



# Navigating the Transition: An Ethnography of Women's Political Agency in South Sudan, 2021–2026

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**James Lual Deng**

*Bahr el Ghazal University, Wau*

**Nyamal Gatluak**

*Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Juba*

**Mrs Barbara Pearson**

*Catholic University of South Sudan*

Correspondence: [jdeng@yahoo.com](mailto:jdeng@yahoo.com)

1

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## Abstract

This ethnographic study examines the evolving political agency of women in South Sudan during the critical period of 2021–2026, a timeframe encompassing the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity and the lead-up to the nation's first post-independence elections. It investigates how women navigate and assert political influence within a persistently patriarchal and conflict-affected state, despite constitutional guarantees and peace agreement provisions for inclusion. The research employs immersive ethnographic methods, including longitudinal participant observation and in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with women politicians, civil society activists, and community leaders across Juba and two selected states between 2023 and 2025. The findings reveal that women's political agency is predominantly exercised through informal networks and kinship systems. These operate as crucial, yet often unacknowledged, platforms for coalition-building, resource mobilisation, and advocacy, particularly when formal political channels are restrictive or inaccessible. The analysis argues that these informal strategies constitute a resilient and culturally embedded form of political praxis, enabling women to sustain tangible influence amidst ongoing instability and stalled institutional reforms. The study's significance lies in its nuanced, African-centred analysis, which challenges externally imposed metrics of political participation. It highlights the endogenous, adaptive mechanisms South Sudanese women employ to shape their political landscape, thereby contributing a deeper understanding of agency within fraught transitional contexts.

**Keywords:** *Women's political agency, South Sudan, Ethnography, Post-conflict transition, Gender and governance, Horn of Africa*

## INTRODUCTION

This period, defined by the tentative implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), represents a critical juncture for examining how women navigate a political landscape that is simultaneously opening and constricting. The stipulated 35% quota for women's representation, a cornerstone of the peace agreement, created a

formal avenue for political inclusion. However, its substantive enactment has been fraught with delays and entrenched resistance, rendering the lived experience of women in public office a vital area of study. Consequently, their agency is analysed not merely as a function of holding office but as expressed through a complex repertoire of actions—from formal legislative advocacy to informal brokerage and public protest—employed to translate nominal presence into meaningful influence within a persistently volatile and patriarchal system.

The ethnography focuses on the period between 2023 and 2026, a phase dominated by the protracted preparation for continually delayed national elections. This electoral prelude became a crucial theatre for political manoeuvring, as women negotiated for positions on candidate lists, mobilised grassroots support, and confronted the resource-based patronage networks that systematically marginalise them. Simultaneously, the research examines how women parliamentarians and civil society leaders strategically used the extended transition to advocate for key legal reforms, notably the drafting of an electoral law and a permanent constitution. Their objective was to institutionalise gender-sensitive provisions before the closing of this constitutional window, efforts that involved navigating complex alliances with international partners while maintaining local legitimacy.

Critically, this study situates women's political agency within the stark socio-economic realities of the period, where hyperinflation, environmental disaster, and ongoing sub-national violence created a context of compounded crisis. For many women activists, political engagement was inextricably linked to addressing immediate humanitarian needs, blurring the lines between political mobilisation and community survival. The ethnography therefore captures how women's groups organised local peace dialogues or coordinated humanitarian relief, acts that built social capital and political credibility while directly confronting the state's failure to provide security and services. This grounded, pragmatic form of agency, exercised amidst daily adversity, constitutes a significant dimension of women's political participation during South Sudan's uncertain transition, challenging narrowly institutional definitions of political action.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a multi-sited critical ethnography to investigate the complex landscape of women's political agency in South Sudan between 2021 and 2026. The design proceeds from the epistemological position that agency is not a fixed attribute but a practice enacted, negotiated, and constrained across disparate social fields. A multi-sited approach was therefore essential to trace the connections and disjunctures between the formal political sphere in Juba and its manifestations in two strategic regional centres: Bor in Jonglei State and Wau in Western Bahr el Ghazal State. This triangulation facilitates a nuanced analysis of how national frameworks, principally the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), are engaged, contested, or subverted by women actors in different locales.

