



INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE FOR PEACE:

Promoting Young Women's Meaningful Political Participation In South Sudan

Annual Monitoring Report:
Reporting Period | July 2024 - June 2025

The production of this Annual Monitoring Report was developed under the Inclusive Governance for Peace Project: Promoting Young Women's Meaningful Political Participation in South Sudan. This was generously funded by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (UNPBF) through the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in South Sudan.

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Published June 2026

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ISBN 978-9913-685-24-5



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research would not have been possible without the generosity, honesty, and willingness of so many young women, leaders, organizations, and community actors who gave their time, shared their experiences and reflections throughout this process.

We especially want to thank the young women across Central Equatoria, Western Equatoria, and Western Bahr el Ghazal who participated in the surveys, focus group discussions, interviews, and case studies. Thank you for trusting us with your stories, experiences, frustrations, hopes, and ideas. Many of you spoke openly about deeply personal and political experiences, and this report is shaped directly by that honesty, courage, and vision.

We also want to appreciate the young women whose leadership journeys were documented as case studies. Your stories reminded us that even within difficult and often exclusionary systems, young women are organizing, leading, mobilizing communities, and creating different political futures for themselves and their communities.

A special thank you goes to the young women data enumerators, namely Tekla Baptist, Marlin John, and Stella Joseph, for the care, patience, and commitment you brought into the data collection process across the three states. How you engaged participants and held space for difficult conversations contributed greatly to the depth and quality of this research. We also deeply appreciate Jackie Ben, Team Lead at Ma'Mara Sakit Village, for her leadership, support with data collection, and coordination throughout the research process across the three states.

We are equally grateful to all the key informants and stakeholders who took part in this research and generously shared their insights and experiences. This includes representatives from youth-led organizations, women-led organizations, government institutions, political parties, civil society organizations, peace negotiators, development partners, and local and community leaders. Your reflections helped deepen the analysis around representation, institutional barriers, participation, and the broader realities shaping young women's political and peacebuilding engagement in South Sudan.

Finally, sincere gratitude goes to the SIHA Team, including Hala Al-Karib, the Regional Director; Faizat Badmus Busari, the Regional Programme Manager; Doreen Murungi, the Regional Communications and Advocacy Coordinator, Ramatoulie Jallow, the Regional Research and Advocacy Officer and Jackline Bage, the South Sudan Country Lead for their contributions and guidance throughout this process.

We hope this report contributes to the ongoing conversations, advocacy, and efforts toward building more inclusive and accountable political and peacebuilding structures and systems for young women across South Sudan.

The Annual Monitoring Report should be cited as follows: The Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) Network, “Inclusive Governance for Peace: Promoting Young Women’s Meaningful Political Participation in South Sudan - Annual Monitoring Report,” 2026.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Meaning
CES	Central Equatoria State
CSO / CSOs	Civil Society Organisation(s)
FGD / FGDs	Focus Group Discussion(s)
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
KII / KIIs	Key Informant Interview(s)
MP / MPs	Member(s) of Parliament
R-ARCSS	Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
SIHA Network	Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNSCR 1325	United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325
WBeG	Western Bahr el Ghazal State
WES	Western Equatoria State
YMO	Youth Multi-Purpose Organization

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Annual Monitoring Report examines the participation of young women (aged between 18–35 years old) in political and peacebuilding processes in Central Equatoria State, Western Equatoria State, and Western Bahr el Ghazal State from July 2024 to June 2025. Conducted by Ma’Mara Sakit Village for the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) Network, the study explores the barriers, opportunities, and lived realities shaping young women’s participation in governance and peacebuilding. Using a feminist and intersectional mixed-methods approach, the research combines surveys with ninety-four (94) young women, thirty-six (36) key informant interviews and seven (7) focus group discussions involving fifty-eight (58) participants, institutional mapping, and case studies.

The findings reveal a significant contradiction: young women are actively participating in political and peacebuilding spaces yet remain largely excluded from meaningful power and decision-making. Survey findings showed that 68.1% of respondents participated in political activities and 69.1% engaged in peacebuilding initiatives, including civic education, advocacy, community dialogues, mediation, and grassroots mobilization. However, this participation rarely translated into institutional influence. Young women occupied only 1.1% of seats in the National Parliament and between 3% and 5% in state assemblies. Within political parties, ministries, and formal peace negotiations, they were frequently confined to symbolic, supportive, or administrative roles rather than strategic leadership positions.

Across all three (3) states, participants identified patriarchal norms, institutional gatekeeping, economic hardship, and insecurity as major barriers to participation. Sexual harassment and exploitation emerged as one of the most severe and normalized forms of political exclusion, with young women reporting pressure to exchange sexual favours for employment, political access, or leadership opportunities. Young women with disabilities faced additional barriers related to inaccessible spaces, lack of information access, and targeted discrimination. The study also found that cultural expectations around marriage, age, and femininity continue to shape perceptions of who is considered legitimate to lead.

Despite these challenges, young women have demonstrated remarkable resilience, agency, and leadership. They continue to play important roles in community peacebuilding, conflict mediation, advocacy for survivors of gender-based violence, youth mobilization, and civic engagement. Young women involved in the Tumaini Peace Initiative also influenced discussions behind the scenes, particularly through thematic working groups and advocacy for youth and women’s inclusion.

The report identifies civil society organizations, mentorship, training, peer networks, and safe spaces as critical enablers of participation. It concludes that meaningful inclusion

requires more than symbolic representation or one-off training programs. Sustainable change demands structural reform, enforcement of gender and youth inclusion commitments, accountability for political violence and harassment, stronger investment in mentorship and leadership pathways, and long-term support for young women’s political participation and peacebuilding work in South Sudan.

INTRODUCTION

South Sudan’s governance and peacebuilding landscape continues to be shaped by the legacies of conflict, political instability, weak institutions, and deeply entrenched gender inequalities. Since gaining independence in 2011, the country has experienced repeated cycles of violence and political transition that have significantly affected social cohesion, civic trust, and inclusive participation in public life. Within this context, young women remain among the groups most excluded from political leadership, governance, and formal peace processes. Their exclusion is shaped not only by gender discrimination but also by intersecting barriers linked to age, economic marginalization, insecurity, limited political exposure, and restrictive social and cultural norms. These factors continue to define leadership and decision-making as male-dominated spaces.

Although South Sudan has made formal commitments toward gender inclusion, including the 35% affirmative-action provision¹, and the South Sudan National Action Plan on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2023–2027)², implementation remains inconsistent across governance and peacebuilding structures. Existing literature, advocacy efforts, and observations from civil society actors suggest that young women continue to engage in governance, civic, and peacebuilding spaces despite structural exclusion and limited institutional support. However, there remains limited, consolidated evidence documenting the nature of their participation, the barriers they encounter, and the conditions that enable or restrict their engagement across the different contexts.

In response to these gaps, SIHA Network launched the “Inclusive Governance for Peace” initiative, under which Ma’Mara Sakit Village was commissioned to produce this Annual Monitoring Report. This study focuses on Central Equatoria State (CES), Western Equatoria State (WES), and Western Bahr el Ghazal State (WbeG), which are the current states of implementation for SIHA’s programming in South Sudan. These states provide important

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¹*Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), 2018*

²*Republic of South Sudan. National Action Plan on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2023–2027). Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, 2023.*

contexts for examining young women's participation in governance and peacebuilding processes across different political, civic, and community settings.

The research adopted a feminist, participatory, and intersectional mixed-methods approach that prioritized the lived experiences and voices of young women themselves. The study combined surveys, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, institutional mapping, desk review, and case studies to examine both formal and informal forms of participation. Particular attention was given to understanding how factors such as safety, access to resources, mentorship, institutional support, education, disability, and community attitudes shape young women's political and peacebuilding experiences. The methodology also emphasized ethical engagement, trauma-informed facilitation, inclusivity, and the participation of young women researchers and enumerators throughout the research process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The participation of young women in South Sudan’s political structures is extremely low. A Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study found that fewer than 1% of parliamentarians were young women (under thirty (30)), reflecting exclusion due to sociocultural norms, limited educational opportunities, and party dynamics. Women’s representation in the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity also remains below the 35% target, especially at local levels.³

Gender gaps in political participation in sub-Saharan Africa are well-documented. Afro-barometer data shows small voter registration gaps but larger differences in informal and decision-making participation. Young women face constraints due to limited education and financial resources. For instance, a Kenyan study found a strong link between young women’s access to economic resources and their corresponding political engagement.⁴

In the South Sudanese context, the problem is compounded by a post-conflict political transition, weak institutions, and patriarchal traditions that render young women invisible in mainstream politics. The gap in research specifically focusing on young women (18-35) in politics suggests the need for more disaggregated studies that examine age, gender, and context.

2.1 PEACE PROCESSES AND YOUNG WOMEN’S ROLE

While women have been active at grassroots levels in peace-building in South Sudan, their roles are frequently informal and are rarely embedded in formal negotiation or decision-making arenas. Similarly, studies highlight that female-led local initiatives in reconciliation, livelihoods, and gender-based violence response are prevalent but seldom feed into formal peace processes.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP’s) study on gender and peace-building shows that women’s roles are shifting but still constrained by norms and insecurity. More recent UN reports emphasize that young women are increasingly participating in youth-led peace initiatives, signaling growing interest and agency.⁵

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³Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, “Young Women in Political Institutions in South Sudan,” 2023.

⁴Hilde Coffe and Catherine Bolzendahl, “Gender Gaps in Political Participation across Sub-Saharan African Nations,” *Social Indicators Research* 102, no. 2 (July 22, 2010): 245–64, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-010-9676-6>.

⁵United Nations, “Gender and Social Inclusion – UNFPA South Sudan Country Programme,” 2023.

Resolution of Conflict (R-ARCSS) recognised two (2) women’s groups, the Women’s Bloc of South Sudan and the South Sudan Women’s Coalition, as stakeholders and signatories.⁶ A young woman also served as the youth representative. Both groups advocated for their representation in various implementation mechanisms of the peace agreement, marking a significant milestone. This progress did not come easily - the women and youth fought tirelessly for these seats at the table during the negotiations and beyond.

