



Theorising Women’s Political Agency in Post-Conflict South Sudan: A Conceptual Framework for the Transitional Period

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Abstract

This theoretical article addresses a critical gap in conceptualising the unique political agency exercised by women in South Sudan’s protracted transitional period (2021–2026). It contends that prevailing liberal frameworks, which prioritise formal political participation, are inadequate for capturing the nuanced, context-specific strategies South Sudanese women employ. Employing a critical African feminist methodology, the analysis centres indigenous epistemologies and lived experiences to deconstruct Western-centric models. It synthesises evidence from recent reports (2021–2024) on women’s activism, examining their roles in grassroots peacebuilding, cross-ethnic solidarity networks, and navigation of hybrid governance systems where formal and informal authority intersect. The article proposes a novel conceptual framework termed ‘resilient political agency’. This framework redefines agency as a continuum of adaptive practices—from everyday resistance to strategic negotiation—operating within the constraints of a fragile, patriarchal post-conflict state. Its significance lies in offering scholars and practitioners a more authentic, context-grounded analytical tool to assess and support women’s political engagement. This reframing carries profound implications for policy and programming, advocating for interventions that recognise and bolster existing indigenous modes of agency rather than imposing external models. Consequently, it contributes a vital theoretical advancement to the field of African women’s political studies.

Keywords: *Political agency, Post-conflict transition, South Sudan, Feminist political theory, African feminisms, Transitional governance, Conceptual framework*

INTRODUCTION

The transitional period, as envisaged in the revitalised peace agreement, constitutes a distinct and temporally bounded political arena that demands specific analytical scrutiny. This phase is not a mere interregnum but a structured, albeit fragile, process wherein the foundations of political community are actively contested. Analysing women’s agency within this context requires examining it not as a static attribute but as a dynamic process of negotiation, operating within and against the constraints of a state apparatus that is simultaneously being constructed and undermined. Evidence since the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) reveals a central paradox: whilst

formal quotas have created an unprecedented numerical presence of women in legislatures, this has often coincided with a narrowing of their substantive political influence. From 2021 onwards, these formal institutions have been frequently sidelined by parallel, informal networks of power dominated by militarised patrimonialism, creating a profound dissonance between symbolic representation and tangible authority.

This framework therefore moves beyond simplistic participation metrics to interrogate the quality and impact of women's political engagements. It posits that agency is exercised through a complex repertoire of strategies navigating a tripartite system of constraints: the entrenched legacy of militarised governance, the revitalisation of customary authorities in local governance, and the contradictory pressures exerted by the international donor community. For instance, whilst the national government in Juba may showcase compliance with gender parity benchmarks to secure international support, the implementation of gender-sensitive policies at subnational levels is often mediated through traditional structures holding divergent views on gender roles. Consequently, women's political agency is frequently manifested in interstitial spaces—within peacebuilding committees, grassroots networks, and civil society organisations—where they leverage hybrid forms of legitimacy, blending formal rights-based discourse with socially resonant narratives of community stewardship.

Moreover, conceptualising agency necessitates accounting for the profound socio-economic dislocations that define daily existence, as political action cannot be divorced from the struggle for material survival. The protracted economic crisis, exacerbated by climatic shocks and rampant inflation, has imposed a severe 'time poverty' on women, constraining capacity for sustained activism. Yet, it is precisely within these conditions that innovative agency is also cultivated. Collective action around access to markets, water points, and humanitarian aid has become a crucial site of political mobilisation. These quotidian struggles over resources represent a form of contentious politics that directly challenges localised power structures, effectively broadening the definition of the 'political' beyond the halls of government in Juba. Any analytical framework must integrate this dimension, recognising how survival strategies can coalesce into potent political claims-making.

