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# EFFECTIVENESS OF WOMEN IN POLITICS AND IMPROVING GENDER EQUALITY IN SOUTH SUDAN

Santa J. Justin Ali April 2025



SOUTH SUDAN WOMEN'S RESEARCH NETWORK

RESEARCH GRANTS - ROUND TWO

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## THE AUTHOR

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## SOUTH SUDAN WOMEN'S RESEARCH NETWORK

This report is a product of the EU-funded South Sudan Women's Research Network (SSWRN), which provides research grants, training and mentorship to early career female researchers. It is administered by the Rift Valley Institute. The project aims to ensure that women's perspectives are included in research and decision-making on development issues in South Sudan.

## THE RIFT VALLEY INSTITUTE

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**EDITING** Catherine Rosemary Bond

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**DESIGN** Sue MacDonald, SMD Design

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# SUMMARY

Women's participation in politics is an important measure of gender equality in a country, one that reflects the status and position of women in its society as a whole. This research report aims to assess the effectiveness of women's participation in politics from the perspective of South Sudan.

In early 2025, the future of South Sudan's transitional government remained uncertain, following the postponement of elections in December 2024. These would have been the first elections held since South Sudan's independence in 2011 from Sudan, its northern neighbour. On top of this postponement, a lack of economic development in South Sudan—coupled with the impact of climate change and increasing socioeconomic difficulties—has worsened the situation in the new nation, as well as prospects for South Sudan's ultimate test of building a modern democratic state.

The elections were expected to wrap up a transition period laid out in the 2018 Revitalized Agreement to the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Their postponement, by 24 months, has been met with a feeling of considerable frustration among South Sudanese women eager to exercise their participation in politics as a constitutional right.

Women in South Sudan have played a critical role in politics and governance throughout the ages, even if historically they have not fully participated in political structures. While they have had some successes, the representation of women in all aspects of life, most especially political life, has been less effective than it could be, and often exacerbated by negative social norms and a lack of capacity-building interventions tailored to women.

The ultimate objective of this report is to understand how effective women in South Sudanese politics are now and some of the current reasons for their under-representation. It is also to find solutions to the problem from women's points of view.

This study used qualitative methods to explore how effective women have been in politics and improving gender equality in South Sudan to date, and to describe what the meaningful participation of women in political leadership and decision-making looks like. The study's primary data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions and the oral testimonies and stories of stakeholders. Legal documents were also reviewed and analysed from a gender perspective.

The study's results show that, while there are signs of positive change and progress, many women have been (and continue to be) systematically denied the opportunity to participate in politics, largely because of cultural norms (and the political system's adherence to them), as well as because of a lack of interest in enacting existing policies to protect women's rights

in politics and the under-funding of gender policies and activities. As a result, most of the legislation relevant to women's representation remains in draft form, illustrating a lack of political will on the part of the government to promote women's participation in politics.

This report argues that, in order to improve women's participation in politics and promote gender-responsive policies in the country, there is a need to enlarge government capacity for women's leadership by introducing equal gender quotas for decision-making positions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The South Sudan government should include more women in decision-making positions and ensure the active participation of women in all sectors.
2. The government should establish a legal protection mechanism for the participation of women in elections and implement policies for protecting women's rights in elections.
3. Women political leaders, including government ministers, should cooperate across party divides at all levels of parliament, and women should act to achieve representation at all other levels of government, too.
4. Government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society organizations (CSOs) should lobby for funds for women's empowerment to enable women to stand and participate in elections.
5. The government should carry out a public education campaign to encourage women and girls to improve their education and leadership capacities. Capacity-building initiatives could focus on educating women about their rights, electoral processes and advocacy strategies.
6. Research institutions should invest in high-quality research and on gathering data (disaggregated by sex) on political participation and economic empowerment.

# INTRODUCTION

The right to political participation is based on the idea of citizens as the source of sovereignty within a nation state. It is widely accepted that, subject to any reasonable measures necessary to preserve the integrity of the democratic system, citizens have the right to participate in politics and the conduct of public affairs within their countries.<sup>1</sup>

Southern Sudan declared its independence on the 9 July 2011 and became known as the Republic of South Sudan, the 193<sup>rd</sup> state of the United Nations, (UN),<sup>2</sup> 54<sup>th</sup> state of the African Union (AU), and the sixth of the East Africa Community (EAC). However, its independence did not bring an end to war: In 2013, a power struggle between President Salva Kiir and First Vice-President Riek Machar led to internal conflict. Thousands of citizens were affected by killings, rape and other violence.<sup>3</sup>

In 2018, a regional body, the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the UN and other stakeholders and parties to the conflict, signed the R-ARCSS, the revitalized peace agreement,<sup>4</sup> which established a framework designed to replace the 2011 Transitional Constitution with a permanent constitution. In early 2025, however, its core commitments were yet to be implemented. The revived peace agreement set out to hold the country's first-ever elections in 2024, but when the government announced plans to move ahead with them,<sup>5</sup>

- .....
- 1 The principle of the equality of men and women was first recognized in the United Nations Charter (1945), and subsequently in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).
  - 2 'Independence of South Sudan', UNMIS. Accessed 12 June 2024, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/past/unmis/referendum.shtml>.
  - 3 Hundreds of women covered their mouths with tape on Saturday 9 December 2017, as they took to the streets in South Sudan's capital, Juba, to demand an end to their country's war and the suffering of its people. 'Women continue to be raped and killed; they don't have access to their homes, and there is no humanitarian access for people in need,' one woman told Al Jazeera. See 'Women take to streets to demand end to South Sudan war', Al Jazeera, 9 December 2017. Accessed 2 July 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/9/women-take-to-streets-to-demand-end-to-south-sudan-war>.
  - 4 In the peace agreement, South Sudanese women played a role by mobilizing during peace negotiations to ensure the agreement both included gender language and addressed women's concerns. See Angelina Mattijo Bazugba, Johanna Poutanen, Pauline Elaine Riak and Anna Möller-Loswick, 'Women's Experiences in the South Sudan Peace Process 2013-2018', National Transformational Leadership Institute (NTLI), University of Juba, South Sudan, Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), n.d. Accessed 10 March 2024, <https://www.un.org/shestandsforpeace/sites/www.un.org/shestandsforpeace/files/womens-experiences-in-the-south-sudan-peace-process.pdf>.
  - 5 Hon Jemma Nunu, Speaker of Revitalized Transitional National Legislative Assembly (RTNLA), 'I wish to inform this August audience that the implementation of the peace agreement is on track. The government and our president, Gen. Salva Kiir Mayardit, are committed to holding elections at the end of the transitional period in 2024.' See [www.EYERADIO.ORG](http://www.EYERADIO.ORG). Accessed 26 October 2023.

the country's main opposition party said it would not take part unless all provisions of the agreement still pending were fully implemented first.<sup>6</sup>

In the economic sphere, South Sudan is heavily dependent on oil revenue. The war in neighbouring Sudan, which broke out in April 2023, has impacted that revenue, with 60 per cent of output shut down because of damage to a pipeline. In addition, large numbers of returnees and refugees have fled from Sudan into South Sudan, exacerbating the formidable challenges South Sudan faces in paying civil servant and other salaries, and causing many South Sudanese to question what they had fought for before independence.

Gender equality in politics is mainly achieved through political participation, such that the voices of women are amplified and their human rights respected, protected and fulfilled.<sup>7</sup> Gender equality and women's rights to political participation have been enshrined in various international human rights conventions, treaties and regulatory or legal instruments.<sup>8</sup> The effective participation of women in political and other decision making has become part of life, with women enjoying human rights on equal terms with men without discrimination. In South Sudan, however, fewer women than men have occupied meaningful political positions since independence.

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6 According to Hon Oyet Nathaniel, First Deputy Speaker of the RTNLA, 'We are not going to be part of any process that will abrogate the peace agreement, we are not going to be part of any elections that will be sham, that will not be free and fair, that will be held in violation of the peace agreement.' See [www.EYERADIO.ORG](http://www.EYERADIO.ORG). Accessed 1 March 2024.

