

July 16, 2025

From: Representatives of Nigerian Women

To: The Chairman, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)

Subject: **ADVOCATING FOR AND SUPPORTING THE SPECIAL SEATS BILL: A PATHWAY TO ENHANCED DEMOCRATIC INCLUSIVITY**

INEC and the Special Seats Bill: A Framework for Pre- and Post-Legislative Action

1. Executive Summary

Nigeria's democratic journey is constrained by the persistent and severe underrepresentation of women and persons with disabilities (PWDs) in its legislative bodies. The proposed Special Seats Bill seeks to rectify this critical democratic deficit by constitutionally mandating dedicated seats for these marginalized groups. As the nation's foremost electoral management body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has a strategic and imperative role in advocating for the passage of this bill and subsequently ensuring its effective implementation. This brief outlines the compelling arguments for the bill's enactment and details concrete strategies for INEC to proactively support the legislative process before passage, as well as to meticulously prepare for and execute its provisions after passage, thereby reinforcing its mandate to foster inclusive, credible, and truly representative elections.

2. The Persistent Representation Gap: A Democratic Challenge

Despite forming nearly half of Nigeria's population, women consistently hold a disproportionately low number of legislative seats at both federal and state levels. For instance, the current 10th National Assembly has a mere 4.5% female representation. Similarly, persons with disabilities, estimated to be at least 35 million citizens, face systemic barriers that result in their negligible political participation and representation. This exclusion is a product of:

- **Socio-cultural and Patriarchal Norms:** Deep-seated traditional beliefs and gender biases, alongside societal stigma

against disability, often discourage women and PWDs from entering the political arena.

- **Economic Disadvantage:** The high financial cost of election campaigns in Nigeria creates a significant barrier for women and PWDs, who frequently face economic marginalization.
- **Structural Barriers within Political Parties:** Existing party structures often lack clear, enforceable policies to promote, support, or nominate women and PWD candidates effectively.
- **Lack of Accessibility:** Inadequate accessible infrastructure, insufficient assistive technologies, and a general lack of disability-inclusive practices within the electoral process itself further hinder the participation of PWDs.

This severe underrepresentation undermines the democratic principle of reflective representation, leading to legislation that may not fully address the diverse needs, rights, and perspectives of all Nigerians.

The Special Seats Bill, currently undergoing legislative scrutiny, proposes a constitutional alteration to create additional, reserved seats specifically for women and PWDs in the National Assembly (and potentially State Houses of Assembly). Key aspects of the typical proposals include:

- **Reserved Quotas:** Allocation of a fixed number of seats (e.g. the Bill proposes to add one additional seat in the Senate for each State and the Federal Capital Territory, one additional seat in the House of Representatives for each State and the Federal Capital Territory, and three seats for women in each State House of Assembly (one per senatorial district), to be contested and filled only by women.), with a percentage of these additional seats further reserved for PWDs.
- **Direct Elections:** Importantly, these special seats are to be filled through direct elections, ensuring accountability and democratic legitimacy of the occupants to their respective constituencies.
- **Temporary Special Measure (TSM):** The bill often frames this as a temporary intervention, subject to review after a specified period (e.g., four election cycles), designed to accelerate inclusivity until a more equitable and competitive political environment naturally evolves.

4. Why Passage of the Bill is a National Imperative

The enactment of the Special Seats Bill is not merely an act of political benevolence; it is a strategic necessity for Nigeria's democratic consolidation and aligns directly with INEC's constitutional mandate to foster free, fair, credible, and inclusive elections.

4.1. Enhancing Democratic Legitimacy and Inclusivity:

- **Diverse Perspectives in Policy-Making:** Evidence from other democracies consistently demonstrates that increased representation of women and PWDs leads to more comprehensive, equitable, and socially responsive legislation.
- **Strengthening Good Governance:** A legislature that truly reflects the diversity of its citizenry commands greater public trust and legitimacy, fostering a more robust and responsive governance system.
- **Fulfilling National and International Commitments:** Passage of the bill demonstrates Nigeria's commitment to its own National Gender Policy and international obligations under treaties

like the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5 on Gender Equality and SDG 16 on Inclusive Institutions)

4.2. Strengthening INEC's Mandate:

- **Operationalizing Inclusivity:** The bill provides a legal framework for INEC to concretely advance its strategic objective of promoting inclusivity within the electoral process.
- **Addressing Systemic Barriers:** By creating constitutionally guaranteed pathways, the bill directly tackles some of the underlying structural biases that currently hinder the political participation of women and PWDs.
- **Data-Driven Electoral Reform:** The bill is a direct, data-informed response to observed democratic deficits, aligning with INEC's commitment to evidence-based electoral reform.

5. INEC's Strategic Support: Pre and Post Passage

INEC, as the impartial umpire and primary implementer of electoral reforms, has a critical role in both the advocacy for and the operationalization of the Special Seats Bill.