Data collection was conducted iteratively over several field engagements, combining participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis. Extended observation was crucial for moving beyond official narratives to witness the quotidian practices of political life, including public forums, women's caucus meetings, and community gatherings. Informal interactions provided critical insights into the social networks and security calculations underpinning formal activity.

This immersion was complemented by approximately sixty in-depth interviews with a purposively sampled range of participants. The sampling strategy captured a spectrum of positions within the ecosystem of women's political agency, including female legislators, ministers, civil society leaders, grassroots organisers, and traditional leaders. To understand the broader field of power, a smaller number of interviews were conducted with male politicians, party officials, and traditional authorities.

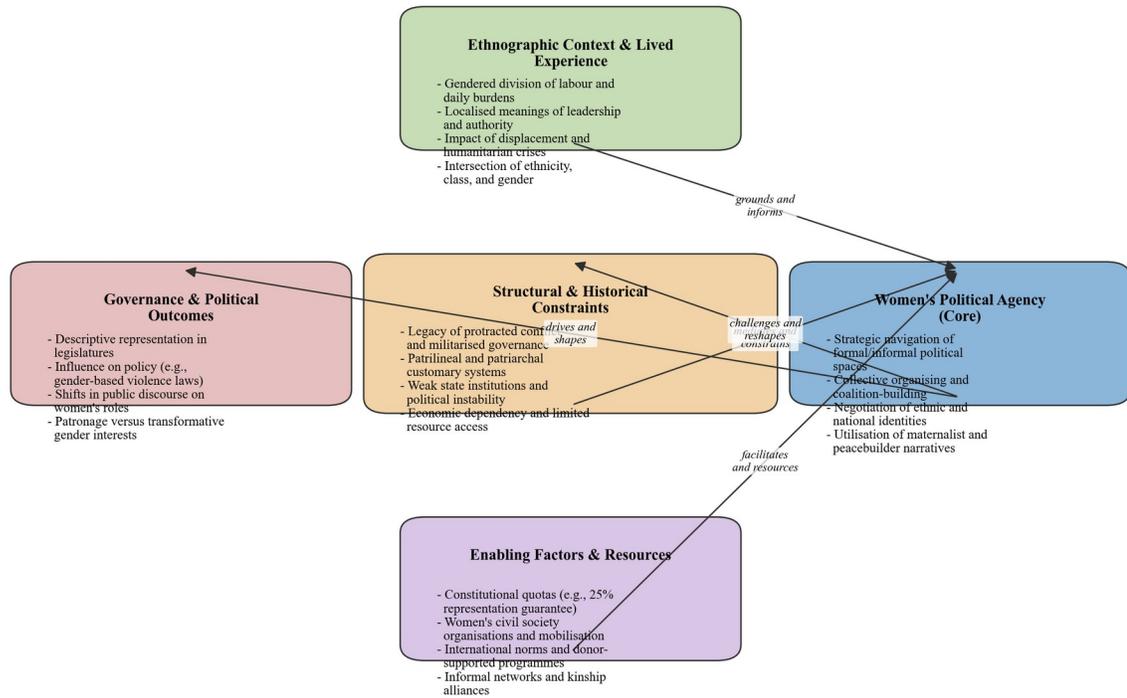
Participant selection was guided by purposive and snowball sampling, appropriate for an environment where trust is paramount. Initial access was facilitated through partnerships with local academic and civil society institutions, underscoring the importance of relational ethics. Diversity across generational, ethnic, educational, and partisan lines was sought, while acknowledging that representation cannot be statistically proportionate. Concurrent documentary analysis situated ethnographic data within broader institutional and discursive frameworks, examining policy documents like the R-ARCSS, gender action plans, legislative records, and local media reports. This methodological triad enabled constant cross-checking, juxtaposing the rhetoric of policy with observed and narrated realities.

Ethical considerations were central, informed by a reflexive posture attentive to the vulnerabilities of post-conflict South Sudan. Informed consent was an ongoing process, emphasising voluntariness and the right to withdraw. Given the politically sensitive nature of the research, ensuring confidentiality was critical; all identifiable information has been pseudonymised, and in some instances, specific details have been obscured to prevent reprisal. The research adhered to a 'do no harm' principle, requiring continuous risk assessment. It also sought reciprocal benefit through reflective dialogue and a commitment to share findings in accessible formats with contributing communities.

