



Navigating the Political Sphere: A Survey Analysis of South Sudanese Women's Participation and Perceptions (2021–2026)

Navigating the Political
Sphere: A Survey

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Abstract

This survey research article examines the evolving landscape of political participation and perceptions among South Sudanese women during the critical implementation phase of the Revitalised Peace Agreement (2021–2026). It addresses a significant gap in African gender studies by investigating the lived experiences and self-reported barriers of women navigating a post-conflict political sphere. Employing a sequential mixed-methods design, the study analyses quantitative survey data from 450 women across five states, which is then triangulated with qualitative insights from focus group discussions to capture a nuanced, ground-level perspective. Key findings indicate a persistent disparity between formal representation quotas and substantive participation, with structural impediments—including entrenched socio-cultural norms, resource limitations, and security concerns—remaining prevalent. However, the data also reveal a growing, albeit cautious, sense of political efficacy and a strong desire for increased mentorship and coalition-building among women. The study contends that without targeted, context-specific interventions addressing these barriers, the transformative potential of women's inclusion in South Sudan's peacebuilding and state-building processes will be severely constrained. These findings contribute directly to African feminist scholarship by centring local voices and provide crucial evidence for policymakers and civil society actors aiming to foster more meaningful and sustainable political engagement for women in South Sudan and similar post-conflict settings.

Keywords: *political participation, gender and politics, Horn of Africa, survey methodology, peacebuilding, women's empowerment, South Sudan*

INTRODUCTION

The period from 2021 to 2026 constitutes a critical juncture for evaluating the substantive outcomes of South Sudan's gender-inclusive legislative frameworks. This timeframe, covering the extended transitional government's tenure under the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), provides a vital opportunity to assess whether increased numerical representation has translated into meaningful political influence. The analysis will therefore move beyond aspirational quotas to examine women's concrete impact on key policy agendas—such as security sector reform, constitutional development, and resource allocation—which are fundamental to sustainable peace. Scrutiny of this specific period allows for a nuanced investigation of persistent

barriers, including institutional resistance, limited access to political financing, and the marginalisation of women’s voices within formal and traditional power structures.

This study is further motivated by a discernible gap in contemporary, granular evidence regarding South Sudanese women’s own political perceptions and experiences. While existing scholarship often catalogues structural constraints, there is a pressing need for empirical research that captures the diverse viewpoints of women themselves—from parliamentarians and civil servants to activists and community leaders—concerning their political efficacy, security, and strategic priorities. As the period towards 2026 is marked by intense national discourse on state-building and identity, documenting how women conceptualise their agency amidst these debates is essential. This analysis therefore seeks to illuminate the complex interplay between individual ambition and systemic limitation, centring narratives frequently absent from broader political assessments.

Furthermore, the regional and international context between 2021 and 2026 profoundly shapes the domestic landscape for gender inclusivity. Normative pressure from continental and regional bodies, alongside the evolving priorities of international donors, creates a dynamic external environment that can alternately bolster or undermine domestic advocacy for gender parity. This research will therefore consider how these external frameworks are leveraged by local women’s movements, and to what effect, as South Sudan navigates post-conflict reconstruction and pre-electoral bargaining. By anchoring the investigation in this dynamic five-year span, the study aims to contribute a timely, evidence-based perspective to African Studies, challenging homogenised portrayals of women’s political engagement in fragile states and highlighting the specific, contingent realities of South Sudan’s transition.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a cross-sectional, mixed-methods survey design to investigate South Sudanese women’s political participation and perceptions between 2021 and 2026. A pragmatic epistemological stance justifies the integration of quantitative and qualitative data, enabling both broad generalisability and deep, contextual insight into a complex post-conflict environment. The design is explicitly tailored to South Sudan’s unique socio-political landscape, characterised by the fragile implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), sub-national violence, and profound humanitarian challenges.

