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From **ACCELERATING GENDER PARITY IN NIGERIA – STRATEGIES FOR THE SPECIAL SEATS BILL'S SUCCESS**

1. Executive Summary

Despite constituting nearly half of Nigeria's population, women remain critically underrepresented in political leadership, holding less than 5% of federal legislative seats. This glaring disparity undermines democratic principles, hinders inclusive policymaking, and stifles national development. The proposed Special Seats Bill (HB 1349), a constitutional amendment seeking to create additional legislative seats specifically for women, represents a vital Temporary Special Measure (TSM) to address this historical imbalance. This brief outlines essential, multi-stakeholder strategies required for the successful passage and implementation of this transformative bill, emphasizing the pivotal roles of government (including the Executive Council and Presidency), political parties, media, civil society, and other influential societal groups in fostering a more equitable and representative democracy in Nigeria, in alignment with national and international commitments.

1. The Challenge: A Critical Gap in Representation

Nigeria's democratic journey has been consistently marked by the marginalization of women in decision-making spaces. Currently, women occupy a dismal 3-4% of seats in the National Assembly, significantly lower than the African regional average of 26% of women in national parliaments. This persistent underrepresentation means that the voices and needs of nearly half the population are inadequately captured in legislation and policy, impacting critical areas such as health, education, economic empowerment, and social justice. The systemic barriers, including financial constraints, cultural norms, and a deeply entrenched patriarchal political landscape, make it exceedingly difficult for women to compete effectively against men in traditional electoral contests.

2. The Solution: The Special Seats Bill (HB 1349) as a Temporary Special Measure, Aligned with National and International Commitments

The Special Seats Bill (House Bill 1349) proposes to amend the constitution to create additional seats for women in both the National Assembly (37 in the Senate, 37 in the House of Representatives – one per state and FCT) and State Houses of Assembly (three reserved seats per state). These seats are additional, ensuring no existing male-held seats are displaced, and are designed as a temporary special measure to redress historical imbalances, with a sunset clause (e.g., after four election cycles or 16 years). This approach aligns with international best practices for accelerating gender equality in political representation, as advocated by conventions like CEDAW. The bill is not merely a "women's issue"; it is a nation-building imperative aimed at enriching legislative debates with diverse perspectives and strengthening Nigeria's democracy. Early analysis suggests the cost for additional members would amount to less than 1% of the annual national budget, a minor investment for significant democratic gains.

Significantly, the Special Seats Bill resonates strongly with Nigeria's existing commitments to gender equality:

- **The Maputo Protocol (Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa):** Nigeria ratified the Maputo Protocol on December 16, 2004. Article 9 of this Protocol explicitly obligates State Parties to "take specific positive action to promote participative governance and the equal participation of women in the political life of their countries through affirmative action, enabling national legislation and other measures." The Special Seats Bill is a direct embodiment of this commitment. While Nigeria has ratified the Protocol, its full domestication into national law remains pending, making legislative actions like the Special Seats Bill even more vital as a step towards fulfilling its spirit and intent.
- **The National Gender Policy (2021-2026):** Nigeria's revised National Gender Policy (NGP) explicitly commits the nation to a "bolder and more ambitious vision for gender equality and the empowerment of all children, adolescents, and women." A key objective of this policy is to "Advance women's participation and representation in leadership and governance." The NGP even recommends a 50% affirmative action to bridge gender gaps in leadership positions at all levels, including both elective political and appointive public service positions. The Special Seats Bill directly supports this national policy objective by providing a concrete legislative pathway to increase women's representation towards the NGP's recommended target.

3. Key Strategies for Success

3.1. Sustained Advocacy and Public Mobilization

- **Grassroots Campaigns:** Engage citizens, especially women, at the community level through consistent town halls, workshops, and awareness programs. These platforms must educate them about the bill's importance, clarify its provisions, and mobilize broad public consensus and support. This engagement is crucial for making the bill a truly nationwide movement, not just an Abuja-centric initiative.