In January 2020, peace talks began between the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity and South Sudanese opposition groups that had not signed the 2018 Revitalised Agreement. These discussions led to the Rome Declaration on the Peace Process in South Sudan. However, progress stalled, prompting President Salva Kiir to request that President William Ruto of Kenya take over the talks. This resulted in the launch of the Tumaini Peace Initiative in Nairobi, in May 2024, with a focus on assessing the participation of young women.⁷

Despite the 35% affirmative action quota and efforts to include women and youth in the mechanisms of the R-ARCSS, young women’s access to formal peace mechanisms, leadership positions, and decision-making spaces remains limited, often hindered by entrenched norms, hierarchies and security concerns.⁵

2.2 BARRIERS, ENABLERS, AND ENABLING CONDITIONS

Across the reviewed literature, key barriers include:

- ◆ Sociocultural norms and patriarchal systems;
- ◆ Limited access to education and economic resources;
- ◆ Security risks and conflict-related displacement;
- ◆ Weak institutional frameworks; and
- ◆ Lack of political will.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), notes South Sudan’s deep gender and social exclusion context, including high rates of child marriage, as a major factor limiting women’s participation. Young women with disabilities and those from minority or rural groups are particularly marginalized.⁸

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⁶ Madhav Joshi, “The R-ARCSS and Institutionalizing Peace and Stability in South Sudan,” *Journal of World Affairs: Voice of the Global South*, October 22, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1177/29769442251384734>.

⁷ Ibrahim Magara and Jan Pospisil, “Overloaded? Hope and Scepticism around the Tumaini Peace Initiative for South Sudan,” *Coventry University*, May 27, 2024, <https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/en/publications/overloaded-hope-and-scepticism-around-the-tumaini-peace-initiativ/>.

⁸ Diana Blench Heebøll, “Unveiling Gendered Peace : A Policy Analysis of South Sudan ´S Strategy for

Conversely, several enablers are identified in the literature, such as:

- ◆ Civic and leadership training for young women;
- ◆ Mentorship programs and capacity-building initiatives;
- ◆ Institutional reforms that encourage women’s participation; and
- ◆ Youth-centred advocacy and safe spaces for dialogue.

2.3 GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CURRENT STUDY

The literature reveals notable gaps: First, many studies treat “women” as a singular group instead of recognising young women (aged 18-35) as a unique demographic. Second, there is a focus on higher-level governance (like parliaments) while neglecting youth, peace structures and young women’s everyday leadership roles. Lastly, there is a lack of disaggregated data on young women’s dual roles in politics and peacebuilding, particularly in post-peace agreement settings.

A further gap concerns definitional inconsistency around youth. The African Youth Charter defines youth as between 15–35 years old, while this study operationalises young women as 18–35 years old to focus on young adult participants and to align with the research design. When comparing the study findings with broader youth policy frameworks, this distinction should be considered.

This study, therefore, presents an opportunity to fill crucial gaps by capturing the participation of young women in both governance and peace processes, including the Tumaini Peace Initiative from July 2024 to June 2025.⁹ It will also document success stories, intersectional perspectives, and links grassroots participation with formal policy spaces, with a focus on CES, WES, and WBeG. It provides a timely opportunity to fill these gaps by documenting young women’s leadership experiences in governance and peace processes, identifying barriers, success stories, enabling factors, linking grassroots participation with policy advocacy.

Women, Peace and Security (2015-2020),” DIVA, June 11, 2024, <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1867860&dswid=7952>.

⁹ Rachel George et al., “POLICY BRIEF Implementing Women, Peace and Security: Reflections on 25 Years,” *Commitment 2025 (October 2025)*, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/C25-Policy.pdf>.

2.4 THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ALIGNMENT

The reviewed literature supports a feminist intersectional framework that focuses on:

- ◆ Access to political and peace processes;
- ◆ Agency in decision-making; and
- ◆ Institutional inclusion and representation.

This framework examines how age, gender, and regional context intersect to influence the inclusive participation of young women. It aligns with feminist peace-building theories and regional commitments, such as UNSCR 1325 and the African Youth Charter, both of which emphasize the roles of women and youth in sustaining peace and governance.

Reference to the Maputo Protocol is also relevant here, particularly Article 10 on the Right to Peace, which affirms women's right to participate in the promotion and maintenance of peace. Despite South Sudan's ratification of the Maputo Protocol in 2023, the underrepresentation of women, particularly young women, continues to have limited implementation in practice.

2.5 LITERATURE REVIEW CONCLUSION

The existing literature highlights the continued marginalization of young women in South Sudan's political and peace landscapes, while also identifying enablers and emerging leadership pathways. Despite progress in recognizing women's contributions, studies focusing specifically on young women remain scarce. This research, therefore, fills a crucial gap by generating disaggregated evidence and amplifying the voices of young South Sudanese women in the areas of peace-building and governance. It aims to provide actionable recommendations to strengthen inclusive governance, enhance youth engagement, and promote gender equality within South Sudan's evolving political context.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This section outlines the methodological framework used to examine young women's participation in political and peace processes across CES, WES, and WBeG (July 2024–June 2025). A mixed-methods approach combined quantitative and qualitative techniques to capture both measurable trends and lived experiences related to participation, barriers, and enablers.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed, enabling the simultaneous collection and subsequent integration of quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data provided statistical insights into participation and institutional representation, while qualitative findings offered a deeper understanding of experiences and contextual influences. Triangulation across multiple sources enhanced validity and reliability.

3.3 STUDY LOCATION AND CONTEXT

Three (3) states, CES, WES, and WBeG, were purposively selected because they are where SIHA is present and working in South Sudan, and they reflect South Sudan's geographic and sociopolitical diversity. CES represents the urban, politically active hub; WES, a state with strong civil society engagement; and WBeG, a context influenced by traditional structures. The study period captured one year of key political and civic events.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

3.4.1 Quantitative: Survey

A structured survey was administered to ninety-four (94) young women (18–35 years) from CES (53.2%), WES (24.5%), and WBeG (22.3%). Participants were reached via a survey with a mixed administration approach: thirty-six (36) responses were collected online via a Google survey form, while fifty-eight (58) surveys were administered manually during focus group discussions across the three (3) states and later digitized. Questions explored awareness, engagement, motivations, barriers, and support systems, complemented by demographic data (the majority aged 25–35; 62% university-educated).

3.4.2 Qualitative: Key Informant Interviews

Thirty-six (36) semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of youth leaders, policymakers, women's rights advocates, local government leaders, women-led CSOs, youth-led CSOs, community leaders, political parties, Tumaini Peace Initiative delegates, key youth-focused public institutions, and development partners. Discussions explored representation, policy, institutional barriers, and opportunities for enhanced participation.

3.4.3 Qualitative: Focus Group Discussions

Seven (7) focus groups with fifty-eight (58) participants (Central Equatoria = 3, Western Equatoria = 2, Western Bahr el Ghazal = 2) examined shared experiences, barriers, safety concerns, and aspirations. Each group (7-12 participants) encouraged peer validation and collective reflection. Participants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling, with an emphasis on young women involved in leadership, governance, political participation, and peace-building within their communities and various institutions. To strengthen inclusivity, one focus group discussion was conducted specifically with young women with disabilities to ensure that disability-related experiences and barriers were represented in the study.

3.4.4 Institutional Representation Analysis

Quantitative data were compiled on the presence of young women in parliament, state assemblies, youth ministries and unions, disaggregated by age and gender.

3.4.5 Case Studies

Three (3) case studies profiled young women leaders, one from each state, highlighting the pathways, enabling factors, and challenges they faced in their leadership journeys.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

3.5.1 Quantitative Analysis

Survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and logistic regression. The chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 2.95$, $p = 0.937$) showed no significant link between education and participation. Regression models identified key predictors such as mentorship, support, and exposure to training.

3.5.2 Qualitative Analysis

Transcripts from interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and open-ended survey responses were thematically analyzed through coding, theme development, and matrix comparison. Major themes included representation, policy frameworks, capacity building, cultural and institutional barriers, security, economic constraints, digital safety, and enabling factors. Sentiment analysis categorized emotional tone as positive, negative, or neutral.

3.5.3 Integration of Findings

Quantitative findings revealed participation trends, while qualitative data explained the underlying causes. Integrating both provided a holistic understanding of the factors shaping young women's political and peace-building roles.

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study adhered to ethical standards, ensuring that informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were maintained. Trauma-informed approaches were used when discussing sensitive topics like harassment or violence, and referral support was provided as needed.

3.7 STUDY LIMITATIONS

The cross-sectional design captured a single-year snapshot, limiting causal interpretation. Statistical generalizability was restricted due to a modest sample size and potential bias from non-random sampling. Self-report and recall biases, along with political instability, may have affected disclosure and access. Nevertheless, triangulated data provide a credible picture of current participation patterns.

While the mixed survey administration approach helped expand participation beyond digitally connected respondents, the sample remained skewed toward university-educated young women. This may reflect the greater visibility, accessibility, and civic engagement of more educated young women, potentially limiting the representation of less formally educated or less networked participants.

The identification of focus group participants through purposive and snowball sampling strengthened the study's ability to gather insights from actively engaged young women leaders and marginalized groups; however, it may also have resulted in greater participation from more visible, educated, and institutionally connected women, leading to the potential underrepresentation of less visible young women operating outside formal civic or leadership spaces.

RESULTS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This section presents findings from this mixed-methods study on the political and peace-building participation of young women in CES, WES, and WBeG (July 2024-June 2025). Results are organised by data source: institutional data, surveys, key informant interviews (KIIs), FGDs, and a cross-state thematic analysis.

4.2 RESULTS AT A GLANCE

The figures below simplify the main quantitative and qualitative findings for easier reading. Detailed tables are retained in the section for transparency and validation.