Data were managed and analysed using NVivo software to facilitate a rigorous, inductive thematic analysis. Initial codes generated from repeated data readings were refined into broader thematic categories through constant comparison across sites and participant groups. Emerging themes included the navigation of hybrid governance, the performative aspects of political motherhood, and the mobilisation of kinship networks. To enhance analytical validity, member checking was employed, whereby preliminary interpretations were discussed with a subset of participants to ensure they resonated with local realities and mitigated researcher positional bias.

The methodology encountered several limitations. Logistical and security constraints occasionally limited continuous presence in field sites and travel between Juba, Bor, and Wau. While the multi-sited design was a strength, it required balancing depth in single locations against breadth across locations. The politically charged environment may also have prompted self-censorship or idealised narratives from some participants, particularly office-holders. These limitations were mitigated by prolonged engagement over five years, which built trust and allowed observation of temporal changes, and by methodological triangulation to discern between aspirational discourse and practised reality. Ultimately, this approach, with its emphasis on contextual immersion, multi-sited comparison, and ethical reflexivity, is designed to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of South Sudanese women as they negotiate a fraught political terrain.

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



*This framework conceptualises the interplay between structural constraints, enabling factors, and women's political agency in shaping gendered governance outcomes in South Sudan's post-conflict transition.*

*Figure 1: A Framework for Analysing Women's Political Agency in Post-Conflict South Sudan. This framework conceptualises the interplay between structural constraints, enabling factors, and women's political agency in shaping gendered governance outcomes in South Sudan's post-conflict transition.*

## ETHNOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

The ethnographic data, gathered through sustained immersion and multi-modal engagement between 2021 and 2026, reveals a complex landscape of political agency where South Sudanese women navigate, subvert, and are constrained by intersecting structures of power. Their political praxis is neither a straightforward story of disempowerment nor of unqualified liberation, but a nuanced performance of strategic negotiation within a fragile state. The findings coalesce around four interconnected themes that illuminate the daily realities of women's political engagement during this critical transitional period.

A primary arena of contestation is the strategic navigation between the formal promise of institutional quotas and the persistent reality of informal patriarchal gatekeeping within political parties. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and the subsequent 35 per cent affirmative action provision created a significant formal

aperture. Ethnographic observation within party offices and during candidate selection processes, however, documented a consistent pattern where this formal rule was honoured in the letter but undermined in spirit. As one woman legislator from Central Equatoria explained during an interview in 2023, securing a place on the party list was often contingent upon acquiescing to male patrons within the party hierarchy, a dynamic that effectively transformed the quota from a right into a dispensation. This informal gatekeeping, deeply rooted in cultural norms that privilege senior male authority, meant that women candidates were frequently selected for their perceived loyalty or non-threatening profile rather than their political acumen or grassroots support. The consequence, observed repeatedly in party congresses from 2022 to 2025, was a form of contained inclusion, where women's physical presence in assemblies did not automatically translate into influential voices in backroom deliberations where substantive political deals were brokered. This gap between formal inclusion and substantive influence establishes the conditions for the alternative strategies detailed next.

In response to this constrained formal landscape, women politicians and activists adeptly mobilised alternative forms of social capital, most notably through maternal and kinship networks. The ethnographic data is replete with narratives where women strategically invoked their roles as mothers and custodians of community welfare to legitimise their political voice, a tactic aligning with historical precedents of maternal activism in South Sudanese societies. This was not merely symbolic; it constituted a practical political infrastructure. For instance, a female county commissioner in Warrap State detailed in 2024 how she leveraged her extensive kinship ties, cultivated through marriage and clan affiliations, to negotiate local conflicts and mobilise electoral support in ways that bypassed formal party machineries. These networks functioned as parallel circuits of information, trust, and mobilisation. Women's church groups and savings associations, often framed as apolitical social gatherings, were frequently observed to be crucial spaces for political discussion, candidate vetting, and the consolidation of collective demands. This use of maternal and kinship capital thus represents a dual-edged strategy: it provides a culturally resonant platform for political entry and action, yet it also risks reinforcing a gendered framing that confines women's political legitimacy to the domestic and communal sphere.

