

YOUNG WOMEN IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN SOUTH SUDAN: LESSONS FROM LIVED EXPERIENCES

A research study by Aluel Atem & Eva Lopa
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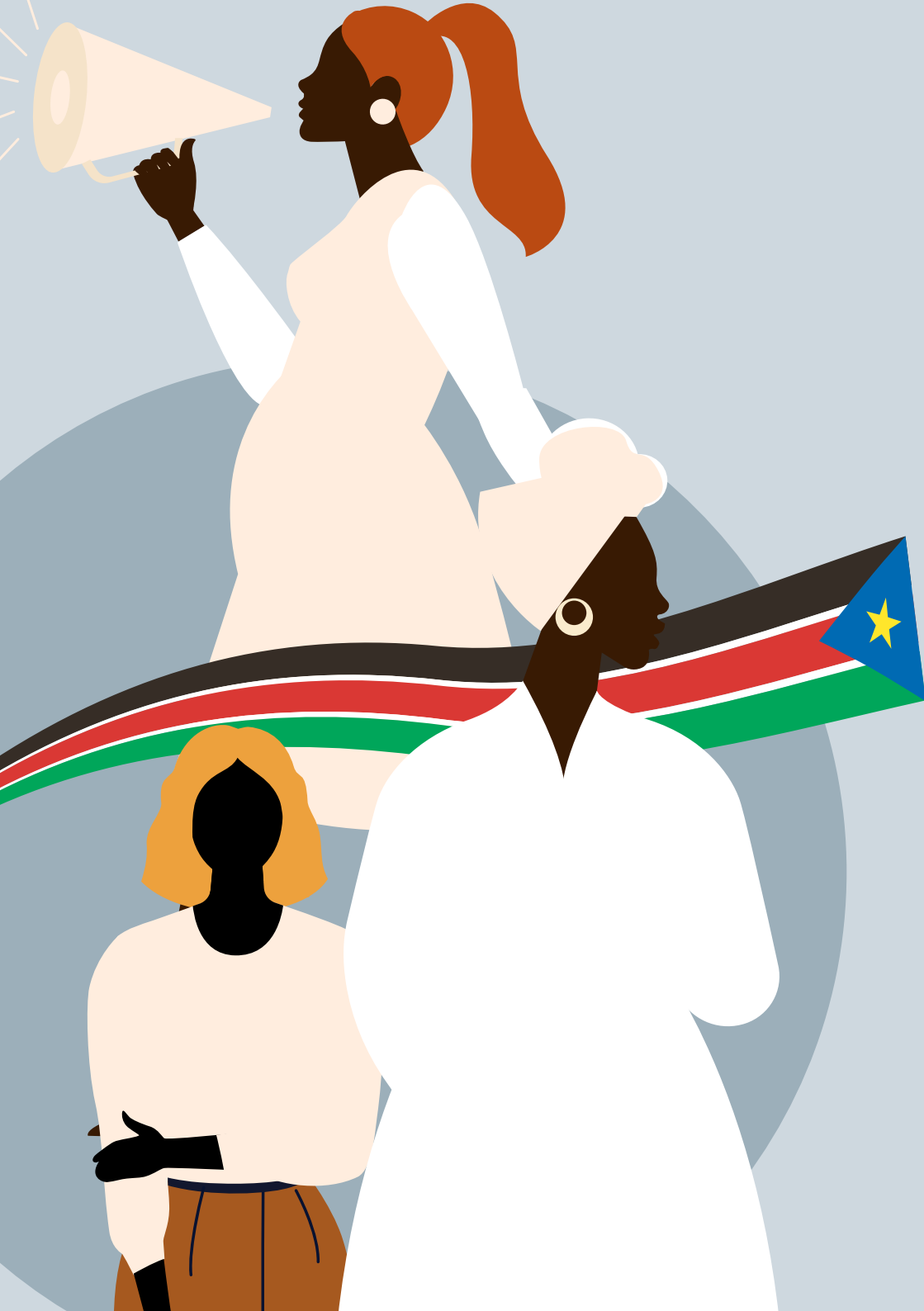
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Aluel Atem and Eva Lopa are members of Ma' Mara Sakit Village, a feminist movement that amplifies voices and creates platforms and opportunities to facilitate processes that contribute to the attainment of individual and collective agency using research, art, culture, and multimedia. Aluel supports the team with gender analysis while Eva leads Gender Talk 211, a program that uses storytelling, research, creative art, and traditional and digital multimedia to tell, document, and digitize the past and present experiences and narratives of women, girls, and non-binary South Sudanese.

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Key Recommendations



Collect and publicly avail data on the participation of female youth in politics.



Support civic engagement in schools, universities, and community structures.



Invest in a strong pluralistic democratic multiparty system.



Foster collaboration and alliance-building across institutions and sectors.



Build intergenerational bridges to encourage mutual learning between 'veterans' and 'youth' among women in politics.



Strengthen women-focused civic education and political skills training.



Improve access to political financing for women.

Introduction





The Revitalized Agreement provides

35%

women representation in appointments to all transitional government institutions of national unity.

