



Beauty Pageantry as a Communication Platform for Women's Empowerment in Taraba State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Despite the growing popularity of beauty pageants in Northern Nigeria, their utility as strategic communication tools for social change remains under-researched, particularly within conservative socio-cultural contexts. This study examines beauty pageantry as a platform for women's empowerment in Taraba State, Nigeria, focusing on the Miss Taraba competition from 2020 to 2025. Guided by Naila Kabeer's Model of Women's Empowerment, the study explores how the pageant facilitates access to power, the communication strategies employed by winners, and barriers to their advocacy. A qualitative research design was adopted, involving in-depth interviews with 17 purposively selected participants, comprising former beauty queens, pageant organisers, media practitioners and government officials. Data were analysed thematically. Findings indicate that pageantry provides titleholders with access to traditional and political leadership, enabling them to transition into visible social advocates. Their strategies include Facebook advocacy, school outreach on girl-child education, and lobbying for institutional responses to gender-based violence. However, limited funding, inadequate advocacy training, religious stereotypes and sexual objectification constrain their efforts. The study concludes that pageantry can facilitate socio-economic and humanitarian impact, but its potential is weakened by exploitative practices and limited institutional partnerships. It recommends formal advocacy training and evidence-based community-impact benchmarks through collaboration between organisers and state agencies.

Keywords: beauty pageants, women's empowerment, strategic communication, social advocacy, Nigeria

Introduction

Beauty pageantry has evolved from simple local beauty contests into a global cultural and commercial phenomenon. Far from being mere entertainment, pageants function as high-profile platforms for cultural diplomacy, identity construction, and public advocacy (Kanzulfikar, 2021). Major global franchises such as Miss World reach audiences across more than 100 nations, while national pageants such as the Most Beautiful Girl in Nigeria (MBGN) serve as primary entry points into international circuits (Silverbird Group, n.d.). In recent years, organisers and advocates have increasingly framed pageantry as a strategic tool for women's leadership, public visibility, and socio-economic empowerment (Srivastava, 2020). By offering contestants access to media coverage, political networks, and community platforms, pageants claim to equip young women with the social capital needed for public leadership (Hinojosa & Carle, 2016). However, pageantry remains a deeply contested space, particularly in conservative environments. In non-Western and



developing societies, pageants frequently trigger intense debate surrounding religious morality, cultural preservation, and Western influence (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Oza, 2001). These tensions have historically led to severe civil unrest, as seen during the 2002 Miss World controversies in Northern Nigeria (Crawford et al., 2008).

Despite the growing narrative that pageantry promotes female leadership, existing academic research remains limited by two key blind spots. Western feminist literature predominantly focuses on whether pageants objectify and commodify the female body (Kumara & Jayawardhana, 2018; Mantai, 2019) versus whether they preserve local heritage (Oza, 2001), while most empirical studies in developing countries concentrate primarily on how pageants affect body image, beauty standards, and individual self-esteem (Kukuczka & Liebelt, 2024). Therefore, there exists a critical gap regarding the functional role of pageantry as a strategic communication tool for development and social change in the Global South. It remains unclear whether and how the social capital, public voice, and media visibility gained by titleholders actually translate into measurable civic engagement, political participation, or tangible socio-economic empowerment within their communities. These academic blind spots have significant theoretical and practical implications. Without empirical data on the actual developmental outcomes of pageantry, policymakers, development agencies, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) miss opportunities to leverage pageantry as an alternative, grassroots communication channel for social intervention and female agency in the Global South. Additionally, in the absence of rigorous evidence, claims by pageant organisers regarding empowerment remain purely promotional, leaving both supporters and critics without objective benchmarks to assess whether pageantry creates genuine social value or merely masks commercial exploitation.

To address the aforementioned gaps, this study examined the functional utility of beauty pageantry as a strategic communication tool for women's empowerment in Taraba State, Nigeria. Anchored on Naila Kabeer's (1999) Model of Women's Empowerment, the study qualitatively explores how pageants function as developmental platforms, how beauty queens deploy specific advocacy strategies and their platforms to drive social change, and what barriers hinder their impact. This research provides vital empirical evidence from the Global South to determine whether pageantry can serve as an effective, non-traditional vehicle for gender mainstreaming and community development.

Conceptual Clarifications

Beauty Pageant

Beauty pageants are organised, highly stylised public contests or shows wherein participants are evaluated through structured criteria and socio-cultural norms by appointed judging panels (Riverol, 1992; Kanzulfikar, 2021). Emerging in the nineteenth century alongside shifting social attitudes towards public displays of female appearance (Banner, 1983; Latham, 1995), pageantry has evolved from early localised spectacles into ritualistic cultural performances deeply intertwined with notions of gender, class, nationhood, and moral integrity (Parameswaran, 2001; O'Riain, 2007). Sociologically, these events operate at both micro and macro levels to generate and contest cultural meanings, shaping societal constructs of beauty and identity across interpersonal and institutional spaces (Cohen et al., in Lazar, 2013; Srivastava, 2020). Across global platforms such as Miss World and Miss Universe, Miss US, and Nigerian franchises



including the Most Beautiful Girl in Nigeria (MBGN), Miss Nigeria, and state-level contests such as Miss Taraba, pageants utilise standardised segments such as talent displays, traditional attire, and question-and-answer sessions, where contestants perform culturally sanctioned values such as selflessness and public service, positioning titleholders as symbolic representations of collective societal ideals (O’Riain, 2007).