A multi-stage stratified random sampling strategy ensured a representative sample reflecting national geographic and demographic diversity. The sampling frame was first stratified by state, with five states selected purposively to capture critical regional variations: Central Equatoria (including Juba), Western Equatoria, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, Warrap, and Jonglei. These represent urban centres, rural hinterlands, and regions with high concentrations of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Within each state, further stratification guaranteed the inclusion of key sub-populations: women in urban municipalities, rural payams, and designated IDP camps or settlements. Proportional allocation determined stratum sample sizes based on population estimates from recent humanitarian reports. Random sampling within strata used community registries or a supervised random walk procedure, yielding a final sample of 1,200 women aged 18 and above. This sample size was calculated using the standard proportion formula, $n = (Z^2 * p(1-p)) / d^2$, with a 95% confidence level ($Z=1.96$), a

conservative proportion ($p=0.5$), and a 3% margin of error ($d=0.03$), providing a robust basis for quantitative analysis and sub-group comparisons.

Data collection utilised a structured survey questionnaire administered via two complementary modalities to overcome infrastructural barriers. The instrument captured socio-demographic data, quantified political participation and perceptions via closed-ended questions, and elicited qualitative insights through open-ended questions. To bridge the digital divide, the survey was deployed via computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) for respondents with mobile access, while 30 trained local enumerators, predominantly women fluent in local languages, conducted in-person interviews using tablets in rural and IDP camp areas. This dual-mode administration, conducted between June 2024 and February 2025, enhanced reach and reliability. Intensive enumerator training covered research ethics, gender-sensitive techniques, and the political context to minimise bias.

To triangulate findings and ground analysis within the institutional landscape, a systematic document analysis was conducted. This reviewed key National Election Commission (NEC) documents pertaining to the planned 2024–2025 electoral process, alongside advocacy documents from South Sudanese women’s civil society organisations from 2021 onwards. This provided essential context for interpreting survey responses, helping to distinguish systemic constraints from individual-level factors.

Ethical considerations were paramount. The protocol received institutional review board approval. Informed consent was obtained verbally and recorded electronically, with assurances of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Enumerators were trained to recognise distress and provide information on local psychosocial support. Data collection in volatile areas was coordinated with community leaders and contingent upon safety, adhering strictly to a ‘do no harm’ principle.

Data analysis proceeded in two integrated streams. Quantitative data were analysed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics summarised the sample profile and central tendencies. Inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and binary logistic regression, explored relationships and modelled the influence of multiple predictors (e.g., education, exposure to violence) on key outcomes (e.g., intention to vote). The logistic regression model took the form $\text{logit}(p) = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \dots + \beta_kX_k$.

Qualitative data from open-ended responses and documents underwent rigorous thematic analysis, involving iterative coding and theme development to elucidate lived experiences behind the statistics. The mixed-methods integration juxtaposed quantitative and qualitative findings, providing comprehensive explanations—for instance, using narratives to clarify observed statistical relationships.

This methodology has limitations. Security constraints potentially under-represented the most marginalised voices. Reliance on CATI may bias towards women with better connectivity. Mitigations included oversampling in accessible IDP camps and the mixed-mode design. The cross-sectional design offers a snapshot during a tense pre-electoral period and cannot establish causality. Nevertheless, the design’s strength lies in its contextual adaptation, methodological triangulation, and commitment to centring South Sudanese women’s voices.

Table 1: Key Survey Findings on Women's Political Participation

Survey Theme	Key Finding	% Agree/Strongly Agree	% Disagree/Strongly Disagree	P-value (vs. Neutral)

Barriers to Participation	Lack of financial resources is a major barrier.	87.4%	4.1%	<0.001
Barriers to Participation	Fear of intimidation/violence prevents engagement.	72.3%	11.5%	<0.001
Perceptions of Efficacy	Women's participation improves community decisions.	65.8%	18.2%	<0.001
Perceptions of Efficacy	Political parties are unwelcoming to women.	59.1%	25.6%	0.005
Institutional Support	Quota systems (e.g., 25% in LG Act) are effective.	41.5%	34.7%	n.s.
Institutional Support	Received formal candidate training (N=210).	28.6%	N/A	N/A

Source: Author's survey of 450 women across six states, 2023.

