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EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL WORK ADVOCACY IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUITY IN POLITICAL APPOINTMENTS IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA, 1999-2025

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ABSTRACT

Women remain few in appointive political offices in Nigeria, even though national policy sets a 35% target for their inclusion. This study examined the effectiveness of social work advocacy in promoting gender equity in political appointments in Rivers State, Nigeria, between 1999 and 2025. One objective, one research question and one null hypothesis guided the study, which was anchored on Feminist Social Work Theory. The descriptive survey design was adopted, with questionnaire data supported by key informant interviews. From a population of 1,110 stakeholders in political appointments, 400 respondents were selected by simple random sampling, and key informants were selected purposively. A validated self-structured questionnaire with a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.70 and a semi-structured interview guide were used. Mean and standard deviation answered the research question, the one-sample t-test tested the hypothesis at the 0.05 level of significance, and interview data were analysed thematically. Respondents agreed that social work advocacy was effective in promoting gender equity in political appointments (grand mean = 4.05, SD = 0.98), with the strongest agreement that continuous advocacy drives legislative frameworks for gender equity (M = 4.21). The mean rating was significantly above the criterion mean of 3.00 ($t = 21.55$, $df = 399$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.08$), so the null hypothesis was rejected. Interviews showed that advocacy has raised awareness and encouraged more women to show interest in leadership, although its results were described as moderate because women remain underrepresented in key decision-making appointments. The study concluded that social work advocacy is effective in promoting gender equity in political appointments, particularly through its influence on legislation, policy and the accountability of appointing authorities. It was recommended that government institutionalise and fund social work advocacy and back it with enforceable affirmative action in appointments.

Keywords: Social work advocacy, gender equity, political appointments, women, feminist social work, Rivers State

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Introduction

Gender equity has become one of the central issues in present-day governance because it seeks to ensure that women and men have fair access to opportunities, rights and decision-making positions. Gender equity differs from gender equality. Equality aims at equal treatment, while equity recognises that women and men do not start from the same position and that deliberate measures may be needed to correct historical disadvantages. Affirmative action and quotas are examples of such measures. In Nigeria, the National Gender Policy recommends that women occupy at least 35% of both elective and appointive positions (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, 2006).

Political appointments are a key avenue through which governments bring people into executive, administrative and advisory positions. Unlike elective offices, they depend largely on the discretion of the appointing authority, on party structures and on patronage. Ideally, such appointments should reflect competence, fairness and gender balance. In practice, Nigerian women have long been underrepresented in political life because of cultural stereotypes, the misuse of religion, traditional practices and patriarchal social structures (Agbalajobi, 2010). Efforts to build state support for women's interests in Nigeria have repeatedly failed because the return to civilian rule did not open political spaces to women and the women's movement lacked strength (Okeke-Ihejirika & Franceschet, 2002).

In Rivers State, gender inequality has been found to limit women's appointment to community decision-making positions and to hinder their participation in active politics (Badom & Ndeeue, 2024). A study of women's political participation in the Niger Delta reported that the number of women in appointed roles in Rivers State was rising, but some participants noted that such appointments were handpicked by the governor rather than made through open screening, and the report urged party leaders to appoint at least 35% women (Stakeholder Democracy Network, 2020). Women who are appointed are often given "soft" portfolios such as women affairs or social welfare rather than finance or works.

Social work, as a profession committed to social justice, human rights and empowerment, has a role in addressing these structural inequalities. Advocacy is one of its core tools. It involves speaking for and with marginalised groups to influence policies, institutions and decision-makers. Recent work describes social work advocacy as a process that defines problems in terms of rights, stands with the people affected and moves from individual cases to wider causes (Tarshish et al., 2025). Applied to political appointments, social work advocacy includes lobbying appointing authorities, engaging legislators, mobilising communities and working with civil society to press for gender-inclusive appointments. How effective such advocacy has been in Rivers State has received little empirical attention. This paper addresses that gap.

Statement of the problem

Political appointments in Rivers State are expected to reflect competence, fairness and gender balance, in line with the Nigerian Constitution, the National Gender Policy and international commitments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. In reality, women continue to occupy only a small share of appointive offices such as commissioner, special adviser and board member, and they are frequently assigned to less strategic portfolios. This pattern limits women's influence on high-level decisions and reinforces the belief that leadership is a male preserve.

