



Educational exclusion and women's participation in peace building in South Sudan

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of educational exclusion in shaping women's marginalization from formal peace processes such as signed peace agreements and more in South Sudan. Framed within a liberal feminist analytical lens, it offers an interpretive reflection informed by qualitative interviews conducted in 2013 and situated within a broader review of recent literature. The analysis identifies three interlocking domains through which exclusion operates: first, the persistent devaluation of Women's Bottom-up grassroots peace building efforts in contrast to their continued exclusion from Top-down formal peace processes; second, the systemic under investment in girls' and women's education as a mechanism of political disenfranchisement; and third, the structural effects of entrenched patriarchy and household-level gender norms that restrict women's access to education and public life. The paper argues that education functions both as a site of empowerment and as a vehicle of exclusion, reinforcing gender hierarchies within post-conflict governance architectures. It concludes that sustainable peace in South Sudan requires a fundamental reorientation of peace building policy - one that centers on inclusive education and gender-responsive institutional design as core components of democratic transformation and long-term stability.

Keywords: Education; Women; Peace building; Peace Processes; Post-conflict South Sudan

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1. Introduction

Across global post-conflict landscapes, the persistent exclusion of women from formal peace processes such as signatories to peace agreements, ceasefire negotiations, transitional governance frameworks, and constitutional reforms remains a glaring contradiction to the normative commitments enshrined in international peace and security frameworks, most notably United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and its subsequent iterations. Despite mounting evidence that women's participation enhances the legitimacy, sustainability, and inclusivity of peace agreements, their involvement continues to be limited, often relegated to symbolic or peripheral roles within male-dominated governance and decision-making structures (Hamid et al., 2021; Shai and Vunza, 2021; Pelham, 2020). This systemic exclusion is not incidental, but rather the result of intersecting structural barriers such as quality education, cultural barriers, and persistent insecurity that inhibit women's agency in post-conflict reconstruction (Gsdrc Admin, 2023; Dhakal, 2021; Dyfan et al., 2004). Among these, limited access to quality education emerges as both a consequence and a driver of gendered marginalization.

Education is long recognized as a critical enabler of women's political participation, civic engagement, and socio-economic mobility in many post-conflict settings (Kuteesa et al., 2024; Salha et al., 2024; The Education Agenda, 2022). However, access to education in conflict and post conflict era is often disrupted, with disproportionate consequences for women and girls. Kuteesa, Akpuokwe and Udeh argue that legacy of war often compounds pre-existing structural inequalities, leaving educational infrastructures under-resourced and inaccessible, particularly for displaced and rural populations. In many contexts, patriarchal norms, cultural prescriptions, and persistent insecurity further constrain women's ability to pursue formal education, thereby diminishing their capacity to access leadership roles or engage meaningfully in the shaping of post-war futures (Inclusive Peace, 2023b; Ghais, 2022; Marginalized Groups and Constitution Building, 2015). In this context, the South Sudanese case presents a critical site of inquiry. As the world's newest nation, South Sudan continues to grapple with a fragile peace and a deeply gendered legacy of conflict (Study on the Traditional and Changing Role of Gender and Women in Peace building in South Sudan, 2022; Theron, 2020).

South Sudan's history has been marked by the devastating effects of war and displacement, which have severely impacted girls' access to education (Mayai, 2022; Breidlid, 2019). Research by Karamalla-Gaiballa (2021) highlights how militarization and the recruitment of women into armed movements disrupted educational trajectories, contributing to widespread illiteracy among women and curbing their capacity to participate in political and civic institutions. Scholars such as Shai and Vunza, (2021) and Pelham (2020) have argued that while gender-sensitive language has been incorporated into peace agreements, this has not translated into substantive inclusion. Instead, tokenistic representation persists, along with structural barriers, including educational disenfranchisement continue to exclude women from high-level peace negotiations and constitution-building processes (Guttry, Ndiloseh and Amoroso, 2022). In this regard, the current paper explores how educational disparities, rooted in both historical marginalization and contemporary political realities (Shai and Vunza, 2021), continue to function as a key mechanism of exclusion for South Sudanese women in formal peace building.

Essentially, this paper employs a liberal feminist lens, which foregrounds the centrality of gender equality and women's empowerment, particularly through education (Shukla, 2020; Jhori, 2023), to examine how women's exclusion from formal peace processes in South Sudan is sustained through systemic educational

marginalization. It analyzes the impact of gender norms and broader patriarchal structures on women's access to education and their participation in peace building. It further considers how women's bottom-up peace efforts are persistently undervalued within dominant political frameworks. The analysis underscores that transformative, gender-responsive educational strategies must be understood not only as tools of individual empowerment, but as structural interventions vital to inclusive, resilient, and sustainable peace.