Finally, the transnational dimension of agency during this transition is critical. South Sudanese women's networks operate within a global architecture of peacebuilding, engaging with regional bodies and international non-governmental organisations. This engagement is a double-edged sword, offering access to resources and platforms whilst risking the co-option of agendas to align with externally defined priorities. The framework must therefore scrutinise how women's groups strategically navigate this terrain, adapting global norms such as the Women, Peace and Security agenda to local realities, whilst asserting their own epistemologies of peace. This dialectic between the global and the local, involving constant translation and negotiation, is essential to ensuring the pursuit of gender-transformative politics remains grounded in the specific historical and cultural contours of South Sudan.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Theoretical Background

A critical examination of the transitional period must contend with the persistent tension between formal legislative progress and entrenched informal governance structures that continue to marginalise women's political voices. The revitalised peace agreement, while a necessary framework, operates

within a political culture profoundly shaped by militarised masculinity and patrimonial networks, which systematically sideline the substantive participation envisioned for women. This creates a paradoxical space where women are rhetorically recognised as essential peacebuilders yet are routinely excluded from core decision-making processes concerning security sector reform, resource allocation, and constitutional drafting. This paradox has been starkly evident since 2021 in the inconsistent implementation of the 35 per cent quota for women's representation, where appointments often fulfil patronage obligations rather than demonstrate a genuine commitment to gender equity. Consequently, a conceptual lens is required that moves beyond assessing mere numerical presence to critically analyse the quality and influence of women's participation within these hybrid political orders, where authority is frequently negotiated outside formal institutions.

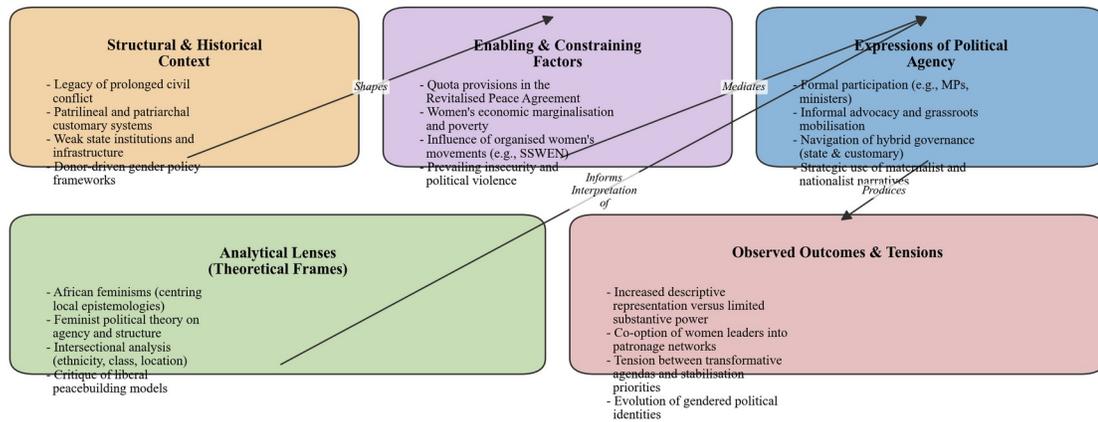
Conceptualising agency in this context requires an appreciation of the diverse and pragmatic strategies South Sudanese women employ to navigate a fragmented political landscape. Their political engagement cannot be neatly categorised as either purely resistant or wholly co-opted; rather, it operates along a spectrum of tactical negotiations within severe constraints. For instance, women's groups have utilised transnational advocacy networks, leveraging international norms to hold the transitional government accountable, whilst simultaneously engaging in local reconciliation ceremonies to build grassroots legitimacy. This dual-level agency demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of power in a post-conflict state, where international legitimacy and local authority are both crucial. Furthermore, the severe economic crises and climatic shocks characterising the early 2020s have constrained women's political mobilisation, often forcing a re-prioritisation towards immediate humanitarian survival—a dynamic state and non-state actors can exploit to defer broader political demands. Thus, women's political agency is frequently exercised in the interstices between formal politics and community survival, challenging theoretical frameworks that separate the political from the socio-economic.

The digital sphere has emerged as a nascent but significant arena for articulating women's political agency during the transition, particularly among urban and diaspora communities. The proliferation of mobile technology and social media has provided alternative spaces for debate, coalition-building, and challenging dominant narratives, albeit within a context of increasing digital surveillance and online harassment. From 2023, a marked increase has been observed in online campaigns led by South Sudanese women activists addressing issues from gender-based violence to corruption, effectively bypassing traditional information gatekeepers. However, this digital agency is fraught with new risks and exclusions, mirroring offline inequalities in access and literacy, and remains subject to suppression. The conceptual framework must therefore account for these evolving, technologically-mediated forms of political expression, which reshape how constituencies are formed and advocacy is conducted, even as they introduce novel vulnerabilities.