Figure 1: Women and young women in parliamentary representation

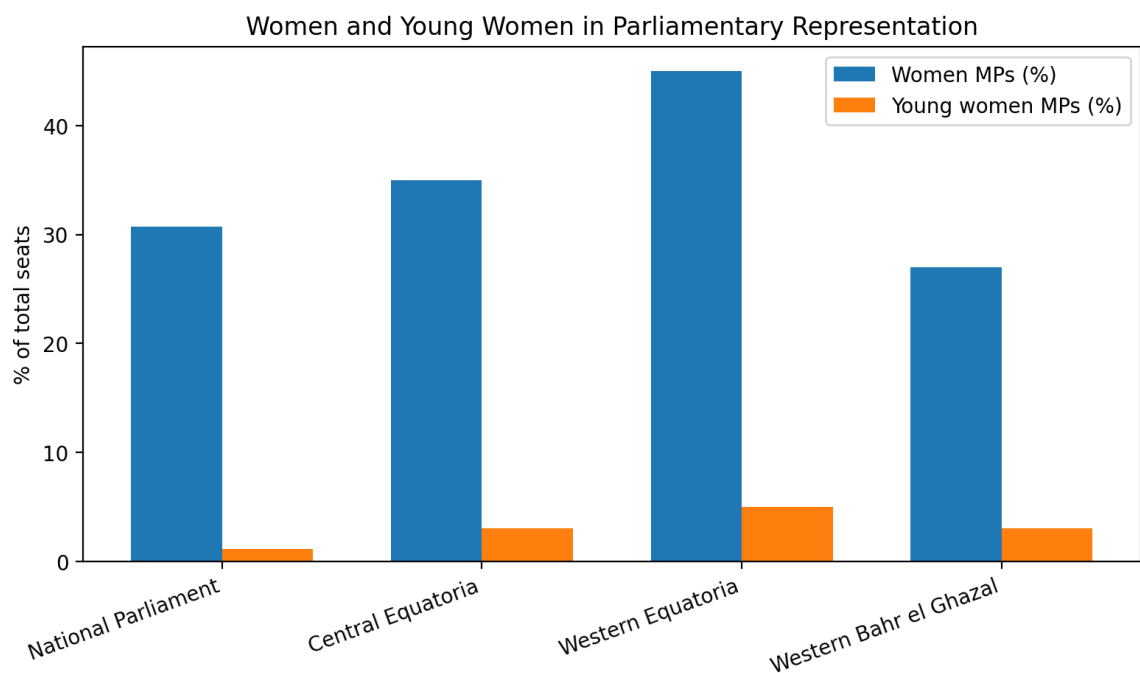


Figure 1 shows that women and young women are present in formal political institutions, but young women remain severely underrepresented. Although women hold 30.7% of national parliamentary seats and 27-45% of seats across the three (3) state assemblies, young women account for only 1.1% nationally and 3-5% at state level, indicating that gender inclusion has not yet translated into generational inclusion.

Figure 2: Survey snapshot on participation, barriers and safety

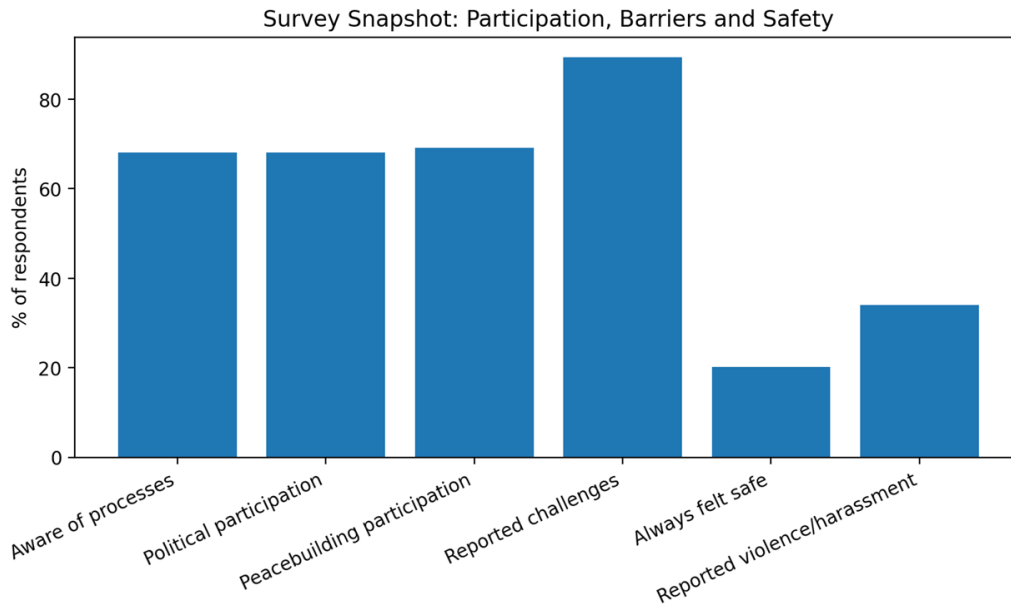


Figure 2 highlights the contrast between relatively high awareness and participation and continued insecurity. While many respondents had received training and reported engagement in political or peacebuilding activities, they also described limited opportunities, exclusion, and safety risks, showing that participation does not necessarily mean meaningful or protected inclusion.

Figure 3: Top reported current participation barriers compared with future support priorities

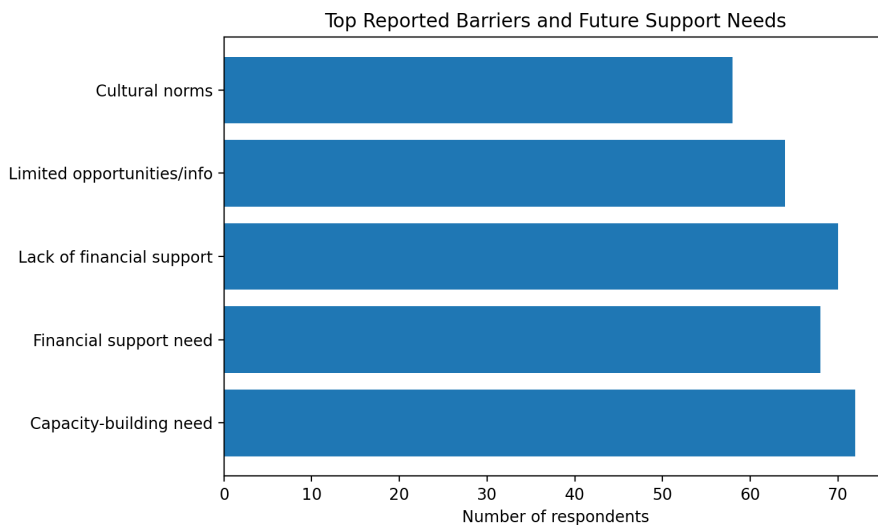


Figure 3 separates current barriers from future support priorities. “Lack of financial support” refers to the immediate resource gap preventing participation, such as transport, campaign costs, and access to meetings. “Financial support needs” refers to the support respondents identified as necessary going forward to sustain engagement, leadership pathways, and programme participation.

Figure 4: Cross-state sentiment distribution in qualitative data (sentiment on participation experiences, barriers, safety, inclusion, and support systems)

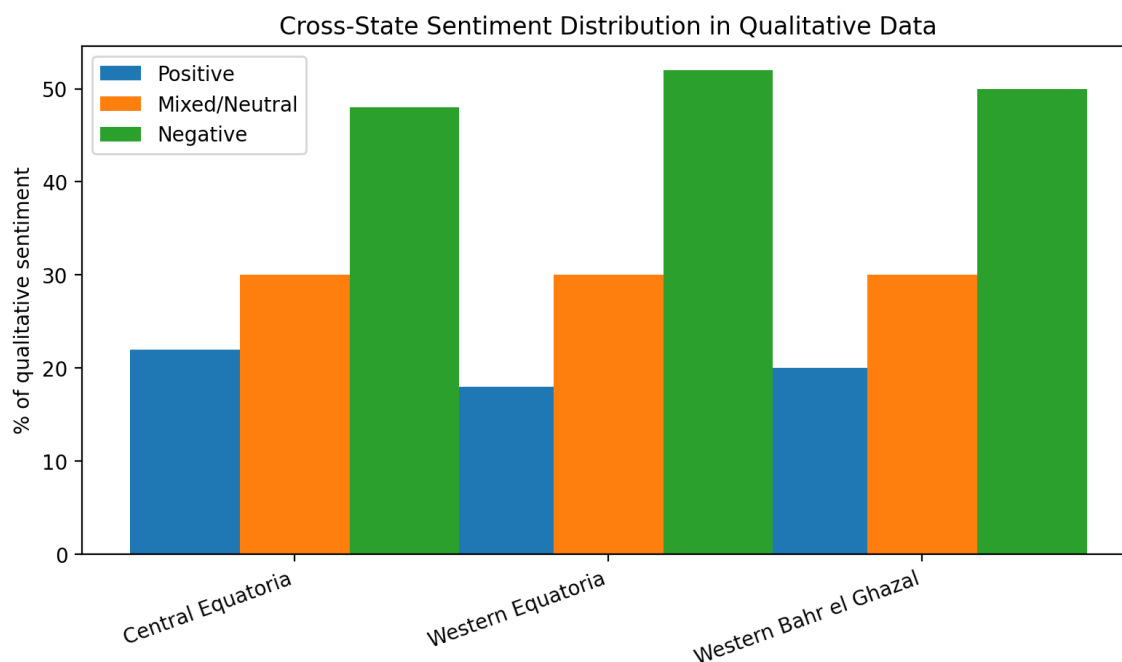


Figure 4 summarizes sentiment across qualitative discussions on young women’s participation, including institutional exclusion, harassment and gender-based violence (GBV), cultural restrictions, resource constraints, safety, and support systems. Negative sentiment was dominant across all three (3) states, while positive sentiment was mainly associated with CSO support, mentorship, training, and examples of young women’s agency.

4.3 INSTITUTIONAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND YOUNG WOMEN

National-Level Representation: Young women are severely underrepresented in the National Parliament. While women hold one hundred and sixty-nine (169) of five hundred and fifty (550) seats (30.7%), only six (6) MPs (1.1% of the total, 3.6% of women) are young women under 35, revealing a pronounced generational gap.

State-Level Representation: State assemblies show variation. WES has the highest representation of women (45%) and young women (5%). CES and WBeG each have 3% young women MPs, though the latter has the lowest overall women’s representation (27%).

Table 4.1: Comparison of Parliamentary Representation Across Levels:

Indicator	National Parliament	Central Equatoria Assembly	Western Equatoria Assembly	Western Bahr el Ghazal Assembly
Total Seats	550	100	100	100
Total Women MPs	169	35	45	27
% Women	30.7%	35%	45%	27%
Young Women MPs (<35)	6	3	5	3
% Young Women (<35)	1.1%	3%	5%	3%
Young Women as % of All Women MPs	3.6%	8.6%	11.1%	11.1%

Leadership in Youth Ministries and Unions: Young women’s roles in the Ministries of Youth and Sports, as well as Youth Unions, were concentrated in operational and support roles, such as deputies, finance, and secretarial positions, rather than senior strategic positions, indicating limited influence despite their presence.

4.4 SURVEY FINDINGS

Respondent Profile: The survey included ninety-four (94) young women, relatively balanced across the following age cohorts (18-24: 22.3%; 25-29: 38.3%; 30-35: 39.4%). Most were highly educated (61.7% held university/college degrees) and engaged in diverse occupations.

Awareness and Participation: Awareness of political/peace-building processes was high (68.1%), though awareness of programs specifically for young women was lower (56.4%). Most respondents (82%) had received relevant training. Participation rates were substantial: 68.1% in politics and 69.1% in peace-building. Common political activities included attending meetings (n=52) and civic education (n=46); common peace-building activities were community dialogues (n=54) and awareness campaigns (n=48). The primary motivation for both was a “desire for change.”