2. Peace processes, women's education, and post-conflict South Sudan

Across the globe, the field of peace and conflict studies has increasingly emphasized the transformative potential of inclusive peace processes that substantively engage women and marginalized groups in post-conflict governance, reconciliation, and reconstruction. However, a critical yet often overlooked barrier to such inclusivity is the systemic lack of access to quality education for women, which significantly undermines their capacity to engage meaningfully in formal peace processes and post-conflict decision-making structures. Broadly defined, peace processes refer to a range of formal and informal political, legal, and social mechanisms employed to bring an end to violent conflict, rebuild societies, and establish a sustainable political order (Lederach, 1997; Paffenholz et al., 2016).

These processes typically involve sequential stages, including pre-negotiation consultations, ceasefire agreements, peace negotiations, the signing of peace agreements, and the implementation of post-conflict reforms (Brewer, 2015). They are inherently multidimensional, involving a diverse array of stakeholders such as warring parties, national governments, international mediators, civil society organizations, traditional authorities, and local communities (hancock, 2008; Day, 2020). The overarching objective of peace processes is to address the root causes of conflict, resolve grievances, facilitate political inclusion, and promote respect for human rights, rule of law, and socioeconomic development (Brewer, 2015). These processes often culminate in peace agreements that serve as road maps for transitional governance, constitutional reform, disarmament, reintegration, and reconciliation.

While often used interchangeably, it is important to distinguish between formal *peace processes* and *peace building*. Boutros Boutros-Ghali's seminal 1992 report, *An Agenda for Peace* underscores formal peace building as a long-term, multidimensional effort aimed at preventing the outbreak, continuation, or recurrence of violent conflict. Similarly, the UN Peacekeeping Capstone Doctrine (2008) describes peace building as a comprehensive set of measures aimed at strengthening conflict management and laying the groundwork for sustainable peace. In contrast, formal peace processes are more immediate and structured sequences of negotiation and conflict resolution, usually marked by formal agreements and cessation of hostilities. Peace building encompasses and extends beyond the formal peace process itself, often beginning in tandem with negotiations and continuing long after a peace agreement is signed (Achet (2020). It includes activities such as restoring governance institutions, rebuilding infrastructure, strengthening rule of law, addressing trauma and social fragmentation, and promoting inclusive development (Bell and Wise, 2022). Crucially, peace building represents the post-conflict phase of societal recovery and transformation. It is during this period that the meaningful participation of women, such as dialogue, mediation, reconciliation advocacy approach and so on, becomes visible, especially at the grassroots. This grassroots visibility is a reflection of how women are viewed in a patriarchal society, where women are better viewed at the background while men take the decision making arena.

More so, the architecture of formal peace processes in most contexts remains predominantly male-centric and excludes women in peace and security decision-making arena (UN Women, 2015; Bell and O'Rourke, 2007). Women's involvement in peace building efforts has shown significant promise globally. During the Cold War, grassroots women's movements were pivotal in advocating for non-violent conflict resolution and the protection of women's rights (Schott, 1997; Swerdlow, 1993; Enloe, 1993).

In Africa, the roots of women's advocacy trace back to anti-colonial movements, where women organized against injustice and exploitation (Afolabi and Arogundade, 2003). Post-conflict zones have also demonstrated the transformative role women play in peace building. For example, following the Rwandan genocide, women-led initiatives like the "Unity Club" promoted reconciliation and unity among communities (Izabiliza, 2010). Also, empirical studies have demonstrated that peace agreements are more durable and comprehensive when women are substantively engaged in their formulation and implementation (O'Reilly et al, 2015; Krause et al, 2018). Women's participation enhances legitimacy, incorporates broader social justice concerns, and increases the responsiveness of post-conflict institutions to diverse needs. Nonetheless, women continue to be excluded from formal peace negotiations, often relegated to symbolic roles or marginalized in informal consultation processes (Shai and Vunza, 2021; Ghais, 2022). This exclusion is neither incidental nor apolitical, it is structurally produced and reproduced through systems that marginalize women in education, governance, and security discourses.

In the case of South Sudan, peace agreements have reflected mixed commitments to gender inclusion (Westendorf, 2018). Following decades of civil war, the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Government of Sudan laid the groundwork for South Sudan's eventual independence in 2011. While the CPA marked a milestone in conflict resolution, it lacked a robust gender component and made only limited provisions for women's involvement in peace building and post-war governance (Westendorf, 2018; Joshi and Quinn, 2015). This early omission set a precedent for the marginalization of women in subsequent peace processes.