5.1. Pre-Passage Support: Building Consensus and Informing Legislation

Technical Advisory Role to the National Assembly:

- **Expert Consultations:** Proactively engage with the National Assembly's relevant committees (e.g., Constitution Review, Electoral Matters) by providing detailed technical briefs and presentations on the operational feasibility, logistical requirements, and financial implications of the proposed bill.
- **Drafting Support:** Offer technical assistance in refining the legislative language of the bill to ensure clarity, consistency with existing electoral laws, and practical implementability.

This includes specific expertise on defining "women-only" constituencies and mechanisms for PWD representation.

- **Comparative Analysis and Best Practices:** Present comprehensive studies on how other countries (e.g., Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, India) have successfully implemented reserved seats or quotas, highlighting models that ensure democratic legitimacy (e.g., direct elections for reserved seats) and lessons learned applicable to Nigeria.

Strategic Engagement and Advocacy (Non-Partisan):

- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Utilize INEC's various communication channels (media, social media, public forums) to educate the general public on the importance of the Special Seats Bill for Nigeria's democracy, emphasizing its role in achieving a more inclusive and representative government. This should be a non-partisan advocacy for the principle of inclusion.
- **Stakeholder Dialogues:** Facilitate or actively participate in consultative meetings with critical stakeholders, including civil society organizations, women's rights advocates, PWD organizations, political parties, traditional rulers, and religious leaders, to build broad-based consensus and garner support for the bill.
- **Data-Driven Persuasion:** Present compelling statistics and research on the current gender and disability representation gaps, and the potential positive impact of the bill on governance and national development, to underscore the urgency of its passage.

Preliminary Planning and Impact Assessment:

- **Resource Forecasting:** Conduct preliminary assessments of the human, financial, and logistical resources that would be required for INEC to implement the bill if passed. This includes projecting costs for additional elections, staff training, and materials.
- **Legal Scrutiny:** Undertake an internal legal review of the proposed amendments to identify any potential conflicts or areas requiring further clarity within existing electoral laws.

5.2. Post-Passage Support: Effective Implementation and Oversight

Legal and Regulatory Framework Development:

- **Subsidiary Legislation:** Develop comprehensive regulations, guidelines, and manuals for the conduct of elections for special seats, covering candidate nomination, campaign finance, voting procedures, and results management for these specific categories.
- **Constituency Delineation:** Undertake the crucial and sensitive exercise of delineating the new "women-only" constituencies as mandated by the bill, ensuring geographical fairness, transparency, and public consultation.

Operational Readiness:

- **Resource Allocation and Mobilization:** Ensure adequate budgetary provisions and timely release of funds for the planning and conduct of special seat elections.
- **Capacity Building:** Develop and deliver specialized, mandatory training programs for all INEC personnel (Electoral Officers, ad-hoc staff, permanent staff) on the specific procedures for special seats, gender sensitivity, and disability inclusion.
- **Technology Adaptation:** Adjust and enhance INEC's electoral technologies (e.g., BVAS, IReV) to seamlessly accommodate the new special seats and related data management requirements.
- **Accessibility Enhancement:** Scale up the provision of accessible polling units, braille ballots, sign language interpreters, and other assistive devices to ensure full and equal participation of PWDs as voters and candidates.

Voter and Civic Education:

- **Targeted Information Campaigns:** Launch extensive, nationwide voter education campaigns specifically designed to inform the electorate about the new special seats, their purpose, the electoral process, and how to vote for candidates in these categories. These campaigns must be accessible to all, including PWDs (e.g., through sign language, accessible formats).

- **Political Party Sensitization:** Engage proactively with political parties to ensure their understanding of and compliance with the new provisions, particularly regarding internal party primaries and the nomination of qualified candidates for special seats.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Review:

- **Performance Tracking:** Establish robust mechanisms for continuous monitoring and evaluation of the special seats framework, collecting comprehensive data on participation rates, election conduct, and the legislative performance of special seat occupants.
- **Data for Review:** Prepare detailed reports and provide evidence-based recommendations for the mandated review of the special seats arrangement after the specified election cycles, informing decisions on its continuation, modification, or discontinuation.
- **Political Party Sensitization:** Engage proactively with political parties to ensure their understanding of and compliance with the new provisions, particularly regarding internal party primaries and the nomination of qualified candidates for special seats.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

The Special Seats Bill represents a pivotal opportunity to address Nigeria's longstanding democratic deficit in representation. Its passage will mark a significant stride towards a more inclusive, equitable, and legitimate legislative landscape. INEC, by virtue of its constitutional mandate and operational expertise, is uniquely positioned to be a driving force behind this transformative reform.

INEC therefore strongly recommends and urges the National Assembly to prioritize the swift passage of the Special Seats Bill. Concurrently, INEC reaffirms its commitment to providing robust technical support, engaging in non-partisan advocacy, and ensuring meticulous preparations both prior to and following the bill's enactment. This strategic support will ensure that the Special Seats Bill translates into a tangible reality of deepened democracy and enhanced governance for all Nigerians.