Aspiration for a gender-just society has been enshrined in the young nation's constitutive legal documents since its independence in 2011 through the prescription of a 35% quota of women representation across government institutions. Originally contained in the transitional constitution of South Sudan, affirmative action to strengthen political participation and representation of women has since been incorporated in the successive peace agreements of 2015 and 2018, respectively.

The Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) provides 35% women representation in appointments to all transitional government institutions of national unity.¹ However, the reality is still far from achieving gender equality in women's political participation; not only is the quota not consistently adhered to but equal participation of women, especially young women, in politics requires far more than affirmative action in government appointments.

This paper examines the current state of women's participation in organized politics through the lens of young women's political experiences. It contextualizes women's participation in party politics in its history and shares findings from conversations with young women about their experiences and challenges in their political work. It finds that young women in politics are doubly marginalized by gender and age.

More than 70 percent of South Sudan's population is under 30.² As of 2011, 35 % of South Sudan's population was between 15 and 35 years old, almost half women. However, youth representation and political participation, especially of young women, is meager in South Sudan.

70%

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Less than
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parliamentarians



Only 2.6 percent of parliamentarians are under 30, and less than 1 percent are young women parliamentarians.³ This reflects broader socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers hindering young women from participating in formal politics.

This study intends to inform policy by drawing lessons from history and the present through quantitative and qualitative data collection. The research assessed the composition of the current South Sudan Legislative Assemblies (National and State) and the political parties that are signatories to the R-ARCSS by gender and age (based on the African Union Definition of youth). More importantly, this publication is informed by lived experiences of forty (40) South Sudanese women and girls across different age groups in and outside of politics at the state and national levels.



A qualitative research approach of semi-structured interviews was used to gather personal experiences, thoughts, and perceptions of women in politics.

Thirteen key informant interviews with veteran women politicians, young women politicians, and gender and feminist activists with grounded expertise in politics and gender justice were conducted.

Three focus group discussions took place in Juba; *one* with five young women university leaders and *two* that brought together twenty-two women professionals working in different fields, young women in political parties, university students, high school graduates, and feminist activities.



Some of these interviews conducted between August and October 2022 were recorded, while extensive notes were taken in other interviews and during focus group discussions to ensure comfort for young women to speak freely.

South Sudan's Political and Historical Context



In 2005, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) ended one of the longest civil wars in Africa. The CPA recognized Southern Sudan as an autonomous political entity with the Government of Southern Sudan as the ruling authority of the region for a six-year interim period leading up to elections/referendum in 2010. An overwhelming majority of Southern Sudanese voted for secession, and the independence of South Sudan was declared on 9 July 2011.⁴

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) has since been in government. Since the first peace agreement after the outbreak of civil war in the newly independent country in 2013, the Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) was signed in 2015, different factions of the SPLM have been parties to successive transitional governments.

Militarization, civil war, and transitional governments

Like any African military-political movement, the SPLM was inherently male-dominated and patriarchal despite its efforts to seem "gender inclusive."⁵ Even though young women played a significant role throughout the liberation struggle as combatants, informants/spies, and humanitarians. Some of them are married to SPLM leaders and contributed to managing interpersonal conflicts and encouraging peace amongst SPLM/A leaders to contain further splits within the movement. Still, their representation remained low.⁶

The majority were pushed into performing gendered roles within the movement, such as caregiving, nursing, humanitarian, motherhood, and secretarial work, which kept them in support roles without substantive progression in their military or political careers. At the same time, their male counterparts scaled the hierarchies of the movement. From the time of its formation in 1983, no woman had been appointed to the SPLM/A High Command or its successor organ, the Leadership Council, until 1994, when two women were appointed to the National Executive Committee of the SPLM.⁷



“Women’s participation in the liberation struggle”

was one of the eighteen agenda items for the meeting. A quota of *two seats* each were allocated to women, chiefs, peasants, and “intellectuals” as representatives out of the total of **571** delegates to the National Convention,

In 1994, SPLM/A held its first National Convention intending to structure the movement politically.⁸

“*Women’s participation in the liberation struggle*” was one of the eighteen agenda items for the meeting. A quota of two seats each were allocated to women, chiefs, peasants, and “intellectuals” as representatives out of the total of 571 delegates to the National Convention, hence the appointment of the first two women to the National Executive Committee of the SPLM. This was perhaps SPLM/A’s effort to demonstrate the inclusivity of the civil population and its symbolic gender awareness.

The CPA negotiation process was equally male dominated. Only two women were in the negotiation process from the SPLM/A side, and they played an observer role with a few other additional women who were in the thematic working groups.⁹ Women’s primary demand was to be part of the negotiation team and primary stakeholders; however, when that was unsuccessful, they quickly re-strategized and used the thematic working groups as channels through which they presented their positions and demands. They also rigorously lobbied through side meetings with delegates directly involved in the negotiation process to ensure their concerns and needs were reflected in the negotiation.