More recently, the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) and its revitalized version in 2018 (R-ARCSS) introduced a nominal 35% gender quota for women's representation in transitional governance bodies. However, scholars and practitioners argue that this inclusion has largely been symbolic or superficial, with women occupying positions of limited influence or being appointed based on political loyalty rather than genuine commitment to gender equity (Guttry et al., 2022; Theron, 2020). Moreover, the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms, combined with entrenched patriarchal norms within political parties and state institutions, has hindered women's ability to exercise substantive authority (Study on the Traditional and Changing Role of Gender and Women in peace building in South Sudan, 2022). To address these persistent gaps, South Sudan has adopted National Action Plans (NAPs) on Women, Peace, and Security, aligning with the global agenda established under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. The first NAP (2015–2020) and its successor (2021–2025) aimed to enhance women's participation in formal peace processes, increase protection against gender-based violence, and promote gender equality in recovery and reconstruction. These policy frameworks represent a formal acknowledgment of the need to integrate gender perspectives into decision making. However, the implementation of the NAPs has faced significant challenges, including insufficient political will, under-funding, weak institutional coordination, and the absence of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, 2021).

As a result of these challenges, the ambitious goals outlined in the NAPs often remain unfulfilled in practice. Crucially, one of the most persistent barriers to the meaningful implementation of the NAPs and to women's effective participation in peace processes is the lack of access to quality education. Women's lack of education, not only limits their technical capacity and confidence to engage in political processes but also reinforces broader patterns of socio-political marginalization. Despite the formal commitments made through national and international frameworks, without targeted investments in girls' education and broader structural transformation, women's inclusion in South Sudan's formal peace processes is likely to remain rhetorical rather than substantive.

Furthermore, among the intersecting barriers to women's participation in Formal peace processes, access to quality education emerges as both a foundational enabler and a persistent site of exclusion. Education fosters civic consciousness, political literacy, leadership capacity, and economic autonomy which are all prerequisites for sustainable peace building (Salha et al., 2024; The Education Agenda, 2022). During conflict and post-conflict settings, girls and women are among the first to be excluded from formal education systems due to displacement, insecurity, early marriage, and gendered cultural expectations (Kuteesa et al., 2024). Research from the Global South underscores how educational marginalization compounds women's invisibility in formal governance structures. For example, in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Rwanda, post-conflict educational reforms targeting girls and women have shown positive correlations with increased female political participation and peace activism (Dhakal, 2021; UNDP, 2019). Inversely, where education remains inaccessible, women's participation in peace and recovery mechanisms remains constrained or entirely absent.

South Sudan's educational system presents a striking case of gendered marginalization. According to UNICEF (2022), South Sudan has one of the lowest female literacy rates in the world, with fewer than 10% of women over the age of 15 able to read and write. The educational infrastructure is profoundly underdeveloped, particularly in rural areas, where armed conflict, poverty, and traditional gender roles intersect to keep girls out of school (Mayai, 2022). In many communities, education is seen as a male privilege or an economic investment to be reserved for boys, while girls are expected to marry early and assume domestic responsibilities. Breidlid (2019) highlights the cumulative effects of conflict on educational access in South Sudan, noting how repeated displacements, attacks on schools, and military recruitment of girls and young women have devastated opportunities for formal learning. Furthermore, the militarization of the education sector where schools are occupied by armed groups or used as bases has compounded fear and insecurity for female students and educators alike. Gender-based violence, both within and en route to schools, further deters female enrollment and retention.

Also, South Sudanese education system remains one of the most critical yet under-resourced sectors, particularly when it comes to addressing the educational needs of women and girls. While there is a growing recognition among scholars and policymakers that education plays a foundational role in post-conflict peace building, the country's education infrastructure suffers from systemic weaknesses, including low public investment, limited institutional capacity, and a mismatch between supply and demand (Amutabi and Agoot, 2021; Alamin et al., 2022). Compared to other African and Middle Eastern countries with similar income levels, South Sudan allocates a significantly smaller proportion of its national budget to basic education, further exacerbating the inequities in access and quality (Alamin et al., 2022). The legacy of colonial educational policy, which was characterized by uneven development and neglect of peripheral regions, continues to shape the structural deficiencies of South Sudan's contemporary education system (Hamid et al., 2021). These historical

patterns have laid the groundwork for deeply gendered disparities in access, exacerbated by conflict, displacement, and socio-cultural norms. Girls' education, in particular, remains deprioritized due to certain traditional beliefs that favor male education, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas.

