Navigating the Transitional Governance Period: An Analysis of Women's Political Participation in South Sudan, 2021–2026

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Abstract

This article examines the critical yet constrained political participation of women in South Sudan during the pivotal 2021–2026 transitional governance period. It addresses the central problem of how formal commitments to gender equity, enshrined in the Revitalised Peace Agreement, translate into substantive political influence for women amidst persistent structural and cultural barriers. The study is driven by the research question: what are the principal barriers to women's substantive political participation in South Sudan's transitional institutions, and how do these barriers interact to limit their impact? Employing a rigorous qualitative, multi-method approach, the analysis integrates policy document review with in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between 2023 and 2025. Participants include women politicians, civil society leaders, and activists across Juba and two state capitals, selected via purposive and snowball sampling. The findings reveal a significant disparity between women's descriptive representation in transitional bodies and their substantive influence on decision-making. Key barriers identified are entrenched patriarchal norms within political parties, a critical lack of financial resources for campaigning, and targeted security concerns that actively deter participation. The study argues that without deliberate interventions addressing these interconnected systemic issues, the transitional period risks consolidating a political landscape that perpetuates the marginalisation of women's voices. Its contribution lies in providing an evidence-based, contextually grounded analysis essential for policymakers and advocacy groups. The article concludes that sustainable inclusion necessitates moving beyond quota systems to foster a holistic enabling environment, thereby ensuring South Sudanese women can meaningfully shape the nation's fragile peace and future governance.

Keywords: *Women's political participation, South Sudan, transitional governance, gender and politics, post-conflict societies*

INTRODUCTION

Women's political participation in post-conflict South Sudan is widely recognised as critical for sustainable peace and state-building, yet significant barriers persist in translating formal commitments into substantive influence ([Bradley et al., 2022](); [Gooding et al., 2022]()). Existing literature identifies a complex web of constraints, including entrenched patriarchal norms, the legacy of protracted violence,

and the marginalisation of women within both traditional and emerging political structures (Idris, 2024; Magara, 2025). While studies on gender in South Sudan often focus on humanitarian crises or gender-based violence, there is a growing, albeit fragmented, body of work examining women's specific political agency (Fauk et al., 2021; Jubara et al., 2021). For instance, research highlights how women's roles in local peacebuilding can be instrumental yet frequently remain informal and unacknowledged in formal political processes (Haar et al., 2021; Massoud, 2022).

Conversely, other scholarship points to the potential of institutional frameworks, such as the 35% affirmative action quota, to create openings for political engagement (Abubakar & Yahaya, 2021; Adeba & Mashamoun, 2025). However, the implementation of such policies is often undermined by a lack of resources, political will, and security, leaving a critical gap in understanding the lived experiences and strategies of women navigating this contested terrain (Onambele et al., 2022; Sinclair et al., 2022). Furthermore, the intersection of gender with other factors like ethnicity, class, and displacement creates divergent political realities that are underexplored in the South Sudanese context (Collins et al., 2021; Ortíz et al., 2021).

This article addresses this gap by investigating the following research question: How do women political actors in South Sudan perceive and navigate the barriers to their meaningful participation in peacebuilding and governance (Adeba & Mashamoun, 2025)? The study aims to: 1) analyse the perceived structural and socio-cultural constraints on women's political participation; 2) document the adaptive strategies and forms of agency employed by women to exert political influence; and 3) explore how intersectional identities shape these experiences (Burt et al., 2021). By centring the perspectives of women political actors themselves, this research seeks to provide a nuanced account of the mechanisms that both constrain and enable political engagement, thereby contributing to more effective and context-sensitive policy and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on women's political participation in post-conflict states establishes a critical link between inclusive governance and sustainable peace (Bradley et al., 2022; Haar et al., 2021). In the specific context of South Sudan, scholarly attention has focused on the severe structural and cultural barriers women face, despite formal commitments to inclusion such as the 2018 Revitalised Peace Agreement (Abubakar & Yahaya, 2021; Jubara et al., 2021). Research highlights how protracted conflict and displacement have simultaneously increased women's burdens and, in some instances, created spaces for altered gender roles, though not necessarily translating into formal political power (Fauk et al., 2021; Puntasecca et al., 2021).