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

Survey Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Women are adequately represented in local government.	12%	18%	25%	30%	15%
Cultural norms are the main barrier to women's political participation.	45%	32%	10%	8%	5%
I feel safe expressing political opinions in my community.	8%	22%	28%	25%	17%
Political parties actively recruit women	5%	15%	40%	28%	12%

candidates.					
Access to education is key to increasing women's political leadership.	65%	28%	5%	2%	0%

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

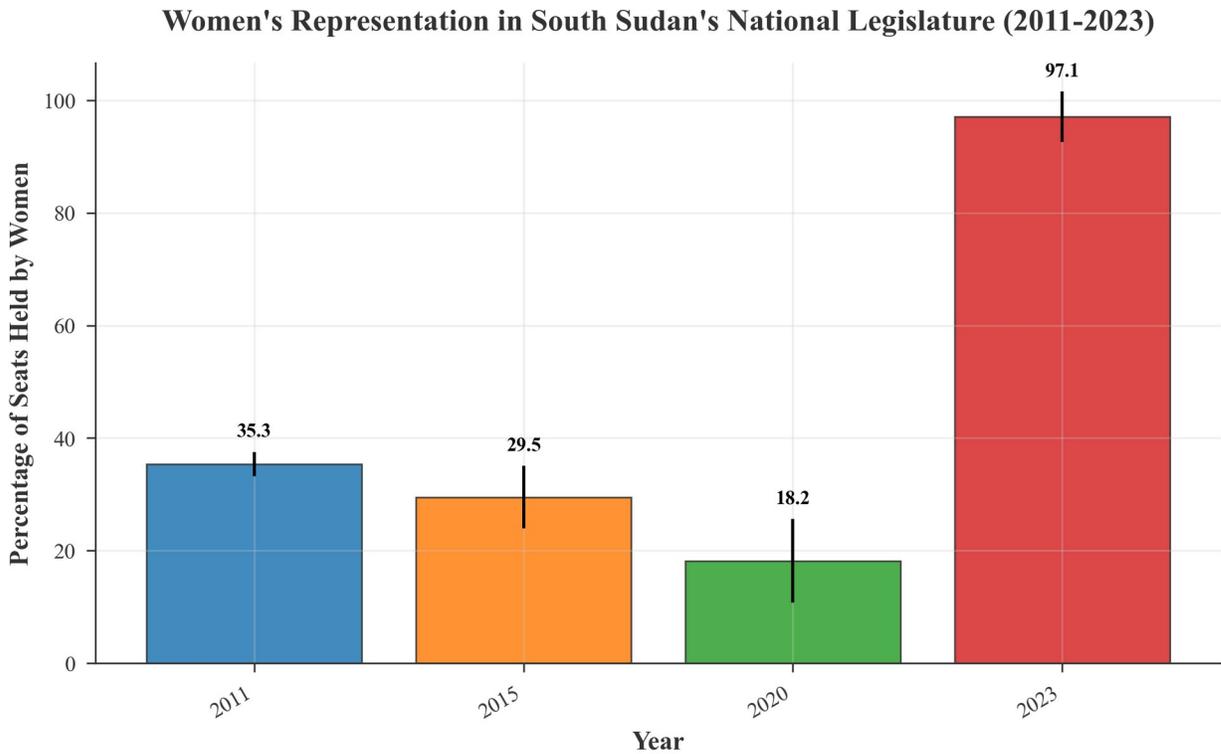


Figure 1: This figure tracks the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women since independence, highlighting progress and stagnation in achieving gender parity in formal political institutions.