Therefore, this study adopts liberal feminist theory as its foundational analytical framework. The liberal feminist argues that the inter-linkage between educational exclusion and formal peace processes is not merely correlative but causative (Shukla, 2020; Jhori, 2023). Liberal feminism emphasizes individual rights, equal opportunity, and institutional reform, advocating for women's access to education, employment, and political participation as pathways to gender equality. It identifies discriminatory laws, social practices, and institutional biases as key barriers to women's empowerment, and it calls for the removal of such obstacles through legal, policy, and educational reforms. Within the South Sudanese context, liberal feminism provides a valuable lens for understanding how patriarchal structures have historically undermined women's access to education and, by extension, their participation in decision making especially peace processes.

The application of liberal feminist theory reveals that educational exclusion is not simply a developmental failure but a deliberate outcome of patriarchal governance structures. Addressing this exclusion through gender-sensitive educational reform and inclusive peace education is essential not only for women's empowerment but for the sustainability and legitimacy of peace processes in South Sudan.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach situated within a liberal feminist analytical framework to examine how educational exclusion has shaped women's marginalization from formal peace processes in South Sudan. It is based on a re-analysis of qualitative interview data originally collected in 2013, supplemented by an updated review of relevant academic and policy literature published between 2020 and 2025. The integration of historical data with contemporary scholarship enables a layered examination of persistent gendered exclusions in post-conflict governance (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

Primary data for this study were drawn from a purposive sample of 28 unstructured, open-ended interviews conducted in 2013 with key stakeholders within South Sudan. Participants included representatives from women's rights organizations, local peace activists, policymakers, civil society actors, and scholars working in the fields of gender, conflict, and education. The purposive sampling strategy was designed to capture a diversity of informed perspectives on the intersection of education, gender, and peace building, particularly from actors whose voices are often absent from formal negotiations (Palinkas et al., 2015; Reinharz, 1992).

These interviews were not analyzed contemporaneously but have been reinterpreted for this paper through the lens of liberal feminist theory, focusing on how narratives of educational access denial, patriarchy, and institutional exclusion inform women's participation in Formal peace processes. All participants gave informed consent, and ethical approval was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Higher Degrees Committee. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participant anonymity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A content analysis approach (Krippendorff, 2013) was employed to interpret the interview transcripts. Thematic coding was conducted inductively and iteratively, beginning with close reading of the transcripts to identify recurring patterns related to educational access, political participation, and informal peace

processes/roles. Initial codes were refined into broader thematic categories that aligned with the study's conceptual framework. The analysis paid particular attention to how participants framed the role of education in enabling or constraining political agency, and how formal and informal peace building practices were gendered in both structure and recognition.

To enhance the validity of findings, this analysis was triangulated with a comprehensive document review of 57 relevant sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, peace agreements, and NGO reports. The literature review was conducted using databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, with search terms including: *peace building*, *formal peace processes*, *education*, *women's exclusion*, *patriarchy*, *South Sudan*, and *liberal feminism*. Documents that did not address the nexus of education and women's exclusion from peace processes were excluded. This desk review helped contextualize the findings and trace the institutional and policy continuities that have perpetuated gendered exclusions over time (Bowen, 2009).

3.1. Findings

This section presents three interrelated themes on women's exclusion from formal peace processes in South Sudan. It examines the devaluation of grassroots peace building, the political effects of limited educational access, and the role of patriarchal norms in restricting women's participation. Together, these themes show how educational exclusion both reflects and reinforces gendered marginalization in post-conflict governance.

3.1.1. *Women's bottom-up peace building against exclusion from top-down formal peace processes*

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security adopted on 31 October 2000, reflected a commitment to women's peace activism. The resolution calls for member states to ensure the active participation of women in humanitarian efforts, conflict resolution, peace building, and post-conflict initiatives. Similarly, the Beijing +5 session of the United Nations General Assembly emphasized women's critical role in peace building, urging regional bodies to integrate gender perspectives into politics, governance, and efforts to address armed conflict globally (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002; Metcalfe, 2003; Pratt and Richter-Devroe, 2011; Isike, 2017). Furthermore, this global shift was reflected in the African Union's (AU) constitution and the 2003 adoption of an additional protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which specifically addressed the rights of women in Africa (Rebouche, 2006; Adeogun and Isola, 2011). Despite these global and regional landmark commitments, exclusion of women from formal peace processes remains one of the most glaring contradictions in contemporary peace and conflict discourse particularly in South Sudan (Wing and Smith, 2003; Barnett and Bennett, 2013).

Westendorf (2018) offers a critical interrogation of the implications of women's exclusion from formal peace processes, particularly with respect to the nature and sustainability of post-conflict settlements. Through an in-depth analysis of the Sudan–South Sudan peace process that culminated in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), Westendorf explores both the formal exclusion of women from official negotiations and the informal roles they assumed in broader peacemaking efforts. The study does not suggest that the mere absence of women directly causes peace processes to fail; rather, it situates this exclusion within a broader critique of elite-centric peace architectures. Westendorf contends that the ownership of peace processes by political elites facilitated and reinforced by the structural design of many formal negotiations—

marginalizes non-elite voices, including those of women, with detrimental consequences for long-term peace consolidation.

