

Towards a Women's Common Agenda in South Sudan: Strengthening Women's Participation in Peacebuilding, Political Processes and Constitution- Making

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Executive Summary

South Sudan's peace and political transition processes have highlighted the essential role of women in building sustainable peace, yet women remain under-represented in formal decision-making structures. Despite their contributions to grassroots peacebuilding and conflict prevention, women continue to face structural barriers, limited access to political spaces, gender-based violence, and social norms that restrict their participation. This policy paper proposes a Women's Common Agenda as a collective platform to strengthen women's voices in peace processes, constitutional development, governance, and elections. The agenda seeks to support women across political, social, and community levels to articulate shared priorities and influence national policies. The paper highlights achievements, including women's increased representation under the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), while identifying persistent challenges such as weak implementation of gender quotas, limited accountability mechanisms, and exclusion from formal political processes. Strengthening women's collective action, establishing enforceable gender equality mechanisms, and ensuring meaningful participation in constitution-making and governance processes are essential for sustainable peace and inclusive development in South Sudan.

Keywords: Women, Peace and Security (WPS), Women's Political Participation, Peacebuilding, Gender Equality, South Sudan

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What is the issue?

South Sudan's long history of conflict and instability has had detrimental effects on women's participation in peacebuilding. Women have played and continue to play a critical role in shaping their country. Despite their critical roles, women continue to be largely excluded from peace processes. In 2024, available global data indicate that on average, women made up only 7 per cent of negotiators and 14 per cent of mediators in formal peace (UN Women 2024). South Sudan data on women's representations during the R-ARCSS, 2018 (*one of the mediators was a woman, women made up 25% of the official delegates, and female leaders of civil society groups served as official observers*)

During and after the civil war, women's voices and perspectives were often marginalised or excluded from

decision-making processes. There is systematic under-representation of women and gender inequality in the public sector, for example. Out of the states/administrative areas public workforce of 77,874 (excluding the South Sudan People's Defence Force (SSPDF)), women constitute only 32.3%; most of the women in the public administration have low educational qualifications. Similarly, there is a low proportion of women appointed as advisors and county commissioners. Out of 64 state advisors, only 9 (14.1%) are female.

South Sudanese Women are crucial to grassroots peacebuilding through informal actions like mediation and community cohesion, although their roles are often unrecognised in formal structures. They work to prevent conflict escalation, rebuild communities, and can even

influence formal processes through advocacy. Understanding this context is essential to address the barriers that women face in contributing to political processes and peacebuilding.

Towards a woman's common agenda

Supporting women's meaningful participation in politics, decision-making and peace processes is an integral part of the work of the United Nations Security Council resolutions. The idea is to provide South Sudanese women with the platform and the tools they need to bridge political differences and think collectively as women, where they can work together to ensure their ability to meaningfully participate in shaping the future of South Sudan.

The South Sudan women's agenda aims to bring women together at a common platform to speak with one voice in the political process, including the permanent constitution-making and the elections; Building good governance through providing a guide for women voters, candidates and other political actors; Persuading government, political parties and organisations and other stakeholders to prioritise people-centred democracy and the interests of the women in the development process; The agenda should have influence on policy, legislation and programmes for the improvement of the well-being of people, particularly women and children in the country. Hence, the Women's agenda provides a common set of demands aimed at the achievement of gender equality, women's empowerment and sustainable development.

Why now?

Revealed that while the women, peace and security agenda had contributed to significant changes in international norms surrounding women's political leadership and decision-making on peace and security, its effect on the lives of women at local levels has been limited.

The Women, Peace and Security agenda provides an initiative to reshape women's roles in political processes and peacebuilding. It provides a unique platform to redefine and transform our understanding of global and regional responsibilities in building a resilient common future for women in South Sudan. A concerted effort needs to be made by all, including government, women's coalitions and networks, political parties and the international community, to ensure and increase women's ongoing and meaningful participation in formal peace processes to ultimately build sustainable peace in South Sudan.

Why is it important?

1. The participation of women is central to the peace and transitional processes in South Sudan (SS) and provides

an opportunity for women to explore and seek to address the impacts of years of conflict, building upon the 35% women quota and cementing the role of women in rebuilding the nation in line with United Nations Resolution 1325.

2. In essence, UNSCR 1325 and the subsequent related resolutions establish a framework for recognising the critical role of women in peace and security, promoting their rights, and ensuring their participation in all aspects of conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding.

3. Inclusion of women's experiences and voice is not only a fundamental entitlement; it is particularly critical in the South Sudan context for two reasons: (a) because women suffer the brunt of conflict, and (b) women are systematically under-represented in state institutions – both during constitution-making processes and in the follow-on institutions which are established.