The problem is sustained by patriarchal norms, political godfatherism, limited access to political networks and weak enforcement of affirmative action. Social workers are expected to advocate for marginalised groups, challenge discriminatory structures and promote inclusive

policies, and advocacy by social workers and civil society has been part of the response. However, it is not clear how effective this advocacy has been in promoting gender equity in political appointments in Rivers State. Without such evidence, advocacy programmes cannot be strengthened in a targeted way. The problem of this study, therefore, was to examine the effectiveness of social work advocacy in promoting gender equity in political appointments in Rivers State between 1999 and 2025.

Aim and objective of the study

The aim of the study was to examine the effectiveness of social work advocacy in promoting gender equity in political appointments in Rivers State, Nigeria, between 1999 and 2025. The objective of the study was to examine how effective social work advocacy has been in promoting gender equity in political appointments in Rivers State.

Research question

The following research question guided the study: How effective is social work advocacy in promoting gender equity in political appointments in Rivers State?

Hypothesis

The following null hypothesis was tested at the 0.05 level of significance. The research question was answered with the questionnaire data, and the interview data were used to support the findings.

H_{01}: The mean rating of respondents on the effectiveness of social work advocacy in promoting gender equity in political appointments in Rivers State does not differ significantly from the criterion mean of 3.00.

Theoretical framework

The study was anchored on Feminist Social Work Theory, associated with the work of Lena Dominelli and developed in the 1970s and 1980s. The theory places women's experiences at the centre of analysis and practice and seeks to transform the gender relations that sustain inequality (Dominelli, 2002). It holds that social, cultural, political and economic systems are structured in ways that favour men, so that the problems women face, such as exclusion from political office, are not isolated personal failings but reflect wider structural inequality. It therefore moves social work beyond case management to advocacy, activism and policy reform, and it recognises the political nature of gender-based oppression and the need for collective strategies to challenge it (Payne, 2020).

The theory is relevant to this study in two ways. First, it explains why advocacy is a fitting social work response to the low share of women in political appointments. If appointments reflect patriarchal power, then changing them requires pressure on appointing authorities, legislators and parties, not only support for individual women. Second, it explains why advocacy may still have limited effect. Feminist social work expects resistance from the structures it challenges, such as male-controlled party networks, patronage and cultural beliefs that leadership belongs to men. The theory therefore guided the measurement of advocacy effectiveness in this study. Critics note that the theory developed in Western settings and may need adapting to collectivist and patriarchal societies such as Nigeria, which makes local evidence of the kind gathered here useful.

Methodology

Research design. The study adopted the descriptive survey design, which is suitable for collecting and describing the opinions and experiences of a large group of people on a social issue without manipulating any variable (Creswell, 2014). Quantitative data from a questionnaire were supported with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with key informants.

Study area. The study was carried out in Rivers State, in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The state was created on 27 May 1967, has 23 Local Government Areas and is a major centre of Nigeria's oil and gas industry, with Port Harcourt as its capital. It has a population of more than five million people drawn from over 25 ethnic groups. Men dominate public decision-making in many of its communities, and there is no binding state law that sets a quota for women in political appointments.

Population and sample. The population comprised 1,110 stakeholders in political appointments in Rivers State, including current and former political appointees, political party executives, women leaders and activists, civil society representatives, social workers and community leaders. A sample of 400 respondents was drawn. The Taro Yamane (1967) formula, $n = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$ with $e = 0.05$, gives a minimum sample of 294 for this population, and the sample of 400 exceeds that minimum. A sampling frame of the 1,110 stakeholders was prepared, and respondents were selected by simple random sampling (balloting), while key informants for the interviews were selected purposively for their direct experience of political appointments and gender advocacy in the state.

Instruments. A self-structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data. Section A obtained the respondents' socio-demographic data. Section B, which is used in this paper, contained five items on the effectiveness of social work advocacy in promoting gender equity in political appointments. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). A semi-structured interview guide of nine questions was used with key informants, including female and male political appointees, party executives, leaders of gender-focused civil society organisations, traditional and community leaders and women activists.

Validity and reliability. The face and content validity of the questionnaire and interview guide were established by the supervisors and other experts in the Department of Social Work, University of Port Harcourt, who checked that the items covered the constructs of the study (Cohen et al., 2018). The instruments were pre-tested among 20 participants in a Local Government Area outside the study sample to check clarity, timing and relevance. Reliability was established by the test-retest method, with two administrations to 10 participants two weeks apart, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.70, the threshold regarded as acceptable.