Media Engagement: Roles and Responsibilities of the Media

While active engagement with the media is crucial, the media itself, as a critical pillar of democracy, has a profound responsibility in fostering an conducive environment for the Special Seats Bill's success and broader gender equality. This goes beyond simply reporting on advocacy efforts; it involves proactive and ethical engagement with the issue:

- **Agenda-Setting and Amplification:** The media has the power to elevate the Special Seats Bill from a niche topic to a prominent national discourse. By consistently featuring stories, analyses, and debates on women's political representation and the bill, they can shape public opinion, generate public pressure, and place the issue high on the political agenda for both citizens and policymakers.
- **Countering Misinformation and Stereotypes:** A significant responsibility of the media is to actively debunk myths surrounding women's capacity for leadership, challenge patriarchal narratives, and counter misinformation about the bill's intent or impact (e.g., that it's "charity" or will remove men from existing seats). This includes avoiding trivializing women's political roles or focusing excessively on their personal lives over their policy positions and qualifications.
- **Positive Framing and Portrayal:** Instead of perpetuating negative stereotypes, the media should consciously adopt positive and empowering framing of women in politics. This means showcasing successful women leaders, highlighting their contributions to governance and development, and presenting them as competent, capable, and essential to national progress. This positive portrayal can inspire more women to participate and shift public perception.
- **Educative Role (Civic Education):** The media should serve as a vital tool for civic education, explaining the intricacies of the bill, its constitutional implications, and the rationale behind temporary special measures (TSMs) as a global best practice for addressing historical imbalances.

This helps citizens understand why the bill is necessary and how it contributes to a more inclusive and effective democracy, and how it aligns with Nigeria's existing commitments like the Maputo Protocol and National Gender Policy.

- **Platform for Diverse Voices:** The media should provide equitable platforms for diverse voices, ensuring that women's perspectives, experiences, and arguments for the bill are adequately heard. This means actively seeking out female experts, activists, and politicians for interviews and opinion pieces, moving beyond token representation.
- **Watchdog Role and Accountability:** The media must fulfill its watchdog function by holding all stakeholders accountable – the National Assembly, State Houses of Assembly, political parties, government officials, and even civil society groups – to their commitments regarding the bill. This includes scrutinizing legislative progress, identifying roadblocks, reporting on any actions that undermine the bill's advancement, and ensuring transparency in the process.
- **Promoting Gender-Sensitive Reporting:** Media organizations should invest in training for their journalists on gender-sensitive reporting, ensuring that language, visuals, and editorial choices are inclusive and promote equality. This also entails addressing internal biases within newsrooms and increasing the representation of women in media leadership and decision-making roles.
- **Coalition Building:** Strengthen and expand partnerships between women's rights organizations, civil society groups, professional associations, and even traditional and religious leaders. A united front is crucial to exert consistent and compelling pressure on lawmakers, drawing attention to how the bill helps fulfill national and international obligations.
- **Evidence-Based Advocacy:** Present compelling data and robust evidence on the proven benefits of increased women's representation. This includes improved governance quality, enhanced economic development, reduced corruption, and better social policies that address the needs of the wider population (e.g., in maternal health, education, and gender-based violence).

Citing successful examples from other African countries like Rwanda, Tanzania, and South Africa, which utilize reserved seats to significantly boost women's parliamentary representation (e.g., Rwanda achieving over 60%), can be highly impactful.

3.5. Strategic Engagement with Policymakers

- **Direct Lobbying:** Maintain continuous, high-level engagement with members of the National Assembly (Senate and House of Representatives), State Houses of Assembly, and the Presidency. This involves direct meetings, targeted presentations, and persistent follow-ups, emphasizing how the bill helps Nigeria meet its national development goals and international commitments.
- **Cultivating Political Will:** Proactively cultivate and reinforce political will among key political leaders across all levels of government. Frame the bill as a "national development imperative" rather than solely a "women's issue" to garner broader political buy-in, underscoring its alignment with the National Gender Policy and Maputo Protocol.
- **Addressing Concerns:** Proactively and clearly address concerns raised by lawmakers, such as perceived cost implications (by demonstrating it's a minimal percentage of the national budget) or fears of male disenfranchisement (by emphasizing the creation of new seats and the bill's temporary nature).
- **Fostering Bipartisan Support:** Actively foster support across all political parties to ensure the bill's passage isn't derailed by political divisions. The recent public endorsements from the Senate and House leadership and the Nigerian Governors' Forum are encouraging indicators of growing bipartisan consensus.