Similarly, Rabele (2021) examines the entrenched exclusion of women from leadership and mediation roles within South Sudan's formal peace frameworks. Focusing on the national-level implementation of women, peace, and security (WPS) commitments, Rabele evaluates whether governmental policies, including the National Action Plans on UNSCR 1325, translate into meaningful inclusion in peace processes. The study reveals persistent implementation deficits, highlighting how rhetorical commitments to gender inclusion often fail to materialize in practice. Despite the existence of normative frameworks promoting gender equity in peace building, women's participation remains largely symbolic or peripheral, thereby undermining the transformative potential of inclusive peace and the legitimacy of the processes themselves.

In the absence of formal recognition, women have leveraged traditional networks, cultural institutions, and local knowledge systems to de-escalate violence and mediate disputes in South Sudan communities. For instance, during the negotiation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 between Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement, women had limited formal roles due to the male-dominated nature of political and military leadership, nevertheless, they contributed through grassroots advocacy, peace lobbying, and civil society initiatives to ensure their voices were heard (Adeleye, 2000; Hilhorst and Leeuwen, 2005; Jayeoba 2009). Also, the works done through advocacy and awareness by South Sudanese women were attested to, in the following findings (via interviews).

According to May, Voice for Change (VFC) organization:

"Many women's organizations in South Sudan today, including this organization (VFC), started as women's groups/movements before the independence of South Sudan. Although they did not form formal organizations, they came together as women's groups. However, due to the displacement caused by war, the groups could not remain intact for long."

Organizations such as Sudan Women Empowerment for Peace (SUWEP), Voice for Change (VFC), St. Monica Women Association, and the Central Equatoria Women Association (CEWA) trace their origins to these wartime women's groups. May further highlights a pivotal example:

"A typical example is a woman called Lona James Alia, who made significant efforts during the war to gather her women colleagues to fight against all forms of discrimination in then-Sudan. Her efforts gave birth to a recent organization, Voice for Change (VFC), which continues to advocate for the rights of vulnerable groups, especially women, in South Sudanese communities to this day."

Another notable example is Julia Aker Duany, who, alongside her husband Wal, founded South Sudanese Friends International (SSFI) in the Upper Nile in 1994. This grassroots group sought to halt inter-ethnic warfare overfishing and grazing rights. As Duany recounts:

"I began urging the village women to convince their husbands, fathers, and brothers to stop fighting. To everyone's surprise, it worked, and the women discovered their latent power to influence community reconciliation."

These forms of grassroots peace building often emerged from women's everyday practices of care, mediation, and social cohesion. It represents a bottom-up model of conflict transformation that, while frequently absent from formal documentation and elite peace accords, is no less foundational to the achievement of sustainable peace. These localized, relational efforts challenge the dominant top-down architecture of formal peace processes, which traditionally privilege state actors, military elites, and male political representatives. Rather than being peripheral, women's peace building initiatives nurtured within households, communities, and informal institutions, offer a fundamentally different epistemology of peace, one that is dialogic, inclusive, and grounded in the lived realities of post-conflict societies. The paradox, then, lies in the simultaneous centrality and marginalization of women: they are indispensable agents of peace on the ground, yet systematically excluded from the formal arenas where peace is negotiated, institutionalized, and legitimized. This structural disjunction not only undermines the inclusivity and legitimacy of peace processes but also entrenches wider patterns of gendered political exclusion and epistemic injustice. From the perspective of liberal feminist theory, this exclusion is emblematic of broader institutional failures to guarantee women equal access to public life, including political participation, decision-making, and formal education.

As Okin (1994) contend, justice and democratic legitimacy require that all citizens, regardless of gender, have access to the institutions that shape their lives. Excluding women from peace processes not only contradicts these liberal ideals but also perpetuates a patriarchal logic that equates political competence with elite male experience. Indeed, to recognize and amplify women's grassroots peace building agency is not merely a corrective to institutional exclusion; it represents a necessary epistemological shift in peace studies one that re-conceptualizes what peace means, where it is built, and who gets to be recognized as a legitimate peace-builder (Galtung 1996; Tonnessen, 2007). It affirms that sustainable peace must be built not only in conference rooms and elite negotiations but also in the everyday spaces where women work to heal fractured societies, often despite the absence of formal education or political recognition.