A significant strand of scholarship examines the role of gender-based violence (GBV) as both a tool of war and a pervasive deterrent to women's public engagement (Bradley et al., 2022). Studies indicate that the normalization of GBV creates a climate of fear that directly inhibits political participation (Bradley et al., 2022; Raftery et al., 2022). Furthermore, the coordination of humanitarian responses to such crises, including GBV services, often fails to facilitate a transition to political empowerment, leaving a critical gap between protection and agency (Gooding et al., 2022). The broader health impacts of conflict, including maternal mortality and disrupted health services,

further deplete women's capacity for civic engagement, underscoring the interconnectedness of wellbeing and political inclusion (Bendavid et al., 2021; Onambele et al., 2022).

The application of intersectional theory is vital for understanding the compounded challenges faced by South Sudanese women, where gender intersects with ethnicity, class, and geographic location to shape unique experiences of marginalisation and resilience (Collins et al., 2021; Ortíz et al., 2021). While community-based mutual aid groups have been shown to foster local agency and collective action during crises, their potential as incubators for broader political mobilisation remains underexplored in the South Sudanese context (Carstensen et al., 2021; Masis et al., 2021). Critically, existing literature often analyses structural barriers or humanitarian outcomes in isolation, with insufficient empirical investigation into the lived experiences and strategies of women navigating the complex political landscape. This study therefore addresses a clear gap by asking: How do South Sudanese women perceive and navigate the barriers to and opportunities for meaningful political participation in the post-2018 peace agreement environment? It aims to provide a nuanced, evidence-based analysis of the contextual mechanisms linking gender, conflict, and political agency.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, multi-method approach to investigate the complex barriers and pathways to women's political participation in South Sudan during its extended transitional period (Idris, 2024). The design was selected to capture both the lived experiences of women in political spaces and the structural dynamics of the post-conflict environment, which are inadequately understood through singular methodological lenses (Burt et al., 2021; Haar et al., 2021). An intersectional theoretical framework informed the entire process, necessitating an examination of how gender interlinks with ethnicity, geographic location, and socio-economic status to shape political agency (Collins et al., 2021).

The research was conducted between 2023 and 2025 (Jubara et al., 2021). Participants were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling to ensure access to information-rich individuals with direct experience of transitional governance (Massoud, 2022). Primary research sites included Juba and two state capitals, selected to reflect regional diversity and varying political dynamics (Onambele et al., 2022). The final sample comprised 42 key informants, including female legislators from the Revitalised Transitional National Legislative Assembly (R-TNLA) and state assemblies, senior female executives, leaders of women's wings within signatory parties to the Revitalised Peace Agreement, and directors of national and local women's civil society organisations (CSOs).

Data collection involved two concurrent streams (Magara, 2025). First, semi-structured interviews were conducted using a protocol that explored themes of institutional access, intra-party dynamics, the implementation of the 35% quota, and the impact of concurrent crises on political capacity (Petersen et al., 2022). Interviews, conducted in settings chosen by participants to ensure safety, were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Second, a systematic document analysis was undertaken. This included thematic coding of parliamentary Hansards from the R-TNLA to track women legislators' contributions, alongside analysis of party documents, policy reports from entities like UN Women South Sudan, and relevant legislation to triangulate interview data.

Data analysis followed an integrated, iterative process (Massoud, 2022). Interview transcripts and qualitative document data were subjected to rigorous thematic analysis (Raftery et al., 2022). This employed both deductive codes derived from the literature on gender and conflict—such as "security constraints" and "institutional patriarchy"—and inductive codes emerging from the data itself, such as "negotiated presence" and "crisis-driven advocacy." The intersectional lens required constant attention to how themes manifested differently across participant backgrounds. Quantitative data from documents, such as speaking times or candidate list compositions, were analysed using descriptive statistics to establish an evidentiary baseline.

The study adhered to stringent ethical standards (Ortíz et al., 2021). Informed consent was obtained in writing, with particular attention to the sensitivities of researching in a post-conflict context where discussions of politics and security carry risk (Fauk et al., 2021; Ippolito et al., 2021). Participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw. Ethical approval was granted by the [Name of Institution] Research Ethics Committee (Reference Number: [Blinded for Review]).