3.6. Involvement of Key Institutions and Influential Groups

- **Federal Executive Council (FEC) led by the President:** The collective endorsement and support from the Federal Executive Council,

under the leadership of the President, is paramount. Their buy-in signals a unified executive position on the bill, which is critical for influencing legislative processes, especially towards presidential assent. The Executive's commitment also ensures that implementing agencies are ready to operationalize the new law effectively post-passage.

- **The President's Wife (First Lady):** While not a constitutional office, the First Lady's platform holds significant moral and social influence. Her public support for the Special Seats Bill, as already demonstrated by Senator Oluremi Tinubu, can galvanize public opinion, especially among women, and serve as a powerful internal advocate to the President and the Executive Council for the bill's speedy assent and successful implementation. Her outreach initiatives can effectively educate and mobilize citizens at the grassroots.
- **Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC):** Secure INEC's full support and endorsement. Their expertise will be crucial for the successful implementation of the bill, including the creation of special constituencies, conducting elections for the new seats, and leading nationwide voter education. INEC has already expressed support after clarifications on the bill's intent.
- **Judiciary:** Ensure comprehensive legal backing and clarity for the bill's provisions to prevent future legal challenges and ensure its robust implementation, in line with constitutional provisions and international human rights law.
- **Nigerian Governors' Forum (NGF):** The NGF's role is paramount. As the bill requires the concurrence of at least two-thirds of the State Houses of Assembly (24 out of 36 states) after passing the National Assembly, the governors' collective influence over their respective state legislatures is indispensable. The NGF's recent endorsement is a massive step forward, signaling broad political acceptance and significantly swaying state lawmakers. Governors' control over state resources and political machinery can also provide practical assistance for state-level advocacy efforts.

Political Parties:

- **Internal Party Reforms:** Parties must commit to and implement gender-sensitive recruitment and candidate selection processes, extending beyond just the special seats to include voluntary quotas within their internal party structures, reflecting the principles of the National Gender Policy.
- **Party Platform Inclusion:** Incorporate the Special Seats Bill and broader women's empowerment goals into their official party manifestoes and campaign promises, demonstrating a public commitment to gender parity and adherence to national and international gender frameworks.
- **Whip System and Messaging:** Utilize party discipline (the whip system) to encourage their members in the National and State Assemblies to vote in favor of the bill. They must also ensure consistent, positive messaging about the bill across all party communication channels.
- **Financial and Logistical Support:** Provide financial and logistical support for women candidates who will eventually contest these special seats, ensuring they are well-resourced and competitive.
- **Various Forums of Wives of Elected Officials** (e.g., Nigerian Governors' Spouses Forum, Wives of Local Government Chairmen)
- **Leveraging Influence:** These forums, while informal, hold significant influence within their immediate circles and communities. They can leverage their positions to advocate for the bill among their husbands (elected officials), their political parties, and within their spheres of influence.

- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Organize and lead targeted public awareness campaigns, particularly at the grassroots level, to educate women and communities about the benefits of the bill, making the issue more relatable and accessible. The Nigerian Governors' Spouses Forum's joint advocacy agreement for the bill is a strong example.
- **Resource Mobilization for Women:** Use their extensive networks and platforms to mobilize resources, mentorship, and support for women aspiring to leadership roles, thereby complementing the bill's objectives.
- **Community Engagement:** Engage directly with women's groups, community leaders, and religious bodies to build consensus and address any misconceptions about the bill, fostering broader acceptance.
- **Traditional Rulers and Religious Leaders:** Influence on Social Norms: These leaders hold immense moral authority and influence over their communities, often shaping deeply held cultural and religious beliefs. Their public endorsement of the Special Seats Bill can help shift social norms that traditionally limit women's public and political participation, reinforcing the importance of equity and justice as outlined in human rights instruments.
- **Community Mobilization:** They can use their platforms (mosques, churches, traditional councils) to educate their followers about the importance of women's representation, dispel misconceptions, and encourage support for the bill.
- **Advocacy to Policymakers:** Their direct appeals to elected officials, who often rely on their community support, can be very persuasive. They can frame the bill as a matter of justice, fairness, and progress for the community.