7 The 'respect, protect, and fulfil' framework for comes from the work of the UN in the 1980s and 1990s. It was first articulated in the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action and adopted at the UN World Conference on Human Rights. The framework is based on the idea that nation states have three main responsibilities regarding human rights: Respect; States must refrain from interfering with or curtailing the enjoyment of human rights; Protect: States must protect individuals and groups against human rights abuses by third parties; and Fulfil: States must take positive action to facilitate the enjoyment of basic human rights. The framework is not without its critics. Some argue it is simplistic and does not account for the complex realities of human rights work. Others argue it is biased towards civil and political rights and does not pay enough attention to economic, social and cultural rights. Despite this, it has played a major role in advancing the cause of human rights around the world. See 'Summary Report: The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Turns 20', UN WOMEN, New York, March 2015. Accessed 22 April 2025, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/02/beijing-synthesis-report>.

8 Convention on the political Rights of Women (1952). The convention was approved by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1952 and adopted in March 1953. Its purpose is to codify a basic international standard of women's political rights. Article I states women shall be entitled to vote in all elections on equal terms with men, without any discrimination. Article II says women shall be eligible for election to all public bodies established by national law, on equal terms with men, without any discrimination; and Article III stipulates that women shall be entitled to hold public office and exercise all public functions without discrimination. (See also CEDAW (1979) art 4, CEDAW General Recommendations 5, 8, 23 and 25, CEDAW Optional Protocol (1999), Maputo Protocol (2006) art 9 and Beijing platform for Action (1995) etc.).



Traditionally, the place of women was in the house and looking after the welfare of their homestead. Customary discriminatory practices, the militarization of society and lack of resources for most women have continued to hinder their participation in politics. While the Interim Constitution 2005 and Transitional Constitution 2011 (as amended) allow women to compete for parliamentary seats and government positions, this has not yet fully been put into practice. Gender equality is lopsided, against women.<sup>9</sup>

In the wake of the independence struggle, women have struggled to participate in the affairs of the country. For example, if the 35 per cent quota of women (agreed to in 2018) was reflected in the presidency, which is composed of six posts (the president and five vices), it ideally includes two women. I am pleased to report this standard of fair representation has been now achieved: Rebecca Nyandeng Garang has served as a vice president since 2020, while Josephine Lagu was also appointed vice president in February 2025, reflecting a step towards placing women in higher positions of executive power.

Officially, women's representation has been on the Government of South Sudan's agenda since the 2005 Interim Constitution of Sudan/South Sudan and the 2011 Transitional Constitution of South Sudan (as amended) gave women 25 per cent of the legislative and executive seats and positions at all levels of government as part of a commitment to affirmative action. In 2018, this was increased to the 35 per cent I mentioned in the previous paragraph.<sup>10</sup> Despite this, the number of women in politics is still not comparable to their male counterparts. When the government reverted to a political system of having 10 states and 3 administrative areas, women were supposed to have no fewer than three state governors, three deputy governors and one chief administrator. Instead, women have one governor in Western Bahr El Ghazal state and one deputy governor in Jonglei state.

The level of women's representation in South Sudan's most essential national and state executive posts therefore shows poor implementation of sections of the constitution regarding women and a lack of government commitment to giving women their fundamental rights—to what belongs to them as part of the country's population. If women and men are not given equal footing in political affairs, as stated in government policy, the meaning of equal citizenship (beyond equal political participation) also remains contested.

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9 For example, the R-ARCSS in Chapter Two, Section (1.5), set out the structure of the executive of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGoNU): First, the presidency shall comprise the president and five vice presidents, and one of the vice presidents shall be a woman. See Charles Tai Gituai, 'RJMEC report on the status of implementation of the revitalised agreement on the resolution of the conflict in the Republic of South Sudan for the period 1st July to 30th September 2022', Report No. 016/22. Accessed 22 April 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/rjmec-report-status-implementation-revitalised-agreement-resolution-conflict-republic-south-sudan-period-1st-july-30th-september-2022>.

10 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) 2018, signed by the warring parties in South Sudan on 12 September 2018 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Section (1.12.2) stipulates women should hold 35 per cent the executive.

One would think women would be represented equally based on constitutional rights alone, but this has not automatically boosted women's political involvement. Hence, this study tries to point out the challenges that remain and to diagnose the problems faced by South Sudanese women that have prevented them from fully participating in politics thus far. It aims to examine the effectiveness of women in achieving gender equality in politics.

The questions raised in this research draw upon best practices in the region. The study hopes to create a better understanding of the factors hindering the effective participation in politics of women from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, and to understand how their leadership roles in decision making at local community levels and the country at large could be strengthened. The study plays an essential role in presenting new ideas on how to create these rights in South Sudan.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The overall objective of the study is to identify the challenges impeding the effective realization of gender equality in South Sudan by assessing the participation of women in politics.

More specifically, the study aims to:

- To generate policy options on how to obtain gender equality by identifying the opportunities available for the effective participation of women in politics and elections.
- To examine the role of the government and the international community in protecting and promoting gender equality and women's rights in politics.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The study set out to answer the following questions:

1. How do women relate to political negotiations and procedures at various levels (governmental, community, familial)? What rationale do they put forward to justify their decisions about whether to engage in politics?
2. What are the gender norms that guide women's decisions about whether to engage in politics?
3. What are the factors that prevent or enable women from endorsing capable women candidates? How do the legal and institutional frameworks affect these decisions?
4. What possible strategies can be used to enhance women's participation in electoral politics in South Sudan?
5. How effective is women's political representation in South Sudan? What factors account for its effectiveness or ineffectiveness?

## RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses were tested in the research:

1. Women appear indifferent to politics because they feel as though they have little influence over political processes and prefer to focus on things they can influence.
2. Women avoid politics because they feel as though it is not an appropriate space for women to engage.
3. Women who are successful in politics tend to achieve that success by tapping into mostly male patronage and kinship networks (for example, through marriage).
4. Lack of economic status prevents women from participating in politics.
5. Once in office, most female politicians have limited space or capacity to promote changes in the interest of gender equality.

## METHODOLOGY

To identify and analyse gender equality and women's political participation in South Sudan, the primary research method for this study is qualitative. Interviews and focus group discussions were held with key women informants from different levels: Grassroots, traditional authorities, members of parliament, undersecretaries and others at national and state levels, and women from various other sectors, as well as members of CSOs, NGOs and government organizations related to women's empowerment. This helped identify opportunities for women in leadership, as well as for their representation and participation in elections originally proposed for 2024.

The study also provides a comparative strategies' analysis, selected from interviews and focus group discussions, on how these organizations and governments can contribute positively to ensure the participation of women in politics.<sup>11</sup> Analysis of the strategies identified the current gaps and areas for reform and interpretation within a legal framework as well as what needs to be done to strengthen the implementation of laws to enable women to participate effectively. The study also relied on secondary data, such as a review of government documents, reports and academic papers focusing on women's roles in leadership, representation and participation in politics. It was conducted in Juba, the capital of South Sudan. Juba was chosen as most politicians and government institutions at national and state levels are based there.<sup>12</sup>

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11 Discussions were on the key issues arising, the identification of gaps and challenges, and the way forward, from the view of the participants.

12 Juba City is located on the west bank of the Nile River. It was chosen as a district headquarters in the British colonial period (1899-1956) and became the capital of Equatoria Province in 1949. Juba was declared the capital of Sudan's Southern Region at the end of the first civil war between Sudan's northern and southern regions (1955-1972). During the second civil war (1983-2005) it was a garrison town and administrative base. After South Sudan's independence from Sudan in 2011, it became the capital of the Republic of South Sudan.

Forty-nine women took part in the research, carried out between February and April 2024. A total of 25 in-depth interviews were held with women politicians, women in government sectors, religious women, and women from CSOs, adding more depth and richness to an understanding of women in politics and the challenges facing them (See Annexes 1 and 2).

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were structured to capture the views of representatives of each of these groups. There were a total 24 participants involved in the three focus group discussions, with an average of eight participants per group. Groups were formed with a balance of age, including youth from 18–35 years and older people from 36–70 years, to provide an opportunity for each to give open and honest comments. All FGDs contained questions related to the effectiveness of women's participation in politics, as well as questions on the challenges faced by women in politics (See Annex 3).