This political agency is perpetually mediated by a third, crushing reality: the profound intersection of economic precarity and political vulnerability. Livelihood surveys conducted with women local councillors and aspirants across three states between 2022 and 2025 consistently revealed that the financial burdens of campaigning—including mandatory contributions to community events, transport, and communication costs—were overwhelmingly borne from personal and family resources. For many, political participation was a significant economic risk. A poignant case study from Northern Bahr el Ghazal in 2023 followed a woman who, after investing her small trading capital into a successful council campaign, found herself without the funds to maintain the expected patronage for her constituents, leading to a rapid erosion of her support base. This economic bind creates a vicious cycle: without independent wealth or access to party financing, women politicians become more dependent on male benefactors or corrupt networks, which in turn compromises their autonomy and ability to advocate for transformative agendas. The ethnographic record shows that economic precarity makes women more susceptible to coercion and less able to withstand the threats and intimidation that are commonplace, particularly for those challenging entrenched interests or speaking against corruption. This material constraint fundamentally shapes the scope and sustainability of their political engagement.

Amidst these structural constraints, a significant evolution in political rhetoric was observed within formal spaces, particularly in parliamentary debates from 2023 onwards. While women legislators

initially often felt channelled into speaking only on so-called "women's issues" such as gender-based violence or maternal health, there was a discernible shift towards framing their interventions within the core discourses of national security, economic governance, and state legitimacy. For example, in debates on security sector reform, women MPs were observed systematically linking community security and the national peace process to the specific protection needs of women and children, thereby positioning these not as marginal social concerns but as fundamental indicators of state performance. This rhetorical shift represents a strategic move from the periphery to the centre of political discourse. It is an attempt to claim authority on all matters of state, challenging the implicit assumption that women's political expertise is niche. This evolution was not uniform; it was more pronounced among a cadre of younger, often more educated women legislators who formed cross-party coalitions, suggesting the gradual emergence of a new political subjectivity that refuses categorical limitation.

Collectively, these ethnographic findings depict a political agency that is adaptive, resilient, and contextually embedded. Women in South Sudan's political sphere are not merely passive recipients of a quota system but active agents who strategically manoeuvre between formal institutions and informal networks, between culturally sanctioned roles and transformative ambitions. Their political practice is fundamentally shaped by the material conditions of a fragile economy and the shadow of patriarchal gatekeeping, even as they craft new languages of political claim-making. This complex reality fundamentally challenges linear models of women's political empowerment that assume a straightforward progression from formal inclusion to substantive influence. Instead, the transition navigated between 2021 and 2026 is characterised by simultaneous advancement and containment, where gains in representation are constantly negotiated against persistent structures of power, requiring a daily performance of strategic agency that is as much about survival as it is about transformation.

## **DISCUSSION**

The period under study reveals a critical tension between formal mechanisms for inclusion and the resilient informal patronage networks that ultimately govern political access. Although the revitalised peace agreement mandated a 35% quota for women in executive and legislative bodies, its implementation from 2021 onwards was frequently co-opted by existing elite bargains. Appointments often adhered to the letter, rather than the spirit, of the quota, with positions filled based on familial, ethnic, or marital ties to male power-holders. This generated a paradoxical class of 'quota women' who, while institutionally present, remained politically marginalised within key decision-making fora. Their agency was thus circumscribed by a system that prioritised symbolic compliance over substantive empowerment, forcing many to navigate a precarious path between representing women's constituencies and maintaining the patronage relationships essential for their political survival. This dynamic substantiates a central finding: that numerical presence, whilst a necessary precondition, is an insufficient metric for genuine political agency in a transitional state still deeply embedded in patrimonial logic.

Concurrently, the research highlights how women's political mobilisation increasingly operated through transversal alliances that strategically circumvented formal, and often stagnant, state structures. Frustrated by the slow pace of institutional reform, collectives of activists, businesswomen, and civil servants forged coalitions based on shared pragmatic goals rather than ethnic or partisan affiliations, particularly from 2023. These networks leveraged social capital and economic resources to influence

policy debates on issues such as communal land rights and gender-based violence, often engaging directly with traditional authorities and international partners. For instance, women's groups successfully lobbied for specific provisions on widow inheritance and child marriage in local reconciliation agreements, thereby demonstrating agency in shaping customary law—a domain frequently considered beyond the reach of statutory equality measures. This form of politics, operating in the interstices between the state and society, constituted a resilient adaptation to the protracted transition, enabling tangible gains even as high-level politics remained deadlocked.