Barriers and Safety: A vast majority (89.4%) reported challenges. The most prevalent barriers were lack of financial support (n=70), limited opportunities/information (n=64), and cultural norms (n=58). Safety was a major concern: only 20.2% always felt safe in political spaces, and 34% reported experiencing violence, intimidation, or harassment due to their engagement.

Perceptions of Inclusion and Support: Most respondents felt that they were inadequately included. Only 23.4% believed young women’s voices were fully included in political decisions, and only 9.6% always felt taken seriously in forums. Support was crucial: 73.4% received support, primarily from CSOs (n=68), with training (n=60) and mentorship (n=52) being the most helpful forms. Future needs emphasized capacity-building (n=72) and financial support (n=68).

Statistical Analysis: A chi-square test found no significant association between education level and political participation (p=0.937), suggesting other factors are more determinative. Logistic regression identified key predictors: for political participation, desire for change (OR=3.39) and support received (OR=2.50) were strongest; for peacebuilding, age was a major factor (30-35 cohort OR=3.42).

Table 4.2: Chi-Square Test Results: Education Level and Political Participation

Metric	Value
N (respondents)	94
Political participation (Yes %)	68.1
Peace-building participation (Yes %)	69.1
Chi-square statistic	2.95
P-value	0.937
Interpretation	No significant association between education and participation

Table 4.3: Top Predictors of Political Participation (Ranked by Odds Ratio)

Feature	Coefficient	Odds Ratio	Significant
Motivate desire for change	1.220	3.388	TRUE
Support received	0.918	2.504	TRUE

Encouragement from peers/mentors	0.758	2.133	TRUE
Support safe spaces	0.752	2.121	TRUE
Age: 30-35	0.539	1.714	TRUE
Support existing laws/policies	0.515	1.674	TRUE

Table 4.4: Top Predictors of Peace-building Participation (Ranked by Odds Ratio)

Feature	Coefficient	Odds Ratio	Significant
Age: 30-35	1.228	3.416	TRUE
Age: 25-29	1.160	3.188	TRUE
Support family/peer encouragement	0.954	2.597	TRUE
Motivate desire for change	0.916	2.498	TRUE
Motivate organisational/community leadership	0.833	2.300	TRUE
Motivational encouragement from peers/mentors	0.789	2.201	TRUE
Support received	0.765	2.149	TRUE
Support training and workshops	0.726	2.066	TRUE

4.5 KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION FINDINGS

KIIs and FGDs across the three (3) states revealed consistent, severe barriers, as well as some key enablers.

Thematic Analysis: The most frequent themes across KIIs were institutional and social/cultural barriers, security/GBV/harassment, and a lack of resources. FGDs echoed these findings, with young women providing vivid accounts of harassment, exclusion, and insecurity.

Table 4.5: Theme Frequency in Western Equatoria Key Informant Interviews

Theme	Mention Count
Representation & Participation	7
Resources/Funding	7
Capacity Building & Mentorship	6
Security/GBV/Harassment	6
Enablers & Opportunities	6
Social/Cultural Barriers	5
Policies & Frameworks	4
Institutional Barriers	3
Digital/Safety	1

Table 4.6: Theme Frequency in Western Bahr el Ghazal Key Informant Interviews

Theme	Mention Count
Capacity/Mentorship	7
Institutional Barriers	5
Enablers/Opportunities	5
Security/GBV/Harassment	4
Social/Cultural Barriers	3
Resources/Funding	3
Policies & Frameworks	1
Digital/Safety & Media	0
Monitoring & Data	0

Table 4.7: Theme Frequency in Central Equatoria Key Informant Interviews

Theme	Mention Count
Representation	10
Policies	10
Capacity	10
Social Cultural	10
Institutional	10
Security GBV	10
Resources	10
Digital	9
Enablers	10
Monitoring	6

Key Barriers:

- ◆ **Security & GBV:** Sexual harassment and exploitation were pervasive and transactional, described as a primary barrier to accessing opportunities. Physical intimidation and violence, including at roadblocks, were also common among respondents.
- ◆ **Cultural Norms:** Patriarchal norms restricted women to domestic roles. Unmarried women and younger women faced particular discrimination. Families and partners often actively discouraged participation.
- ◆ **Institutional Gatekeeping:** Male-dominated political parties and government institutions controlled resources and candidate selection, systematically excluding young women.
- ◆ **Resource Constraints:** Poverty, a lack of funding for programs and for individual participation (e.g., transport costs) were also flagged as significant barriers.

Key Enablers:

- ◆ **Civil Society Organisations:** CSOs were the primary source of training, mentorship, safe spaces, and advocacy support.
- ◆ **Capacity Building & Mentorship:** Training programs and relationships with mentors were consistently identified as transformative, building skills and confidence.
- ◆ **Support Systems:** Peer networks, women’s solidarity groups, and supportive family/ community members provided crucial emotional and practical support.

A dedicated FGD with women with disabilities in Central Equatoria highlighted intersectional barriers, including physical inaccessibility, a lack of sign language interpreters, and targeted sexual harassment exploiting their vulnerabilities.

4.6 CROSS-STATE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Integrated analysis across all data sources confirmed ten major themes.

Table 4.8: Cross-State Thematic Summary

Theme	Central Equatoria	Western Equatoria	Western Bahr el Ghazal	Cross-State Pattern
Representation	Strong but symbolic	Strong in community leadership	Moderate, more traditional	Youth under-represented everywhere
Policies & Frameworks	High awareness, low enforcement	Low awareness, minimal implementation	Very low policy integration	Weak implementation across all states
Capacity/Mentorship	Strong, urban-based NGOs	Strong, church and NGO-led	Moderate, less structured	Uneven but critical enabler
Social/Cultural Barriers	High, urban stigma	Very high, traditional + religious	Very high, traditional barriers	Most persistent barrier across states
Institutional Barriers	Strong in political parties	Strong in chiefs, church, CSOs	Strong in administrative + tribal systems	Gatekeeping universal
GBV/Harassment	Extremely high	Extremely high	Extremely high	Most severe across all contexts
Resources/Funding	Medium barriers	High barriers	Extreme barriers	Chronic underfunding of universal
Digital Safety	Moderate risk	Mixed but low access	Low access, rumour-based risk	Uneven vulnerability

Enablers/ Opportunities	Strong (urban networks)	Strong (peace- building networks)	Moderate (NGO part- nerships)	CSO's primary enabler
Monitoring/ Data	Weak	Very weak	Absent	No systematic tracking

Summary of Integrated Findings:

Young women participate in political and peace-building processes, but their roles are often symbolic and limited. Policies like the 35% affirmative action quota usually face weak implementation, as customary laws frequently undermine these formal frameworks. Gender-based violence and entrenched social norms create significant barriers. Civil society organisations help by providing training and mentorship. However, the lack of monitoring and data on young women's participation obscures their contributions and hinders accountability.

Table 4.9: Cross-State Sentiment Distribution

State	Positive Sentiment	Mixed/Neutral Sentiment	Negative Sentiment	Overall Interpretation
Central Equatoria	~22%	~30%	~48%	High institutional barriers & safety issues
Western Equatoria	~18%	~30%	~52%	Most severe harassment & insecurity reported
Western Bahr el Ghazal	~20%	~30%	~50%	Cultural & mobility constraints dominate

Sentiment analysis across qualitative data revealed a consistently negative tone (~48-52%), reflecting the pervasive and severe nature of the barriers. Positive sentiment (~18-22%) was associated with enablers like training and mentorship, but was overshadowed by challenges.

DISCUSSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This section interprets the study's findings in relation to existing literature and the South Sudanese context, synthesizing in depth, quantitative and qualitative results to answer:

- 1) What patterns define young women's participation in politics and peacebuilding?
- 2) What barriers and enablers shape engagement?
- 3) What do these reveal about women's empowerment in post-conflict societies?

5.2 PARTICIPATION WITHOUT POWER

Participation in Politics and Peacebuilding: The most striking finding of this research is the existence of high participation rates in politics (68%) and peace-building (69%) by young women respondents in the study. When probed further to understand what they meant by participation, it became clear that the majority participated in receiving training that enhanced their knowledge and skills. 81.9% reported having received information or training on leadership, governance, peacebuilding, or civic engagement. In peace-building, 65.3% were participants in workshops or training, 13.3% played the roles of organisers/facilitators, and 12% engaged in direct community mobilisation work. In governance, and politics, 60.8% participated in civic education, 40.5% held leadership positions, 29.7% involved in local governance or community decision-making, and 21.6% supported political campaigns, protests, and advocacy movements.

Institutional Leadership: At the policy decision-making and institutional level, the representation of young women among policymakers is 1.1% at the National Legislative Assembly, 3% at the CES Legislative Assembly, 5% at the WES Legislative Assembly, and 3% at the WBeG Legislative Assembly. In the Ministries of Youth and Sports and Youth Unions, representation in key leadership positions is generally low, with young women mostly filling the positions of deputies and secretaries. These roles reinforced gendered roles deemed 'suitable' for women, primarily supporting leading roles.

Participation in Formal Peace Processes: In the Tumaini Peace Initiative, only two (2) out of the twenty-one (21) delegates were young women, and they mostly participated behind the scenes. Young women from CSOs were actively involved in the thematic working groups, with some leading certain groups but not physically present at the talks. From the government and the opposition groups, despite being physically present at the talks, the young women mostly played supporting roles as their seniors led the negotiations in

the room. There were a few instances when they were in the room, but for the most part, they primarily participated in discussions at their party/movement levels within the working groups.

Symbolic and Tokenistic Inclusion: The involvement of young women is notable but often superficial, leading to minimal decision-making authority across the three (3) states. In CES, they are visible in political arenas yet remain excluded from key decisions made by political parties. In WES, they exhibit the strongest presence in community peace initiatives yet struggle to find representation in formal political settings. In WBeG, their engagement is primarily through community-driven and humanitarian efforts, which afford them minimal influence. They were present in high-level peace negotiations, yet their participation lacked meaningful incorporation into the process.

Inclusion to Advance Institutional Interests: Participation in peace talks and community mobilisation engages young women and supports gender equality, but strategic power and resource control remain with older, predominantly male elites. There is a notable gap between participation and actual power, as young women often face explicit barriers, such as limited access to senior roles, and subtle challenges, including poor meeting conditions. Kabeer's empowerment framework emphasizes the important link between resources, agency, and achievements. While young women demonstrate agency, their limited financial means and lack of institutional support hinder their ability to transform participation into meaningful leadership.