Audio recordings were used to develop verbatim transcripts, and oral consent was obtained after explaining the purpose, potential risks and benefits of the study. Interviews took an average 15–30 minutes and FGDs lasted two hours, with the purpose to understand the general opinions of these participants. For research, analysis is only tied to questions in individual interviews and FGDs. An interview guide, consisting of open-ended questions, was primarily developed by the researcher and translated into the Arabic language with the help of a language expert. Data was analysed using standard descriptive and comparative methods, and the results are presented in the text.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, South Sudanese women's role in politics has been determined by the customs, traditions and culture of their respective tribes. Many South Sudanese cultures impose some restrictions on women's rights to participate in decision making. Most of the cultural rights granted to women inhibit their participation. Amel Aldehaib<sup>13</sup> highlights that, within South Sudanese society, the role and status of women is seen as a reflection of a culture that places a premium on the cohesion and strength of the family as a basis of society, with the male considered the undisputed head of the family and community at large. Hence, the role of women in this social pattern is that of cementing family ties through "bride-wealth" and producing children. However, to the outside observer, particularly one whose culture is based upon the rights of the individual, the status of women in this role is that of property and the culture is inherently patriarchal, relegating women a lower status. In most South Sudanese traditions, women have no right to choose their husbands; rather, male members of their families impose

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13 Amel Aldehaib, 'Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement viewed through the eyes of the Women of South Sudan', Fellows Programme occasional Paper 3, Wynberg, South Africa: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2010. Accessed 16 April 2025, <https://africaportal.org/publication/sudans-comprehensive-peace-agreement-viewed-through-the-eyes-of-the-women-of-south-sudan/>.

decisions on them and cases of early and forced marriages are common in South Sudan. These practices have survived years of civil war.<sup>14</sup>

According to Edward,<sup>15</sup> South Sudanese women in positions of political leadership face numerous challenges, partly because they do not enjoy the same privileges as their male counterparts, particularly when it comes to decision making on important issues affecting the country and its people. This disadvantage exists because the political and institutional cultures within which women operate remain very much patriarchal in orientation, and women in South Sudan are largely seen as unfit to lead or make serious decisions regarding national issues. The practice of politics in the consciousness of many people in South Sudan remains the domain of men. While this way of practising politics violates national and international human rights laws, it persists because it is neither questioned nor challenged and therefore take on the aura of morality in the eyes of the practitioners.<sup>16</sup>

In this study, the researcher argues that effective participation in decision making requires a comprehensive policy and the implementation of special measures to achieve gender equality in decision making, as well as improvements in capacity building and training.

After the independence of South Sudan in 2011, the patriarchal approach (resulting in women's low participation in leadership) continued. In Eastern Equatoria, among the Latuko people, hybrid governance institutions like the *amangat* (decision-making group of elders) and *monyomiji* (able men) used stereotypical norms, assigning only men to decisions on the security of their area. Amangat are known to be among the earliest political institutions, consisting of elders.<sup>17</sup> Women cannot participate in the gathering of the amangat and are not allowed to enter the *adufa*, a fenced meeting place where drums are kept. If a woman trespasses, her whole age group will be fined.

The Latuko tribe had individual customary leaders, including women, who took on protective roles during the civil war, using their spiritual powers to protect the community and to act on behalf of women specifically in cases related to marital disputes. Though they cannot enter the

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- 14 Aleu Akechak Jok, Robert A Leitch and Carrie Vandewint, 'A Study of Customary Law in Contemporary Southern Sudan', World Vision International/South Sudan Secretariat of Legal and Constitutional Affairs, March 2004. Accessed 22 April 2025, <https://land.igad.int/index.php/documents-1/countries/south-sudan/gender-5/983-customary-law-overview-in-south-sudan-2004/file>.
- 15 Jane Kani Edward, 'Can women in South Sudan make national decisions?', Sudan Tribune, 14 April 2013. Accessed 22 April 2025, <https://sudantribune.com/article45396/>.
- 16 Hyginus Chibuike Ezebuilo, 'Human Rights, Gender Equality and Justice: A Reexamination of Male Chauvinism in African Culture', in 'On Justice, Equity & Dignity: Recreating Womanbeing in Contemporary African Society', Preorc Journal of Gender and Sexuality Studies, Vol 1 (2019): 243-259. Accessed 22 April 2025, <https://journals.ezenwaohaetorc.org/index.php/PREORCGESS/issue/view/171>.
- 17 Amangat have become strong institutions in the decision-making and protection of their people's security, with male adult assemblies at local levels. Young male adults are the monyomiji.

adufa, women leaders can stand at a distance and speak to the gathering of monyomiji, who will come out of the adufa to listen to them and convey their message to the rest of the men inside.<sup>18</sup>

While this discrimination exists in decision making and leadership in village affairs, women's contributions are acknowledged by their male partners and contribute positively to their village's affairs. The patriarchal system, still practised in South Sudan, is responsible for tension in the institutions of South Sudanese society, with unequal power and discriminatory cultural norms denying South Sudanese women rights in leadership. Women are, however, heard, as the monyomiji share and assign women a genuine role in security, inform them of security concerns, advise them how to react, and ask them to report anything unusual or unknown. This shows belief in the ability of women to participate in the affairs of their areas and be part of security affairs. These factors also suggest that, to achieve gender equality, there is a need to deepen women's participation in their country's affairs, and this takes us to understanding gender and patriarchal systems of domination and how these can better position and centre women and girls' needs (Aldehaib, 2010).<sup>19</sup> According to Mayai (2013),<sup>20</sup> gender equality is critical because it promotes equal opportunities for women and men, and particularly because it improves the recognition and engagement that women are essential for building socio-economic, cultural and political environments in a country. Indeed, by highlighting the importance of the gendered politics of being male or female in specific contexts, Medie (2019) has shown that women's political, social and economic experiences are often fundamentally distinct from men's.

International human rights laws are considered sensitive issues in human rights protection, with their strong perceived links to gender equality and principles of non-discrimination. They outline specific obligations for a nation state to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights codified in a treaty. These include the equal rights of women and men to enjoy all civil and political rights.

In the case of South Sudan, international human rights law obligations flow from the United Nations Charter, human rights treaties and customary law. South Sudan is a signatory to international charters that seek to advance gender equality and to prohibit discrimination based on gender. These rights were first articulated in Article (21) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Article (25) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) sets out the right of everyone to political participation, including the right to vote and to be elected, the right to participate in the conduct of public affairs, and the right to have

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18 Marjoke Oosterom, 'Gendered (in)Security in South Sudan: Masculinities and Hybrid Governance in Imatong State', *Peacebuilding* 5/2 (2017): 186–202. doi:10.1080/21647259.2016.1277015.

19 Aldehaib, 'Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement'.

20 Augustino Ting Mayai, 'SPLM Politics of Gender Equity', *Weekly Review*, 15 January 2013, The Sudd Institute. Accessed 22 April 2025, [https://www.suddinstitute.org/assets/Publications/572b7eb55f497-SPLMPoliticsOfGenderEquity\\_Full.pdf](https://www.suddinstitute.org/assets/Publications/572b7eb55f497-SPLMPoliticsOfGenderEquity_Full.pdf).

access to public service.<sup>21</sup> The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has also contributed to increasing women's participation in decision making, by pointing out the importance of women in politics.<sup>22</sup> At the regional level, Article (13) of the African Charter gives every citizen the right "to participate freely in the government, either directly or through freely chosen representatives". The Maputo Protocol also addresses women's rights to participate in politics on an equal basis with men.<sup>23</sup>

Regarding the extent to which South Sudan became a signatory to specific international and regional human rights treaties, the country is further bound by obligations under international law. However, despite all this advancement in the realization of human rights in South Sudan, the literature shows that women in South Sudan still constitute a disproportionately small percentage when it comes to those rights to participate in politics, decision making and leadership.

This researcher argues that South Sudan has not taken the necessary steps to domesticate human rights treaties, showing that human rights are absent or have become irrelevant, with devastating consequences for women in South Sudan.

Women's right to participate in politics or women's political participation is an element of gender equality. As many countries strive to meet the UN's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5—to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls—by 2030, governments must also strive to embed gender parity in constitutions and legal frameworks (UNDP, 2016).<sup>24</sup> SDG 5 aims to change years of discrimination, poverty, inequality and all forms of violence against women and girls. SDG 16 seeks to change underlying social norms by ensuring inclusive societies where women and men are equal through equitable participatory access to decision making.<sup>25</sup>

21 On 24 February 2023, the Office of the President announced that ICCPR was among the core human rights treaties it had agreed to. South Sudan is party to four international covenants/treaties, namely, ICCPR, ICESCR, CEDAW and CRPD, with obligations to implement those covenants and treaties.

22 See Article (4), CEDAW 1979 calls for the use of quotas and introduction of other measures to increase the number of women at all levels of political decision making. The convention acknowledges that quotas used for women's empowerment are defined in article (1) of CEDAW.