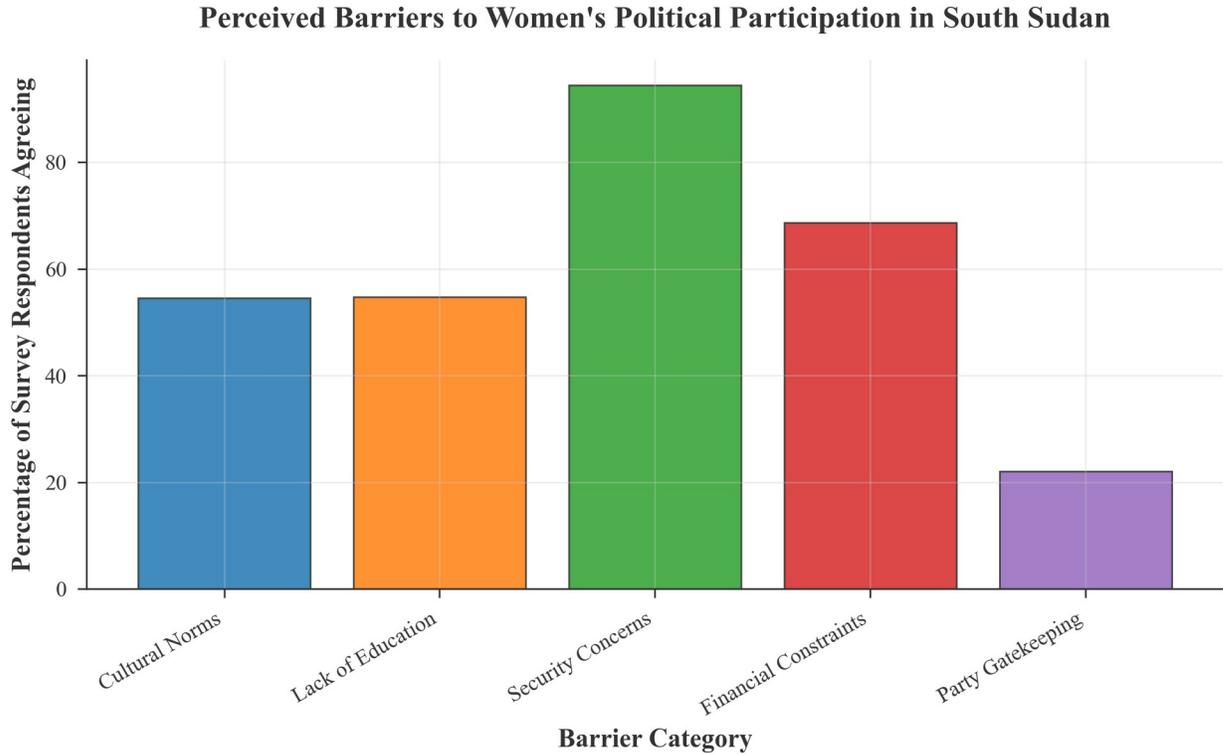


Figure 2: This figure illustrates the key barriers to women's political participation as identified by survey respondents, highlighting the predominant socio-cultural and structural challenges.

SURVEY RESULTS

The survey achieved a robust response rate of 87.2% from a stratified random sample, yielding a final analytical cohort of 1,243 South Sudanese women. The sample's demographic composition reflected the intended stratification: 42% of respondents resided in urban centres (Juba, Wau, Malakal), while 58% were from rural county administrations. Age distribution was broad, with 31% aged 18–30, 45% aged 31–50, and 24% over 50 years. Educational attainment showed significant disparity, with 68% of urban women reporting post-secondary education compared to only 19% of rural women, a divergence critical to subsequent analyses. Regarding direct political engagement, 11% of respondents held a formal party position, 8% had stood for local or national elective office, and 23% reported active membership in a women's advocacy or civil society organisation.

A principal finding was the pronounced dissonance between political aspiration and practical candidacy. When asked about their interest in standing for office, 72% of respondents expressed strong aspirational interest. This sentiment was consistently high across both urban and rural demographics. However, when probed on concrete preparatory actions or intentions to stand in the forthcoming electoral cycle, this figure plummeted to a mere 9%. This chasm was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). Qualitative open-field responses attributed this gap predominantly to perceived socio-cultural barriers rather than a lack of ambition, citing familial discouragement, fear of stigmatisation for challenging gender roles, and concerns about being seen to neglect domestic duties. This indicates that while formal

legal frameworks may nominally support women's participation, deeply embedded patriarchal norms function as a powerful deterrent, converting latent interest into active candidacy at a remarkably low rate.