5.3 INTERSECTING BARRIERS: AGE, GENDER, AND OTHER MARGINALITIES

The research reveals how age, gender, and ability statuses interact to create distinctive vulnerabilities for young women that differ from those facing either older women or young men. This intersectional dynamic operates across multiple domains.

5.3.1 Double Bind of Age and Gender

Young women face discrimination based on both gender and age, particularly in leadership roles. As noted by Smooth (2011) in African political contexts, women leaders often derive authority from age, maternal and marital status, which unmarried or childless young women lack. This exclusion highlights how leadership legitimacy for women remains tied to traditional roles. Young women prioritising political engagement over marriage and motherhood may face social sanctioning for transgressing societal expectations.

During the Tumaini Peace Talks, a young woman voiced frustration over being interrupted by colleagues in sideline meetings, who allowed male peers to speak longer. She noted

that her vocal contributions were perceived as threatening by some middle-aged male colleagues, as young women are often expected to be quiet and subservient, often in a secretarial role. One young woman described herself as a “victim of her success,” feeling sidelined as she showcased her abilities. Young women face a dilemma: if they assert their expertise, they are perceived as too much, but if they don’t, they are seen as lacking expertise.

In the few instances where women were lobbied and advocated to be in the negotiation room, the party hierarchies also dictated who spoke and when.

“Whenever it was a bigger group and there was an opportunity to have all the women there, the younger woman would normally shy away, you know, like she would not really want to speak up much unless she was given the opportunity to do so. Maybe it also comes from a place of inexperience because this is like her first major political process to participate in,” **one of the delegates reflected.**

5.3.2 Heightened Vulnerability to Sexual Exploitation

Sexual harassment and exploitation were significant barriers for young women across the three (3) states, with WES reporting the highest cases. The findings highlighted systematic exploitation, where sexual favours were demanded in exchange for job opportunities or access to decision-makers. Young women’s vulnerability, due to their lack of power and resources, made them particularly susceptible to this coercion.

“Last year in June, I applied in my former school, and the headteacher wanted to sleep with me first, yet he employed other friends of mine, so I decided to leave and I have excluded myself from my friends. I reported it to my mom, and she did not believe me because the headteacher is a family friend. This affected me mentally, I also did not like my mom for sometimes, because there is no way I could actually lie in such things.”

“Sexual exploitation is rampant and, in most cases, leads to the dropout of young women from political parties.”

“My sister was denied a job because the HR wanted to sleep with her, and she refused, so she gave up on applying for any job this year, in January.” These quotes were among the many examples of sexual exploitation and harassment that were shared during the focus-group discussions.

Young women at formal peace talks often felt sexualized and objectified, even if they didn’t directly face harassment. One participant noted how men would call for side meetings under the guise of discussing important matters, only to flirt instead. Another woman

expressed feeling used to fill a quota, emphasizing that when her qualifications surpassed those of some men in these spaces, it created tension.

This aligns with broader patterns of sexual exploitation and abuse in post-conflict settings where institutional weakness, militarisation, and normalised violence create environments of impunity. However, the specific targeting of young women in political and professional contexts has received less attention than conflict-related sexual violence, representing a significant gap in both research and programming.

5.3.3 Additional Intersections: Disability, Location, Education

The dedicated focus group specific to women with disabilities powerfully illustrated how disability compounds barriers facing young women.

“Lack of access to training venues [is a barrier]. Most of the programs happen in the hotels. Some of the hotels have stairs that we can’t even manage, and they do not have people around to support, so sometimes we don’t attend those trainings because we do not want to burden people,” **one participant shared.**

“Lack of access to information, we do not get information easily, sometimes by the time we know it, it is gone,” another participant contributed.

“Most peace-building programs don’t have language interpreters; we don’t even get the knowledge easily,” another participant echoed. These examples show that physical inaccessibility, informational exclusion, and explicit discrimination in employment create a multilayered and intersectional disadvantage.

Targeted sexual harassment often exploits disabilities, as illustrated by a young woman’s experience during a training session in Palm Africa. An individual associated with the hotel made demeaning comments about her blindness, suggesting he could assault her because she would not hear him. Although he later claimed it was a joke, this incident underscores the intersection of violence shaped by gender, age, and disability.

Geographic location greatly affects opportunities for young women. Urban centres like Juba in CES offer better access to networks and training than in WBeG and WES. However, urban living can also heighten risks like cyberbullying. Interestingly, education level does not correlate with participation, emphasizing that access to networks and safe spaces is more important than academic credentials in political engagement.

5.4 CULTURAL NORMS AS ROOT CONSTRAINTS

The finding that social and cultural barriers emerged as the most persistent theme across all data sources and states warrants careful examination. While these norms are often framed as “traditional” or “cultural,” implying they are fixed and ancient, scholarship on gender and politics in Africa emphasizes that gender norms are constructed, maintained, and can be contested. This is consistent with broader gender-and-politics scholarship that treats gender norms as socially constructed and contested rather than fixed (Coffe and Bolzendahl, 2010).

5.4.1 Patriarchal Norms and Political Legitimacy

Prevailing gender ideologies in South Sudan define women’s primary roles as wives, mothers, and domestic managers, shaping who is seen as legitimate for public authority. When young women pursue political engagement, they challenge gendered and generational hierarchies, facing resistance from both men and older women. The preference for older women leaders over younger ones highlights how patriarchy adapts; as women’s exclusion becomes less acceptable, some women (older, married, mothers) are included while younger, unmarried, or childless women remain excluded. This selective inclusion maintains male dominance while giving an appearance of gender equality.

5.4.2 Moral Policing and Reputation Threats

The pervasive fear of reputational damage, gossip, and moral judgment revealed in findings operates as a powerful control mechanism. Young women described being constantly surveilled in their behaviour, appearance, relationships, and speech. Stepping into political visibility risks being labelled “too ambitious,” “immoral,” “disrespectful,” or worse, being subjected to witchcraft accusations in WES, representing an extreme but illustrative example.

Such reputational risks are gendered; young men pursuing political ambition are seen as appropriately masculine, while young women doing the same are seen as violating feminine modesty expectations. These risks are also classed and location-dependent; young women with strong family backing, urban sophistication, or elite education faced less severe sanctioning than those without such protective factors.

The role of religious institutions in moral policing, particularly in WES and WBeG, is notable. While faith communities can support women’s leadership when framed as service, they can also enforce restrictive gender norms when women’s political engagement is viewed as immodest or inappropriate. Engaging religious leaders as allies in empowering young women requires careful navigation of theological interpretations and institutional interests.

5.4.3 Cultural Change as Collective Process

Findings revealed that cultural norms vary, with some communities showing increased acceptance of young women's competence. Many families supported their daughters' political engagement, and male allies emerged. Notably, 68% of young women surveyed participated in politics, challenging restrictive norms. This indicates that while cultural barriers exist, they can be overcome. Strategic interventions that engage communities, highlight the contributions of young women, and that involve supportive traditional and religious figures can foster gradual cultural change. However, this process requires patience and a long-term commitment, as it often takes longer than standard programming cycles.

5.5 INSTITUTIONAL GATEKEEPING AND STRUCTURAL EXCLUSION

The research revealed systematic institutional gatekeeping operating across various sectors, including political parties, government agencies, civil society organisations, traditional authorities, educational institutions, and faith-based structures. This gatekeeping was not incidental but structurally embedded in rules, practices, resource allocation, and organisational cultures.

5.5.1 Political Party Structures

Political parties, as primary vehicles for political careers and representation, emerged as particularly exclusionary. Despite formal commitments to gender equality, parties maintained male-dominated leadership that controlled crucial resources: endorsements, funding, candidate selection, messaging, and strategic direction. Young women could join but merely to maintain an appearance of gender equality:

“We came in just because, you know, there was a demand for women, and it had to be women, like you know, it wasn't a choice of adding another person, cuz if it was a choice of adding another number, they would still choose a man. But this time they're like, we need another person from the movement, but it has to be a woman,” relayed one young woman delegate, reflecting on how her party ended up making her join the Tumaini Peace Talks.

A key barrier to young women's participation in the Tumaini Peace Talks was also logistical, particularly due to the lack of flexible funding for more delegates. The host institution was reluctant to send invitations that implied full financial responsibility. While some established organisations could self-fund, many young women lacked resources, which limited their involvement in Nairobi and on the technical team. The young women-led working group on economic reforms operated remotely from Juba. When delegate numbers were

cut, young women from holdout groups were often the first to lose their spots due to hierarchy and funding constraints.

This pattern reflects the broader challenges of political party gender equality documented across Africa. Parties operate through patronage networks, personal relationships, and informal power that favour those who can reciprocate by offering money, mobilising votes, or providing other resources. Young women, typically lacking independent financial means and established networks, cannot participate in these exchange relationships on equal terms.

Financial barriers to party participation, such as membership fees, expected contributions, and campaign costs, constituted particularly insurmountable obstacles. One participant shared that **“you have your clean certificate, but to get a job one has to get dirty,”** capturing the impossible choice many face: maintain integrity and remain excluded or submit to exploitation for access.

5.5.2 Exclusive Formal Peace Negotiation Processes

During the Tumaini Peace Talks, most sessions were held in small groups, requiring five (5) delegates, with a few sessions allowing all seven (7) delegates per group to participate in the negotiation room. For the sessions that required only five (5) delegates from each group, both the government and the holdout groups would exclude women, arguing that selection was based on hierarchy and rank. Young women’s physical presence at the talks did not translate to meaningful inclusion and participation.

“Because of the limited numbers and the many representations, they prioritise men to take up those spots. So if they needed like two (2) or three (3) people per movement, women were never thought of, you know. Unless it’s over five (5), that’s when they include a woman. So up to five (5), it was always men,” **said one female delegate.**

5.5.3 Lack of Clear Inclusion Guidelines in Formal Peace Processes

According to the delegates interviewed, the Tumaini Peace Initiative lacked clear guidelines for inclusion. Initially, it focused primarily on the government and the holdout groups, with limited attention given to other stakeholders. The demands for inclusion from stakeholder representatives prompted the expansion of stakeholder groups, making the process a little more inclusive than initially designed, including the demand that parties include women in their delegations.

5.5.4 Customary and Traditional Authorities

In WBeG, particularly, customary authorities wielded substantial power over community governance, often superseding formal government structures. These systems, controlled by male elders, offered young women little space for influence. The explicit statement that **“unmarried young women cannot lead”** in traditional contexts reflected how customary law maintains patriarchal and gerontocratic authority.