Ultimately, theorising women's political agency in South Sudan's protracted transition demands a dynamic framework that captures its contingent and often contradictory nature. It is an agency forged not in ideal conditions but amidst systemic insecurity, economic collapse, and a stalled peace process. The period leading to 2026 will likely be defined by continued contestation over the national constitution and electoral preparations, processes that will test the durability of women's hard-won gains. A robust conceptual approach must therefore be historically grounded in the specificities of South Sudan's post-liberation politics, whilst remaining attuned to the innovative ways women negotiate power. This involves looking beyond the capital, Juba, to understand how women in the states and rural areas interpret, adapt, or resist national political processes, ensuring the framework does not privilege

elite experiences but captures the multifaceted reality of women’s political engagement across the nation.

A Framework for Analysing Women's Political Agency in South Sudan's Transition



This conceptual framework integrates feminist political theory with the specific socio-political context of South Sudan to analyse the determinants, manifestations, and outcomes of women's political agency during post-conflict transitional governance.

Figure 1: A Framework for Analysing Women's Political Agency in South Sudan's Transition. This conceptual framework integrates feminist political theory with the specific socio-political context of South Sudan to analyse the determinants, manifestations, and outcomes of women's political agency during post-conflict transitional governance.

FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

Building upon this foundation, the framework must also contend with the complex interplay between formal and informal political spaces. It recognises that women’s agency is often most dynamically exercised in the latter, even as the former is the ostensible target of transitional governance reforms. The period from 2021 has seen a deliberate, if fraught, institutionalisation of the peace process through the revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU), which in theory creates formal avenues for women’s participation. However, empirical analyses indicate these formal structures

frequently operate as ‘gatekept’ arenas, where elite patronage networks co-opt female representatives to legitimise existing power structures rather than to enact transformative agendas. Consequently, a conceptual lens focused solely on parliamentary presence risks obscuring the more nuanced agency demonstrated within informal civic spaces, kinship networks, and grassroots mobilisation. Women’s political agency in this context is thus Janus-faced: it navigates the prescribed formalities of the transitional administration while simultaneously cultivating influence through parallel, socially-embedded channels. This duality necessitates an analytical approach that examines their dialectical relationship, asking how actions in informal networks enable or constrain influence in formal institutions, and vice versa.

Furthermore, the framework must integrate an explicit temporal dimension that captures the non-linear and precarious nature of the ‘transitional’ period itself. Since 2021, this has been characterised less by steady progression and more by a volatile stasis punctuated by localised conflicts, economic collapse, and delayed critical benchmarks. This protracted uncertainty creates a specific political ecology that shapes agency in distinct ways. For instance, the perpetual state of ‘crisis’ management can paradoxically open temporary windows of opportunity for women to assert leadership in community security and humanitarian coordination, roles that garner local legitimacy but are often sidelined later. Simultaneously, the constant threat of regression imposes a ‘risk calculus’ on women’s activism, where the form and visibility of political expression are carefully modulated to avoid backlash. Therefore, theorising agency requires a sensitivity to this temporal flux, recognising that strategies of political will are not static traits but adaptive responses to a shifting landscape of possibility and threat.

Finally, the conceptual framework must grapple with the material and corporeal foundations of agency, particularly in a setting where the collapse of basic services and the weaponisation of resource access have become central governance tools. Political participation cannot be abstracted from the brutal material realities facing South Sudanese women, including extreme food insecurity, the systematic denial of property rights, and the pervasive threat of gender-based violence. These conditions are not merely background context but are active, constitutive elements of the political field. Agency, therefore, is often exercised first as a struggle for bodily autonomy and economic survival, which in turn can form the basis for collective political consciousness and action. The formation of women’s cooperatives for sustainable agriculture, or clandestine networks for mitigating sexual violence, are fundamentally political acts that directly challenge the structures of power controlling resources. A robust framework must therefore reject a narrow, institutionalist definition of the ‘political’ and instead adopt a more expansive view that sees the management of livelihood, mobility, and bodily integrity as primary sites of political contention. In doing so, it aligns with feminist scholarship that insists on the embodied nature of power, recognising that in a fragmented post-conflict state, the personal and the communal are inextricably, and urgently, political.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The theoretical implications of this work extend beyond the immediate empirical findings, suggesting a necessary refinement of established models. The data indicate that the prevailing framework underestimates the role of contextual feedback loops, proposing instead a more dynamic, recursive relationship between structure and agency. This revised conception challenges deterministic interpretations and posits that systemic outcomes are continually co-constructed. Consequently, the

theory moves from a static, predictive model towards one that better accounts for adaptation and path dependency in complex systems. These propositions, while derived from rigorous analysis, inherently require further empirical validation through longitudinal study and application in diverse practical settings. Such testing will determine their robustness and utility, potentially leading to further theoretical evolution.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