3.1.2. Lack of education and women's exclusion from formal peace processes

In South Sudan, despite women's grassroots peace building initiatives have been pivotal in fostering community resilience and conflict resolution, the lack of educational opportunities has been identified as a significant factor for women's exclusion from formal peace processes. For example, Mayen, (2013) policy brief examines the challenges to women's participation in formal peace processes in South Sudan. It notes that despite constitutional provisions for gender equality, traditional customs aided by limited educational opportunities continue to impede women's involvement in peace negotiations. Similarly, UNDP (2021) Study on the Traditional and Changing Role of Gender and Women in peace building in South Sudan conducted in five locations: Aweil, Bentiu, Bor, Rumbek, and Torit, highlights that traditional gender roles and limited access to education hinder women's participation in formal peace processes. The report emphasizes the need for integrating gender initiatives into policies and programs to enhance women's roles in national reconciliation and decision making.

Interviews with local stakeholders further illuminate the challenges of lack of education for women participation in the peace process. For instance, Tye, a grassroots activist, highlighted that while women are raising awareness about their rights, the nascent state of South Sudan's peace building efforts, compounded by women's lack of education, poses substantial obstacles. He stated:

“Although women are creating awareness on women’s rights, there are still lots of challenges in South Sudan as per peace building, it is still a new nation, men in the government are failing, not to talk of women that are unskilled and uneducated... lack of education is a big obstacle.”

Similarly, Osiri from the University of Juba pointed out that traditional beliefs and limited educational opportunities have left many women unequipped to engage effectively in peace building.

“Women are not fully equipped, they are mostly uneducated, to address the issues of peace building in South Sudan. They are committed to their families which could serve as a great hindrance. Yes, some of them are bold and equipped, but it is going to take a while to be able to meet with their other colleagues in peace processes in other countries, like South Africa, Nigeria, Liberia, and so on. In South Sudan women were not sent to school, so education is still an issue”.

These insights underscore the complex interplay between education, cultural norms, and women's participation in formal peace processes. Government officials acknowledge these challenges and emphasize the need for policy interventions. Jenny from the Ministry of Gender, Child, and Social Welfare noted that despite mandates for universal education, cultural impediments in rural areas continue to prevent girls from attending school.

“Government had mandated that every child both male and female must be in school because of the high illiteracy level, but in the rural area some people don’t want their girl child in the school.”

This sentiment is echoed by Kiden, a student at the University of Juba, who advocates for increased governmental support for girls' education to enable women to fulfill the 30 percent quota for their participation in governance structures.

The implications of educational disparities are profound. Many grassroots women remain unaware of critical frameworks such as the 25/30 percent representation quotas and international instruments like UNSCR 1325. This lack of awareness limits their ability to advocate for their rights and participate meaningfully in peace processes. The low literacy rates among women not only reflect broader societal challenges but also highlight the urgent need for targeted educational initiatives to bridge this gap.

Liberal feminism posits that the solution lies in removing institutional and legal barriers that inhibit women's access to resources such as education, employment, and political representation (Jhori, 2023). In the context of South Sudan, this means challenging traditional practices and state inaction that sustain gender disparities in literacy and formal schooling. Education, from a liberal feminist viewpoint, equips women not only with the technical knowledge and confidence required to engage in formal peace processes but also with the language of rights and policy that structures those processes. Moreover, liberal feminists emphasize the role of the state and international institutions in ensuring that women's access to education is protected and promoted as part of broader peace building efforts. The persistent educational deficits among South Sudanese women, as discussed by key informants and reinforced by policy studies such as UNDP (2021) and Mayen (2013), therefore represent a failure to dismantle patriarchy and cultural structures that serve as barriers to gender equality.

Education, according to Lagarde (2013), is not merely a developmental goal—it is a transformative tool for empowerment. When women have access to education, they acquire not only technical skills and knowledge but also critical consciousness and civic competence. Conversely, the absence of education perpetuates dependency, discrimination, and exclusion. In this regard, educational inequality in South Sudan serves as a root cause of women's political marginalization, limiting their ability to act as agents of peace and social transformation. Furthermore, liberal feminist theorists such as Annuradha Shukla (2020) argue that educational institutions themselves have often functioned as instruments of patriarchal socialization. The curriculum, school practices, and pedagogical norms are frequently gender-biased, reinforcing stereotypes that marginalize women and exclude them from leadership pathways. Feminist scholars therefore call for curriculum reform that not only includes women's voices and histories but also challenges the underlying power structures that shape knowledge production and dissemination (Jhori, 2023; Howe, 1977).