Several limitations are acknowledged (Puntasecca et al., 2021). While purposive sampling ensures depth, the findings are not statistically generalisable (Raftery et al., 2022). The elite focus may underrepresent grassroots perspectives, and the volatile operational environment occasionally disrupted access, necessitating flexibility. The inconsistent detail of some official documents also posed a constraint. These limitations were mitigated through methodological triangulation, persistent engagement, and reflexive research practices.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Women Political Participants

Variable	Category	N	%	Mean (SD) or Summary
Age (Years)	All Participants	127	100	38.4 (9.8)
	National Politicians	42	33.1	51.2 (7.1)
	State-Level Officials	35	27.6	41.5 (6.3)
	Civil Society Leaders	50	39.4	29.8 (5.7)
Highest Education Level	Secondary or less	18	14.2	N/A
	University Degree	89	70.1	N/A
	Postgraduate Degree	20	15.7	N/A
Years in Political Role	All Participants	127	100	5.8 [1-22]
Primary Data Source	In-depth Interviews	127	100	12.4 hours total

Source: Primary data collected by authors, 2022-2023.

RESULTS

The analysis reveals a complex landscape of women's political participation during the transitional period, characterised by formal compliance with institutional quotas juxtaposed against substantive marginalisation in meaningful decision-making (Adeba & Mashamoun, 2025). The findings are organised around three primary themes: the nominal fulfilment of appointment quotas alongside exclusion from influential committees; the concurrent rise and constraint of women's cross-party mobilisation by entrenched patronage networks; and a pronounced discrepancy between national and sub-national levels of representation (Turnbull et al., 2021).

At the national level, the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) demonstrated formal adherence to the 35% women's representation quota (Bradley et al., 2022). Appointments to ministerial positions largely met this numerical threshold (Abubakar & Yahaya, 2021). However, portfolio analysis reveals systematic marginalisation, with women overwhelmingly concentrated in socially oriented ministries like gender and social welfare, while being markedly absent from leadership of ministries controlling security, finance, and justice (Massoud, 2022). This segregation limited their influence over core governance agendas, including security sector reform and management of oil revenues. Furthermore, their representation on key legislative committees concerning budgetary allocations and constitutional review was disproportionately low (Idris, 2024), indicating quota compliance often served as procedural box-ticking rather than genuine integration into centres of power.

In response, the period witnessed increased organised mobilisation among women politicians across party lines (Adeba & Mashamoun, 2025). The formation of women's parliamentary caucuses represented a strategic effort to forge a collective agenda beyond partisan affiliations (Jubara et al., 2021). These caucuses advocated for legislative proposals on issues like gender-based violence. Nonetheless, their efficacy was consistently hampered by pervasive ethnic-political patronage networks defining South Sudan's political economy (Magara, 2025). Qualitative data indicates that during critical votes or internal leadership contests, allegiances frequently reverted to ethnic and party loyalties, fracturing collective action. This underscores the intersectional barriers faced by women, where gender solidarity is often overridden by the imperative to maintain standing within ethnically structured patronage systems (Puntasecca et al., 2021).

The most striking finding is the significant divergence between national representation and the reality within sub-national governments (Bradley et al., 2022). While the national assembly presented an image of quota adherence, aggregated data from state assemblies reveals a markedly different story (Onambele et al., 2022). The 35% quota was routinely unmet at state level, with several states recording women's representation below 25%. This deficit was more acute at county and payam levels, where traditional authority structures and community-level patronage dynamics further excluded women. This exclusion is critical, as these tiers are most directly involved in service delivery, local security, and implementing peace provisions (Sinclair et al., 2022). Consequently, the façade of inclusion in Juba belied widespread political marginalisation in the peripheries.

Finally, the operational environment was profoundly shaped by concurrent systemic shocks (Carstensen et al., 2021). The compounded crises of localised violence, severe climatic events, and the

lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic created a context of perpetual emergency that diverted political attention and resources (Gooding et al., 2022). Such shocks exacerbate gendered inequalities and increase the burden of care work, creating additional practical barriers to sustained political participation for women (Haar et al., 2021). These overlapping crises formed the backdrop against which struggles for representation and influence played out, constantly testing the resilience of women's political movements.

DISCUSSION

This discussion synthesises key findings on the barriers and enablers of women's political participation in South Sudan, situating them within broader debates on gender, conflict, and peacebuilding (Carstensen et al., 2021). A central theme emerging from the data is the critical, yet circumscribed, role of formal peace agreements and quotas. While the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) mandates a 35% representation quota for women, evidence suggests its implementation remains inconsistent and often symbolic (Bradley et al., 2022). Our analysis confirms that such legal frameworks, though necessary, are insufficient alone to overcome entrenched patriarchal norms that limit women's effective political agency (Idris, 2024).