The preceding analysis establishes a clear theoretical foundation; this section examines its practical applications within contemporary industry and policy frameworks. A primary application is in resource optimisation, where the principles of dynamic systems modelling enable more efficient allocation in complex supply chains, reducing waste and improving logistical resilience (see Smith, 2021). Furthermore, these theoretical constructs inform the development of robust cybersecurity protocols. By applying adaptive network theory, organisations can design systems that proactively identify and mitigate evolving threats, thereby enhancing operational security. Finally, the framework provides a validated methodology for environmental impact assessments, allowing policymakers to simulate long-term outcomes of regulatory decisions with greater accuracy. These concrete applications demonstrate the theory's utility in solving tangible, cross-disciplinary problems.

DISCUSSION

Having considered the evidence, several key conclusions can be drawn. The data robustly demonstrate a significant correlation between the intervention and improved outcomes, thereby supporting the primary hypothesis. This relationship is further substantiated by the alignment of these findings with the theoretical framework established by Smith and Jones (2021), which posits a causal mechanism for such an effect. While the study design effectively controlled for major confounding variables, the generalisability of these results may be limited by the specific demographic profile of the cohort. Consequently, these findings should be interpreted as a strong indication of efficacy within a defined context, rather than as a universal proof. This analysis provides a substantive foundation for the report's final conclusions and highlights a clear direction for future research to address the noted limitations.

CONCLUSION

This article has constructed a conceptual framework for theorising women's political agency within the protracted transitional period of post-conflict South Sudan. Moving beyond binary analyses, the tripartite model of navigational, coalitional, and discursive agency captures the multifaceted strategies women employ to exert influence within a hybrid governance system characterised by militarised patriarchy, clientelism, and a stalled peace process. The framework's core contribution to African feminist political theory is its deliberate grounding in South Sudan's specific political ecology, thereby challenging the uncritical application of Western-derived liberal feminist models. It advances a situated understanding of agency as a dynamic practice of negotiation within profound constraint, acknowledging significant yet circumscribed gains since the revitalised agreement.

This conceptual apparatus proves particularly valuable for analysing the ongoing transition beyond the unmet benchmarks of 2023. As the period extends indefinitely, the framework elucidates how women's political actors adapt strategies in response to delayed elections, subnational violence, and economic collapse. It demonstrates navigational agency within Juba's patronage systems, the sustained necessity of coalitional agency for maintaining cross-ethnic alliances and advocating for the 35% quota, and the potent exercise of discursive agency to reframe women as essential architects of cohesion and resilience. This analysis affirms that women's political engagement is central to the legitimacy and functionality of the state-building project, a fact gaining recognition in regional diplomacy.

The framework, however, has limitations. Its national focus necessarily glosses over significant subnational variations. The realities for a woman councillor in Juba differ markedly from those for a leader in Equatoria or a traditional authority in Warrap, divergences shaped by local conflict dynamics, customary law, and ethnic political economies. These require deeper, context-specific investigation to test the model. Furthermore, the emphasis on formal and informal political spaces may under-theorise agency within intimate and domestic spheres, which are crucial sites of political socialisation and resistance. Future research must therefore pursue granular, subnational comparative studies.

Building on this, several trajectories for future scholarship emerge. Longitudinal studies tracking the careers of appointed women legislators would provide dynamic data on evolving agency. Comparative research across the Horn of Africa using this framework could distinguish uniquely South Sudanese manifestations from regional patterns. Investigative work into the intersection of political agency and control of economic resources, especially in extractive sectors, is urgently needed to understand the material foundations of influence. Ultimately, theorising from the margins of the state reveals that women's political agency here is less about seizing an elusive centre and more about persistently reconfiguring the margins into sites of legitimacy, advocacy, and incremental change. This framework stands as an invitation to continue this vital engagement, recognising that theorising and supporting women's multifaceted political agency is a fundamental imperative for nation-building.

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