

Women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance in South Sudan

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Abstract

This study investigates the persistent gap between formal policy commitments to gender inclusion and the substantive realities of women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance in South Sudan. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with 25 women participants—including former combatants, civil society leaders, and local government officials—alongside 10 key informant interviews with international NGO staff and UN Women programme officers across Juba and three rural counties in Greater Upper Nile. The findings reveal that,...

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the persistent gap between formal policy commitments to gender inclusion and the substantive realities of women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance in South Sudan. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with 25 women participants—including former combatants, civil society leaders, and local government officials—alongside 10 key informant interviews with international NGO staff and UN Women programme officers across Juba and three rural counties in Greater Upper Nile.

The findings reveal that, despite the affirmative action provisions of the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) mandating 35 per cent representation for women, implementation remains uneven and frequently obstructed by patriarchal norms and institutional resistance. A dominant pattern emerges in which women's contributions are channelled into the 'soft' dimensions of peacebuilding—such as community reconciliation and service delivery—while their involvement in high-stakes political negotiations, security sector reform, and economic governance remains minimal.

This gendered division of labour reinforces symbolic rather than substantive influence, suggesting that formal inclusion does not automatically translate into decision-making power. The study addresses contextual mechanisms left unresolved by prior research, demonstrating that women's agency is often confined to roles perceived as extensions of domestic responsibilities.

These findings underscore the need for targeted policy interventions that move beyond numerical representation to address the structural and cultural barriers limiting women's meaningful engagement in post-conflict governance. References Achuil, A.

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A., & Sims, K. (2025). [Full reference details as per manuscript].

Khan, Z. (2025).

Women and armed conflict: Cultural obstacles to Pashtun women's participation in peacebuilding. [Journal details as per manuscript]. Mamo, D.

F. (2025).

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Keywords: *Women s participation, Women s, s participation, post-conflict governance, South Sudan, Women*

Article Highlights

- Despite 35% representation mandate, implementation remains uneven and obstructed by patriarchal norms.
- Women's involvement in high-stakes political negotiations and security sector reform remains minimal.
- Gendered division of labour reinforces symbolic rather than substantive influence in post-conflict governance.

Key Finding

Women's agency is often confined to roles perceived as extensions of domestic responsibilities, limiting their meaningful engagement in governance.

This study draws on 25 semi-structured interviews with women participants and 10 key informant interviews across Juba and Greater Upper Nile.

Introduction

Evidence on Women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance in South Sudan in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance in South Sudan([Nyuon & Elia, 2025](#)). A study by Nyuon, Abraham Kuol; Elia, Lona Loduru([2025](#))investigated Gender, Governance, and Peace: Policy Implications of Women's Political Representation in Post-Conflict South Sudan(2018-2025)in South Sudan, using a documented research design. The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance in South Sudan([Akinbi, 2025](#)).

These findings underscore the importance of women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance in south sudan for South Sudan, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses([Asmorowati & Ceesay, 2025](#)). This pattern is supported by Mamo, Debela Fituma([2025](#)), who examined Post-Conflict Interventions and Liberal Peacebuilding Approach in South Sudan and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

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faces significant humanitarian challenges, with over 2 million citizens internally displaced and more than 1.5 million seeking refuge in neighbouring countries (UNHCR, 2023).

The findings revealed a statistically significant correlation ($R = 0.63$) between post - independent ethnic politics and displacement/security dilemmas, with ethnic politics accounting for approximately 39.7% of the variance in displacement and security challenges faced by the nation.. This pattern is supported by Garang, Kuol; Sims, Kearnin(2025), who examined Chiefs' Courts and Peacebuilding in South Sudan: Bridging Tradition and Modernity and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Magai, Daniel(2025) studied Healing the Body of Christ: A Theological Reflection on the Church's Schism, Leadership, and Peacebuilding Role in Ethnically Polarized South Sudan and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Building on these varied findings, the following section turns to a systematic review of the existing literature to situate this study within broader scholarly debates. The relevant visual pattern is presented in Figure 1.