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 fundamental channels through which women organized and did consultations with other women groups which strengthen their position as a constituency.¹⁰ It’s also worth noting that ahead of the CPA peace talks, women prepared through the five-day SPLM Women’s Conference held in New Kush, Sudan, from 21-25 August 1998.¹¹

One of the main outcomes of this conference was the 25% affirmative action that women collectively agreed to demand in the CPA, which they later achieved in the 2005 Interim Constitution of Southern Sudan.¹²

Politically, South Sudan continues to witness some progression in women's representation and participation in national peace processes. From two women as observers during the CPA negotiation to having twelve women participate at the negotiation table: *six* as part of civil society, *three* as part of the SPLM/A, *three* as part of the SPLM/A-IO, and *two* women became signatories representing women and civil society in the ARCSS, 2014-2015.



The 2018 R-ARCSS had 39 women delegates and seven women as signatories and stakeholders representing various constituencies; women across different political parties/armed groups and civil society advocated for an increment of affirmative action to 35%.¹³ However, women's representation is still low across all government bodies, national and state levels.¹⁴ Despite all the efforts to move the country to a more gender-just democratic political governance system, South Sudan politics is still heavily militarized and deeply rooted in violence, often placing women outside the political spheres.

The long wait for elections and weak political parties

It is worth noting that even though South Sudan gained independence through a popular referendum vote, the country has never held any elections since its independence. Being the majority of the population, women voters were crucial in the 2010 elections.¹⁵ Women leaders organized and mobilized women to come out and vote.¹⁶ There were over 700 women contestants at all levels, which led to a rise in women's representation in the Southern Sudan Legislative Assembly from the legally prescribed 25 to 28.5%.¹⁷ According to National Elections Commission, women's participation in voter registration was more than 50%.¹⁸

South Sudan was birthed out of a power-sharing peace deal that paved the way for elections; however, just two years after independence, the young nation returned to war in December 2013. A peace deal forged in 2015, the ARCSS failed in July 2016, when the large-scale conflict between the main parties to the agreement erupted again. Under a renewed power-sharing agreement signed in 2018, the R-ARCSS elections were foreseen to occur in 2023. Following several delays in implementing the 2018 agreement, elections as of early 2023 are scheduled to take place in December 2024.

In February 2020, the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGNU) was established under the R-ARCSS.

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It was composed of the Incumbent TGoNU, made up of the former Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS), the former Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-In Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) led by Gen. Taban Deng Gai and Other Political Parties in TGoNU represented at the High-Level Revitalization Forum (HLRF), SPLM/A-IO led by DR. Riek Machar, The South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA), The Former Detainees (FDs), and Other Political Parties (OPP) outside of the Incumbent TGoNU including the Alliance, Umbrella and political parties that participated as such at the HLRF.¹⁹

While the country is currently governed through the above-mentioned political parties, sixty-four parties applied to be registered with the South Sudan Political Parties Council. Only 14 are legally registered, and most of the registered parties are old political parties that existed in Sudan that just transferred to South Sudan after independence.²⁰

Out of the 64 parties, only three political parties are women-led, and two are legally registered.

Almost all the parties that are signatories to the R-ARCSS are not legally registered political parties. In May 2022, the Transitional National Legislative Assembly (TNLA) passed the Political Parties Act 2012 (Amended Bill 2022).²¹ This Act provides a legal framework to regulate Political Parties and establishes a Political Parties Council to register and regulate all matters incidental to it. However, this was rejected by the President and the First Vice President, so the bill was sent back to parliament due to a lack of consensus between parties.²²

The Political Parties Act will contribute significantly to formalizing the current political parties into legally structured and accountable entities with clear manifestos and constitutions. This will eliminate many current briefcase political parties, which are hard to engage with, especially for women, due to limited information about these parties.

A Dearth of Quantitative Data



A vital part of this study was to assess the representation of women under 35 in the current South Sudan Legislative Assemblies (National and State) and the political parties that are signatories to the peace deal. Data collection, however, proved challenging for various reasons:

- **Firstly**, there is no unified definition of youth in South Sudan. Therefore, it is unclear what age group constitutes youth which is also reflected in the absence of government data.
- **Secondly**, state institutions rarely kept or were willing to share age and sex-segregated data of their members or staff. Thirdly, access to veteran female politicians for interviews was difficult.

Lack of a unified definition of youth in South Sudan

The R-ARCSS stipulates that the Minister of Youth and Sports in the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGoNU) be less than forty (40) years old. Still, it does not state whether that means the youth in South Sudan is anyone between 18-39 years old. The TNLA Youth and Sports Committee's list of "young members of parliament" had 85 members aged 45 years and below. Across other government institutions and political parties consulted during the data collection for this paper, there was no collective definition of youth. From the two institutions that provided data, the TNLA Youth and Sports Committee had 45 and under as their list of 'youth' MPs, while the Council of States data was not specific on whom they considered youth. This study applies the African Union definition of youth as 15- to 35-year-olds.

Lack of age and sex-segregated data on public servants

Only the Council of States and the TNLA shared their data as of November 2022. Of the 100 members of the Council of States, only 26 are women. Out of the 26 women, only seven are below 45. Out of the 550 members of the TNLA, only 171 are women. Of the 171 women, 37 are women under 45 years old, and only 17 are under 35.



