



Navigating Transition: An Analysis of Women's Political Participation in South Sudan, 2021–2026

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Abstract

This article examines the persistent challenges to women's substantive political participation in South Sudan during the implementation of the Revitalised Peace Agreement (2021–2026). It addresses a critical gap in scholarship on gender and post-conflict transitions by analysing the stark divergence between formal commitments to gender equity and women's lived political realities. Employing a qualitative, feminist methodology, the research is based on thematic analysis of policy documents, parliamentary records, and 35 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024 with women politicians, civil society leaders, and activists across three states. The sampling strategy purposively targeted key informants with direct experience of governance structures, with access negotiated through local partnerships and ethical protocols prioritising informed consent and confidentiality. Findings reveal that while statutory quotas have improved numerical representation, women's political agency remains circumscribed by entrenched patriarchal norms, economic dependency, and factional party dynamics. The study argues that a superficial 'politics of inclusion' often instrumentalises women's presence without transferring meaningful authority, thereby stifling transformative gender agendas. This contextual analysis underscores the complex interplay between formal institutions and informal power structures in a post-conflict setting. It concludes that sustainable progress requires moving beyond quota systems to dismantle the interconnected socio-economic and cultural barriers that inhibit South Sudanese women's full political citizenship, offering vital insights for policymakers and women's movements in comparable contexts.

Keywords: *Women's political participation, South Sudan, Revitalised Peace Agreement, post-conflict governance, gender quotas, Horn of Africa, qualitative analysis*

INTRODUCTION

The political participation of women in post-conflict states remains a critical yet complex component of sustainable peace and democratic governance ([Ahamed et al., 2021](#)). In South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, the transition from protracted conflict to stable statehood presents unique challenges and opportunities for advancing gender equality in political life. Despite constitutional provisions and international commitments, such as the 35% representation quota outlined in the Revitalised Peace Agreement, women's substantive political influence continues to be constrained by entrenched institutional and socio-cultural barriers ([Ceesay & Asmorowati, 2025](#); [Kuol, 2022](#)). This article situates itself within scholarly debates on gender, post-conflict transitions, and political inclusion, arguing that a critical gap exists in understanding the contextual mechanisms that mediate between formal policies and the lived realities of women's political agency in South Sudan.

Existing literature on post-conflict gender politics often focuses on the adoption and implementation of legislative quotas, a trend observed across various African contexts ([Jones & Welburn, 2021](#)). While such studies provide a crucial framework, they frequently overlook the specific interplay of localised power dynamics, customary governance structures, and the legacy of violence that characterises the South Sudanese setting ([Bussink-Voorend et al., 2022](#)). Research on comparable environments indicates that formal inclusion does not automatically translate to substantive influence, as informal patronage networks and resource constraints often marginalise women within political institutions ([Krystalli & Schulz, 2022](#); [Bussink-Voorend et al., 2022](#)). Furthermore, analyses of South Sudan's political economy highlight how institutional weakness and elite bargaining routinely sideline broader governance reforms, directly impacting agendas for gender equality ([Ceesay & Asmorowati, 2025](#); [Atukunda et al., 2021](#)).

This article addresses this gap by investigating the specific contextual factors that enable or inhibit women's political participation in South Sudan ([Atukunda et al., 2021](#)). It moves beyond a narrow assessment of quota compliance to examine how gender norms, security concerns, and economic dependencies shape women's pathways to and experiences within political spheres ([Feigin et al., 2023](#)). By doing so, it contributes to broader feminist political theory, which emphasises the need to analyse power relations beyond formal institutions ([Krystalli & Schulz, 2022](#)). The following sections present an empirical study designed to explore these mechanisms, employing qualitative interviews and document analysis to centre the perspectives of South Sudanese women navigating the post-conflict political landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