In contemporary society, beauty pageants have expanded from commercialised television spectacles with global viewership (Banet-Weiser, 1999; Crawford et al., 2008) into strategic platforms for communication, leadership, and social advocacy (Hamashima, 2012; Hinojosa & Carle, 2016). Modern pageantry, from international franchises to localised African and Nigerian contests, increasingly emphasises developmental imperatives such as gender equality, education, public health, and cultural preservation (Hamashima, 2012; Prohaska, 2023). However, pageantry remains a deeply contested site of socio-political tension. Historically condemned by feminist groups for objectification and by religious traditionalists for moral degradation (Crawford et al., 2008), it has also been associated with geopolitical controversies in global competitions such as Miss Lebanon in 1993 (Mejia, 2015). Nevertheless, pageantry persists as an influential cultural institution capable of adapting to shifting political ideologies, shaping public discourse, and serving as a platform for women’s empowerment and development (Prohaska, 2023).

Women’s Empowerment

Empowerment as a concept literally means an interactive and transformative process through which individuals and communities gain control over their lives, challenge entrenched power asymmetries, and cultivate the agency needed to influence decision-making structures (Wallerstein, 1992; Zimmerman, 1995; Völker & Doneys, 2020). Specifically, women’s empowerment denotes the expansion of women’s capacity to make strategic life choices, exercise public agency, and transition from marginalised positions to equitable social standing (Chattopadhyay, 2005; Reshi et al., 2022). Scholars (Srivastava, 2001; Sohail, 2014; Salahuddin & Ahmad, 2017) emphasise that this process is deeply contextual and multidimensional, spanning interconnected economic, social, political, and psychological domains. Broadly operationalised by global bodies such as the United Nations, women’s empowerment links individual self-worth and autonomy directly to broader structural transformations in governance, economic production, and community decision-making (Salahuddin & Ahmad, 2017; Reshi & Sudha, 2022).

According to Salahuddin and Ahmad (2017), power structures are culturally specific and value-laden; as such, the expression and realisation of women’s empowerment vary significantly across socio-religious contexts, often clashing with entrenched traditional norms in patriarchal settings. Furthermore, despite its institutionalisation as a global development priority since the 1995 Beijing Conference, operationalising women’s empowerment in practice remains vulnerable to shifting political agendas and policy neglect (Eyben et al., 2008). Hence, effective empowerment requires moving beyond tokenistic participation or surface-level access to address the fundamental social, political, and cultural barriers (Panigraphy & Bhuyan, 2006; Reshi et al., 2022) that restrict women’s substantive agency in both private and public spheres.



Review of Empirical Studies

Literature across diverse cultural and geopolitical domains has increasingly interrogated beauty pageantry. A significant body of existing studies examines how pageantry commodifies female bodies within broader structures of global capital, neocolonialism, and neoliberalism. In this regard, Kumara and Jayawardhana (2018) demonstrate how international competitions enforce Western Caucasian aesthetic standards despite selecting participants from peripheral nations, thereby institutionalising neocolonial aesthetic hierarchies under corporate control. Corroborating this, Balogun and Hoang (2018) compared Nigerian beauty pageants and Vietnamese sex work, arguing that both sectors capitalise on female body visibility within exploitative transactional networks.

Similarly, Auletta and Jaén (2013) demonstrate through inductive analysis of Miss Venezuela how cultural production becomes subservient to commercial profitability. Prohaska and Thompson (2024) revealed through qualitative interviews within the Miss Universe circuit that pageant-derived confidence functions as an embodied form of capital; however, such social mobility is predominantly accessible to affluent women, reinforcing post-feminist, individualistic paradigms over collective structural reform. Adding a structural labour perspective, Michael et al. (2021) indicate that pageantry has a hidden occupational labour encompassing aesthetic management, emotional regulation, and backstage logistics that obscures systemic exploitation under the banner of personal achievement. These studies imply that the empowerment rhetoric of beauty pageants often masks systemic inequality, leaving a critical empirical gap regarding whether pageants can ever function as genuine tools for grassroots social change.