The relationship between customary and formal systems is complex and multifaceted. Customary authorities provide legitimate governance in contexts where state capacity is weak. However, they also perpetuate exclusions of women, youth, and minorities, which conflict with constitutional equality commitments. Navigating this tension requires strategies that respect customary legitimacy while advocating for internal reform toward greater inclusion.

5.5.5 Government Institutional Weakness

Government institutions ostensibly responsible for youth and women’s empowerment, such as Ministries of Youth, Gender, and Peace-building, demonstrated limited capacity to fulfil their mandates. Weak budgets, inadequate staffing, the absence of gender focal units, and minimal programming mean that these institutions can not counterbalance the exclusions operating in political parties and traditional systems.

South Sudan’s institutional weakness highlights broader state fragility, where limited government services often leave gaps that are filled by civil society. Without functional state institutions to enforce quotas and hold discriminatory practices accountable, legal frameworks remain aspirational. Although policy frameworks created supportive narratives, weak enforcement mechanisms hindered their actual implementation. This gap between formal commitments and practical application hampers the advancement of young women’s leadership.

5.6 SECURITY AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AS POLITICAL STRATEGY

The severity and pervasiveness of sexual harassment, exploitation, and violence revealed in this research demand recognition not merely as incidental abuse but as systematic political exclusion. When the cost of political engagement for young women includes high risk of sexual exploitation, physical assault, threats to family, public humiliation, and psychological trauma, these “barriers” function as deterrents, maintaining male political dominance.

5.6.1 Sexual Harassment as Gatekeeping

The pattern of sexual exploitation documented in this research, such as demands for sexual favours as prerequisites for jobs, positions, and access to officials, represents the weaponization of sexuality to control women's political participation. This is not individual deviance by isolated perpetrators but systematic gatekeeping where men use their power over opportunities to extract sexual compliance. Young women who refused faced exclusion, retaliation, and career foreclosure. Those who submitted faced exploitation, trauma, loss of dignity, and often continued vulnerability as compliance did not guarantee sustained support.

5.6.2 Physical Violence and Intimidation

Physical threats documented include being beaten because of political party affiliation, roadblocks where women were stopped and turned back, and physical assault at political events, among others, illustrating how violence maintains gendered political boundaries. Such incidents send messages not only to the direct victims but also to all young women who observe that political participation brings danger.

A participant in WBeG who was beaten by men saying, ***“let your party colleagues rescue you”***, experienced violence explicitly linking gender, politics, and vulnerability. Her decision to continue participating despite trauma demonstrated remarkable resilience, but the fact that such resilience was necessary reveals the hostile landscape young women navigate.

Political affiliation-based threats create particularly complex dynamics. Supporting opposition parties posed heightened risks in states led by the ruling party. This means young women face not only gender and age-based barriers but also risks stemming from political positions, further constraining genuine political pluralism and freedom of expression.

5.6.3 Impunity and Absence of Accountability

Critically, perpetrators of harassment and violence face no consequences. Reporting mechanisms were absent or non-functional. When young women report to authorities, they are often not believed, blamed, or even face retaliation. Institutional responses reinforce rather than disrupt impunity.

This impunity reflects broader challenges of the rule of law and governance in South Sudan, but also reveals gendered dimensions. Violence against women in political spaces is normalised, minimised, or dismissed as private matters rather than violations of political rights. Without accountability, deterrence does not exist, and violence continues.

5.6.4 Psychological and Emotional Toll

Harassment and violence result in significant psychological harm, leading to shame, fear, trauma, and mental health issues among participants. Some individuals completely withdrew from political participation, while others continued, incurring a personal cost, experiencing hypervigilance and emotional numbing that impacted their well-being. The impact of hostile environments on mental health and political engagement among women warrants more attention. Supporting young women politically requires not only skills training, but also psychological support and spaces for trauma processing.

5.7 THE CONTRADICTION OF CAPACITY-BUILDING SUCCESS

Capacity-building emerged as the strongest positive theme and most consistent enabler, with 82% of survey respondents having received training, and capacity-building, which was consistently identified as transformative in qualitative data. Yet high training exposure coexisted with minimal political representation and persistent exclusion. This inconsistency of “trained but not empowered” requires interpretation, as examined below.

5.7.1 Skills Are Necessary But Insufficient

Training enhances public speaking, policy analysis, leadership skills, political literacy, and confidence. Participants found it empowering and transformative. However, individual skills cannot dismantle structural barriers like sexual harassment and discrimination. This highlights critiques of individualistic empowerment approaches that suggest women's exclusion is due to personal deficits rather than systemic discrimination. While skills and confidence are important, focusing solely on capacity-building can be misleading.

5.7.2 Training as Mobilisation and Consciousness-Raising

Training goes beyond skill development; it facilitates mobilisation, networking, and political awareness. Participants connect with peers, build solidarity, and gain confidence through collective learning, which can be just as valuable as the skills they acquire. The survey results indicate that training and awareness campaigns are a significant motivator for participation, serving as a recruitment tool that encourages young women to engage in politics in a safe and supportive environment.

5.7.3 Sustainability and Pathway Challenges

Capacity-building faced sustainability and pathway challenges. Training was often one-off or short-term, without follow-up support to apply the skills. Pathways from training to actual political positions, party leadership, or decision-making influence were unclear. Young women developed capacities, but lacked vehicles for deploying them in sustained leadership.

The disconnect between student leadership and broader political influence illustrates this. Universities provide rich leadership development through student unions and clubs. However, graduating students struggle to transition these experiences into political careers, facing economic pressures to earn a livelihood, finding few avenues for integrating into party structures or government positions.

5.8 CONTRIBUTIONS, IMPACT, AND INFLUENCE

Young women are not passive recipients; they are agents of change with measurable impact. Their involvement strengthens peace structures and expands civic engagement, but remains under-recognised and under-supported.

5.8.1 Evidence of strong leadership and positive outcomes in peace and justice

Many young women in South Sudan took on leadership roles that positively impacted peace in their communities. They represented their country in international forums, facilitated local peace dialogues, mediated conflicts, and advocated for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, helping them find justice. By encouraging critical perspectives on political participation among their peers, they inspired young girls to pursue their own political agendas. Their efforts also transformed how local chiefs viewed the leadership of young women.

Some examples of high impact included

- ◆ A case of land-grabbing in Maridi, where a man took a women's group's land. After intervention and advocacy, the land was successfully returned to the women's group, one young woman shared.
- ◆ Another young woman participant recounted a community-level incident during disarmament when army violence erupted; they intervened through dialogue and advocacy, helping to restore peace.
- ◆ Another shared a personal example of leading a peace mission to Mundri. She used her personal funds for transportation, accommodation, and logistics, even after being involved in an accident en route. Her persistence led to a successful resolution of the conflict, among many other examples that were shared.

5.8.2 Shaped High-Level Peace Negotiation Outcomes

For the young women who attended the Tumaini Peace Talks, although they did not directly participate in the negotiations for the most part, they saw their voices and contributions from meetings and discussions outside the room shaping the discussions in the negotiation room.

“I’ve seen my leaders, literally almost, if not literally, quoting what I contributed, you know, and I’ve even seen them using my words, and it just shows what we contribute goes a long way,” **said one young woman.**

From the civil society, young women were actively involved in the thematic working groups; a young woman led the thematic working group on economic reforms.

“You know, the blueprint for the protocol on economic reform came from the young woman who led that thematic working group and her team. We just came and you know gave feedback here and there, the language and all that, but you know that that document was [developed] predominantly by that working group.”

A delegate mentioned this about the influence of young women behind the scenes at the Tumaini Peace Talks.

Additionally, the two young women present in the room strongly advocated for the ‘youth quota’ agenda alongside the youth representative, demanding that all groups include youth representatives in their delegations. **“They also pushed for formal recognition and specific mention of women in the agreement text, ensuring their inclusion was explicit rather than assumed,”** another delegate shared.

5.9 CASE STUDIES

The three (3) case studies show young women stepping into leadership across the three (3) states, rising from student governance, to community organising and grassroots peace-building. Despite all the barriers, their stories demonstrate agency and resistance, serving as proof of the transformational work and impact of young women in their communities.

5.9.1 Case Study 1: Leila Suzan

Breaking the Quiet Barriers: How Leila Suzan Became the First Female Deputy Guild President at St. John Catholic University in Western Equatoria

Leila was born and raised in Yambio in a devoted Christian family. From a young age, she demonstrated leadership potential and a commitment to community involvement through her participation in Sunday school and church activities. Her early exposure to church leadership laid the foundation for the 30-year-old young woman leader that she is today.

As a young girl, Leila actively participated in Sunday school leadership. She was recognized by the late Bishop Peter Munde, who gifted her a Bible in appreciation of her

ability to read scripture fluently in her mother tongue. She served as a Sunday School leader from 2005 to 2007. Her passion for ministry led her to join the Evangelical Team during her secondary school years in Uganda, where she received training in Bible Studies and Christian Doctrine. She then became the Youth Ministry and Evangelical Team leader from 2017 to 2018. For six (6) months in 2020, she transitioned into another leadership position, becoming the Executive Director of the Union for Struggle Against HIV/AIDS and Poverty (USAP), a community-based organization. In 2021, she assumed the role of Child Protection Officer with World Vision in Yambio, a position she held until this year. Through this experience, she gained knowledge in organizational management, advocacy, and child protection.

In November 2024, Leila was elected as Deputy Guild President at St. John Catholic University and became the first female Deputy Guild President of her university. Her election was conducted through a democratic process that involved applications, campaigns, and a voting process. Despite strong competition from male candidates and limited financial resources, she emerged victorious. "Competition was high, but I stood firm. I believed that leadership is not about gender, it's about the ability to serve," she said. She acknowledged that her campaign team and mentorship from the previous cabinet played an instrumental role in her victory. A few months into her leadership, Leila faced a critical leadership test when the university administration attempted to implement abrupt leadership and administrative changes without proper consultation. Recognizing the potential harm to the institution's stability and reputation, she intervened through dialogue and mediation, successfully convincing the administration to reconsider its decision. "It was a challenging moment, but I stood firm to protect the integrity and future of the university," she said during the interview.

Leila's leadership impact extends beyond the university, as she continuously advocates for scholarship opportunities for female students, capacity building and mentorship programs, and increased support for young female leaders in higher education in Western Equatoria. Leila was inspired to become a leader because of her passion for gender equality and women's empowerment. She credits her self-confidence to multiple capacity-building opportunities in gender, child protection, GBV awareness, and women's rights advocacy, provided by women-led organizations in Western Equatoria. "I was trained to advocate for women and girls, and that motivated me to speak out and lead without fear," she said.