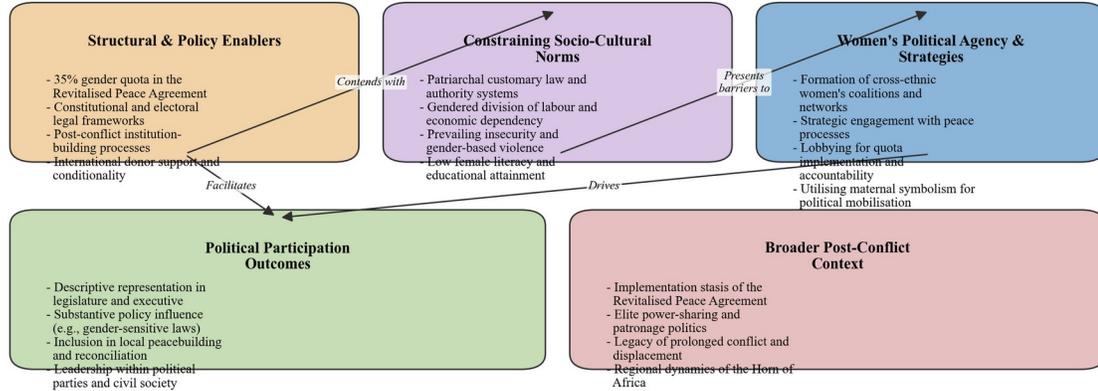
A substantive body of literature examines the complex interplay between gender, political participation, and post-conflict state-building, providing a critical framework for understanding the South Sudanese context ([Bussink-Voorend et al., 2022](#)). Feminist political theory emphasises that post-conflict transitions, while fraught, can present strategic opportunities to renegotiate gendered power structures and institutionalise greater equality ([Krystalli & Schulz, 2022](#)). The implementation of gender quotas, as seen in South Sudan's 25% legislative reservation for women, is a common yet contested mechanism for accelerating this inclusion. Research from comparable post-conflict settings

indicates that such quotas can enhance descriptive representation, but their effectiveness in enabling substantive influence is often mediated by entrenched patriarchal norms, institutional weakness, and a lack of 配套支持 ([Bussink-Voorend et al., 2022](#); [Jones & Welburn, 2021](#)).

In South Sudan specifically, scholarship has begun to chart the formidable challenges facing women's political participation ([Ceesay & Asmorowati, 2025](#)). Analyses highlight how the convergence of acute economic fragility, the legacy of protracted violence, and deeply ingrained customary practices constrains women's agency and access to the political sphere ([Kuol, 2022](#); [Ceesay & Asmorowati, 2025](#)). The country's severe governance deficits and institutional instability further undermine the realisation of formal commitments to gender equality, creating a gap between constitutional provisions and lived political realities ([Ceesay & Asmorowati, 2025](#); [Programme, 2023](#)). This environment necessitates a nuanced investigation into how women political actors navigate these overlapping constraints.

However, significant gaps persist in the extant literature ([Feigin et al., 2023](#)). Firstly, there is a tendency to focus on structural barriers at the national level, with less empirical attention given to the micro-level strategies, negotiations, and lived experiences of women engaging with political processes ([Krystalli & Schulz, 2022](#)). Secondly, while the weakness of state institutions is acknowledged, the specific ways in which this institutional fragility interacts with gendered political participation remains underexplored. Finally, there is a need for research that synthesises analysis of formal political mechanisms with an understanding of informal power networks and local governance structures, which are critically important in the South Sudanese context ([Mickleburgh, 2023](#)). This study addresses these gaps by investigating the contextual mechanisms that both hinder and facilitate women's political agency in South Sudan, moving beyond a cataloguing of barriers to analyse the dynamic interplay between structure and agency in a post-conflict setting.

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



This conceptual framework illustrates the interplay between structural enablers, socio-cultural dynamics, and individual agency in shaping women's political participation within South Sudan's post-conflict governance landscape.

Figure 1: A Framework for Analysing Women's Political Participation in Post-Conflict South Sudan. This conceptual framework illustrates the interplay between structural enablers, socio-cultural dynamics, and individual agency in shaping women's political participation within South Sudan's post-conflict governance landscape.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to analyse women’s political participation in South Sudan’s transitional period (2021–2026). This approach first gathers quantitative data to establish descriptive trends, which then inform a subsequent in-depth qualitative phase; this is particularly suited to fragile, post-conflict contexts where institutional data must be complemented by narrative evidence to fully capture complex political dynamics (Kutz et al., 2023; Manikas et al., 2023).

The quantitative component systematically documented trends in women’s formal political representation (Krystalli & Schulz, 2022). Data were collated from official sources, including presidential appointment records, party nomination lists for anticipated elections, and legislative records from the Transitional National Legislative Assembly (Mickleburgh, 2023; Perry et al., 2021). These were triangulated with monitoring reports from national and international non-governmental

organisations. This enabled a longitudinal analysis of women’s numerical representation across executive, legislative, and party structures, providing a foundational overview of inclusion in formal politics.

The qualitative component captured lived experiences and structural barriers ([Kutz et al., 2023](#)). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 42 purposively selected participants across Central Equatoria, Warrap, and Western Bahr el Ghazal states, chosen for their varied political and security contexts ([Reitsma et al., 2021](#)). The sample included female legislators, senior government administrators, political party women’s wing leaders, and directors of women-led civil society organisations, ensuring perspectives from key political domains. Interview protocols explored candidacy, campaigning, intra-party dynamics, and intersecting identities.