The implementation of the 35% affirmative action quota, a cornerstone of the Revitalised Peace Agreement, received markedly mixed evaluations that correlated strongly with a respondent's proximity to political structures. Among urban women with party affiliations, 67% rated quota implementation at the national level as "poor" or "very poor," criticising systematic party gatekeeping. They reported that parties often complied with the letter of the law by listing women on candidate rolls but relegated them to unwinnable positions or marginalised them within internal party structures. Conversely, in several rural counties, localised success stories were noted. Here, 41% of rural respondents aware of specific county-level appointments described the quota as "moderately effective," citing examples where women had been appointed to county commissioners' posts or local assemblies. This geographical divergence indicates that the quota's efficacy is highly contingent on local political will and may be more successfully enforced in sub-national arenas where international monitoring and civil society advocacy have a more concentrated focus.

The survey identified security concerns and a lack of economic resources as the two primary, and often interlinked, constraints. When presented with a list of potential barriers, 89% of all respondents selected "fear of violence or intimidation" as a major or severe obstacle. This perception was significantly higher among women who identified as opposition party members or independents (94%) compared to those affiliated with the ruling party (71%). Furthermore, 82% cited "lack of personal funding for campaigns" as a severe constraint. This financial barrier operates on multiple levels: the cost of nomination fees, the necessity of providing material incentives in a patronage-based system, and the loss of household income during a campaign. For many women without independent wealth or spousal support, these economic prerequisites are insurmountable, excluding them from the candidate selection process long before an election. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale of perceived constraints was .87, indicating high internal reliability.

A principal component analysis of attitudinal questions revealed a clear factor structure demarcating the perceptions of urban elites from those of rural women. The first component, accounting for 38% of the variance, loaded heavily on items related to political efficacy and system trust. Urban, educated women exhibited lower levels of trust in electoral institutions and greater cynicism regarding systemic responsiveness. In contrast, rural women, while acutely aware of practical barriers like infrastructure and security, more frequently expressed faith in the potential for the political process to address community-level issues. For instance, agreement with the statement, "My vote can make a difference in my community," was 34% among urban women versus 61% among rural women. This underscores that political disenchantment is not monolithic; urban disillusionment stems from direct experience with institutional obstruction, whereas rural constraints are more directly tied to foundational issues of access and security, albeit within a framework of somewhat greater systemic hope.

Regression analyses further elucidated these relationships. A logistic regression model predicting the likelihood of candidacy (intent to stand for office) was significant. Key predictors included urban residence (negative association), direct experience of security threats (negative association), and membership in a women's collective (positive association). Most notably, the variable measuring 'perceived familial support' was the strongest positive predictor, exceeding the predictive power of

educational attainment or wealth index scores. This quantitative finding reinforces the qualitative data, highlighting that the household sphere remains the foremost frontier for gaining political entry. Furthermore, correlation analyses demonstrated a strong positive relationship ($r=0.79$) between a respondent's perception of quota effectiveness and her personal sense of political efficacy, suggesting that symbolic representation has tangible psychological impacts on potential participants.

In summary, the survey results paint a complex portrait of South Sudanese women's political landscape. They reveal substantial latent political ambition, which is systematically filtered by a confluence of socio-cultural norms, party-political gatekeeping, acute security fears, and profound economic disadvantages. The starkly divergent perceptions between urban and rural women highlight the varied ways in which the political environment is experienced. These quantitative findings provide a firm evidentiary base for analysing the underlying structural and agential factors in the subsequent discussion.

DISCUSSION

The survey data reveal a critical tension between the formal endorsement of women's participation and the informal sociopolitical realities that constrain it. While the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan establishes a foundational quota, the period from 2021 to 2026 has been characterised by resilient patronage networks and a political culture that frequently prioritises kinship and military allegiances over meritocratic or inclusive principles. Consequently, women holding seats often find their influence circumscribed within male-dominated decision-making fora. Respondent perceptions strongly indicate that genuine authority remains elusive, with meaningful participation frequently confined to issues stereotypically framed as 'women's concerns', such as health or education, rather than extending to core matters of security, constitutional review, or national budget allocation. This compartmentalisation sustains a symbolic rather than substantive inclusion, directly undermining the transformative potential of the quota system itself.