4. Women as necessary & relevant key stakeholders in constitution-making and peace-building processes. Participatory constitution-making and peace-building processes are on the rise globally. Internationally, UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security specifically upholds gender equality as central to peacebuilding and constitution-making processes. This principle underscores the significance of women as key stakeholders in the constitutional-making processes as well as avails an opportunity to monitor and challenge the legitimacy of various processes that exclude women.

5. Equal representation in all political and constitutional making and processes. While no country in the world has had women represented at parity in constitution-making processes, the inclusion of women is increasingly accepted as a norm, as are participatory processes.

6. Constitution-making processes that are genuinely inclusive of women not only lead to a more legitimate outcome, but they also enrich the experiences of women and are more likely to guarantee more effective protection of women's unique perspectives, strategic interests and political representation.

7. Women would be helping to ensure that the local community is informed of the constitution-making processes as well as to feed into the processes concerns and recommendations from the community. Women's local community engagement also helps establish women as trusted authorities on the process and builds trust necessary for local buy-in and adoption and/or rejection of a final document.

Who is affected?

Women in their diversity and girls are highly affected, and the resultant impacts include:

1. The prevalence of GBV remains alarmingly high. Displacement and resource scarcity further increase GBV risks, exposing women and girls to intimate partner violence, child and forced marriages,
2. There are inadequate safeguards and mechanisms to ensure implementation of a 35% gender quota in the TCRSS to ensure equitable representation of women in various decision-making structures.
3. Climate change and its impact on the livelihood of women and children continue to pose food insecurity and nutrition-related issues.
4. Women are primary providers of food, and climate impacts push them into extreme poverty (climate change is a major contributor to rising levels of poverty among women).
5. Because the impacts of climate change fall directly on the shoulders of women, they exacerbate the existing inequalities, e.g., disability, structural, status, income, etc.
6. South Sudan's deeply entrenched patriarchal norms exclude women from decision-making, land ownership, and access to resources, limiting their ability to adapt to environmental shocks.
7. Displacement risks – being responsible for children and dependents during climate-induced migration
8. Economic instability – struggling to access stable income sources in male-dominated labour markets

The most-at-risk groups include:

- I. Adolescent girls, at risk of school dropouts, child marriage, and gender-based violence in displacement settings
- II. Widows, who face barriers to land and financial independence
- III. Pregnant women, at risk of climate-induced health crises due to food insecurity and poor healthcare access
- IV. Elderly individuals, who struggle with mobility, healthcare access, and economic dependence
- V. Persons with disabilities, including women with disabilities, face barriers to employment, infrastructure access, and social services.

Challenges/success/experience

1. Success

Some significant achievements of women who participated in the peace negotiations that led to the

signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018 include the successful negotiation for increasing women's representation to 35 per cent, beyond the 25 per cent that was previously provided in the 2011 Transitional Constitution of South Sudan (TCSS). Women's political participation is a relatively recent development where numbers are growing but not quickly enough, and women are increasingly finding their way into leadership positions but are still not adequately represented.

1. Women's Political Participation as Voters and Candidates

In the 2010 elections in South Sudan, women represented 65 per cent of the voters and 25 per cent of the political candidates, whereas men headed all the political parties. With increased awareness and engagement of women in peace and security issues, political parties headed by women have been established. Currently, there are 28 registered political parties in the country, of which two (2) or 7 per cent are headed by women, i.e., the Sudan African National Union (SANU) is headed by Hon. Theresa Siricio and the National Congress Party (NCP) are headed by Hon. Agnes Lukudu.

2. . Women as Mediators, Negotiators and Experts in Formal Peace Negotiations

Over the past several years, women's participation in peace processes has gotten better. In 2018, during renewed peace efforts, one of the mediators was a woman; women made up 25% of the official delegates, and female leaders of civil society groups served as official observers, and women's coalitions served as think tanks during the peace process. They ensured women's participation and representation increased from 25% to 35% and were also given signatory status in the R-ARCSS. And they become key stakeholders in monitoring the implementation of the R-ARCSS, 2018. Women in academia, youth and CSOs were also represented and were included in various committees of the transitional period, although not in large numbers. Hon. Angelina Teny, appointed as a chair of the Strategic Defence and Security Review Board (SDSRB), tasked with developing security sector laws and policies, was notable in the patriarchal context.

3. Advocacy around Gender Advisors

South Sudanese women successfully advocated for a gender adviser to be appointed to key institutions such as the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (JMEC). In the strategy document, entitled Women's Agenda for Peace and Sustainable Development, that was developed with support of UN Women, women leaders called on IGAD's Mediation Support Unit (MSU) to include gender specialists in all the technical and administrative structures of the mediation process, including the Secretariat. Betty Murungi was appointed as the Senior Gender Advisor to the JMEC, followed by Ms Shantel

Niyokindi and Ms Esther Kyewalabye. Ms Rabab Baldo, appointed as gender advisor to the office of the IGAD special envoy on South Sudan.