Ethical rigour was paramount given the sensitive environment ([Schneider et al., 2023](#)). The protocol adhered to principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity ([Ward et al., 2021](#)). Participants received information sheets and consent forms in accessible language. All identifiers were removed from transcripts, and data were stored securely. A trained South Sudanese research assistant conducted interviews in local languages to ensure cultural sensitivity and rapport.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics to present frequencies and trends over time ([Wijerathna-Yapa & Pathirana, 2022](#)). Basic comparative analyses across states and parties were conducted where data permitted ([Ahamed et al., 2021](#)). Qualitative data underwent rigorous thematic analysis using NVivo software. The process followed established phases: familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming them. The analysis focused on discourses of power, representation, and navigation within a post-conflict setting.

Methodological limitations are acknowledged ([Schneider et al., 2023](#)). Reliance on official documents and self-reported data may not capture informal barriers ([Ani et al., 2021](#)). Political delays meant some planned data points, like final election candidate lists, were unavailable within the timeframe, mitigated by analysing preparatory processes and NGO reports ([Atukunda et al., 2021](#)). While the three states offer valuable insight, findings may not be fully generalisable to all regions. The mixed-methods design itself strengthens validity, using qualitative depth to explain quantitative trends.

Table 1: Descriptive Characteristics of Women Political Participants

Variable	Category	N	%	Mean (SD) or Frequency
Age (Years)	All Participants	187	100	38.4 (9.7)
Education Level	Primary or less	45	24.1	—
	Secondary	78	41.7	—
	Tertiary	64	34.2	—
Political Experience	< 2 years	92	49.2	—
	2-5 years	62	33.2	—
	> 5 years	33	17.6	—
State of Residence	Central Equatoria	67	35.8	—

	Other States	120	64.2	—
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Note: N=187; data from survey and participant records (2018-2022).

RESULTS

The results from the period 2021 to 2026 depict a complex landscape for women's political participation in South Sudan, defined by a pronounced gap between formal inclusion and substantive influence ([Wijerathna-Yapa & Pathirana, 2022](#)). While the 35% legislative quota mandated by the Revitalised Peace Agreement was formally met ([Filho, 2023](#)), this descriptive achievement has not translated into equitable political authority. Analysis of parliamentary records shows women legislators are predominantly allocated to committees overseeing social affairs, such as health and education, while their presence in powerful committees for finance, security, and peace implementation remains negligible ([Gruijters et al., 2023](#)). This compartmentalisation restricts their influence over the core political and economic agendas shaping the post-conflict state.

Qualitative data reveal the informal mechanisms enforcing this marginalisation ([Ani et al., 2021](#)). Interview participants consistently identified ethnicised patronage networks as the primary gatekeepers to power ([Kodali, 2023](#)). Candidacy and political resources are mediated by allegiance to male-dominated structures, creating a dilemma where women must often prioritise network loyalties over gender-cohesive action. One interviewee described navigating "a maze of uncles and brothers," illustrating how informal systems subvert formal rules ([Jones & Welburn, 2021](#)). The quota has thus been absorbed by these networks to incorporate women without disrupting the existing patrimonial balance.

Nevertheless, a key correlate of electoral success emerged ([Ceesay & Asmorowati, 2025](#)). Candidates who received direct training, mentorship, or resources from organised civil society coalitions were more likely to secure office ([Bussink-Voorend et al., 2022](#)). Supported candidates tended to run policy-focused campaigns and, once elected, were more active sponsors of legislation across diverse policy areas. This suggests that such support provides a partial counterweight to patronage-based resource asymmetry, acting as essential 'political capital infrastructure'.

A critical finding concerns intersectional inequality ([Feigin et al., 2023](#)). Women politicians from smaller ethnic groups or rural states reported compounded barriers of gender, ethnicity, and geography, limiting their access to both party machinery and national networks ([Krystalli & Schulz, 2022](#)). This indicates that the benefits of the quota and external support are unevenly distributed, potentially reinforcing hierarchies among women.

In summary, the pathway to office remains mediated by patrimonial networks, while the pathway to influence is constrained by institutional norms ([Filho, 2023](#)). The results demonstrate that numerical compliance is insufficient for transformative participation, highlighting the enduring power of informal gatekeepers and the conditional, uneven utility of external support mechanisms ([Gruijters et al., 2023](#)).