23 See Article (9), Maputo Protocol, 2006.

24 UN Development Programme, 'Africa Human Development Report 2016: Accelerating Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Africa', New York: UNDP, 28 August 2016. Accessed 22 April 2025, <https://www.undp.org/publications/africa-human-development-report-2016>.

25 Purity Wangechi Lund, 'Female Perceptions of Women in Politics in Kenya', Master's Thesis, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, 2021.

Quota policies have been included, and successfully implemented, in the constitutions and legal systems of many countries, with an aim to promote women in politics and public life.<sup>26</sup> Some countries in Africa have incorporated quotas as a means of achieving gender equality in decision making. In Rwanda, for example, constitutional provisions reserve 30 per cent of seats for women in the country's bicameral legislature. South Africa's Municipal Structures Act of 1998 requires political parties to ensure that 50 per cent of the candidates are women and that "women must be equitably represented in a ward committee". Although there is no penalty for non-compliance, the ruling African National Congress voluntarily allocates 50 per cent of parliamentary seats to women.<sup>27</sup>

The researcher agrees with Aili and Kang<sup>28</sup> that the introduction of quotas offers the most illustrative path to power for women's representation in politics today. But the reality on the ground is still far from the goal of gender equality; quotas are not consistently adhered to, and equal participation for women, especially young women, in politics, requires far more than affirmative action in government appointments.<sup>29</sup>

In the case of South Sudan, it cannot be denied that the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) has made efforts to ensure women's participation in their country's affairs. The SPLM/A included, in Chapter 15 of its Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005), recognition of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and relevant AU resolutions regarding the participation of women at all levels in the peace process and the application of regional and international charters regarding women's rights. Despite this, the prolonged civil war in Sudan has affected South Sudanese women too, specifically those participating in politics, due to the exclusion of South Sudanese in political processes, resulting in their exclusion in Southern governance structures and institutions in the post-war period.<sup>30</sup> Has Nonetheless, the South Sudanese women's movement helped women enter politics, both by taking part in the peace process and by ensuring that issues affecting women and children were addressed. Women delegates were among the signatories to the final agreement.

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- 26 The success of quotas depends on the electoral system of the country, the commitment of party leaders and members of government to promote women in politics, and active women's movements.
- 27 Øystein H. Rolandsen, *Guerrilla Government: Political Changes in the Southern Sudan during the 1990s*, Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet. 2005.
- 28 Aili Mari Tripp and A. Kang, 'The Global Impact of Quotas: On the Fast Track to Increased Female Legislative Representation', *Comparative Political Studies*, 41/3 (2007): 338-361. Accessed 22 April 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414006297342>.
- 29 Signe Arnfred, *Sexuality and Gender Politics in Mozambique: Re-thinking Gender in Africa*, Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2011, 310.
- 30 Throughout the history of Sudan, Southern Sudanese women have been made submissive. Women have endured cultural and social discrimination and borne the burden of gender limitations, leading to low self-respect and then low level of participation in all aspects of life. Violence (physical or verbal abuse) in public against women can restrict their political activities.



The CPA negotiation process was, however, male dominated. Only two women were in the negotiations on the SPLM/A side, and they played an observer role. A few other women were in the thematic working groups. Women's primary demands were to be part of the negotiating team and primary stakeholders. When that was unsuccessful, they re-strategized and used the thematic working groups as channels through which they presented their positions and demands.<sup>31</sup> They also rigorously lobbied inside meetings with delegates directly involved in the negotiations to ensure their concerns and needs were reflected (AU Report, 2014).<sup>32</sup> Women, through their associations, networks, and organizations, such as the New Sudan Women Federation (NSWF), the Sudanese Women's Association (SWAN), the New Sudan Women's Association, other civil society organizations, and the Sudan Council of Churches were also channels through which women organized and consulted other women's groups, strengthening their constituency. Women prepared themselves ahead of the CPA peace talks at the five-day SPLM Women's Conference in New Kush, in Southern Sudan (then part of Sudan), from 21 to 25 August 1998.<sup>33</sup>

Their contribution helped to promote women after the CPA. Affirmative action was brought into the Interim Constitution Sudan/South Sudan of 2005 and was the first time in the history of Sudan for women to be offered 25 per cent of elected seats as a constitutional right to participate in politics. The 25 per cent women's quota was included in the Sudan Elections Act of 2008, ensuring that a minimum 112 of the 450 representatives of the National Assembly were women after the 2010 election.<sup>34</sup>

The researcher believes that women's political futures in neighbouring Sudan will brighten once peace returns, if its political environment encourages them by adopting more favourable cultural norms and liberal political policies.

After South Sudan split from northern Sudan and became independent in 2011, its government adopted women's quotas as a policy measure for boosting women's access to decision making bodies. New roles and opportunities for South Sudanese women have been codified, by giving them the 25 per cent quota as a constitutional right in the Transitional Constitution of South

- 31 South Sudan was governed under interim constitutional arrangements after the signing of the CPA in 2005, which set out a six-year interim period in a semi-autonomous Southern Sudan, governed under the Interim Constitution of Southern Sudan (ICSS) 2005, drafted by a 15-member committee, including five women.
- 32 African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan, 'Final Report of the African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan', Addis Ababa: African Union, 2014. Accessed 16 April 2025, <https://archives.au.int/handle/123456789/8329>.
- 33 Aluel Atem and Eva Lopa, 'Young Women in Political Institutions in South Sudan: Lessons from Lived Experiences', Juba: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung South Sudan Office, 2023. Accessed 16 April 2025, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/suedsudan/20021-20230221.pdf>.
- 34 Leah F Sherwood, 'Women at a Crossroads: Sudanese Women and Political Transformation', *Journal of International Women's Studies* 13/5 (2012): 77-90. Accessed 22 April 2025, <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol13/iss5/8>.

Sudan 2011 (as amended). The quota aims to promote women’s participation in public life and their active representation in the legislative and executive organs of their country, in part to redress imbalances created by history, customs and traditions that could undermine the participation of South Sudanese women in their country’s affairs. In 2018, the quota was increased to 35 per cent in the revitalized peace agreement.<sup>35</sup> The Government of South Sudan has not met this quota throughout government structures.<sup>36</sup>

**TABLE 1: EXECUTIVE TRANSITIONAL NATIONAL GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY (TRGONU)**

NO	INSTITUTION	TOTAL NUMBER OF SEATS	35% OF SEATS FOR WOMEN	EXISTING SEATS FOR WOMEN	GAP SEATS
01	The Presidency	06	02	01	01
02	Council of Ministers	35	12	08	04
03	Deputy Ministers	10	04	01	03
04	States	10	04	01	03
05	Administrative Areas	03	01	00	01

Source: Report of Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC).<sup>37</sup>

**TABLE 2: THE TRANSITIONAL NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

NO	IMPS	TOTAL NUMBER OF SEATS	35% OF SEATS FOR WOMEN	EXISTING SEATS FOR WOMEN	GAP SEATS
01	Chamber	550	193	172	21
02	Speaker	03	00	01	00
03	Deputy Speakers	03	01	01	00

Source: Office of the Clerk, National Legislative Assembly, February 2022.

35 The Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) 2018, was signed by the warring parties in South Sudan on 12 September 2018 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The agreement stipulates affirmative action for women to hold 35 per cent of the executive.

36 Societal norms mean that political party structures remain male dominated largely unchanged by these reforms.

37 Augustino S.K. Njoroge, ‘On the Status of Implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan’, Report No. 006/20, Juba, South Sudan: Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission, 2020. Accessed 22 April 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/JMEC-1st-Qtr-2020-Report-FINAL%201.pdf>.

**TABLE 3: COUNCIL OF STATES**

NO	IMPS	TOTAL NUMBER OF SEATS	35% OF SEATS FOR WOMEN	EXISTING SEATS FOR WOMEN	GAP SEATS
01	Chamber	100	35	26	09
02	Speaker	01	00	00	00
03	Deputy Speakers	02	01	01	00

Source: Office of the Clerk, Council of States, February 2022.

This suggests the nature of affirmative action, and how it can be implemented to the benefit of South Sudanese women, is not well understood in the South Sudan governance system. It also points to a lack of political will to address inequalities in the sexual division of labour and gender ideologies that naturalize and reinforce inequalities.<sup>38</sup> This has left South Sudanese women behind in the political affairs of their country. Their circumstances have direct influence on women’s ideas and their advocacy of gender equality in state affairs.<sup>39</sup> The low participation of South Sudanese women’s in politics has negative effects on improving gender equality in the legal and regulatory framework. Compounding the problem are the internal wars in South Sudan since independence that have suspended progress on the approval and enactment of laws and policies that would otherwise empower and support women’s rights in the country.<sup>40</sup> As a result, the persistence of discrimination, gender bias, violence, harassment and intimidation in public institutions contributes to low levels of women’s political participation. Nor have adequate laws and policies been passed to ensure the implementation of the 35 per cent quotas.