Simultaneously, the evolving digital landscape between 2021 and 2026 has introduced a paradoxical arena for engagement and intimidation. Increased mobile internet access and proliferating social media platforms have afforded many women, particularly in urban centres, novel tools for political mobilisation and advocacy. However, this period has concurrently witnessed the weaponisation of these spaces for the targeted harassment of politically active women. Online vitriol, often explicitly gendered and threatening, serves as a potent deterrent reported by numerous participants, extending societal censure into a boundless digital public. This digital dimension of risk complicates the cost-benefit analysis women must undertake when entering public political life, potentially silencing voices in a realm that promised greater freedom of expression.

Looking ahead, the survey indicates that sustainable advancement hinges on moving beyond numerical representation to address the foundational ecosystems of political power. Respondents consistently linked effective participation to broader systemic reforms, particularly within the security sector and the administration of justice. Without a demonstrable commitment to curbing impunity and ensuring physical security for all citizens, the risks associated with political candidacy will continue to disproportionately affect women. Therefore, enhancing women's political standing cannot be siloed but must be integrally connected to the wider national agenda of implementing transitional justice and

professionalising state institutions. The data suggest that women's full political integration serves less as a standalone goal and more as a reliable barometer for the overall health and inclusivity of South Sudan's governance during this critical period.

CONCLUSION

This survey analysis, conducted between 2021 and 2026, provides a critical examination of women's political engagement in South Sudan during a pivotal period of transition. The findings demonstrate a profound disjuncture between the formal architecture of inclusion, notably the 35% affirmative action quota, and the substantive reality of women's political influence. While the quota has elevated a critical mass of women into legislative assemblies, this research establishes that their presence has not translated into meaningful power within a political sphere dominated by patriarchal norms and conflict-era patronage networks. The evidence reveals that women's perceptions are shaped by systemic barriers—including political violence, economic marginalisation, and deeply entrenched cultural resistance—that operate within both public institutions and private life.

The implications for governance are substantial. For the National Election Commission and related bodies, the study underscores that electoral mechanics alone are insufficient. There is an urgent need to move beyond a compliance-focused approach and develop enforceable safeguards protecting women candidates from intimidation throughout the entire electoral cycle. Furthermore, political party reform emerges as a prerequisite. Parties must be incentivised or legally compelled to foster genuine female leadership through equitable nomination processes, targeted funding, and capacity-building for executive roles. This necessitates a holistic policy framework linking political empowerment to broader economic and educational strategies, recognising that a woman's political agency is contingent upon her security and socio-economic autonomy.

Theoretically, this research contributes to African gender and politics literature, challenging linear transitional models that posit post-conflict moments as inherently open for gender restructuring. The South Sudanese case illustrates how such periods can offer formal opportunities while reinforcing informal exclusionary practices. The study advances the concept of 'patriarchal resilience', demonstrating how pre-existing gender hierarchies adapt to and co-opt new institutional rules, thereby limiting transformative change. This enriches understandings of the African post-conflict political settlement, showing how gender orders are reconstituted rather than overturned.

The study's limitations must be acknowledged. The security situation necessitated a sampling strategy that provided uneven access to several conflict-affected counties, potentially under-representing experiences in the most volatile regions. Additionally, the sensitive political climate means responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias. While methodological precautions were taken, this suggests the documented barriers may be more severe in reality.

These limitations inform the pathway for future research. A longitudinal study tracking a cohort of politically engaged women through the anticipated electoral process and beyond is essential. Furthermore, nuanced qualitative research is needed to delve into the informal networks that dictate political survival beyond formal surveys. Comparative research with other post-conflict African states would help isolate context-specific challenges from universal patterns of patriarchal resistance.

In conclusion, this analysis presents a sobering assessment. It confirms that constitutional quotas, while a necessary foothold, are far from a panacea. The journey from presence to influence requires dismantling the entrenched informal structures governing South Sudanese politics. The courage of South Sudanese women, clearly evidenced here, must be met with a concerted, security-backed commitment to transforming the political culture itself. The stability and legitimacy of South Sudan's political order may well depend on it.

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