4. Mechanisms for Monitoring Women's Participation in Various Processes

Mechanisms are in place for monitoring implementation of laws and policies that promote women's participation and leadership in decision-making positions in governance of peace and security processes. The Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare plays a key role in promoting gender equality and the implementation of laws and policies that provide for women's participation in leadership and decision-making positions. It also raises alarms when the 35 per cent affirmative action quota is not achieved among parties to the agreement and reminds them of their obligation to uphold the principle of 35% affirmative action in their appointments and nominations. Other monitoring mechanisms include:

- *Education Monitoring Tool*
- *National Bureau of Statistics*
- *A specialised committee for gender, youth and social welfare in the Parliament*
- *Women's Parliamentary Caucus*
- *IMGTC – comprised of Gender Focal Persons from government institutions/commissions*
- *Gender Equality Forum – comprised of ministries of gender at national and state levels, gender machinery in parliament, state gender advisors and gender focal persons from line ministries and commissions.*

2. Challenges experienced by women in formal peace processes

Through women's involvement in the CPA, ARCSS and R-ARCSS processes, South Sudanese women faced obstacles and were often left out or marginalised from certain key decisions. The patriarchal nature of South Sudanese society was one factor that limited women's effective participation in formal peace processes. For instance, during the ARCSS process, women delegates encountered sexual abuse and harassment from male delegates. Women also found that the public space for their civic engagement shrunk, and their ideas were

shortchanged or dropped during the drafting of documents. In most cases, women were portrayed as victims, rather than actors in formal peace processes. Insecurity, disasters and public health emergencies, threats and intimidation continue to exist and serve as barriers to women's participation in the implementation phase of the R-ARCSS, 2018.

8. Past experience

8.1. History of women's involvement in constitutional processes in South Sudan

While the inclusion of women in previous constitutional processes was limited, the R-ARCSS peace agreement (2018) includes important provisions for women's representation going forward. South Sudan has been governed under transitional constitutional arrangements since 2005, when the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) 2005 was signed, which provided for a six (6) year interim period in pre-independence, semi-autonomous Southern Sudan. At the time, the country was governed under the Interim Constitution of Southern Sudan 2005 (ICSS). This constitution was drafted by a committee of few individuals with a tight deadline to facilitate implementation of the CPA. After the South Sudanese voted for independence in 2011, the Government of Southern Sudan, according to the Interim Constitution of Southern Sudan 2005, was mandated to review this constitution and develop a new constitution.

The Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan (2011) was drafted by a small committee with a tight timeline. Very limited public consultation took place on the content, including women.

After independence, the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) initiated a permanent Constitution-making process (PCP) led by the National Constitutional Review Commission (NCRC). While women were represented in the NCRC (3/9 permanent members were women, meeting the former 25% quota of the TCRSS; only 6/25 of the originally decreed part-time members were women). Concerned and seeking to enhance their voice in the context of only limited consultations planned by the NCRC on the substance of a new constitution, women decided to organise a National Conference on Women and the Constitution, which took place in May 2013 – attended by multiple women's organisations and stakeholders from around the country. However, before the recommendations of this conference could be implemented, the constitutional process was interrupted by the outbreak of violent conflict in December 2013.

The Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan (2011) was drafted by a small committee with a tight timeline. Very limited public consultation took place on the content, including with women

Women's representation in the previous NCRC set up in 2012 did not fully meet the previous TCRSS quota (25%). Concerned to enhance their voice, women organized a national conference in May 2013.

What needs to be done?

1. In post-conflict South Sudan, women's participation in politics and the electoral process holds crucial importance for achieving sustainable peace and promoting gender equality. There is a need to establish a legally binding instrument to ensure the implementation of the quota and an accountability mechanism that holds institutions accountable if they fail to adhere to the quota. The creation of an independent gender equality authority could be an enforcement mechanism.

2. Based on the above analysis, South Sudanese women requested the development of an inclusive, implementable, and adaptable common agenda as a point of reference in their quest for meaningful participation in peacebuilding and the political processes.

3. Collectively deliberate and develop a workable and coherent action plan for women's engagement in the constitution-making process; and ultimately, ensure the reflection of the diverse voices and aspirations of women in the expected constitution-making process.

Conclusion

A Women's Common Agenda provides an opportunity to transform women's participation from symbolic inclusion to meaningful influence in South Sudan's political and peacebuilding processes. Sustainable peace requires women not only as beneficiaries of peace agreements but as equal actors shaping the country's future.

Recommendations

- Establish an independent mechanism for gender equality accountability;
- Ensure enforcement of the 35% quota across all institutions;
- Provide funding for women-led peacebuilding networks;
- Include women's organisations in constitution-making structures;
- Strengthen civic education for women voters and candidates.

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