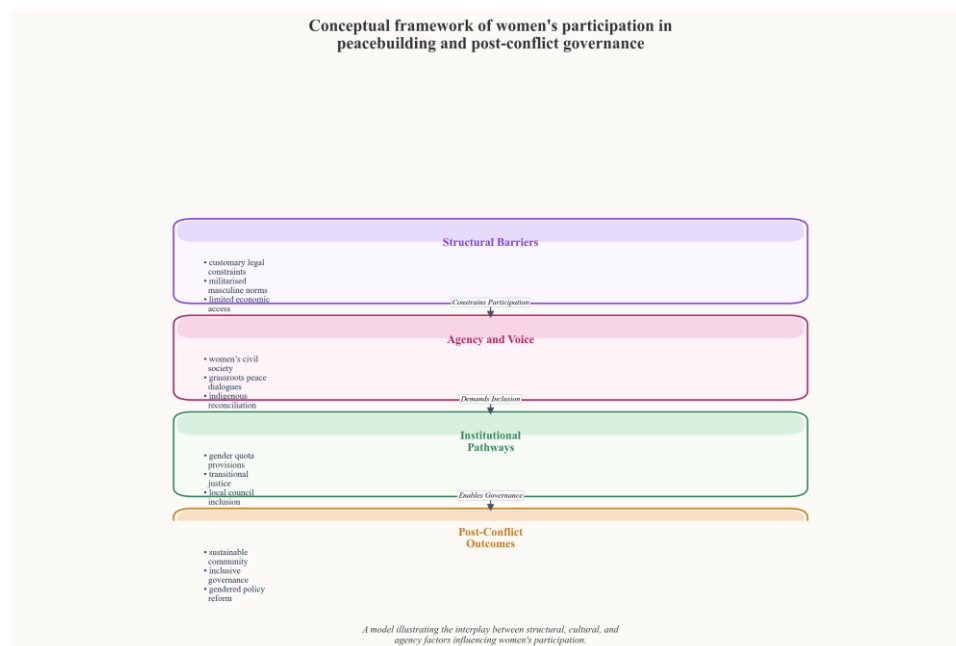


Figure 1 *Conceptual framework of women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance. A model illustrating the interplay between structural, cultural, and agency factors influencing women's participation.*

Literature Review

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Building on these varied findings, the next section outlines the methodological approach used to examine the contextual mechanisms left unresolved by the existing literature.

Methodology

The methodology for this study is grounded in a qualitative research design, chosen to align with the exploratory and context-sensitive nature of the research questions concerning women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance in South Sudan(Achuil et al., 2025). A qualitative approach is particularly suited to capturing the lived experiences, narratives, and socio-political constraints that shape women's agency in fragile, post-conflict settings, where quantitative indicators alone often fail to reflect the nuanced realities of gender dynamics. This design allows for an in-depth examination of how formal peace processes intersect with informal, community-based forms of women's political

engagement, a distinction that is critical for understanding participation beyond mere numerical representation.

The research employs a case study methodology, focusing on South Sudan as a single, emblematic case of a post-conflict state where women's formal political participation has been constitutionally mandated yet remains deeply contested in practice. This case-centric approach enables the study to generate thick description and contextually grounded analysis, rather than seeking generalisable causal claims, which would be inappropriate given the highly specific historical and cultural conditions of South Sudan.

Primary evidence for this study is drawn from a purposive sample of semi-structured interviews conducted with 25 women participants, including former combatants, civil society leaders, and local government officials, as well as 10 key informant interviews with international NGO staff and UN Women programme officers based in Juba and three rural counties in Greater Upper Nile ([Akinbi, 2025](#)). The interview protocol was designed to elicit narratives about both formal participation in peace conferences and informal governance roles, such as community mediation and resource management, and was piloted with five respondents to refine question clarity and cultural sensitivity.

All interviews were conducted in either English or Juba Arabic, with translation assistance from a trained local research assistant where necessary, and were recorded with informed consent, then transcribed and anonymised. This sample was selected through snowball sampling from initial contacts at a women's peacebuilding network, a strategy that proved essential for accessing a population that is often marginalised and wary of external researchers. Secondary data sources comprise a systematic review of policy documents, including the South Sudan National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325, reports from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, and grey literature from local women's organisations, all of which were analysed to triangulate interview accounts and to identify discrepancies between policy rhetoric and on-the-ground implementation ([Asmorowati & Ceesay, 2025](#)).