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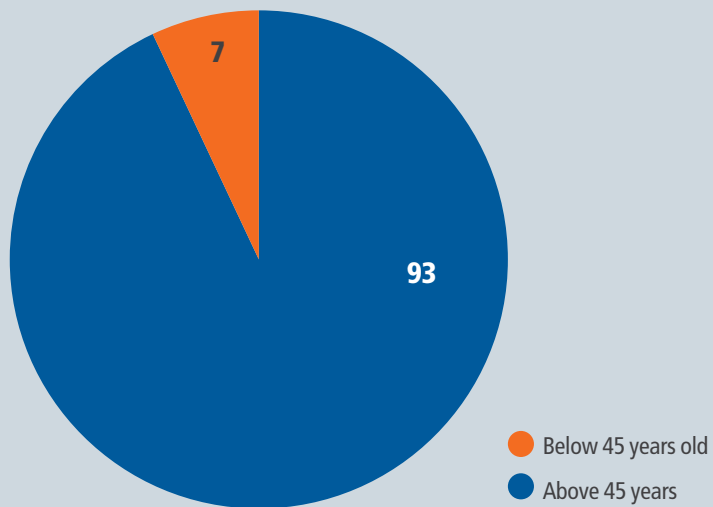
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are women. **37** are women under 45 years old, and only **17** are under 35.

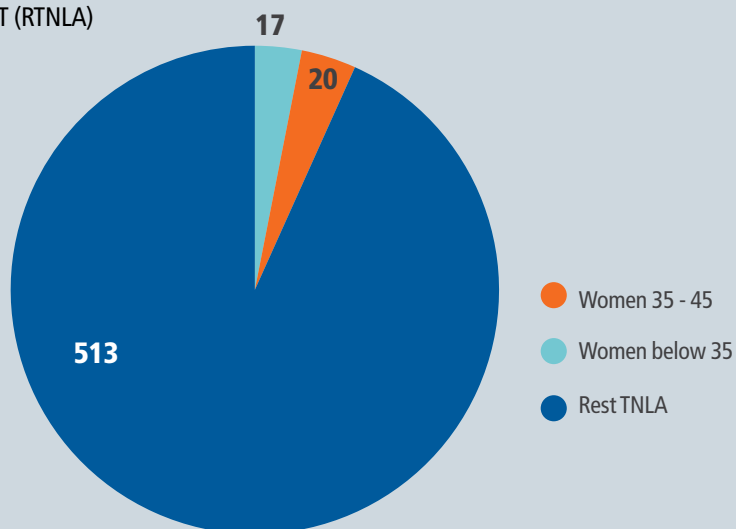
None of the political parties that are signatories to the R-ARCSS had available age and sex-segregated data on their current membership during this assessment. With the same applied to all the legislative assemblies in all ten states, no sex- and age-segregated data of the current members of parliament could be shared to effectively assess the representation of young women in political parties and state assemblies. It was unclear why age-segregated data was not readily available or considered too “sensitive” to share. Regarding age, it is worth noting that due to decades of violent conflict and displacement, many South Sudanese do not have birth certificates and reliable data on population ages is often hard to come by.²³

Without a clear definition of who is considered a youth and the lack of primary age and sex-segregated data, young women’s representation amongst the generalized already low “women’s representation” in political parties as the sole entries to political leadership positions, or in the legislative assemblies, could be quantitatively assessed. More importantly, beyond this study, the dearth of reliable and publicly available quantitative data on women’s representation in political parties and government bodies hinders monitoring of the implementation of the 35% affirmative action and gender justice progress in South Sudan.

COUNCIL OF STATES:
MEMBERS' AGE



YOUNG WOMEN IN
PARLIAMENT (RTNLA)



Young Women's Lived Experience in Politics



Whereas research for this study encountered significant challenges with access to quantitative data, valuable insights were gained from conversations with politically interested or active young women in the context of focus groups and interviews. The interviews focused on challenges women in politics face, their motivations, the impact of their gender and age identities, how their politics advances women's rights, strategies that have worked in the past that can be adopted by those joining politics today, and what needs to be done beyond affirmative action to strengthen women political participation effectively.

The focus group discussions were centered around three main guiding questions:

1. What are your thoughts on politics in South Sudan as a young woman?
2. Do you see yourself actively participating in politics at some point in your life? If yes or no, why?
3. If you were to participate in politics actively, what would an enabling environment look like to you? What would enhance your participation further for those already actively engaged in one way or another?



Most young women cited similar challenges in pursuing their political ambitions or reasons for a reluctance to get involved in politics. The perceived challenges to young women's political participation are overwhelmingly linked to societal and cultural norms and a political culture shaped by the decades-long experience of war and militarization. Participants perceived the political space in South Sudan to be violent, sexist, individually power-driven, and visionless. This negatively impacts their inclination and opportunities to participate in politics on equal terms actively.