Looking ahead, Leila envisions her leadership journey extending from the academic sphere to national governance. "After my work with NGOs, I plan to join the government and contribute to political leadership. My dream is to serve the people and bring meaningful change. A good leader must be educated, spiritually grounded, and an

example to others. Leadership should be about service, not power,” she emphasized. Her message to young women is to develop self-confidence and determination, be ready to take risks, and seize opportunities. She encourages them to serve as role models, inspire other young women, and to strengthen their networking with senior leaders and mentors. To leaders and policymakers, Leila wants to see them enforce national laws that protect and promote women’s participation, create a peaceful and supportive environment for young leaders, and promote freedom of speech and civic engagement within institutions.

5.9.2 Case Study 2: Hon. Diana Richard Wani

Power Has a Young Woman’s Voice: Hon. Diana Richard’s Rise from Community Organising to State Legislature

Hon. Diana Richard was born in Khartoum in 1996 and was raised there until 2011, when South Sudan gained independence from Sudan. Her family then relocated to Juba, South Sudan. While studying for her bachelor’s degree in economics at the Catholic University of South Sudan, Hon. Diana spent her free time attending public lectures on leadership and listening to motivational speeches online, which increased her interest in politics. From a young age, she knew she was born to serve her people. She began her political career at the Boma level through her Boma’s youth association in Sinidiru Boma, Lo’bonok Payam in Juba County, Central Equatoria State. The conflicts of 2013 and 2016 were pivotal moments that shaped her leadership journey.

At the age of 21, she became the Secretary for Finance of Sinidiru Boma Youth Association. As one of the few young women leaders in the association, she took it upon herself to push for gender-sensitive, youth-focused policy initiatives. A year later, she moved from the Boma Youth Association to the Payam Youth Association level, becoming the Secretary for Gender and Social Welfare of Lo’bonok Payam Youth Association in 2018. Her commitment, dedication, and passion at her Boma and Payam youth associations made her leadership stand out at the state level, where she was later appointed as an Advisor for Gender and Social Welfare for the Jubek State Youth Union in the same year. Her extensive experience led her to become one of the youth delegates representing her state at the 2019 South Sudan National Youth Union Convention, a role that affirmed her leadership and allowed her to engage with youth leaders from across South Sudan.

In 2020, she was appointed Hon. Councilor to the Lo’bonok Legislative Council, laying the foundation for her appointment to the Central Equatoria Transitional Legislative Assembly in 2021, at the age of 25, making her the youngest member of parliament among her peers at the state assembly. In this role, she participated in legislative

debates, policy development, and oversight of state governance structures. She remains engaged with her constituents to promote inclusive policymaking and community development, contributing to discussions on economic planning, gender, education, and infrastructure development. That same year, she became an honorable member of parliament and served as a delegate to the National Dialogue.

Over the past five years, she has served in parliament, holding several leadership roles, including Secretary for Research and Planning for the Women's Parliamentary Caucus, Secretary-General of the Juba County Parliamentary Caucus, and Chair-lady of Women in Peacebuilding in Central Equatoria State, among others. Between July 2024 and June 2025, Hon. Diana focused on sharpening her leadership skills through participation in the "Political Minds Program" by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, a five-month initiative designed to equip young women leaders with the skills to navigate political institutions, engage effectively with the public, and pursue their political goals strategically. She also traveled to Uganda for a regional gathering of young women politicians, where she took part in a learning exchange on feminism in African democracies.

While Hon. Diana's leadership journey is admirable, it has not been without challenges. She has faced and continues to encounter numerous obstacles in exercising leadership in a patriarchal, capitalist, and highly militarized environment. Becoming a member of parliament as an unmarried young woman at that time posed significant challenges. She was often undermined due to her age, gender, and marital status, despite her leadership expertise; most people viewed her solely through these social markers, and she constantly had to prove herself. Politics requires financial resources, and as one of the youngest members of parliament, Hon. Diana still finds it difficult to meet all the expectations that come with holding such a high position, where continuous lobbying and advocacy are necessary to advance her career.

Despite these challenges, Hon. Diana remains driven by her love for her country and the desire to serve and transform her community. She is optimistic about the potential for young women's leadership in South Sudan. She calls on young women to invest in themselves by educating themselves, joining political parties, and youth groups/associations.

5.9.3 Case Study 3: Suzana Anthony Sabino

The David of Her Family: From Household Leadership to Community Peacebuilding in Western Bahr el Ghazal

Suzana was born in 1997 in Wau, Western Bahr el Ghazal, where she grew up and still lives today. She is the second-born, after her older sister, and has three (3) younger siblings. Like most South Sudanese girls, Suzana took on leadership roles within her family at a young age. Growing up, her older sister lived and studied in Juba, so Suzana often acted as a deputy parent to her siblings, supporting her single mother. She frequently mediated disputes among her siblings and guided them. Suzana recalls a time when one of her siblings was sick and needed to be taken to Khartoum. Her mother went with all three (3) siblings, leaving Suzana home to care for their grandmother. During that time, she dropped out of school to fully care for their home and grandmother while her mother was away. Her leadership often shone through during crises, such as funerals, where she was typically chosen to lead among her peers. “Whenever there is a funeral or any function at the family level, I just don’t know why, but I find that I am the one most involved. You hear Susan come and do this, Susan take care of this. I am always made to be the team leader for the service team, or you know, supervise this, organize this, monitor this...” she said. Her leadership was noticeable; her mother used to call her the ‘David of their family’. The praise from her mother always made her feel recognized, which built her confidence and enabled her to navigate the times when she was in self-doubt.

Her leadership abilities were not only recognized at her family level. When Suzana was in primary seven (7), her classmates nominated her to be the head girl, and her other peers, including some teachers, endorsed the nomination. She ran for the position and was elected as head girl for her school, a role she held throughout her primary seven (7) and eight (8). Throughout her high school years, she remained actively engaged in her community, particularly in youth peace-building initiatives.

Having noticed some of the challenges youth are facing in Western Bahr el Ghazal, such as limited access to education and an endless cycle of inter-communal violence, Suzana did not just want to sit around and wait; she wanted to be a part of the solution to some of these challenges. In 2023, along with six (6) other young people, they founded the Youth Multi-Purpose Organization (YMO), an organization she currently leads as Executive Director. Through YMO, under her leadership, she can create spaces for women and youth in her state, providing opportunities to learn new skills, acquire knowledge, and build networks. YMO is an active member of the education and peace-building clusters in Western Bahr el Ghazal. She wants to see YMO become a platform that promotes unity and education amongst the youth across

Western Bahr el Ghazal and that contributes to food security in the State. While leading YMO, Suzan is also pursuing her bachelor's degree in education, where she serves as a Class Coordinator at her college, coordinating between students and the administration.

“My message to young women and girls is to involve themselves or engage themselves in leadership and peace-building initiatives. Second, they must be consistent. I am saying this because they are most likely to face negative criticism. They are most likely to face gender discrimination because of being a woman or [for]being a young woman, and they are most likely to face the challenge of who to support them with finances or resources, since those are similar challenges that I have been through,” she said. She wants her generation to lay a solid foundation for peaceful coexistence, so the next generation can build on it and not have to start from scratch, as her generation did. Suzan aspires to impact the lives of other youth through YMO, become a motivational speaker, a leadership coach, and an author. She still experiences the profound impact that her mother's words of affirmation have had on her life, from her childhood to this day, and wants to be able to positively impact the lives of other young people by sharing her experiences and words of encouragement.

5.10 THE CRITICAL ROLE OF SUPPORT SYSTEMS

The logistic regression finding that support received was among the strongest predictors of both political and peace-building participation (OR=2.50 and OR=2.15, respectively) quantitatively validates the qualitative emphasis on support systems as crucial enablers.

5.10.1 Civil Society as Primary Support Infrastructure

Civil society organisations emerged as the primary and most consistent support system across all States. CSOs provide training, mentorship, platforms, information, safe spaces, advocacy backing, financial assistance, and networking functions that government institutions and political parties largely fail to provide.

This CSO centrality reflects South Sudan's weak state capacity and vibrant civil society sector. However, it also reveals vulnerabilities. CSO programming depends on external funding, which is often discontinued when priorities shift. Relying on civil society to fulfil functions that should be government responsibilities, such as ensuring citizens' political rights and providing pathways to representation, is ultimately insufficient for systemic change.

5.10.2 Mentorship Relationships

Mentorship, whether formal or informal, proved transformative. Young women described mentors as providing guidance, opening doors, offering emotional support, sharing practical knowledge, and modelling leadership. The importance of mentorship aligns with extensive literature documenting its value for women's political careers.

However, mentorship remained largely informal, dependent on young women's initiative and luck in finding supportive senior women. Scaling and systematizing mentorship, creating structured pipelines, training mentors, and institutionalizing relationships could amplify impact.

5.10.3 Peer Networks and Sisterhood

Solidarity among young women, peer support, sisterhood, and collective organizing functioned as a crucial sustaining mechanism. Participants described their peers as encouraging perseverance, providing emotional support, sharing information, opportunities, and creating a collective voice that is stronger than individual advocacy.

This aligns with feminist literature that emphasizes consciousness-raising, solidarity, and collective action as foundational to women's empowerment. Programming that facilitates peer networking and collective organizing may prove as valuable as individual capacity-building.

5.10.4 Family Support

Family support greatly enhanced participation by providing resources, emotional encouragement, protection, and legitimacy. However, family discouragement was also common, reflecting mixed community attitudes toward young women's political roles. Engaging families through sensitization and leveraging supportive members as advocates is a valuable but often overlooked strategy.

5.11 MOTIVATION AND AGENCY DESPITE BARRIERS

A striking finding was the high motivation young women demonstrated despite overwhelming barriers. The desire for change emerged as the strongest predictor of political participation (OR = 3.39), and qualitative data revealed powerful motivations rooted in civic duty, representation, personal empowerment, and inspiration from role models.

This persistence challenges deficit narratives that frame women's underrepresentation in politics as stemming from a lack of interest or ambition. Young women want to partic-

ipate, are motivated to lead, and demonstrate remarkable agency in navigating hostile environments. The problem is not a lack of women's motivation, but rather barriers that constrain their expression.

5.11.1 Civic Duty and Representation

Many participants viewed participation as a civic responsibility that contributes to peace, development, and democracy. They saw themselves as representatives of young women whose voices needed amplification. This framing of participation as a duty, rather than merely personal ambition, resonated with cultural values of service and community contribution, while also asserting political rights.

5.11.2 Personal Empowerment

Participation offered personal growth, including increased confidence, skills, networks, a sense of identity as leaders, and a voice in decisions affecting their lives. Young women valued these outcomes intrinsically, not merely as instrumental means to positions or power.