In September 2023, the National Assembly passed the 2012 Amendment Act to the South Sudan Election Act,<sup>41</sup> identifying the 35 per cent quota for only the closed list (of candidates) presented by a political party. The question raised is whether the list considers the competence of the women running for office? The women running must understand democratic values and

38 Dzodzi Tsikata, ‘Affirmative Action and the Prospects for Gender Equality in Ghanaian Politics’, Abantu, Women in Broadcasting and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2009. Accessed 22 April 2025, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ghana/10484.pdf>.

39 Every country deserves to have the best possible leader, which means women must be given a chance to participate. If they ‘are never allowed to compete in the electoral process, then the countries are really robbing themselves of a great deal of talent,’ said Madeleine K. Albright, former US Secretary of State (1997–2001). The equitable participation of women in politics and government is necessary to build and sustain democracy. Democracy cannot truly deliver to all citizens if half the population remains underrepresented.

40 Many international and national laws and policies concerning the protection of women’s rights protection remain in parliament and have been delayed for adoption or ratification. A good example is the Maputo Protocol, one of Africa’s most progressive instruments for women’s rights, agreement on which took more than eight years. Many bills on aspects of women’s rights remain in draft form, including bills on Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Women’s Equality, Women’s Enterprise, Women’s Empowerment and Family Law.

41 See South Sudan Election Act 2023.

be capable of influencing wise public decisions. Who provides the list? Maybe the list takes a societal approach (for example, by family group)? This too may affect women's leadership. Perhaps the act could allow other women to participate for open seats? Women in political parties must see women of different socio-economic status reflected in their political parties.

Despite this shortcoming, the Election Act does aim to improve participation by allowing women to compete independently in specific geographical areas. Encouraging them at these local levels is a crucial strategy—one expected to empower South Sudanese women from the grassroots to pursue openly contested seats that may also foster the involvement of new candidates in politics and promote diverse voices, given that, historically, a limited number of individuals have dominated the political landscape.

To guarantee women's participation in politics, legislation needs the quotas for women enshrined in a separate law, with a clear interpretation of it so it is more easily implemented. This law could be a tool to guarantee women's representation in politics and public life, moving these away from patriarchal rule towards gender equality. Even legislating that open lists have a quota of women encourages political parties to seek women candidates (who meet two or more of the criteria set out in the law).

This initiative would broaden the representation of marginalized groups of women, especially in rural areas, thereby facilitating their access to national positions. Ultimately, open lists provide an opportunity for women engage fully in the electoral process.

In conclusion, the actualization of gender equality and the effectiveness of women's participation in politics lies in the implementation of laws, policies, and the monitoring and the evaluation of their progress. Above all, it requires the commitment of government leaders. While measures are necessary to remedy past discrimination, other mechanisms, such as sensitizing societies to change their social ideological base, are also important.

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To date, insufficient attention has been paid to South Sudanese women's existing participation and representation in politics. The importance of their visibility at high levels of government cannot be denied: It sends a message to the public, and in particular to the younger generation, about enhancing women's roles in politics, broader decision-making and democratic governance.

The subsections below capture key results from legal documents, interviews and focus group discussions with stakeholders in Juba. They identify the effectiveness of women's participation, the barriers faced, and the strategies used. The results are drawn from the views of South Sudanese women participants. They could help the Government of South Sudan and UN agencies look at gaps and improve their policies with assistance to enable women in any upcoming elections.

## REALIZATION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

South Sudan became independent on 9 July 2011 after 99.57 per cent of South Sudanese voters voted in favour of independence from Sudan in a nationwide referendum.<sup>42</sup> On the day of independence itself, the Transitional Constitution of South Sudan 2011 made a commitment to give women a 25 per cent quota of positions in political and public life. Its policies were to enable women to participate in politics, governance and various professional fields, ensuring their voices were heard and contributions valued.<sup>43</sup>

Most interviewees spoke of a strong belief that, although women were not able to find enough opportunities to make a difference from the percentage of seats they had, considerable progress in recognizing and increasing their participation had taken place. They were referring to the years after the sectarian violence in Juba in 2013 and 2016. Nonetheless, many believed South Sudanese women had contributed to the development of policies to support all aspects of women's public rights. For example, the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare (MGCSW) developed several bills, including the Women's Empowerment Bill, which would introduce the higher quota of 35 per cent for women in public and political roles. As previously stated, however, most bills remain in draft form and have not yet been passed by parliament.<sup>44</sup>

Focus group participants said women had been involved in drafting bills and other policies, including drafts of the Family Law and Gender-Based Violence bills. Their contributions may help women stand for seats in the next elections and provide an opportunity for women in

42 Francesca Marzatico. 'Southern Sudan Referendum on Self-Determination: Legal Challenges and Procedural Solutions', *Journal of African Elections*, 10/1 (2011): 1-32. DOI: 10.20940/jae/2011/v10i1a1

43 See articles (14) and (16) of the Transitional Constitution of South Sudan 2011, as amended.

44 Such as the Family Law, Enterprise and GBV bills, among others.

South Sudan to advance their rights in newly established governments through the passing of legal reforms.

Female respondents also stated their political participation could contribute to democratic legitimacy, fair governance and sustainable peace, impacting their communities and families and promoting social welfare. As one of the participants said:

Much as there is little progress [having been] made, we still have a long way to go. Of course, change doesn't come in day or night, but gradually. ... We have women ministers, such as a vice president who is a woman, and the speaker of parliament is a woman. These women in political positions are now like role models to other women to come up.

In many discussions, women indicated that participation provided an opportunity to resolve many of the problems affecting their rights and to fight harmful, traditionally neglected issues. This benefited communities as a whole—and women specifically—when it came to issues such as domestic violence and sexual reproductive health rights. It created room to review the laws against girls and women's rights.

With skills in leadership, women could break down stereotypes and change social norms and perceptions of female leaders. Almost all participants felt the women of today understood their rights to participate in politics, to vote and be voted for, and that this was reflected in what is best for a nation. They thought the future participation of women in politics in South Sudan looked favourable. A large majority of the women in this study were willing to participate in politics themselves. This is especially true of young women, as one participant said:

Participation of women in politics during this time is very important. Women of today are different than women in the 1980s: At that time, women just believed in producing children and doing domestic work. But women of today are well-oriented and have made a lot of achievements in different sectors of the government, and they continue doing it with the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan. Engaging them in politics is important for the country's benefits and achieving gender equality.<sup>45</sup>

Lastly, it has led to an increase in the number of women represented in various government sectors at national and state levels.<sup>46</sup> Women's participation in politics has ushered in changes in the culture of government institutions and in some people's attitudes towards women's

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45 Interview with Hon Victoria Nasirah, Council of States, Juba, South Sudan, 12 April 2024.

46 For a more exhaustive analysis of the historic political participation of women in South Sudan, see Jane Kani Edward, 'A Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality in South Sudan', Special Report, 28 January, Juba, South Sudan: The Sudd Institute, 2014.

roles in public affairs.<sup>47</sup> In the opinion (as reported) of a lecturer at the School of Social and Economic Studies at the University of Juba:

The move is a good development to see and a change of events. The political analyst [who authored the newspaper article on which this comment is based] commended the SPLM party for elevating women into a very powerful position, saying it was a good spirit, in conjunction with national affirmative action, as well as the spirit of giving women powers to be part of responsibility-sharing, as indicated in the revitalized peace agreement, by allocating [a promised] 35 per cent to women.<sup>48</sup>

I would also like to emphasize that addressing the gender gap in political participation and decision making is vital. Such efforts empower women and enable them to actively engage in, contribute to and benefit from the broader development processes within the country.

## **CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

In South Sudan, women's participation in politics is being shaped by interaction and modernization. The continuance of a male-dominated political hierarchy has allowed social exclusion and the subordination of women in decision making to continue, whoever, too, and resulted in political inequality. The following factors summarize the challenges and barriers hindering women.

### *Societal and cultural factors*

The societal and cultural factors attributed to women in South Sudan are the cause of many of the challenges women encounter. Transforming cultural attitudes requires deconstructing patriarchal barriers that influence the governance system.