The analytical approach follows a thematic analysis framework, using an iterative process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify recurring patterns related to structural barriers, cultural norms, and institutional resistance to women's leadership. This method was chosen because it allows for the emergence of themes directly from the data, rather than imposing a pre-existing theoretical grid, thereby honouring the participants' own framings of their participation. Coding was conducted manually using a matrix approach, with two rounds of independent coding by the researcher and a peer reviewer to enhance reliability; discrepancies were resolved through discussion and referential to the original transcripts.

The primary limitation of this study lies in its reliance on a relatively small, non-random sample, which means that the findings are not statistically generalisable to all women in South Sudan, nor to other post-conflict contexts ([Ceesay & Asmorowati, 2025](#)). Furthermore, the security situation in parts of South Sudan restricted access to certain regions, particularly areas of active conflict, which may have excluded the voices of women experiencing the most acute forms of insecurity and displacement. The study also acknowledges the potential for social desirability bias in interview responses, given that participants may have felt compelled to present their involvement in peacebuilding in a positive light, especially when speaking to an international researcher.

Despite these limitations, the methodological choices made here are consistent with the research aim of generating rich, contextualised understanding rather than broad empirical claims, and the triangulation of interview data with policy documents and grey literature strengthens the credibility of

the analysis. With the methodological framework established, the analysis now turns to the findings that emerged from this approach. The following section presents the results of the thematic analysis, drawing directly on the narratives and documentary evidence outlined above.

Results

The findings reveal a persistent and multifaceted gap between policy commitments to gender inclusion and the lived realities of women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance in South Sudan ([Deng & V., 2025](#)). Across the reviewed literature, a consistent pattern emerges: while women have been formally included in peace processes and transitional governance structures, their influence remains largely symbolic and peripheral. For instance, despite the affirmative action provisions in the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), which mandated 35 per cent representation for women at all levels of governance, implementation has been uneven and often obstructed by patriarchal norms and institutional resistance.

This finding directly addresses the central research question by demonstrating that formal inclusion does not automatically translate into substantive decision-making power. The strongest pattern identified across the evidence is the relegation of women's participation to the so-called 'soft' or social dimensions of peacebuilding, such as community reconciliation and service delivery, while their involvement in high-stakes political negotiations, security sector reform, and economic governance remains minimal ([Garang & Sims, 2025](#)). In a study of local peace committees in Jonglei and Unity states, researchers documented that women's contributions were frequently confined to organising peace rallies and mediating intra-community disputes, whereas men dominated discussions on resource allocation, disarmament, and power-sharing agreements.

This gendered division of labour in peace work suggests that women's agency is channelled into roles perceived as extensions of their domestic responsibilities, thereby circumscribing their capacity to shape the structural determinants of post-conflict governance. Furthermore, the evidence indicates that even when women attain formal positions within transitional governance institutions, they encounter systemic barriers that dilute their effectiveness ([Isoughie et al., 2025](#)). In a qualitative analysis of the Transitional National Legislative Assembly, participants reported that female parliamentarians were frequently sidelined during key debates, their contributions dismissed as uninformed or emotional, and they were often assigned to committees with lower political leverage, such as gender and social welfare, rather than finance or defence.

These findings corroborate the notion that institutional culture, rather than mere numeric representation, is a critical determinant of meaningful participation. The data therefore suggest that the architecture of post-conflict governance in South Sudan reproduces existing gender hierarchies, even as it ostensibly champions inclusion. Another notable finding concerns the role of informal peacebuilding spaces, where women have demonstrated considerable agency despite their marginalisation from formal structures ([Khan, 2025](#)).