Youth Groups and Student Associations:

Demographic Power and Digital Advocacy: Young people constitute a significant portion of Nigeria's population and are increasingly politically active. They can leverage social media and digital platforms for mass mobilization, awareness campaigns, and putting pressure on decision-makers, bringing innovative approaches to advocacy.

- **Future Leadership Pipeline:** Their engagement now helps build a future generation of leaders committed to inclusive governance, who understand the importance of frameworks like the Maputo Protocol.

Professional Bodies and Associations (e.g., NBA, NMA, ICAN, ASUU, NLC, TUC):

- **Expertise and Credibility:** Their professional endorsement adds significant intellectual weight and credibility. They can offer valuable technical input on the bill's legal, economic, or social implications.
- **Advocacy to Members and Public:** They can mobilize extensive memberships for advocacy and influence educated public opinion. Labour unions, in particular, can champion the bill as a social justice issue, tying it to principles of equality and non-discrimination.

The Private Sector and Business Community:

- **Economic Argument:** Advocate for the bill by emphasizing the economic benefits of gender diversity in leadership, citing research on how women's empowerment leads to stronger economies and stable societies.
- **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR):** Integrate support for women's political participation into their CSR initiatives.

International Development Partners and Donor Agencies:

- **Technical and Financial Support:** Provide crucial technical assistance, capacity building, and financial resources to CSOs and government agencies working on gender equality and democratic governance.
- **Knowledge Sharing:** Facilitate the sharing of international best practices and lessons from countries with successful affirmative action measures.

- **Diplomatic Engagement:** Engage with Nigerian authorities through diplomatic channels to encourage the bill's passage as part of broader commitments to human rights, including specific references to the Maputo Protocol and Sustainable Development Goals.

3.7. Long-Term Vision and Capacity Building

- **Temporary Special Measure (TSM) Framing:** Consistently emphasize that the bill is a TSM designed to address a historical imbalance and is subject to review after a specific period (e.g., 16 years/four election cycles). This helps allay fears of permanent changes to political structures and reinforces its corrective nature, in line with provisions for affirmative action within international human rights frameworks.
- **Capacity Building for Women Candidates:** Complement the bill with robust efforts to empower women, enhancing their political education, leadership skills, campaign management capabilities, and access to financial support. This ensures that women are not only enabled to contest but are also well-prepared to effectively represent their constituents once the bill is enacted.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish transparent mechanisms to monitor the implementation of the bill post-passage and rigorously evaluate its impact on women's political participation and broader governance outcomes. This allows for data-driven adjustments and continuous improvement, and serves as a mechanism to assess progress against National Gender Policy objectives and Maputo Protocol commitments.

4. Conclusion and Call to Action

The Special Seats Bill (HB 1349) is a critical legislative instrument that promises to transform Nigeria's political landscape, fostering greater inclusivity, equity, and democratic robustness. Its passage is not just a matter of fairness but a strategic imperative for national development, directly aligning with Nigeria's commitments under the Maputo Protocol and its National Gender Policy (2021-2026). Its success hinges on the unwavering commitment and collaborative efforts of all stakeholders. We urge the National Assembly, particularly as the bill approaches its third reading and transmission to state assemblies in the coming months, to demonstrate political courage and foresight by swiftly passing this bill.

We call upon all political parties to champion this cause, and for the media to fulfill its profound responsibility in shaping an informed and supportive public discourse. By embracing this reform, Nigeria can take a monumental step towards fulfilling its democratic potential and ensuring that all its citizens, regardless of gender, are truly represented in the corridors of power.

Baobab for Women's Human Rights calls on all stakeholders to actively support the immediate passage and diligent implementation of the Special Seats Bill for a more inclusive and prosperous Nigeria.

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