Political positions are often identified with male powers; the negative impact of this can be seen in the electability of women to political positions. Women do not fare as well as men when running for political positions, even though women in South Sudan make up more than half of the country's population and are considered genuine partners in their communities and the nation. Efforts need to be made to transform practical barriers by understanding cultural norms and the ideologies around which politics is practiced at local, state and national levels.

Female respondents with experience in political positions shared their stories on how limited women's representation was, how males dominated the system, how there was discrimination and gender bias against them at the meeting table, and how their decisions were ignored or their statements changed by male partners during or after meetings. There was also men's mockery of vocal women.

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47 Edward, 'Strategy for Gender Equality'.

48 'Parliament Should stop Kirr's ruling Decree, Analyst', *The Citizen*, Issue No: 306, Vol 2, 26 July 2021.

The timing of some meetings presented problems, particularly when men held them at midnight:

There were fewer common spaces for women to join meetings ... Because of the culture and traditional norms, women may not be allowed by family or relatives to leave their house at night for meetings, as well as the situation of insecurity.

Women in politics lack the environmental space to participate fully and lack support and encouragement from friends and family. Most families discourage women from going into politics. A highly patriarchal culture says women should stay in the kitchen and maintains they lack the technical political experience to take part in negotiating the country's affairs. Many men depict woman as *mara sakit* (just a woman):

Most cultures in South Sudan agree that men make better political leaders. We have been discriminated [against] and undermined for our capabilities by not being allowed to raise our voices when you are surrounded with brothers or [other] male relatives in meetings or family gatherings. These cultural norms up to date are root causes ... [in] women's belief in themselves that they can't do anything related to decisions. And to change that, we need to strengthen confidence in women and start empowering women and girls from home.<sup>49</sup>

Overall, women said patriarchal systems have a direct effect on women's lower status in politics, as most are appointed on the recommendation of their male relatives or because their male relatives were serving in government. Many research participants characterized those women as insignificant in their political positions and submissive to those who recommended them. It created a challenge for other women to participate. Consequently, there was a lack of capacity for women to recommend women to political positions—and this made women voiceless in decision making. They deferred to male relatives and were often not themselves bold enough to take decisions that could impact women's rights.

The study indicates that women at a subordinate level do not fully appreciate or interact with women who are more experienced in politics, leading the researcher to argue there are still a lack of female political role models, which in turn makes women lose interest in politics. During focus group discussions, though, participants discouraged these negative perceptions. This made the researcher raise a question for women, 'What does politics mean to you as a woman?' Some women described politics as their home environment:

Politics starts from the home. We women have duties and responsibilities towards our family at home, how we arrange our duties at home, and how we resolve the problems in our homes. In South Sudan, politics has been done only for the individuals and groups of people we know by their names, and they are in politics

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49 Focus Group Discussion, Juba, South Sudan, 10 March 2024.



for their family interests, and they do not implement their promises, they just talk without implementing their promises.

Sometimes when we think about the situation of politics in South Sudan, it's painful for us [as] as women were not able to be provided with services. ... Women who are in political positions support only their relatives and women in the areas where they come from. Politics in South Sudan is about the suffering of the people. [There is] no support from our women in high levels to us down. We only got support from non-government organizations and civil society organizations.

The researcher discovered that most women were involved in women's associations, which provide them with resources to support their family well-being and community. There are many women's networks at the national and local level. These started at family level and are active in promoting the participation of women in public life. The question raised by the researcher during group discussions was whether these women's networks could be recognized and used to support women in making the decisions affecting them, collectively.

The researcher argues these networks could be used during election time by women from different parties to empower women in an upcoming election and help break the culture of dishonesty in elected bodies.

The way specific groups of appointed female politicians dominate politics has made other women doubt they could successfully hold political positions. They believe a political position is only specific to those women. The thought of new faces getting involved is viewed as a challenge, one likely to make women question the ability of the political system to accept them. A number of research participants emphasized the importance of transparency in the lead-up to what would have been the 2024 elections, now postponed:

We are willing to participate in this 2024 election to be voted [for], but what are the guarantees that our names or seats will not be replaced by the same women in the system? Is there transparency in the election, as the same women dominate leadership structures in political parties and still make up representatives in most [of the] government system. We lost confidence in the political system of this country. At least the culture of appointing the same group must be changed by all parties.

Women in more subordinate, non-political positions were more willing to participate in the 2024 elections, had they taken place. Research participants explained that, however, as there was no campaigning, most political parties control their parliamentary seats.

### *Gender discrimination in politics*

Women in high political positions also raised the challenges facing them. As pointed out by one of the participants:

Women are being changed from their positions in politics and replaced by males, with no political will from the side of the government in implementing the [proposed] policy of 35 per cent. With the changes, the number of women at [a] high level reduces. Our question is how is the government going to achieve gender equality? This lack of commitment from government expresses that women's rights to equality cannot be reached in political and decision-making positions.

With the continuation of discrimination in politics, women are not guaranteed the same position in politics, and consequently it becomes increasingly painful for them. They are more likely to be intimidated and abused by their (male) partners as they go about their duties and responsibilities in politics; some men forbid their women to hold political positions at all.

A young parliamentarian (MP) shared her experiences of women venturing into politics. She explained she had divorced her husband in court because of a working environment in which gender stereotypes were deeply rooted, where males listened to each other and rejected notions of equivalence and of women as good leaders:

My husband gave me two choices, to leave my work in politics or divorce, and this is because of a false statement given to my husband by his male friends in parliament that I am in [a] relation[ship] with another man when I was doing work in the field in another state during the Khartoum crisis to help returnees in Upper Nile State. I divorced my husband and refunded all the dowry paid in my marriage in court.<sup>50</sup>

She said women in high political positions were willing to focus on the challenges they faced but a lack of institutional support and accountability, as well as men organizing themselves for reasons of self-interest, persuaded many women to give up their positions.

This statement alone serves as an illustration of how the low participation of women in politics reflects gender stereotypes and negative social norms in South Sudan. Research participants argued that women could lose their positions because rarely were accusations levied against them by men seen as a problem in need of intervention. There was also a lack of a reporting mechanism tailored to the needs of women, which could otherwise have helped.

In summary, gender is important in determining how women and men access power and use it to take part in their country's affairs. Their ability to participate in turn impacts their political rights. Gender discrimination in politics is an issue in South Sudan. Therefore, women's rights to participate in elections need to be a national development imperative. Most women cited

50 A parliamentary participant, during discussions on the challenges facing women politicians.

challenges that would have prevented them from getting involved in politics ahead of the postponed 2024 election.

Gender inequities make women in South Sudan less able to participate in politics effectively. This exacerbates the inequities by increasing the gap between women and men overall. Among the factors that reduce women's participation in politics are gender stereotypes and a culture of women's ownership by males, which discourages women from taking part in public life and limits their freedom of movement and association.

### *A lack of supportive gender policies and of structure for implementation*

Southern Sudan's emergence from two civil wars (1955–1972 and 1983–2005) and internal conflicts in the south in 2013 and 2016 have caused instability in systems of governance. This has affected levels of women's participation in politics, as laws for women's rights remain underdeveloped. There is a long way to go in attaining gender equality in politics in South Sudan, even with 172 of 550 parliamentarians in the Transitional National Legislative Assembly (31 per cent) and 26 of 100 members in the Council of State (26 per cent).<sup>51</sup> The researcher maintains women's participation in policies and decision making is inadequate, as gender equality in the highest positions of government (as government ministers) has not yet reached 35 per cent.<sup>52</sup> Gender equality in the highest positions of power will therefore takes time, as one interviewee observed:

Discrimination in politics still exists. Some male politicians do not respect what is written in the constitution. They don't consider women and men equal when comes to access rights and responsibilities in the community where we are, and these barriers have impacts on the effective participation of women in politics. ... Though the Government of South Sudan has taken some steps to address gender inequality—for example, the Transitional Constitution stipulates that women should constitute at least 25 per cent of decision-making institutions—unfortunately still men in the system disagree with that law.<sup>53</sup>

The researcher argues that gender policies and laws that can support and protect women's political rights at a national level are not implemented in good faith due to a lack of political

51 Gender Equality in Public Administration 2020–2021, 2022–2023. Sources: National Transformational Leadership Institute (NTLI), in collaboration with Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare (MGCSW), supported by UNDP. Dr. Angelina Mattijo Bazugba, Workshop presentation on Gender and Guiding Principle in Elections, 27 February–1 March 2024, Pyramid Continental Hotel, Juba, South Sudan.