Data collection and ethics. Ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board, and letters of introduction were sent to political institutions, party offices and community leaders. Copies of the questionnaire were administered in person and through Google Forms with the help of trained research assistants, and all 400 copies were completed and used for analysis. Interviews were conducted by the researcher and trained facilitators in safe and neutral venues and were audio-recorded with consent. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and participants were told they could withdraw at any time.

Data analysis. Data from the questionnaire were analysed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequencies and percentages described the respondents, and mean and standard deviation answered the research question. With a five-point scale, the criterion mean was 3.00 [(5 + 4 + 3 + 2 + 1) / 5]; a mean of 3.00 and above was taken as agreement and a mean below 3.00 as disagreement. The hypothesis was tested with the one-sample t-test at the 0.05 level of significance, comparing the mean rating on the effectiveness items with the criterion mean of 3.00, and Cohen's d was reported as the effect size. Interview data were transcribed and analysed thematically.

Results

All 400 copies of the questionnaire were returned and used for analysis. The characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 400)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	264	66.0
	Female	136	34.0
Age	18-25 years	25	6.3
	26-35 years	64	16.0
	36-45 years	99	24.8
	46-55 years	147	36.8
	56 years and above	65	16.3
Political experience	Less than 1 year	30	7.5
	1-5 years	51	12.8
	6-10 years	89	22.3
	11-15 years	145	36.3
	16 years and above	85	21.3
Political status	Party member	184	46.0
	Ward executive	61	15.3
	Local government party official	44	11.0
	State party official	55	13.8
	Elected public office holder	26	6.5
	Political appointee	21	5.3
	Other	9	2.3

Percentages are rounded to one decimal place. Source: Field Survey (2026).

Table 1 shows that 264 respondents (66.0%) were male and 136 (34.0%) were female. The largest age group was 46-55 years (36.8%), and most respondents had 11-15 years of political experience (36.3%). Party members formed the largest group (46.0%), followed by ward executives (15.3%) and state party officials (13.8%). The respondents were therefore mostly experienced, middle-aged political actors at different levels of party structures.

Research Question: How effective is social work advocacy in promoting gender equity in political appointments in Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean Ratings on the Effectiveness of Social Work Advocacy in Promoting Gender Equity in Political Appointments (N = 400)

S/N	Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	Social work advocacy groups have influenced policy changes favouring women's appointments.	4.12	0.97	Agreed
2	Lobbying efforts have made appointing authorities more accountable regarding gender equity.	4.19	0.95	Agreed
3	Without social work advocates, fewer women would be considered for cabinet positions.	3.90	0.92	Agreed
4	Advocacy bridges the gap between marginalised women and decision-makers.	3.85	1.12	Agreed
5	Legislative frameworks for gender equity are driven by continuous advocacy.	4.21	0.93	Agreed
	Grand mean	**4.05**	**0.98**	**Agreed**

Criterion mean = 3.00. A mean of 3.00 and above = Agreed; below 3.00 = Disagreed. The grand mean and grand standard deviation are the averages of the item values. Source: Field Survey (2026).

Table 2 shows that all five items had means above the criterion mean of 3.00. Respondents agreed most strongly that legislative frameworks for gender equity are driven by continuous advocacy (M = 4.21, SD = 0.93) and that lobbying efforts have made appointing authorities more accountable regarding gender equity (M = 4.19, SD = 0.95). They also agreed that social work advocacy groups have influenced policy changes favouring women's appointments (M = 4.12, SD = 0.97) and that without social work advocates fewer women would be considered for cabinet positions (M = 3.90, SD = 0.92). The lowest, though still high, rating was on advocacy bridging the gap between marginalised women and decision-makers (M = 3.85), which also had the widest spread of opinion (SD = 1.12). The grand mean of 4.05 (SD = 0.98) shows that respondents regarded social work advocacy as effective in promoting gender equity in political appointments in Rivers State.

H_{01}: The mean rating of respondents on the effectiveness of social work advocacy in promoting gender equity in political appointments in Rivers State does not differ significantly from the criterion mean of 3.00.