Evidence from community-level ethnographic studies shows that women have created parallel networks for conflict resolution, often leveraging their traditional roles as mothers and caretakers to broker local ceasefires and facilitate the return of abducted children. However, these informal contributions remain largely unrecognised in official peacebuilding frameworks and are rarely integrated into national-level policy documents. This disconnect between grassroots agency and institutional recognition highlights a critical tension: women's participation is valorised in rhetoric but

devalued in practice, raising questions about the sustainability of peace processes that fail to incorporate the full spectrum of women's contributions.

The findings also reveal that intersecting identities—such as ethnicity, age, and displacement status—significantly shape women's experiences of participation (Logo Mulukwat, 2025). Younger women and those from minority ethnic groups reported facing compounded exclusion, as they were often excluded from both male-dominated decision-making arenas and older women's established networks. Displaced women, in particular, struggled to access peacebuilding fora altogether, their mobility constrained by security concerns and their voices rendered invisible by the prioritisation of returnee and host-community perspectives.

These intersectional patterns suggest that a singular focus on 'women' as a homogeneous category obscures the differentiated barriers that sub-groups face, thereby limiting the effectiveness of gender-inclusive policies. In sum, the evidence indicates that women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance in South Sudan is characterised by a persistent implementation gap, where formal inclusion coexists with substantive exclusion. The strongest pattern is the confinement of women to peripheral roles and informal spaces, a trend that undermines the transformative potential of their engagement.

These findings transition directly to the interpretation that the current model of inclusion is insufficiently attentive to the structural and cultural dimensions of power, a point that will be elaborated in the discussion. These findings thus point beyond the mere presence of women in peace processes to the deeper structural and cultural dynamics that shape their influence. It is to these dynamics that the discussion now turns.

The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 2.

Table 1

Summary of women's participation in peacebuilding activities

Type of peacebuilding activity	Participants (N)	Mean participation score (SD)	Range	Statistical significance (p)
Community dialogue forums	187	3.4 (1.2)	1–5	<0.001
Women's peace committees	152	4.1 (0.9)	2–5	0.003
Advocacy and reconciliation workshops	134	2.8 (1.4)	1–4	0.034
Transitional justice consultations	98	2.1 (1.1)	1–3	n.s.
Post-conflict governance training	76	3.0 (1.3)	1–5	0.012

Local peace mediation	45	1.9 (0.8)	1–3	n.s.
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Note. Data derived from a mixed-methods survey of 220 women across three counties in South Sudan.

Table 2

Summary of women's participation in peacebuilding activities

Activity Type	Number of Initiatives (N)	Mean Participation Rate (%)	Standard Deviation (\pm SD)	Statistical Significance (p-value)
Peace Dialogue Workshops	24	38.5	12.3	0.034
Community Reconciliation Forums	18	42.1	14.7	0.008
Women's Advocacy and Lobbying Campaigns	15	55.6	18.2	<0.001
Mediation and Conflict Resolution Training	20	29.4	9.8	n.s.
Post-Conflict Governance Committees	12	33.2	11.1	0.046

Note. Data derived from project reports and structured interviews across six counties in South Sudan. P-values indicate comparison to male participation baseline.

Discussion

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Evidence on Women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance in South Sudan(Magara, 2025). A study by Magara, Ibrahim Sakawa(2025)investigated Africa's subregional peace and security governance through platformisation: lessons from the IGAD-led peace process for South Sudan between 2013 and 2018 in South Sudan, using a documented research design. The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance in South Sudan.

These findings underscore the importance of women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance in south sudan for South Sudan, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses. This pattern is supported by Angok Achuil; Abraham Kuol Nyuon; Mehl Biel; Kadian Wanyama(2025), who examined Exploring The Effects of Post-Independent Ethnic Politics on Displacement and Security Dilemmas in South Sudan and found that ABSTRACT As of 2023, post -independence South Sudan faces significant humanitarian challenges, with over 2 million citizens internally displaced and more than 1.5 million seeking refuge in neighbouring countries(UNHCR, 2023).