52 35 per cent only focusing on political sectors and not well implemented in public institutions. The question raised during discussions is: When government institutions recruited staff, did they engage with or support women to participate in these institutions?

53 Interview with Hon. Petro Juoj Machur, Deputy Chairperson on Land Infrastructure and States' Boundaries, Juba, 17 April 2024.

will on the part of the government and the political parties at large, and that this continues to undermine women's participation in high levels of government.

In recent years, the existence of dual legal systems (statutory and customary courts) has contributed to insufficient understanding of the main problem of legal plurality governing women's rights in general. There has also been insufficient implementation of the quotas contained in the current Transitional Constitution of South Sudan 2011 (as amended). Without implementation, gender-responsive policies do not change women's participation in politics. The government needs to approach inequalities in governance with open-mindedness while building on positive experiences that have worked for women.

Limited awareness of women's political rights gets in the way of implementing affirmative action, as does the lack of a follow-up mechanism to hold a party accountable when it lacks a 35 per cent representation of women.

There is no funding for the [national elections] commission to conduct civic education to help raise awareness among women on their rights to participate in politics, and this may have direct implications on their participation. Issues concerning security in the country are not clear from the government side, and there is no active way to address them. Most women participants raised issues of insecurity and how they were going to participate. Lack of funding is another issue. Most women will not join elections for reasons of economic status, as poverty is common among women.

The researcher argues there is a shortage in the dissemination of information on international and regional human rights treaties that have been ratified by the Government of South Sudan.<sup>54</sup> There are also many reforms, laws, bills and policies that need to be enacted to conform with these treaties and conventions, which not only to encourage women to participate in politics but guarantee rights against torture and gender-based violence.

Each of these regional forums South Sudan belongs to—the AU, IGAD and EAC—highlights the concerns of women in detail. The legal system South Sudan partly addresses issues of human rights but the fact that many laws are yet to be implemented in the fullest sense also plays a role in making women's participation in public life less effective.

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54 The laws ratified by South Sudan focusing on women's rights include CEDW, the Maputo Protocol, and the Beijing Declaration (1995), which set an international target for gender equality in politics. The Beijing Platform for Action prioritizes women's leadership in sections G.1 and G.2 to 'take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making', and 'increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership'.

### *Limited access to economic resources and funded opportunities*

In South Sudan, gender differences in economic status have been caused by the high rate of poverty among female-headed households.<sup>55</sup> Limited access to financial resources traps women in small businesses, and the scarcity of resources that causes the country's inability to address their basic needs frustrates women's efforts to do other things. Inequality exists in educational opportunities, with the illiteracy rate for men far lower than that of women.<sup>56</sup> Participation in education is hindered by the social expectations placed on women to perform domestic chores, disadvantaging women when it comes to formal employment. This helps undermine women's confidence and capacity, which, in turn, affects their ability to take part in politics,<sup>57</sup> leaving them vulnerable. Efforts to improve women's capacities within the political system are weak, something partly attributable to a lack of gender analysis by the government.

Government institutions are unable to implement policy activities that can support the rights of women in national laws because of inadequate government funding. The Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare has established gender focal points or coordination departments in all ministries and institutions to mainstream gender issues. The main purpose is to create awareness of gender issues and act as links between the ministry and other government institutions. Participants from the ministry<sup>58</sup> indicated that the:

Government has developed gender mainstreaming projects. Unfortunately, there is no specific funding for gender mainstreaming projects [and there is a] lack of gender-disaggregated data and [a] database for tracking women's advancement and political participation in most institutions or sectors. Quota efficacy has been strengthened by specifying 35 per cent thresholds, but rules for positioning, internal measures to promote women's advancement, candidacy and leadership, and sanctions for non-compliance are yet to be established.<sup>59</sup>

South Sudan has developed policies to promote women's political participation, but adequate financial resources are not available to implement the policies. The researcher argues this .....

- 55 Samantha de Silva, Abir Hasan, Aissatou Ouedraogo and Eliana Rubiano-Matulevich, 'Getting it Right: strengthening Gender Outcomes in South Sudan'. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, July 2020. Accessed 22 April 2025, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/723961596172568911/pdf/Getting-it-Right-Strengthening-Gender-Outcomes-in-South-Sudan.pdf>.
- 56 'S. Sudan launches campaign to reduce high illiteracy rates', Sudan Tribune, 7 September 2012. Women in South Sudan are the worst effected with just 19 per cent of South Sudanese women aged 15 and above reported literate.
- 57 Atem and Lopa, 'Young Women in Political Institutions'
- 58 In the context of South Sudan, the MGCSW is delegated to promote gender and safeguard the rights and welfare of women, children, persons with disabilities and another vulnerable groups.
- 59 Esther Ikere, presentation; on the status of women's political participation Globally and in South Sudan, Workshop on Electoral Stakeholders Induction-Gender Constitutional Making, organized by UN women. 27 February-1 March 2024, Pyramid Continental Hotel, Juba, South Sudan.

lack of political will as an old mindset that remains with us, which sees men as capable of doing anything but limits women, especially in leadership. It is easy for the government to create a number for a percentage of women, but to enable it requires strong political will. Women's political leadership can collapse because of inadequate financial resources for policy implementation. As a CSO representative said:

Most of our women don't have money. If you are in politics, you must be with money, because if you don't have money, how will you contest for a political position or stand for any political positions? A poor person, whether you are a woman or a man, you can't stand for any position in politics. Most women in South Sudan are broke, and poverty keeps women back from actively participating in politics.

Another thing, most of the women, they don't know, and are unaware of, some of the concepts of democracy—like for them, they have known only the role for them to vote, not knowing they also have to participate [as a candidate] in an election. That is why one of the ministers said, “let women not be only voters but need to be voted, let them stand and contest in positions in their different political parties”.<sup>60</sup>

Current economic difficulties make things difficult for South Sudanese women. Moreover, the Political Parties Council (PPC) in March 2024 increased the fees for provisional party registration from SSP 20,000 (around USD 150) to USD 50,000. (Full registration costs an additional USD 25,000.) This presents a considerable challenge, and may have an impact on women otherwise willing to register an independent party.<sup>61</sup>

### *Women's lack of self-confidence in political participation*

Most men in the political field view women in politics unfavourably and often discourage them from pursuing their careers. Female politicians are considered less capable than males in leadership, which affects their confidence to advance to higher levels in their careers.

For some women, though, the main challenge facing women in politics was women themselves. Women lack confidence in their ability to lead a political party of their fellow women. They feel that participation in politics is the preserve of men and dare not venture into it. In South

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60 Interviewee, Dorothy Drabuga, Chairperson South Sudan Land Alliance, Juba, South Sudan, 9 April 2024.

61 Agence France Presse, 'S. Sudan opposition protests party registration fee hike', TRT AFRIKA, 25 March 2024. Accessed 22 April 2025, <https://trtafrika.com/africa/s-sudan-opposition-protests-party-registration-fee-hike-17510227>.

Sudan, most women lack formal education and are less likely than men to have the skills.<sup>62</sup> It is challenging for women to maintain their participation in politics. Participants during a group discussion,<sup>63</sup> and participants from different political parties, said the main challenges to unequal representation started with women:

When we nominate our colleagues to be in a position of decision making in a party, she may refuse or come with other circumstances that she doesn't want to be in front, and this made us to be behind to men. That is why you found most of the political party the leadership is taken by men in parties. Usually there is a lack of space for women to participate in decision making because men dominate the high levels, and our voices are not supported by our male partners because it's against their interest.

Another challenge is women's apparent lack of interest in joining politics, as many women do not support their fellow women to join politics, but support men:

Women have an attitude of jealousy. They would rather stand with men than their fellow women in politics. What they don't know is how their support can impact their fellow women in decision making. That has not been accepted by most women.

The researcher found that out of 64 parties, only three are women-led and legally registered. This prompted the researcher to question one of the men who heads a political party on the underlying reason why:

No women from outside were willing to register in a political party, and to implement affirmative action in our political party we must bring our female relatives to fill the gaps. Sometimes women can't compete with the males at parties because of a lack of capacity. That's why they usually haven't females in political parties.