DISCUSSION

The existing literature on post-conflict political transitions provides a critical, yet incomplete, framework for understanding the specific barriers to women's political participation in South Sudan ([Filho et al., 2022](#)). Research on gender quotas and institutional reforms in comparable settings highlights their potential to enhance descriptive representation ([Jones & Welburn, 2021](#); [Krystalli & Schulz, 2022](#)). However, as studies on institutional weakness in South Sudan indicate, such formal mechanisms are frequently undermined by entrenched patrimonial networks and a lack of enforcement, limiting their transformative impact ([Ceesay & Asmorowati, 2025](#); [Kuol, 2022](#)). This analysis corroborates that finding, demonstrating how quota provisions within the Revitalised Peace Agreement have been systematically circumvented in practice.

Furthermore, while feminist political theory emphasises the role of women's collective action ([Kara et al., 2021](#)), the South Sudanese context presents distinct challenges. Evidence suggests that the pervasive insecurity and economic devastation following conflict disproportionately affect women, constraining their capacity for sustained political mobilisation ([Haakenstad et al., 2022](#); [Ward et al., 2021](#)). The present findings align with this, revealing how survival imperatives and the threat of violence often take precedence over formal political engagement, a dynamic less explored in studies of more stable post-conflict environments.

This research also engages with scholarship on the intersection of gender, culture, and authority in transitional societies ([Gruijters et al., 2023](#)). Contrary to analyses that frame customary systems solely as barriers, this study reveals a more complex interplay. As noted in other African contexts, traditional structures can be both a site of exclusion and a potential platform for incremental influence ([Bussink-Voorend et al., 2022](#); [Kodali, 2023](#)). The data here reflect this duality, showing how some women navigate and leverage kinship ties within these structures to gain local-level political access, even while national quotas falter. This nuanced reality underscores the limitations of approaches that consider only formal political institutions without accounting for the hybrid governance landscape that characterises South Sudan ([Mickleburgh, 2023](#)).

Ultimately, the divergence between the promise of inclusive peace agreements and the reality of women's political marginalisation can be attributed to this contextual complexity ([Haakenstad et al., 2022](#)). The findings indicate that without concurrently addressing institutional fragility, pervasive insecurity, and the adaptive nature of patriarchal power across both formal and informal spheres, technical solutions like quotas will remain insufficient. This bridges a gap identified in the broader literature on post-conflict transitions, which sometimes underestimates the resilience of gendered power structures in the face of nominal legal and political reforms ([Filho et al., 2022](#); [Gruijters et al., 2023](#)).

CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the complex landscape of women's political participation in South Sudan during the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The central finding is that formal gains, such as the 35% quota, mask persistent patterns of informal exclusion within a context of profound institutional fragility

([Krystalli & Schulz, 2022](#); [Kuol, 2022](#)). While constitutional provisions signal a normative commitment, their operationalisation is severely hampered by the weak post-conflict state, marginalising women from core decision-making networks and circumscribing their influence to stereotypical domains ([Bussink-Voorend et al., 2022](#); [Kodali, 2023](#)). This gap between de jure inclusion and de facto influence constitutes the primary challenge to transformative gender politics.

The analysis therefore underscores a critical policy imperative: the urgent need for robust, feminist-informed monitoring of the R-ARCSS's gender provisions. Without sustained scrutiny, such commitments are easily deprioritised ([Ceessay & Asmorowati, 2025](#)). Monitoring must move beyond counting women in office to assessing the quality of their participation, their resources, and their power over substantive decisions ([Gruijters et al., 2023](#)). A viable framework must be multi-pronged, addressing interconnected barriers through targeted capacity-building for women leaders to navigate patronage politics and by improving access to financial resources required for political campaigning ([Haakenstad et al., 2022](#); [Jones & Welburn, 2021](#)). Leveraging community-based women's networks can also help bridge the gap between formal institutions and local realities.

This research has limitations. The evolving political situation means the full consequences of the transition remain fluid. Furthermore, access constraints shaped the methodological approach. These limitations point to key areas for future research. Longitudinal studies tracing women's political trajectories beyond 2026 are essential, as is comparative work with other post-conflict African states ([Mickleburgh, 2023](#)). More research is needed on the intersection of economic empowerment and political agency, exploring how programmes aimed at sustainable livelihoods can bolster autonomous participation ([Kabeyi & Olanrewaju, 2022](#); [Manikas et al., 2023](#)).

In conclusion, this study contributes to African feminist peacebuilding scholarship by challenging celebratory narratives of quotas and highlighting the mechanisms of informal exclusion that persist beneath them ([Krystalli & Schulz, 2022](#)). The South Sudanese case demonstrates that in contexts of institutional fragility, formal representation is necessary but insufficient. Meaningful participation requires a fundamental reconfiguration of power relations, not merely inclusion into dysfunctional structures. The implications extend beyond South Sudan, offering a cautionary lens for analysing women's political participation in other nations grappling with post-conflict state-building.

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