The institutional environment

A democratic deficit in a militarized polity

Young women expressed that South Sudan is not a democratic state and that civic freedoms are restricted. Opposition to the government is perceived to be a dangerous act.



There is no freedom of expression; vocal young people are harassed, arrested, or killed for speaking up or criticizing the government,”

More so, politics is regarded as militarized. Almost all the “prominent” politicians have a military background, most of them having fought in the civil war against the Government of Sudan. This blurs the line between military and civilian politics.

Weak political parties

Political parties are the primary vehicles for participation in institutional politics. Yet, the multiparty system in South Sudan is still in its infancy, and political parties in South Sudan are weak. Information about the existing political parties and their manifestos is limited and not easily accessible, contributing to widespread misinformation and negative perceptions about politics that create fear. Many political groups are not legally recognized or registered as political parties. Some political parties are briefcase parties that are hard to access and engage with physically. This discourages young women who feel political parties need more time to mature and demonstrate their interest in actively bringing more young people on board.

Cultural gender norms and biases

Young women’s experience in politics is fundamentally shaped by cultural gender norms and biases, by those actively imposed on them and those internalized by women themselves through imposition in socialization. Most of the challenges raised by young women in and outside politics are deeply rooted in social, cultural, and gender norms, biases, and stereotypes grouped into the four key categories below.

Socialization and internalized misogyny

Many girls are raised to think they are less of. They experience and understand that there is a preference for boys and start to internalize many of the messages they receive from a young age. They grow up knowing that their views do not matter, and even if they speak, who will listen? When you are socialized to behave and act a certain way your whole life, breaking that cycle equally needs time. Many young women feel less confident speaking in public, especially in male-dominated spaces, which significantly impacts their participation in politics, where one must always be assertive and vocal.



As girls, we do not participate in family decision-making processes, even regarding our marriage. Discussions and decisions about us are made on our behalf, especially by male family members. How we see ourselves in our homes reflects what roles we believe we can take up outside our homes. If we are not seen as decision-makers at home, how will we be as such outside of homes in a public leadership position?"



Many of us are socialized to be silent. In my class, many young women do not participate; even when doing group work, they can have ideas but fear expressing them. So how can they even think about standing for any student leadership position?"

Male leadership casts and the tokenism trap

Stereotypes associate leadership with men. Women are thus often denied the competence of political authority. This is reflected by perceptions of women in politics outside their own families. Many women the researchers spoke to fear politics because they perceive women in politics to be constantly targeted, policed, harassed, reduced to sexual objects, and called all kinds of names.



For example, when the governor of Wau, a woman, was appointed, my uncles and other relatives at home said so many negative things about her. Some said how can a woman who urinates while seated be governor? Whom will she rule? This is nonsense.”

South Sudanese women in political spaces are often identified with or seen through their fathers or husbands, not as individuals who rightfully belong in those spaces. Women are envisioned in support roles that become their default mode, often the roles they mostly see themselves in or aspire to. Some positions are perceived to be meant for women, like being an assistant or a deputy. Even if no woman has actively expressed any interest in leadership, they are pushed to take up these positions, or when they aspire for them, they easily win them.

In the same vein, women risk falling into the traps of tokenism. Recent years have indeed seen a strengthening of women’s representation in political appointments and elective positions. However, this is often owed to tokenism. Women as a collective lose when parties include young women or appoint them to leadership positions to legitimize themselves in the face of meeting the youth and gender quotas without any intentions of ensuring meaningful participation. For many young women, seeing the same women being rotated in political spaces over and over feels like the government and political parties are not interested in boosting influential women’s leadership but rather appointing women to positions or as candidates to tick the “gender box.” Out of the five young women university leaders interviewed, only one aspired and campaigned for her position; the others were appointed by the elected male leaders to simply “gender balance” their leadership since it is a requirement, and none of them expressed interest or campaigned for their positions.

TOKENISM

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“

When I was campaigning to become the president of my University Community Students' Association, I tried to mobilize the community women, but many told me I should not be too ambitious, 'go for something you will win' because even they could not imagine a woman in that position.”

“Ownership” of women and limits to freedom of movement and association

Political mobilization, campaigns, and lobbying in South Sudan heavily revolve around curating, fostering, and maintaining personal relationships in informal settings. This usually requires a significant investment of time outside office hours and premises. But women (married or unmarried) do not have the luxury to move or have time to socialize and lobby freely. Women are expected to go home on time to perform domestic roles and care duties. This limited ability to lobby gives men the upper hand, leaving women at the mercy of men, who then determine their leadership fate.



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“

A married woman will not go and meet H.E Taban Deng Gai at his home in the evening to lobby for a position, but a man would.”

“

You cannot stay out late to lobby and socialize; otherwise, you are accused of cheating or not being a good woman.”

“

Men do their politics at night when women are home, taking care of their families; when women do the same, they are called loose women.”

For young women, marital status is a critical factor in politics. In their parents' home, their family restricts them from aspiring to or joining politics while unmarried. Yet again, some married women are controlled by their husbands, who may refuse them to enter politics or be otherwise actively involved. These are experiences so many women and girls can relate to and identify as some of their main barriers.