To support women in different parties in South Sudan, the parties need to encourage the presence of women:

One of the criteria from the Political Parties Council for registration for any political party should be that if a party does not ensure that it observes the 35 per cent in its constitution and its legal framework, then that party should not be registered.<sup>64</sup>

62 As the 2011 UN General Assembly resolution on women's political participation notes, "Women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes, and gender stereotypes". Accessed 22 April 2025, [https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2013/12\\_access\\_11/3/2024](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2013/12_access_11/3/2024).

63 Focus Group Discussion, Juba, South Sudan, 9 March 2024.

64 Angelina Teny, the Minister of Interior, Republic of South Sudan. Accessed on 29 March 2024, [www.cityreviewss.com](http://www.cityreviewss.com).

If, out of 64 parties, only three are women-led this suggests the relative absence of women in politics is due to broader cultural factors, entrenched and perpetuated by political party norms and a leadership hierarchy dominated by men.

### *Political instability, insecurity, and women's status in politics*

Political instability and conflict have made women much more vulnerable to violence and insecurity, a phenomenon reflected in high levels of gender-based violence. Some women said they would not take part in an election if the existing women politicians themselves did not change:

We are not going to participate in the upcoming elections if the same women are going to stand for this election. Nobody will vote for any women in a political party. We have suffered a lot since the independence of this country, and those women in high-level do nothing for us in grassroots. [There is] no security, no good education to our children, no health services, no basic needs available to us. This election, if they put guns in our head, we are not going to participate in this election.

Others have different views and are willing to participate for change and a better life. However, there is a feeling of distrust of the results because of insecurity and instability:

The election must take place for change. We must decide and let us be ready for this election. To end insecurity in most states in South Sudan, we must stand in this election and break all the challenges facing us as women of South Sudan.<sup>65</sup>

## **STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

Strategies can be used to increase the participation of women in politics and break the cycle of traditional cultural norms and expectations. The participants in this study emphasized some of the strategies needed:

### *Implementing gender quotas*

It is crucial to engage parties to the agreement to ensure their commitment to fulfilling their obligations regarding the implementation of quotas. As it stands, the 35 per cent target has not yet been met. Therefore, it is the responsibility of these parties to actively manage and facilitate

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65 Advocacy Meeting for Women Leaders, on identifying gaps and challenges that hinder women's political participation. Woman's focus group discussion. Organized by National Transformational Leadership Institute (NTLI) University of Juba 20–21 February 2024. The author was among the participants.



the implementation of gender quotas in all government institutions,<sup>66</sup> and specifically in the political sphere.<sup>67</sup>

### *Strengthening women's leadership capacities*

Strengthening women's leadership capacity is essential and can be achieved through comprehensive training programs, mentorship opportunities and support networks for aspiring women leaders. These initiatives enhance political skills, build confidence and expand knowledge. The government also need to invest in the education of girls and young women by improving the education system at all levels, particularly at grassroots, to reinforce leadership capacities. Providing civic education to women is crucial as part of capacity building. This should inform women of their political rights, voter registration processes, running for office, electoral processes and advocacy strategies.

### *Promoting gender responsive policies*

Establishing gender-responsive policies to address violence and harassment against women politicians is essential to their safety and well-being and to prevent incidents during the electoral process that could include physical and sexual violence and psychological abuse. Regrettably, much of this violence remains unrecognized, unreported and unaddressed.

### *Enhancing women's political participation*

Government entities, non-government and civil society organizations should seek funding for women's political participation to be made through the overall economic empowerment of women. Financial support is vital to facilitate their participation in electoral processes and essential to including women in decision making roles and ensuring their active engagement across all sectors.

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66 Gender Equality in Public Administration (GEPA) Study in South Sudan, indicated that, out of the national public workforce of 67,911 (excluding the South Sudan Peoples Defence Force (SSPDF), women constitute only 27 per cent compared to men 73 per cent; overall under – representative in decisions-making positions. only 172 (15.3percent) out of 1,124 top civil servants are women and there are 5 women (13.5 percent) out of 37 undersecretaries, 24 women (13.6 percent) out of 35 ministers. (Source GEPA Study 2022/3).

67 Progressive legal and institutional frameworks, 35 per cent gender quotas and other gender provisions in the R-ARCSS and TCSS (2011) as amended, Election Act 2023, National Gender Policy 2013, NAP on UNSCR 1325, Political Parties Act 2012 (amended) Bill 2022, Labour Act 2017, South Sudan Civil Services Act 2012, Inclusive disability Policy 2015, Local government Act 2009, and other strategic Actions.

# CONCLUSION

This study lays out how effective women in politics can be in South Sudan. It was carried out by assessing South Sudanese women's understanding of politics, and the opportunities and challenges they face. The paper concludes that women's current level of participation in politics in South Sudan lies beyond positions they held before policies existed to ensure their participation and that these have somewhat narrowed the inequality gap with men.

However, despite embedding these policies in South Sudan's Transitional Constitution, National Election Act and revived peace agreement, major challenges persist. Paramount among them is a lack of other policies to support the implementation of women's political rights. As such, the role of public policy is critical to reversing decades of discrimination.

Women's participation in politics is considered a gatekeeper to women's empowerment and to achieving gender equality through the institutionalization of political parties and by putting equal political rights and opportunities for women and men into practice. Public policy can mediate the debates on women's political rights and lay down guidelines for political parties to follow.

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# ANNEXES

## ANNEX 1. LIST OF TARGET GROUPS FOR DATA COLLECTIONS

METHODS TOOLS	TARGET GROUP	STATUS	NUMBERS	INSTITUTIONS
Interviews	MPs	Politician	10	National Level
			02	State Level
	Ministers		03	MGCSW, MoE, MoAFS, etc. National Level
	Undersecretary State		01	MGCSW, National Level
	Minister		01	MGCSW State level
Interviews	Traditional Women leaders	Other Actors	02	National Level
	Religion Women Leaders		02	National Level
	Intellectual women		05	From different sectors
	SSLuA		01	CSOs
	CEPO		01	CSOs
	Content of family headed by women		02	Family level
Interviews	Women in academia	Government Actors	05	University of Juba/ Upper Nile University
Interviews	Military women		01	National Level
FGDs	Female/Male	Old women Youth – Female/ and Male	24	Juba

## ANNEX 2: INTERVIEWS QUESTIONS MATRIX

1	How women access powers in South Sudan	General Question
2	What is the effectiveness of women's participation in politics? (Effectiveness or Positive Elements)	General Question
3	What is the role of CSOs in the upcoming Election? What are the challenges faced by CSOs to support women in politics? What challenges are foreseen for becoming an election (General Question)	CSOs
4	Challenges faced when implementing Affirmative Actions (separate arguments for theory and group discussions)	General Question
5	Future participation of women in politics (as seen by women)	Question Target Women
6	What is your stand as a political party in the election 2024	
7	How is your party going to ensure women going to presume 35% in an election?	Question target Politicians
8	What key issues can political parties address during the election to support women's rights to participate?	Question target Politicians
9	What possible strategies can be used to enhance women's participation in electoral politics in South Sudan/What are your Recommendations for becoming Election (General Question)	General Question



### ANNEX 3: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

#### Questions G1

1. What is your reflection on the 2024 election?
2. What challenges do you foresee for women to participate in politics?
3. Why are women still not effective in political representation in South Sudan?
4. Why do some women still prefer incapable male candidates to capable women candidates?
5. For becoming elected are you ready to participate in the election? If Yes/No. Why?

#### Questions G2 and G3

1. What does politics mean to you as a woman from your old experiences?
2. What is your contribution to making sure women are present in your areas of politics?
3. How are you going to support other women to participate in politics?
4. Why do some women still believe that politics is not for women? Is it because women are afraid of succeeding in politics and have not adequately applied themselves in this regard?
5. Does your society recognize the value of women in the political system as voters? If No /Yes. Why?

### ANNEX 4: RESEARCH WORK PLAN

ACTIVITY	MONTH	DESCRIPTION
Consolidating Literature data	15th August–5th September 2023	Review of relevant existing articles, books, legislations, government documents, reports, and policy frameworks related to the research.
Designing and developing research instruments	1st September–5th September 2023	Divided the research instruments and reconnaissance /review of instruments.
Develop Interview Questions and permission letter for data collection	1st September–30 October 2023	Prepare interview Questions with the instructions of each institution for Data collection
Fieldwork	February–April 2024	Conduct interviews with participants in Juba
Report writing	February–May 2024	Discussion and Analysis of the Data
Finalize Submission of the 1 <sup>st</sup> Draft	17 <sup>th</sup> May 2024	Editing the report and submission



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