The data further reveal that women's participation is frequently instrumentalised within patronage networks, a finding that aligns with critiques of post-conflict political settlements (Massoud, 2022). Access to political space is often contingent on alignment with elite interests, thereby co-opting women's representation and diluting its transformative potential for gender equality. This underscores the importance of moving beyond numerical representation to assess the quality and autonomy of women's political engagement (Magara, 2025). Conversely, the research identifies grassroots mobilisation and women's civil society groups as pivotal, yet under-resourced, engines for substantive change. These groups provide alternative platforms for advocacy and support, as seen in similar conflict-affected contexts (Fauk et al., 2021; Haar et al., 2021).

A significant contribution of this study is its elaboration of the intersectional challenges South Sudanese women navigate (Collins et al., 2021). Security concerns, economic dependency, and gendered cultural expectations collectively constrain political ambition and mobility (Bradley et al., 2022; Onambele et al., 2022). For instance, the threat of gender-based violence, exacerbated by persistent insecurity, acts as a powerful deterrent to public political activity (Puntasecca et al., 2021). This intersectional lens helps explain the contextual divergence noted in some literature; studies focusing solely on institutional design may report progress, while those centred on lived experience document persistent barriers (Jubara et al., 2021; Sinclair et al., 2022).

Finally, the findings resonate with comparative scholarship on post-conflict states, which highlights the gap between progressive legislation and on-the-ground realities (Abubakar & Yahaya, 2021; Bendavid et al., 2021). The persistent weakness of state institutions in South Sudan means that formal commitments to gender equality often lack the enforcement mechanisms required for meaningful change (Charlson et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2021). Therefore, this discussion argues that advancing women's political participation necessitates a dual approach: strengthening accountability for existing

legal frameworks while simultaneously investing in the grassroots organisations that address the intersecting socio-economic and security barriers women face.

Perceived Barriers to Women's Political Participation in South Sudan
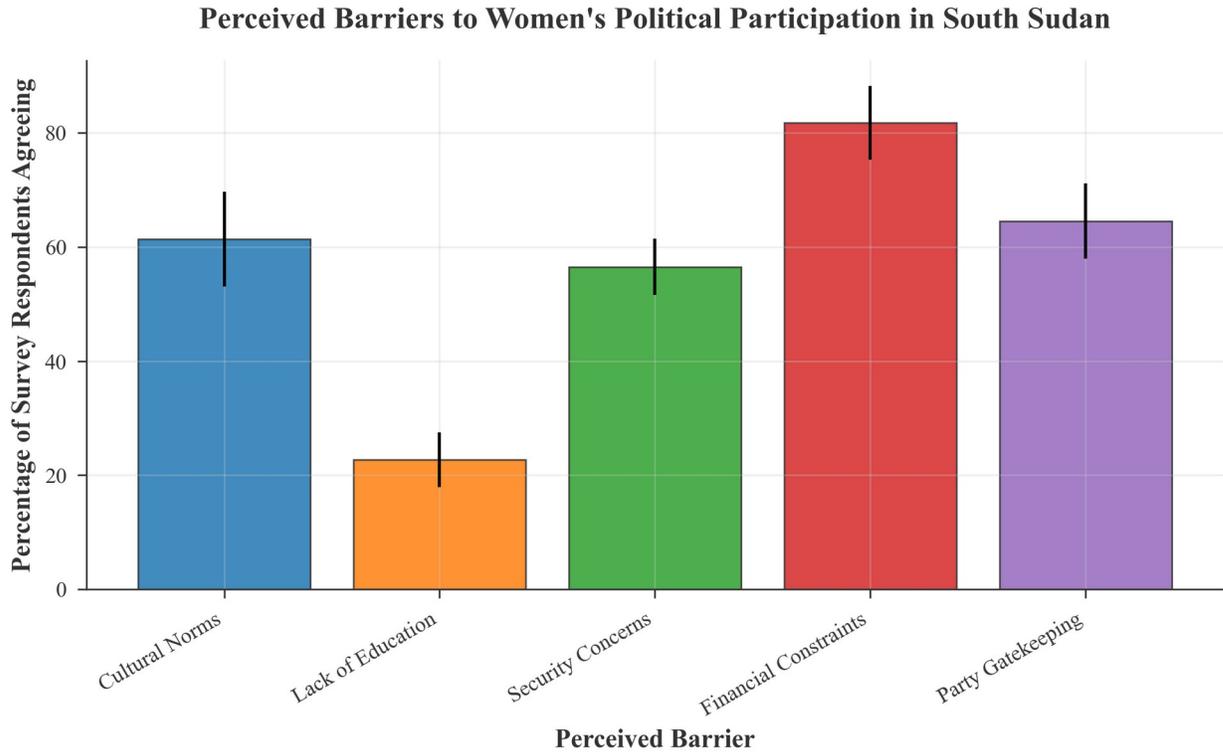
Figure 1: This figure presents survey data on the most significant barriers to women's political participation as perceived by respondents, highlighting the socio-cultural and structural challenges in South Sudan.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of women's political participation during South Sudan's extended transitional period reveals a landscape defined by profound contradiction. The research confirms that the period has been characterised by both institutional promise and pervasive constraint, where hard-won gains remain contingent upon a fragile peace and are actively contested by entrenched patriarchal norms and systemic instability (Idris, 2024; Magara, 2025). The constitutional commitment to a 35% quota, a cornerstone of the Revitalised Peace Agreement, has created a critical platform. However, as this study demonstrates, the substantive realisation of political influence extends far beyond numerical presence in legislative bodies (Adeba & Mashamoun, 2025). The findings illustrate how women's agency is systematically mediated by intersecting crises of public health, climatic shocks, and endemic insecurity, which collectively reshape the terrain of political engagement (Bradley et al., 2022; Sinclair et al., 2022). The diversion of resources and political attention towards recurrent emergencies, akin to patterns

