

APRIL 12, 2025

SUBJECT: Special Seats for Women: A Path to Enhanced Governance, Shared Prosperity, and a Stronger Legislature**TO: Relevant Stakeholders in Nigerian Governance and Civil Society, particularly Male Legislators**

Achieving a Win-Win with Special Seats for Women in Nigerian Governance

I. Executive Summary

Achieving a truly representative and effective democracy in Nigeria necessitates addressing the persistent underrepresentation of women in political leadership. While the push for increased female participation has been ongoing, systemic barriers continue to impede progress. This policy brief argues that the establishment of special seats for women at all levels of governance—federal, state, and local—is not merely an affirmative action, but a strategic imperative that offers a win-win situation for all Nigerians. By guaranteeing women's presence, special seats will unlock their immense contributions, leading to more inclusive policymaking, improved governance, and accelerated national development, ultimately benefiting men, women, and children alike, and significantly strengthening the legislative arm of government.

II. The Challenge: Persistent Underrepresentation and its Costs

Despite Nigeria's commitment to gender equality in various international conventions, women's political participation remains alarmingly low. They constitute less than 10% of elected officials across most tiers of government. This disparity is not due to a lack of capability or interest but rather a complex interplay of socio-cultural norms, economic disempowerment, political violence, and structural barriers within political parties.

The current electoral system, while democratic, has not adequately facilitated equitable representation, leaving a significant portion of the population's perspectives and needs unaddressed in critical decision-making processes. This deficit in representation is not just a women's issue; it is a governance issue that limits the potential for robust policy-making and ultimately disadvantages all citizens by excluding valuable insights and skills.

The Solution: Special Seats as a Catalyst for Shared Progress

The implementation of special seats for women is a proven mechanism adopted by various democracies worldwide to fast-track gender parity in politics. These seats, whether reserved through constitutional amendments or legislative provisions, ensure a minimum threshold of female representation. For Nigeria, this approach presents a win-win scenario, and it is crucial to understand how this benefits all legislators and the entire political system:

For Women:

- **Enhanced Voice and Agency:** Special seats provide a direct pathway for women to enter legislative and executive spaces, ensuring their experiences, priorities, and unique perspectives are heard and integrated into policy formulation. This directly addresses the concerns of organizations like Baobab for Women's Human Rights, which advocate for women's empowerment.
- **Increased Political Efficacy:** Guaranteed representation empowers women to actively participate in legislative processes, advocate for gender-sensitive legislation,

and influence national development agendas.

- **Reduced Barriers to Entry:** It mitigates the prohibitive financial, social, and political hurdles women often face in competitive elections, allowing more qualified women to serve.
- **Expanded and Enriched Legislative Capacity:** The addition of special seats does not diminish the influence or roles of existing male legislators. Instead, it expands the legislative pool, bringing in diverse talents and perspectives that can enrich debates, improve the quality of legislation, and lead to more effective oversight. More minds working together on national issues ultimately benefits everyone.
- **More Comprehensive Policy-Making:** Women often bring different perspectives and prioritize issues that are crucial for societal well-being but might be overlooked, such as maternal health, early childhood development, combating gender-based violence, and community-level economic empowerment. Their inclusion leads to more holistic and effective laws and policies that cater to the needs of the entire population, including the families and constituents of male legislators.
- **Strengthened Democracy and Public Trust:** A legislature that truly reflects its population is more legitimate and trustworthy in the eyes of the citizens. By making governance more inclusive, special seats for women bolster public confidence in democratic institutions, reducing apathy and potentially increasing voter engagement for all elections.
- **Improved National and International Standing:** Countries with higher female representation in government are often seen as more progressive and stable, attracting more foreign investment and fostering stronger international partnerships. This positive global image benefits all citizens and reflects positively on the entire political class.
- **Innovation and Problem-Solving:** Diverse legislative bodies are better equipped to identify complex problems and devise innovative solutions. Women's unique

experiences can lead to fresh approaches to economic challenges, security concerns, and social issues, benefiting the entire nation.