“

I faced many challenges when I joined a political party in my second year at the university. First, even though I was not under 18, they wanted consent from a parent/guardian, which my uncle refused. My aunty signed the consent form, and I joined, but my uncle made it difficult for me to participate actively; at some point, he hid my ID card and would restrict me from going out to attend party meetings over the weekend.”

“

When I was nominated to the state assembly, my uncles were angry that I did not get permission from them first.”

“

My cousin wanted to serve in the Jonglei State Assembly through her party, but her husband was against it and refused the party to nominate her, yet she is very competent.”

Limited resource access for women

Politics is capital-intensive. South Sudan is patriarchal; many women depend on their husbands or other male relatives because men own families and communal wealth. “Appointed or elected, political positions are lobbied for,” says a young woman politician. To lobby, campaign, and effectively engage or serve your constituency requires material resources that women, young or old, usually lack. Even within political parties, individual members with resources are deemed more worthy. In other words, operating in a male-dominated space where men hold social, political, and economic power, women, especially young women in politics, are vulnerable and prone to sexual exploitation and abuse.



South Sudan is **patriarchal**; many women depend on their husbands or other male relatives because men **own families and communal wealth**.

“

Politics requires money; I cannot join if I do not have money. Otherwise, I will be forced to depend on others and can quickly be taken advantage of or forced to be answerable to whoever supports me financially.”

Facing double marginalization of age and gender

While young women are being encouraged to join politics, those who have already taken that step are battling many challenges; being young and female tops this list. They live in the shadows of older women and male youth in women's and youth spaces, respectively.



Sometimes, even when they invite me to events, they prioritize other speakers and do not give me any chance to speak because they believe that, being a young woman, I know nothing. Sometimes they do not even recognize you. Even when we make it here, it is still hard to participate because they see you like you have no experience.”



My main challenge has been a lack of respect; being a young woman, even when I introduced myself as an MP, I still get disrespected, especially by men, at checkpoints, by traffic police officers, and everywhere for no other reason but the fact that I am young and female.”

Learning from other Women's Experiences



One of the challenges raised in all three focus group discussions with young women was their inability to access and engage with women in politics; politicians are feared and not seen as public servants. These young women lack opportunities to interact and get first-hand lessons from women in politics. At the same time, little is documented about the experiences and milestones of South Sudanese women in politics for them to read or learn about.



I want to be inspired by the positive things South Sudanese women in politics have done, but there is no such documentation.”

The same applied to this research; the accessibility of interviewees was a challenge. Out of the seven veteran women politicians that were identified for key-informant interviews, only three were accessed. Some seemed hesitant to be interviewed, and others were too busy; they kept rescheduling the interview. This study then focused on young women politicians who were equally not easily accessible. Establishing contacts was a big challenge; when some references were attained, many were not responsive to the interview requests.

Conversations with three veteran women politicians sought to draw lessons for a young generation of women in politics. Their key messages were to

- 1) not be content with affirmative action,
- 2) prioritize the education of women,
- 3) invest in movement building and organizing,
- 4) foster alliance building across borders and
- 5) leverage international legislation for the advancement of women's goals.



The

35%

quota for women's representation is just a threshold and young women need to aim and work to achieve beyond that fighting more rigorously and demanding for more.

Affirmative action is a start, not an endpoint

Young women must understand that affirmative action is not the limit of their representation and participation; it is the bare minimum. The 35% quota for women's representation is just a threshold, something to use as the starting point for negotiations, and young women need to aim and work to achieve beyond that. Young women must rigorously fight and demand more; no one will hand it to them.



When we did not have 25%, they could be comfortable with just one woman representing us, and they would say women are represented, but when we had 25%, we would say that is not what the interim constitution says. . Today, when we use this 35% to negotiate with our leadership, even before we talk, our leadership will say I do not want to go into trouble with women, which means that our messages have been received properly. I have sat with President Kiir in several forums, and he would say, I do not want to go into trouble with women; let them have their rights before they come for my neck."

In short, while the struggle is far from over, affirmative action has also afforded women an increase in political leverage, which they may use to strengthen their position further.

Equal access to education as an essential investment

The three veteran women politicians interviewed shared in common the support from their families, right from giving them equal access to education, a privilege many girls did not have to access to political spaces. It is not about teaching women their rights but dismantling the patriarchal system, shifting attitudes and mindsets, and redistributing gendered roles limiting women's abilities to work outside the home.



You cannot have a culture that refuses a woman from working outside of the home; of course, you can say I have 25%, but if women are not educated, if you do not create room for girls to go to school if you marry them early, how can you at the same time have women to fill the 25% if you have not created a conducive atmosphere?"