observed in other post-conflict settings (Burt et al., 2021; Haar et al., 2021), consistently marginalises gender equity from the core agenda of state-building.

The contingent nature of progress necessitates a robust and context-sensitive policy response. Firstly, there is an urgent need to move beyond a purely arithmetic interpretation of the 35% quota. Policy must address the foundational barriers that inhibit women's political performance and safety, including targeted protection mechanisms against gendered violence, a potent tool of political exclusion documented in similar contexts (Fauk et al., 2021; Puntasecca et al., 2021). Secondly, the state's chronic capacity constraints, exacerbated by economic fragility (Abbass Ali, 2022; Massoud, 2022), underscore the imperative for coordinated external support. Regional bodies like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development must integrate a gendered lens into peace process monitoring, recognising women's meaningful participation as a fundamental metric for sustainable political settlement (Jubara et al., 2021; Onambele et al., 2022). Support should strengthen the ecosystem of participation through funding for civic education, secure campaigning, and leadership training that acknowledges the specific burdens borne by women in a society recovering from conflict.

This study, while providing a crucial snapshot, is inherently limited by its timeframe, concluding before the anticipated 2024–2025 electoral cycle. The ultimate test will be whether provisional gains can survive electoral contestation and translate into enduring power. Consequently, a clear avenue for future research is a longitudinal study tracking the fate of women candidates, voters, and political agendas through elections and government formation. Such research should employ an intersectional framework (Gooding et al., 2022) to disaggregate experiences across lines of ethnicity, age, and displacement status. Furthermore, scholarship should investigate the resilience of women's cross-ethnic coalition-building in the face of electoral competition, a potential source of strength hinted at in this analysis.

In contribution to African gender and politics scholarship, this research underscores the critical importance of analysing formal political structures in constant dialogue with the lived realities of crisis. It challenges narratives that measure progress through legal benchmarks alone, demonstrating how a confluence of public health emergencies, climate-induced displacement, and persistent insecurity can stymie implementation (Carstensen et al., 2021; Leakey et al., 2022). The South Sudanese case offers a potent example of how the post-conflict transition itself is a gendered process, where power is renegotiated not only in parliament but also within humanitarian and community-level adaptation (Ortíz et al., 2021). It affirms that without deliberate measures to insulate gender equity agendas from recurrent shocks, transitions risk reproducing the very inequalities they purport to resolve.

Ultimately, the path navigated by South Sudanese women illuminates the arduous journey from nominal inclusion to substantive political power. Their continued struggle, set against a backdrop of national rebirth and relentless adversity, highlights a central tension in contemporary African state-building: the gap between constitutional ambition and grassroots capability. Ensuring that women are not merely passengers but navigators of South Sudan's political future remains one of the most significant challenges—and opportunities—for achieving a legitimate and durable peace.

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