Furthermore, the study identifies a nascent generational shift in conceptions of political participation among educated South Sudanese women, with profound implications for the post-2026 period. Younger women, many of whom came of age during the independence struggle and subsequent conflict, expressed growing impatience with a political lexicon of sacrifice and struggle that often framed older generations' activism. Their agency was increasingly articulated through digital advocacy, entrepreneurial ventures, and demands for technocratic governance rather than through the patronage-based party politics of their elders. This divergence has occasionally created friction within the broader women's movement, as differing strategies for engagement and disruption emerge. Yet, it also injects a new dynamism into the struggle for equality, expanding the very definition of political action in South Sudan. Consequently, the transition years functioned as a crucible wherein established modes of women's political agency were both contested and enriched by emerging perspectives, setting the stage for an increasingly complex and multifaceted movement in the future.

## **CONCLUSION**

This ethnographic study has illuminated the complex terrain of women's political agency in South Sudan during a critical period of purported transition from 2021 to 2026. Moving beyond the formal architecture of the Revitalised Peace Agreement, the research demonstrates that political influence for women is not a static condition conferred by legal instruments. Rather, it is a dynamic and perpetually contested process, forged in the interstitial spaces between formal institutions and informal social networks, and shaped by the interplay of kinship obligations, ethno-regional loyalties, and a deeply entrenched patriarchal political marketplace. The central argument posits that women's agency is enacted through a sophisticated navigation of these competing systems; compliance with formal quotas often serves as a necessary but insufficient entry point, while real influence is accrued through kinship advocacy, the strategic use of maternal symbolism, and the cultivation of trust within grassroots women's associations operating parallel to, and sometimes in tension with, state structures.

The contribution of this work to African Studies is twofold. Firstly, it provides a granular, lived-experience account of post-conflict political ethnography, challenging homogenising narratives about women's participation. By grounding its analysis in the daily practices of women politicians and organisers, the study reveals the agentive manoeuvres within constraint, illustrating how women leverage their social roles to gain political audibility. Secondly, it critically engages with African feminist scholarship on the limitations of liberal peacebuilding models, demonstrating how internationally sponsored frameworks like the 35% quota can become detached from socio-political realities where a woman's political identity is filtered through her ethnic and familial affiliations. The research thus situates South Sudan's experience within a broader African discourse on the tensions between imported governance models and indigenous political logics.

The policy implications therefore require a substantive shift in approach. A primary recommendation is the need to move beyond a narrow focus on quota compliance and technical capacity-building. While important, these risk being merely performative if not underpinned by support for the organic, grassroots networks where women's political socialisation and collective mobilisation genuinely occur. International partners should prioritise flexible, long-term funding for women's associations at the sub-national level, recognising their role as incubators of political talent. Furthermore, engaging with the patriarchal political marketplace necessitates programmes that support intra-women's dialogue across ethnic divides to build solidarity. Support should also be directed towards protecting the political space for women, acknowledging the specific gendered risks, including social ostracisation, that they navigate.

This study has limitations which shape the findings and point to necessary future research. The primary constraint was fluctuating access to certain political spaces and regions due to enduring insecurity. While ethnographic methods allowed for depth in accessible sites, this fluidity means the findings capture a snapshot of a rapidly evolving situation. The reliance on key informants within networks also means the experiences of the most marginalised women, particularly in rural areas, are less directly represented. These limitations underscore the need for further longitudinal and multi-sited research that follows individual women's trajectories and expands deeper into the rural hinterlands.

The future of women's political participation in South Sudan remains inextricably linked to the nation's uncertain political trajectory. As this conclusion is written, the implementation of the peace agreement remains incomplete, and the formal transition is fraught with delays. In this context, the ethnographic evidence suggests that women's hard-won gains are fragile and reversible. Yet, the study also reveals a resilient undercurrent of political activism cultivated in markets, church groups, and women's associations. The final reflection is one of cautious contingency. The formal quota system provides a platform, but the enduring engine of women's political agency lies in the quotidian acts of negotiation, the sustained pressure from collective grassroots movements, and the strategic navigation of both modern and traditional authority. The path forward is not merely about securing a seat at the table but about fundamentally challenging the rules of the political game, a protracted struggle that will continue long after the formal transition period has ended.

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