Forging networks of solidarity: organizing and movement building

Veteran women politicians interviewed during this research stressed the need for organizing and movement building. During the liberation struggle, women's associations and unions were crucial in advancing women's politics and rights. Some later transformed and registered as women-led nongovernmental organizations. Through these bodies, women gained access to decision-making positions and demanded to be recognized as stakeholders that must be included in all processes. They mobilized and organized as women, capitalizing on each other's expertise and strength regardless of their professional backgrounds. Within and across borders, whether in Khartoum, SPLA liberated/controlled areas, displaced to the neighboring countries, or overseas, sisterhood was a strategy that worked well for women during the liberation struggle. It enabled them to stay connected, form support networks, and continue the fight regardless of where they found themselves. For example, women in neighboring countries like Kenya, the U.S.A., the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, etc., were in better positions to lobby and do international advocacy and campaigns on global companies exploring oil and fueling the conflict.

Both generations have identified a divide within women's spaces as a rising hurdle preventing intergenerational dialogues and intersectoral collaborations. We observe a trend of individualism over collective resistance. During the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) between 1983-2005, women mobilized themselves across different ethnic backgrounds and expertise.



There was no differentiation between women in politics, humanitarian, or education sectors. We had the same problems and demanded solutions together.”

Today women are more divided; women in civil society, politics, humanitarian, and business, among other sectors, are working and focused on their sectors with minimal alliances to build and sustain a collective women's movement across sectors.

A commitment to cross-sectoral organizing and collaboration will strengthen movement-building among today's young women. There is still a huge population of South Sudanese in the diaspora. The advantage of digital technology has made accessibility and connectivity easier across the vast country of South Sudan and with the still huge diaspora population to build solidarity at home and abroad and amplify their voices.

International instruments as tools of empowerment

Legal frameworks are a foundational step to women's liberation. Advocacy at regional and international levels and ensuring South Sudan adopted International instruments, such as The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and UN Security Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security among others, were significant efforts leading to the formulation of national action plans and policies that women's rights organizations continue to capitalize on to advance women's rights and hold the government to account where national laws and policies fall short. There is a lot that can be achieved at regional and international levels that influence laws and policies on women's rights in South Sudan that young women politicians must not lose sight of.

Conclusions and Recommendations





The efforts of donors and other international actors can be more effective if they **supplement national efforts aligned with priorities to address gender inequality in South Sudan,** especially on the political front.

Women's meaningful political participation and engagement will significantly influence national policies and legal frameworks that protect women's and girls' interests, ensure gender mainstreaming, and sufficient national allocation of financial resources and commitments to gender equity and equality broadly. As this study has shown, public institutions have a vital role to play in enhancing young women's participation in politics in South Sudan. It's not enough to "empower" young women if the cultural, political, economic, and social structural barriers limiting their effective participation and engagement as citizens are not addressed. It's not about adding young women to dysfunctional politics. The efforts of donors and other international actors can be more effective if they supplement national efforts aligned with priorities to address gender inequality in South Sudan, especially on the political front.

1. Collect and publicly avail data on the participation of female youth in politics.

Data plays a vital role in formulating effective policy. We found that quantitative data on women's participation, especially young women, is hardly available. The dearth of (publicly available) sex and age aggregated data across legislative and government institutions at national and state levels is an obstacle to better policymaking for the participation of young women in politics. Collecting aggregate national data on youth, specifically young women in politics, is premised on a unified understanding of who constitutes youth. Critically, a codified definition of youth in the South Sudanese legal framework is needed. Public institutions must prioritize documentation, digitization, and archiving of age and sex-segregated data and make such data accessible to the public.

The experiences, journeys, and milestones of women in politics must be documented while these women are still here to tell their stories. Digital technology, alongside traditional data storage tools, should be taken advantage of to ensure the safety and accessibility of information to the public.

2. Support civic engagement in schools, universities, and community structures.

There are structures and groups from where young women can be drawn into formal politics; these include high schools and universities with student leadership bodies that are political in their rights. Political Parties, through their respective parties' secretariats or youth and women's leagues. Community associations, especially youth associations, are a segue to leadership positions. Local communities' forms of governance are a great opportunity that young women should not undervalue because community leaders act as brokers between formal institutions and community members. In the long run, more active young women in community leadership structures can potentially shift the attitudes and gender biases toward women and leadership, which in return can positively impact their formal political participation. Donor engagement aiming to strengthen the participation of young women in politics should support young women's participation in the community, high school and university associations, and leadership bodies.

3. Invest in a strong pluralistic democratic multiparty system.

Despite how 'dysfunctional' or disorganized the existing political parties might seem, they are the principal points of any political leadership. More work still needs to be done to increase interest for young women to join political parties because it is through political parties that they can be appointed to political positions. Parties must make information about their political parties, manifestos, and constitutions available and accessible at various youth entry points, such as universities or community youth associations. Many young women new to the political space might not stand many chances, with significant parties like SPLM primarily dominated by veterans and founding members. On the other hand, small parties are desperate for visibility and want to legitimize themselves. It is about being strategic and calculative, and young women must understand these dynamics and where more opportunities might lie, especially with parties that fit their political orientation/agenda.

In pursuing a democratic South Sudanese state, broad participation in a vibrant political party landscape is central. Veterans of the liberation struggle have dominated parties, but generational change is inevitable. Young political talent is nurtured in high schools, universities, and community associations. The development of women's political talent in these institutions should be supported.