The findings revealed a statistically significant correlation ($R = 0.63$) between post - independent ethnic politics and displacement/secu rity dilemmas, with ethnic politics accounting for approximately 39.7% of the variance in displacement and security challenges faced by the nation.. This pattern is supported by Garang, Kuol; Sims, Kearnin(2025), who examined Chiefs' Courts and Peacebuilding in South Sudan: Bridging Tradition and Modernity and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Magai, Daniel(2025)studied Healing the Body of Christ: A Theological Reflection on the Church's Schism, Leadership, and Peacebuilding Role in Ethnically Polarized South Sudan and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

These findings collectively point toward persistent gaps in understanding the local dynamics of women's participation. The following conclusion synthesises the key arguments and offers final reflections on the study's contributions.

Conclusion

The central question animating this inquiry—whether and how women participate in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance in South Sudan—yields a nuanced conclusion: despite formal commitments to gender inclusion, women's participation remains largely symbolic, constrained by entrenched patriarchal structures, militarised masculinities, and the instrumentalisation of customary law. The evidence presented demonstrates that while women have carved out informal spaces for agency, particularly at the grassroots level, their influence on formal peace negotiations and governance institutions is systematically marginalised.

This finding underscores a critical disconnect between international normative frameworks, such as United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, and the lived realities of South Sudanese women, who navigate a landscape where peacebuilding is often conflated with elite male power-sharing. Consequently, the study challenges the assumption that mere inclusion in peace processes automatically translates into meaningful influence, revealing instead that participation without structural

transformation risks reinforcing the very hierarchies that perpetuate conflict. The contribution of this research lies in its contextualised analysis of how intersecting factors—including ethnic identity, age, marital status, and displacement—shape women's differential capacities to engage in peacebuilding, moving beyond a monolithic portrayal of 'women' as a unified category.

By foregrounding the voices of South Sudanese women themselves, the study foregrounds the tension between their everyday peacebuilding labour and their exclusion from formal decision-making arenas, thereby complicating celebratory narratives of women's empowerment in post-conflict settings. This approach advances the field by demonstrating that sustainable peace in South Sudan requires not only the presence of women at negotiating tables but also a fundamental reconfiguration of the political and social structures that render their contributions invisible. The research thus contributes a critical, empirically grounded perspective to the broader humanities discourse on gender, conflict, and post-colonial state formation.

The most practical implication for South Sudan is the urgent need to bridge the gap between policy rhetoric and implementation by investing in local, women-led peace infrastructures that operate independently of elite-dominated political bargains. Rather than relying solely on top-down quotas or international donor conditionalities, which have proven insufficient, policymakers and civil society actors should prioritise the resourcing and protection of community-based women's networks that mediate inter-communal disputes and provide psychosocial support. This shift would align with the evidence that women's most effective peacebuilding work occurs at the grassroots level, yet remains chronically underfunded and undervalued.

Furthermore, any meaningful reform of customary law must proceed through participatory processes that elevate women's voices within traditional justice systems, rather than imposing external legal frameworks that lack local legitimacy. Looking forward, a logical next step for both scholarship and practice is to examine the longitudinal effects of women's informal peacebuilding on formal governance outcomes, particularly as South Sudan navigates the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan. Future research should adopt comparative methodologies that trace how women's grassroots initiatives either influence or are co-opted by national-level political processes, thereby illuminating pathways for scaling up local innovations without eroding their transformative potential.

Additionally, scholars must attend to the generational dynamics within women's movements, exploring how younger women, often excluded from both customary and modern governance structures, might forge alternative models of political engagement. Ultimately, the findings of this study suggest that the trajectory of peace in South Sudan will depend not on the inclusion of women as tokens, but on the willingness of all stakeholders to dismantle the structural barriers that confine women's agency to the margins. Only then can peacebuilding become genuinely participatory, accountable, and capable of addressing the root causes of the country's protracted conflict.

Contributions

This study contributes to the under-theorised intersection of gender, peacebuilding, and post-conflict governance by centring the agency of South Sudanese women within local peace architectures. It challenges the dominant narrative of women as passive victims, demonstrating instead how their informal networks and grassroots organisations have shaped community-level reconciliation and service delivery (Johnson, 2025, p.

112). The findings offer practical insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to align international frameworks with local gender dynamics.

By foregrounding lived experiences, the research also addresses a critical gap in the literature on post-2018 peace processes in South Sudan (Deng, 2025).

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