Table 3: One-Sample t-Test of the Mean Rating on the Effectiveness of Social Work Advocacy against the Criterion Mean

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Test value	df	t	p-value	d	Decision
Effectiveness of social work advocacy	400	4.05	0.98	3.00	399	21.55	< 0.001	1.08	H_0 rejected

One-sample t-test, two-tailed, $\alpha = 0.05$, against the criterion mean of 3.00. $t = (M - 3.00) / (SD / \sqrt{N})$; $d = (M - 3.00) / SD$ (Cohen's d). SD is the average of the item standard deviations,

which is at least as large as the standard deviation of respondents' cluster scores, so the t values shown are conservative. Source: Field Survey (2026).

Table 3 shows that the mean rating on the effectiveness of social work advocacy (M = 4.05) was significantly higher than the criterion mean of 3.00, $t(399) = 21.55$, $p < 0.001$. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected. The effect size ($d = 1.08$) is large, which shows that respondents' agreement that social work advocacy is effective was not only statistically significant but also substantial.

Evidence from the key informant interviews. The interviews gave supporting evidence on the effectiveness of advocacy. Informants said that social work advocacy has raised awareness of gender equity in political appointments and encouraged more women to show interest in leadership. However, they described its results as only moderately effective, because women remain underrepresented in key decision-making appointments.

Discussion of findings

The main finding is that respondents regarded social work advocacy as effective in promoting gender equity in political appointments in Rivers State, and the mean rating was significantly above the criterion mean. The strongest agreement was that continuous advocacy drives legislative frameworks and that lobbying has made appointing authorities more accountable. This agrees with the view of Tarshish et al. (2025) that effective social work advocacy moves from individual cases to wider causes, since the items rated highest concern laws, policies and accountability rather than help to individual women. It is also consistent with the report of the Stakeholder Democracy Network (2020), whose participants in Rivers State observed a rise in the number of women in appointed roles alongside advocacy for a 35% share. From the standpoint of Feminist Social Work Theory, the finding supports the position that collective action aimed at structures is a core part of social work's response to gender inequality (Dominelli, 2002; Payne, 2020).

The lowest-rated item, and the one with the widest spread of opinion, was that advocacy bridges the gap between marginalised women and decision-makers. This suggests that advocacy has been more successful at shaping policy and public expectations than at connecting ordinary women directly with those who make appointments. This reading is supported by the interview finding that appointments are negotiated within networks to which women have limited access, and by the observation of the Stakeholder Democracy Network (2020) that some appointments of women in the state were handpicked rather than made through open screening.

The interview data point the same way but with more caution. Informants said that advocacy has raised awareness and encouraged more women to show interest in leadership, yet they described its results as moderate because women remain underrepresented in key decision-making appointments. This is consistent with the Stakeholder Democracy Network (2020) report, in which the number of women in appointed roles in Rivers State was rising while party leaders were urged to appoint at least 35% women. It also supports the view of Tarshish et al. (2025) that advocacy is judged by its movement from individual cases to wider change.

Taken together, the survey and interview findings present a largely positive but cautious picture. Stakeholders believe that advocacy works, yet informants describe its results as moderate. Feminist Social Work Theory anticipates this tension: advocacy challenges power, and the structures it challenges may resist. The results should be read with two limitations in mind. The data are perceptions of stakeholders rather than records of actual appointments, and the hypothesis test compares ratings with a fixed criterion, so it shows the strength of agreement but not the size of any change in women's appointments over the period.

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Conclusion

The study concludes that social work advocacy is regarded as effective in promoting gender equity in political appointments in Rivers State, particularly through its influence on legislation, policy and the accountability of appointing authorities. Its effect is weaker in linking marginalised women directly with decision-makers, and interview evidence describes its results as moderate because women remain underrepresented in key decision-making appointments. Advocacy is therefore valuable, and its gains should be consolidated with enforceable rules to produce equitable appointments.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. The Rivers State Government, in collaboration with professional social workers, civil society organisations and political parties, should institutionalise social work advocacy programmes by providing adequate funding, policy support and legal backing for sustained gender equity campaigns.
2. Social workers and civil society organisations should create direct platforms, such as regular dialogues and appointment-readiness forums, that link qualified women with appointing authorities and party leaders.
3. The Rivers State House of Assembly should enact a law that enforces the 35% affirmative action target in state political appointments, with public reporting of the gender composition of appointments.
4. Future studies should combine stakeholder perceptions with official records of appointments between 1999 and 2025 to measure changes in women's share of political appointments directly.

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