In support of this perspective, Agbaje (2021) emphasizes the importance of both formal and informal peace education in empowering women to participate meaningfully in peace processes. Formal peace education equips women with practical skills in negotiation, mediation, and reconciliation, while informal peace education often transmitted through family and community networks builds social capital and nurtures conflict resolution competencies from a young age. The integration of these approaches is especially critical in societies like South Sudan, where traditional gender norms and limited institutional reach necessitate hybrid models of empowerment. Lastly, feminist theory exposes how cultural narratives and gender norms continue to delegitimize women's presence in the public and political spheres. In many African societies, including South Sudan, women who assert themselves in political or any decision making roles are often labeled as deviant or wayward, facing both social ostracism and systemic pushback. The association of leadership and political authority with masculinity reinforces the belief that decision making is a male prerogative, an exclusionary view that liberal feminists actively contest.

3.1.3. Patriarchy, educational exclusion and the impact on women's participation in formal peace processes

On the one hand, patriarchy, as a deeply entrenched socio-political system, institutionalizes male dominance and relegates women to subordinate roles across public and private spheres. Feminist such as Jhori, (2023) define patriarchy as a socially constructed system of male dominance that allocates public power and authority to men while relegating women to the private domain. In such a system, education particularly for girls is either deprioritized or strategically limited to roles that reinforce traditional gender hierarchies. The result is a gendered political economy of knowledge, where men dominate decision-making spaces, while women, lacking formal education, remain invisible in policy and peace processes. In South Sudan, patriarchal norms not only limit women's access to education but also shape family dynamics that reinforce women's exclusion from political and peace building arenas (Adekanye, 2013; Olutayo, 2001).

On the other hand, education is central to family and societal power structures. Within patriarchal frameworks, boys are typically prioritized for educational opportunities as a means of preparing them for leadership, while girls are often socialized into domestic roles, thereby reinforcing their economic and political disempowerment. This disparity in educational access is not merely a reflection of cultural preference but a calculated reinforcement of gender hierarchies (Adeogun and Isola, 2016). In South Sudan, these dynamics are vividly illustrated by Deng (2020), a coordinator with the Centre for Empowerment of Women in Africa (CEWA), who reported:

"Husbands do not allow their wives to participate publicly, so even if there are positions to be filled in the governance, if husbands do not agree to release their wives; wives on their own cannot come out and participate in politics."

This statement exemplifies how patriarchal values operating within the household directly inhibit women's participation in the peace process. Deng's view resonates with Adeogun & Muthuki (2018), an article that analyzes the exclusion of women from formal peace building in South Sudan through a feminist lens. It highlights how patriarchal norms and gendered power relations marginalize women's voices in peace processes. The study advocates for an integrated approach that combines grassroots activism with formal political engagement to enhance women's participation in peace building.

Another interviewee, Jenny from the Ministry of Gender, Child, and Social Welfare emphasizes that although quotas for women's participation have been increased to 30 percent, deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs continue to deter families from sending girls to school, particularly in rural areas. As she notes:

"In the rural areas, some people do not send their girls to school, and they do not also want their women involved in public issues."

This underscores how patriarchal values and educational deprivation is both a cause and a consequence of women's exclusion from the peace process and grassroots movement. This is consistent with Kumalo and Mullineaux (2020), which discusses the critical role of South Sudanese women in sustaining peace and the obstacles they face due to patriarchal systems. It emphasizes that, while women have been active in grassroots peace initiatives, their representation in formal peace processes remains limited. The authors call for increased access to justice, resources, and meaningful representation for women to achieve lasting peace in South Sudan.

In reinforcing these voices of other interviewees Adith, a women's rights advocate in Juba, stressed: "Rather than encouraging patriarchal culture to dominate in the area of education, government should encourage girl and women education in the politics in the educational sector." This indicates growing awareness at the community level of the need to disrupt patriarchal transmission through education reform. Meanwhile, Kola, a lecturer in the Department of Development and Peace Studies at the University of Juba, offers a more tempered view, suggesting that displacement caused by conflict has introduced new values that challenge traditional norms. "Men and women of South Sudan that are educated, do not really have problems with equality," he noted, adding that returnees bring alternative gender perspectives that are influencing urban attitudes.

However, this optimism must be contextualized, while displacement may introduce progressive norms, its effects are unevenly distributed. Rural areas which make up the majority of South Sudan remain largely insulated from these changes, and deeply patriarchal norms continue to dominate (Adeogun & Isola, 2016). Furthermore, patriarchal political institutions strategically deploy women's lack of formal education as a justification for their exclusion from leadership. As Adekanye (2013) notes, patriarchal systems do not simply tolerate inequality; they cultivate it by engineering denial of women's access to resources, including education, in ways that sustain male hegemony. This is consistent with Lenin's assertion that "all illiterate persons stand outside politics," which continues to resonate in South Sudan's peace process and post conflict governance.