- **No Diminishment of Existing Seats:** Crucially, the proposal for special seats for women is not about reducing or taking away seats currently held or contested by men. It is about creating additional seats to address historical underrepresentation, ensuring that the existing competitive landscape for general seats remains intact for all candidates. This bill is designed to complement the current system, not undermine it.
- **Shared Responsibility and Reduced Burden:** With more women in leadership, the burden of governance and representation can be more widely distributed. Female legislators can become key allies in addressing diverse constituency needs, potentially easing the workload on male counterparts and fostering more collaborative parliamentary environments.

Addressing Concerns: Clarifying the "Win-Win"

We understand that any significant change can raise questions. However, the special seats provision is designed to be a strategic enhancement, not a threat:

- **Not a Zero-Sum Game:** This is not about women gaining at men's expense. It is about expanding the overall capacity and effectiveness of the legislature for the benefit of all.
- **Enhancing, Not Eroding, Meritocracy:** Special seats are a temporary, corrective measure to address historical systemic barriers that have prevented qualified women from reaching elected office. They aim to level the playing field, ensuring that Nigeria can tap into its full talent pool, including highly capable women who might otherwise be excluded.
- **Cost-Effectiveness for National Progress:** While there may be some additional operational costs, the long-term benefits of

more inclusive and effective governance leading to better health outcomes, improved education, economic growth, and social stability, far outweigh these. The true cost is in excluding half the population's potential.

Recommendations

To achieve this win-win situation, Baobab for Women's Human Rights urges the following actions, framed to highlight collective benefits:

- **Constitutional Amendment:** Support a constitutional amendment to create a specific number or percentage of special seats for women at the federal (National Assembly), state (State Houses of Assembly), and local government levels. Emphasize that these are additional seats, not replacements for existing ones.
- **Legislative Framework:** Develop clear legislative guidelines for the nomination, election, or appointment processes for these special seats, ensuring transparency, meritocracy, and broad representation of women from diverse backgrounds.
- **Capacity Building:** Invest in comprehensive capacity-building programs for all legislators, including women aspiring to or occupying special seats, equipping them with the necessary skills for effective governance, legislative drafting, and policy advocacy.

This investment strengthens the entire legislative body.

- **Public Awareness and Sensitization:** Launch nationwide campaigns to educate the public on the benefits of women's political participation and special seats, garnering widespread support and dispelling misconceptions. These campaigns will also highlight how an inclusive legislature serves everyone.
- **Collaboration with Civil Society:** Foster stronger partnerships with women's rights organizations, civil society groups, and community leaders to ensure the effective implementation and monitoring of these provisions, recognizing that civil society plays a vital role in strengthening democratic processes for all.

Conclusion: A Shared Vision for a Stronger Nigeria

The choice before us is clear: continue with the status quo of underrepresentation, or embrace a strategic reform that promises profound and lasting benefits for all Nigerians. Establishing special seats for women is not merely an act of equity; it is a foundational investment in Nigeria's future. This progressive step will not diminish the influence or capacity of existing male legislators; rather, it will fortify our democratic institutions, enrich our policy debates with diverse perspectives, and accelerate our journey towards sustainable development and shared prosperity.

By empowering women's voices in governance, we empower every citizen. We unlock new solutions to old problems, foster greater trust in our leadership, and project a more confident and modern Nigeria to the world. We urge all stakeholders, particularly our esteemed male legislators, to champion this bill as a testament to their commitment to a truly representative, effective, and thriving Nigeria—a future where the success of women in leadership translates directly into success for the entire nation. Let us seize this opportunity to build a stronger, more inclusive, and ultimately more prosperous Nigeria, together.



**THINK OF THE
FUTURE,
INVOLVE
WOMEN NOW**

True Democracy can only be
achieved when **WOMEN**
and **MEN** are equally
represented in
POLITICAL LEADERSHIP



**EVERY FEMALE
POLITICIAN
DESERVES
A SEAT AT
THE TABLE**



**Women INCLUSION
in politics
is the path to
PROGRESS**



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