their formal right to participate into genuine, secure, and influential political power.

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