4. Foster collaboration and alliance-building across institutions and sectors.

Women of all ages interviewed for this research underscored the need for organizing and alliance-building across institutions, issues, and international borders. This included better coordination among the age group through a youth caucus in parliament, collaboration and alliance building across sectors and boundaries, and intergenerational dialogue among women politicians. During interviews with some of the young women MPs, they mentioned that they are working on creating the youth or young parliamentarians' caucus, just like the established women's caucus at every legislative assembly, which makes it easy to access women in parliament and would also be an excellent opportunity for youth parliamentarians to organize and strategically engage with other youth groups. This would be a great body to engage. In the meantime, legislative assemblies have Youth and Sports Committee records of all MPs they consider "young" and could be an access point to young women parliamentarians.

Young women in politics need other young women in sectors such as NGO, humanitarian, business, law, health, education, learning institutions, and community associations, to mention a few. Challenges that affect South Sudanese girls and young women are interrelated, and young women in politics must be aware and in touch with the realities of young women across sectors. Policy and development interventions targeting young women in politics, either by the government, civil society organizations, or international organizations, must ensure that young women in politics are not alienated from other networks of young women. They must be designed to enable engagement and foster organizing and movement-building on critical social and policy issues across sectors.

5. Build intergenerational bridges to encourage mutual learning between 'veterans' and 'youth' among women in politics.

A significant gap between older and young women/girls limits information and experience sharing. Intergenerational conversations often tend to be one-directional in ways that place one group as the “expert” speakers and the other as listeners. There is a need for intergeneration dialogues and mentorship programs that foster a brave space, enable mutual learning and support, build trust, sustain connectedness, build reciprocal relationships of solidarity, and ensure personal and professional transformation. Conversations and support grounded in respect and appreciation of the diversity of identities amongst women as a collective strength. The older women in politics have much to learn from the younger women politicians and vice versa. All interviews and focus group discussions raised the need for intergenerational dialogues and mentorship, especially for women in politics.

6. Strengthen women-focused civic education and political skills training.

Preparing young women for politics also requires capacity building, making information about politics and political parties more accessible, and targeted skills enhancement. For young women in politics, in addition to political leadership skills and political economy, there is often an assumption that being a woman means one is gender aware. There is a need to deepen women in politics’ understanding of gender and patriarchal systems of oppression and how they can better position and center women and girls’ needs in their politics.

Lack of information about politics, political parties, or their manifestos, and limited access to women in politics, especially those slightly higher up the ladder, remains a big challenge for young women, especially those who aspire or could aspire to join politics. The government, civil Society, and women-led organizations need to scale up capacity enhancement programming and information-sharing mechanisms where young women can stay informed on various political issues. This can include digital technology options for access to information to raise the political consciousness of young women to make informed political decisions, especially on political parties to join.

Especially for young women who are already in politics, one of the most pressing needs is building their capacity in public speaking and presentation, essential communication, advocacy, lobbying, and negotiation skills to make them more assertive in their communication and boost their confidence and credibility.



We need to break stereotypes about women and leadership. A lot of the work lies in unlearning things we are taught to believe about ourselves. If we build our confidence, nothing can stop us; the work starts with the self before others can want to support us.”

Some initiatives by and for South Sudanese women contribute to building leadership skills and raising the feminist and political consciousness of young women in South Sudan through programs that balance self-awareness, knowledge, and skills-based approaches and foster mentorship and cross-sectoral relations among young women and girls. Others keen to strengthen young women’s political participation should learn from these existing approaches, may scale them up, or adapt to design other programs with similar objectives.²⁴

7. Improve access to political financing for women.

Money plays a critical role in any electoral process: lobbying for posts, some requiring nomination fees, and campaigns, to mention a few. All that require resources, especially money.

The constraints of access to campaign funds importantly reflect women’s position in the economic system. Unless women have a more significant share in the country’s economy, more substantial women participation in the long term will continue to face disproportionate constraints in the mobilization of money for political activities.

While women must build coalitions with women in other sectors, like women in business, women should look to more than just women for funds. The government should explore political party financing mechanisms tailored to promote the participation of (young) women in elective politics. More importantly, government, non-state actors, and donors should ensure sustained support to prepare women for participation in elections and political leadership positions.

Endnotes

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- 18 Observing Sudan’s 2010 National Elections (Final Report). The Carter Center, 2010.
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- 24 These include the National Transformational Leadership Institute (NTLI), a semi-autonomous institution at the University of Juba that conducts a series of leadership training, passing the baton by Mara Muhim, a young women’s program by one of the veteran feminist politicians, Dr. Anne Itto, focused on raising the political consciousness of young South Sudanese women. The Incubator – Young Women Leadership program by Eve Organization for Women Development combines skills-based training and mentorship for young women and the Feminists’ Talking Circles by Ma’ Mara Sakit Village, a program on feminist conscious-raising.

YOUNG WOMEN IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN SOUTH SUDAN: LESSONS FROM LIVED EXPERIENCES

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