5.11.3 Representation and Visibility

The visibility of women leaders, such as female VPs, MPs, ministers, CSO directors, and activists, among others, inspired young women by demonstrating the possibilities. This underscores the importance of representation not only for policy influence but also for symbolic modelling, showing younger women that leadership is achievable.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This research highlights the political participation of young women in post-conflict settings, demonstrating how the intersection of age and gender creates unique barriers and opportunities. It critiques gender-only analyses that overlook generational dynamics in women's political organizing.

The findings support intersectional approaches to political empowerment, demonstrating how overlapping systems of marginalization, such as gender, age, disability, location, and poverty, impact participation. Single-axis interventions focused solely on gender or youth are inadequate; effective programming must tackle compound disadvantage.

The research also contributes to understanding tokenistic participation, revealing mechanisms through which institutions perform inclusion while maintaining exclusionary power structures. The paradox of high participation rates coexisting with minimal decision-making influence illuminates how invited spaces of participation can serve institutional legitimacy needs without redistributing power.

Findings on sexual harassment and violence as systematic political exclusion, not merely individual deviance, advance understanding of how gender-based violence operates as a political strategy maintaining male dominance. This framing has implications for how violence against women in political spaces is conceptualized and addressed.

6.2 METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

The mixed-methods approach was crucial for understanding the experiences of young women. Survey data provided quantitative insights on participation rates and barriers, while qualitative data offered context and depth to these findings. Triangulating institutional data, surveys, interviews, and focus groups enhanced validity by confirming patterns across sources. As evidence accumulated, including the prevalence of harassment and the impact of capacity-building, confidence in the conclusions increased.

The dedicated focus group with women with disabilities demonstrated the value of creating specific spaces for marginalized groups within marginalized categories. Their experiences might have been less visible in mixed groups where women without disabilities dominated discussions. This suggests that attention to within-group diversity and intersections strengthens research on marginalized populations.

6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

6.3.1 Stakeholder Implementation Matrix

To make the recommendations more actionable, the practical implications are organized below by stakeholder group while preserving the core programming priorities identified by the study.

Stakeholder group	Priority recommendations
Political parties and formal peace process actors	Reform party structures, candidate selection, delegation rules, financing practices, and negotiation procedures so that young women are not included only symbolically. Establish clear inclusion guidelines and pathways for young women to participate in decision-making roles.
Key ministries and policy-makers	Strengthen enforcement of gender equality and youth inclusion policies, resource youth and women's programmes, create functional gender focal units, and develop accountability mechanisms for institutions that fail to meet inclusion commitments.
Civil society organisations and development partners	Continue capacity-building, mentorship, safe spaces, peer networks, advocacy support, and financial/logistical support, but link training to sustained leadership pathways, placements, internships, and follow-up opportunities.
Traditional, religious, and community leaders	Engage as allies in norm change by framing young women's participation through service, peace, and community contribution; involve families and community structures in supporting rather than restricting young women's engagement.
Security, justice, and accountability actors	Treat harassment, exploitation, intimidation, and violence as political exclusion. Establish safe reporting mechanisms, meaningful follow-up, legal support, survivor-centred referrals, and perpetrator accountability.
Researchers, monitoring actors, and institutions	Develop standard indicators and regular data collection systems disaggregated by age, gender, disability, location, and other relevant characteristics; make data available for advocacy and oversight.

6.3.2 Multi-Level Intervention Necessity

Findings demonstrate that effective support for young women's political participation requires simultaneous intervention at multiple levels: individual (capacity-building, psychosocial support), interpersonal (mentorship, networks), organizational (party reform, CSO programming), institutional (quota enforcement, gender focal units), community (norm change, family engagement), and policy (legal reform, resource allocation). Single-level interventions will be insufficient.

6.3.3 Safety and Protection as Prerequisites

Programming cannot proceed as though safety is peripheral. When young women face harassment, exploitation, and violence as routine consequences of participation, addressing these threats must be foundational. This requires establishing reporting mechanisms with meaningful follow-up, creating safe spaces for political activities, providing accompaniment and protection for high-risk engagements, and offering legal support and advocacy for survivors. Implementing perpetrator accountability measures and conducting community sensitization on political violence against women is essential.

6.3.4 Beyond Individual Capacity-Building

While capacity-building remains important, exclusive focus on training young women individualizes structural problems. Programs must also invest equally in transforming institutional cultures and practices, reforming political party structures and financing, strengthening the enforcement of gender equality policies, engaging men as allies and accountability partners, and shifting community norms through dialogue and demonstration. They must also focus on building coalitions for collective advocacy.

6.3.5 Addressing Economic Barriers

Economic constraints pervaded all findings, necessitating direct intervention through the provision of stipends or financial support for participation, covering transport and logistics costs, and creating income-generating opportunities compatible with political engagement. This is in addition to allocating adequate budgets to youth and women's programs within government institutions and civil society organisations.

6.3.6 Sustained Mentorship and Pathway Development

Moving beyond ad hoc mentorship to structured pipelines requires formal mentorship programmes pairing young women with senior leaders. Peer mentorship networks among young women themselves, transition support from student leadership to broader political roles, internship, and placement programs in political parties and government. It also

requires investment in young women's political careers over time rather than one-off interventions.

6.3.7 Digital Capacity and Safety

As political engagement increasingly occurs in digital spaces, programming must address digital literacy and the effective use of online platforms for organising and advocacy. It must also address digital security training to protect privacy and manage online threats, as well as strategies for addressing cyberbullying and harassment. Additionally, it should focus on bridging the digital divide to ensure that rural and less-resourced young women can access digital opportunities.

6.3.8 Monitoring and Accountability

The absence of data and monitoring systems must be addressed by developing standardized indicators for tracking young women's participation and implementing regular data collection, disaggregated by age, gender, and other relevant characteristics. Establish accountability mechanisms for institutions failing to meet their inclusion commitments. Making data publicly available to enable advocacy and oversight.

6.3.9 Working With Rather Than Against Cultural Contexts

Effective interventions respect cultural values while challenging harmful practices. This requires: engaging traditional and religious leaders as allies in young women's empowerment, framing political participation in culturally resonant terms (service, community contribution, peace), demonstrating rather than merely asserting young women's capabilities, and involving families in supporting rather than restricting daughters' engagement. It also requires recognizing that cultural change is gradual, requiring sustained commitment over time.

6.4 LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FINDINGS

Returning to earlier methodological limitations provides important context for interpreting findings. The cross-sectional design reflects a specific twelve-month period, limiting the ability to conclude long-term trends. Longitudinal research on young women's political journeys over time would better reveal how participation patterns and barriers evolve across career stages.

Sampling through organisational networks likely overrepresented connected, educated, urban young women, while marginalized groups, such as those from rural areas, with limited education and economic hardship, were underrepresented. This suggests that

the findings understate the barriers faced by young women with less access to support systems, and the 68% participation rate cannot be generalized to all young women in the three (3) States. The sample size of ninety-four (94) respondents, although adequate for exploratory analysis, is limited in terms of statistical power and generalizability; larger samples would allow for more sophisticated modeling and reliable extrapolation.

The geographic coverage of three (3) States captures important diversity, but cannot represent all South Sudan contexts. Findings may not fully transfer to states with different conflict dynamics, ethnic compositions, economic conditions, or civil society landscapes. However, the consistency of major themes across the three (3) study States, despite their differences, suggests that patterns may be relatively robust.

Self-report data may be influenced by social desirability bias; however, the severity of reported negative experiences suggests that participants felt comfortable sharing. Recall bias may have impacted the accuracy of events reported during the twelve (12) months. Political and security volatility may have impaired participation and honesty, with some potential participants deterred by safety concerns, highlighting the challenges young women face in political engagement. Despite these limitations, consistent findings across diverse data sources emphasize key conclusions: high participation without power, widespread harassment and violence, the importance of support systems, and strong motivation despite obstacles, reflecting genuine realities rather than mere methodological artefacts.

6.5 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This research opens several important questions for future investigation.

Longitudinal Trajectories: How do young women's political participation patterns evolve over time? What factors predict sustained engagement versus withdrawal? How do early political experiences shape longer-term leadership trajectories? Longitudinal research following cohorts of young women over multiple years could shed light on these developmental questions.

Comparative Analysis: How do patterns identified in South Sudan compare to those in other post-conflict societies? What is universal about barriers and enablers facing young women in political participation, and what is context-specific? Comparative research across multiple countries could identify transferable lessons and context-specific adaptations.

Intervention Effectiveness: What types of interventions most effectively increase young women's meaningful political participation and influence? Rigorous evaluation of programmes, ideally including experimental or quasi-experimental designs, could identify best practices and cost-effective approaches.

Men's Perspectives: This research centred on young women's experiences. Complementary research examining men's attitudes, behaviours, and roles regarding young women's political participation would illuminate how male allies can be effectively engaged and how resistant attitudes can be shifted.

Intergenerational Dynamics Among Women: The relationship between young and older women in political spaces deserves deeper examination. When do older women mentor and support younger women, and when do they act as gatekeepers? How can intergenerational solidarity be strengthened?

Success Stories and Exceptional Cases: Although this research has documented barriers, examining young women who have successfully overcome obstacles to achieve sustained political influence could reveal protective factors, effective strategies, and successful pathways.

Specific Mechanisms of Violence: The prevalence of sexual harassment and exploitation deserves focused investigation examining: specific contexts and institutions where violence is most severe, perpetrator characteristics and motivations, organisational factors enabling or preventing violence, effective intervention and accountability mechanisms, and survivor experiences and needs.

Economic Dimensions: The interplay between economic empowerment and political participation requires deeper analysis. Do income-generating programmes increase political participation? How do economic independence and political engagement mutually reinforce?

Digital Politics: As digital spaces become increasingly important for political organising, focused research on young women's digital political participation, online harassment, digital security, and effective online advocacy strategies is needed.

6.6 CONCLUSION

Young women in three (3) States demonstrated remarkable determination to engage in political and peacebuilding efforts, despite facing significant barriers. Instead of waiting for external empowerment, they actively create space for their voices, organize collectively, and build their skills.

However, their involvement is often stifled by structures designed to exclude them, with cultural norms, institutional gatekeeping, and economic poverty constraining their political agency. Support systems, such as civil society organisations and mentorship networks, play a crucial role in enabling their participation; however, they remain fragmented and underfunded.

Meaningful progress requires not only individual capacity-building but also structural transformation through policy enforcement, institutional reform, and effective resource allocation. Recognizing young women's political empowerment is essential for democracy, peace, and justice in South Sudan.

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