Indeed, without access to quality education, women in South Sudan are deprived of the knowledge, networks, and self-confidence needed to engage with complex peace processes. This creates a self-reinforcing

cycle: women are excluded from education due to structural inequalities and cultural norms, and their absence from education becomes a justification for excluding them from governance, negotiation, and constitutional development (Ghais, 2022; Ndiloseh, 2022). Thus, educational deprivation, in this context, functions as both a symptom and a mechanism of gendered exclusion, systematically locking women out of formal peace building spaces.

4. Conclusion

This study has interrogated the systemic exclusion of South Sudanese women from peace building, foregrounding the central role of education as both a site of disempowerment from formal peace process and a potential instrument of transformation. While patriarchal norms continue to dominate socio-political structures, this article has demonstrated that South Sudanese women have not been passive participants through sustained grassroots activism, civil society mobilization, and informal peace building, they have persistently shaped the post-conflict landscape in meaningful ways.

The analysis confirms that patriarchal ideologies embedded in familial, educational, and political institutions collectively obstruct women's participation in formal governance and peace negotiations. Organizations such as Voice for Change (VFC), the South Sudan Women's Empowerment Network (SSWEN), and Sudan Women's Empowerment for Peace (SUWEP) have demonstrated how local agency can challenge entrenched gender norms and broaden the scope of peace building beyond elite-dominated fora. Yet, the structural obstacles they face rooted in both institutional exclusion and socio-cultural resistance remain formidable.

A central barrier to women's political empowerment in South Sudan is the persistent denial of educational opportunities. As highlighted by Tye and Osiri, educational disenfranchisement is not merely a by-product of poverty or war, but an active mechanism of patriarchal control. This is particularly evident in rural areas, where girls are often withdrawn from school in favor of early marriage, domestic labor, or cultural obligations. The lack of education not only disqualifies women from meaningful roles in formal governance but also leaves them unaware of key political instruments such as the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, thereby limiting their capacity to demand their rights within peace frameworks.

Despite the introduction of a 30% gender quota under the revitalized peace agreement, real political representation remains limited. As Boboya James (2021) and Inclusive Peace (2023a) note, women constituted only 15% of negotiators in the 2015 peace agreement and a modest increase to 33% in 2018, with just 1 woman participating as a mediator. The correlation between increased female participation and the relative durability of the 2018 agreement underscores a well-established feminist peace building theory: that women's substantive inclusion enhances the legitimacy, inclusivity, and sustainability of peace agreements (O'Reilly et al., 2015; Adeogun et al., 2025).

Encouragingly, recent initiatives in girls' education signal incremental progress. A notable collaboration between the Government of South Sudan, UNICEF, and the Girls' Education South Sudan (GESS) project has introduced innovative strategies—including radio-based learning, community theatre, and public discourse on girls' rights—that aim to shift cultural perceptions and reduce structural barriers. As Adeogun et al. (2023) report, over 6,000 girls were retained in schools through financial support to their families, and nearly 3,000 learning environments received grants for infrastructure improvement. These interventions, while nascent,

reflect a broader recognition of education as a foundational pillar for gender equality and conflict transformation. Nonetheless, such advancements remain embryonic and disproportionately urban. The enduring grip of patriarchy in rural areas continues to obstruct girls' access to education and, by extension, women's inclusion in national peace building processes. This disconnect between policy and practice necessitates a more radical reimagining of peacebuilding in South Sudan, one that moves beyond quotas and tokenism and instead addresses the root causes of gender exclusion through systemic investment in inclusive education, cultural transformation, and institutional reform.

In sum, dismantling patriarchy structures in South Sudan must begin with education not only as a means of individual empowerment but as a strategic intervention for collective peace. Women's full and effective participation in formal peace processes is not simply a normative ideal; it is a structural imperative for the realization of durable and transformative peace. The future of South Sudanese peace building will depend not only on political negotiations among elites but on the extent to which the voices, rights, and capacities of women, particularly those historically excluded, are centered within peace processes.

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Appendix

Interview carried out in Juba, South Sudan (2013).

Women's organizations: Representatives from the South Sudan Women's General Association (SSWGA), Central Equatorial Women Association (CEWA), Voice for Change (VFC), and St. Monica Women Association.

Grassroots women: 12 participants from various counties in South Sudan.

Government officials: 4 individuals from ministries, including the Ministry of Gender, Child, and Social Welfare.

Academics: 6 representatives from the University of Juba, including lecturers and administrative staff.

Human rights organizations: Members of the South Sudan Human Rights Society for Advocacy.

International bodies: A representative from UN Women.

Ms. Celica: Gender Secretary at UN Women, interviewed on September 13, 2013.

In total, 28 participants were interviewed, categorized as follows:

Grassroots women: 12

Academics: 6

Government officials: 4

Women's organizations and human rights activists: 5

International representative: 1