In reaction to globalised aesthetic norms, researchers have examined how regional pageants attempt to negotiate indigenous identity against commercial pressures. Applying Gramscian hegemony and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's decolonisation framework to Miss Nepal, Shrestha (2023) argues that while pageants enforce bodily discipline, integrating indigenous aesthetics offers a corrective mechanism to resist aesthetic colonialism. This tension between indigenous preservation and commercialisation is echoed in West Africa. Analysing *Ghana's Most Beautiful* through qualitative audience analysis, Ofori-Birikorang et al. (2021) observe that while digital audiences frequently criticise contestants as commodified figures, they simultaneously reframe them as purposeful agents of cultural advocacy. However, Azuah and Apuaa (2020) caution through sequential exploratory research that commercial and entertainment imperatives consistently risk diluting indigenous cultural change objectives in Ghanaian pageantry unless governance structures explicitly safeguard advocacy goals. The class of studies therefore suggests that indigenous pageantry offers a potential space for resisting cultural imperialism, yet remains perpetually vulnerable to commercial co-optation unless intentionally governed for social change. However, the studies failed to explicitly demonstrate how indigenous pageants can be deployed for women's empowerment.

Furthermore, a substantial body of literature related to political communication highlights the capacity of pageantry to generate political agency and social capital. Comparative analyses by



Carle and Hinojosa (2010) across Venezuela, Jamaica, France, and the United States reveal that pageants produce significant representational capital, equipping women with the public visibility necessary to enter governance. Hinojosa and Carle (2016) extend this argument, demonstrating that the public speaking skills, media training, and social presence cultivated in pageantry directly stimulate long-term female political ambition and civic leadership. Historically, state actors have recognised this utility; Shissler (2004) documents how early republican Turkey systematically co-opted beauty pageants as state-led instruments for secularisation and female emancipation. At the international level, Elledge and Faria (2020) illustrate how pageant contestants utilise self-presentation as soft-power diplomacy to advance national development narratives on global stages. The implication of these studies is that beauty contests possess real transformative potential as non-traditional vehicles for female civic participation and state-level diplomacy. However, the studies have not directly shown how the platforms of beauty pageants can be deployed by titleholders to empower women, especially in the Global South.

A growing body of literature related to the subject focuses on the semiotic and communicative mechanics employed by pageantry platforms. Hermawan et al. (2023) conducted a multimodal discourse analysis of Miss Universe, illustrating how visual cues and verbal messaging systematically construct public perceptions of ideal femininity. On digital platforms, Hermawan (2022) utilises Peircean semiotics and shows how titleholders leverage personal branding to shift public focus from physical aesthetics towards inner beauty and social advocacy. Grounding these communicative practices within state biopolitics, Kukuczka and Liebelt (2024) introduce the concept of aesthetic citizenship, illustrating how institutions utilise bodily presentation and pageantry as mechanisms of civic discipline and moral education. While this literature demonstrates how titleholders strategically use semiotic cues and digital branding to project social advocacy, it focuses almost exclusively on elite international platforms and macro-level civic governance, leaving a critical empirical gap regarding how these communicative strategies function and translate into functional women's empowerment within localised, socio-religiously conservative settings in the Global South and Nigeria in particular.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Naila Kabeer's (1999) Model of Women's Empowerment, which posits that empowerment is a multidimensional process through which women gain the ability to make strategic life choices across three interrelated dimensions: resources (preconditions such as skills, social networks, and institutional support), agency (processes including decision-making, negotiation, advocacy, and leadership), and achievements (outcomes reflecting tangible improvements in social standing and influence) (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). In relation to this study, Kabeer's (1999) model provides the analytical lens for explaining how the Miss Taraba beauty pageant functions as a transformative platform where contestants and titleholders acquire exposure and networking assets as resources, deploy public speaking and social campaigns as expressions of agency, and realise career advancement,

Research Methodology

This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative descriptive case study design. The population comprised past Miss Taraba winners, pageant organisers, media practitioners, and



government officials. Using purposive sampling, 17 participants were selected: five past winners (2020–2025), five pageant executives, five media practitioners, and two government officials. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews guided by Kabeer's (1999) dimensions of empowerment. Interviews were conducted physically, by telephone, or virtually, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Trustworthiness was ensured through expert review and Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw guaranteed.

Thematic Data Presentation

The data were presented according to the research questions, with themes emerging accordingly.

RQ 1. *How do beauty pageants function as strategic communication platforms for promoting women's empowerment?*

The analysis generated three interrelated themes in response to the above research question. These themes are: the crown as institutional access and authority; converting visibility into advocacy; and credibility and social mobilisation.

Crown as Institutional Access and Authority

A dominant pattern across the interviews was the perception that winning the *Miss Taraba* title altered the communicative status of young women by providing access to institutional spaces that participants considered difficult to enter without the crown. PT1 captured this perceived transformation by explaining:

Before I won the *Miss Taraba* Beauty Pageant, I was just another girl with an opinion. But with the crown, when I walk into a government office, the doors open. It isn't just about beauty anymore; it is about the fact that the title gives you a seat at the table where decisions about our people are made.

This account illustrates what may be described as an institutionalisation of voice. Similar accounts emerged from the organisers and government stakeholders, who described the queen as an intermediary between formal institutions and communities. PT16, a government stakeholder, explained that the Ministry of Women Affairs viewed the *Miss Taraba* office as an extension of its advocacy activities because queens could engage rural communities and traditional leaders through more direct interpersonal interaction. The accounts from institutional stakeholders also suggest that this authority was relational rather than inherent in the title itself. PT6, an organiser, described the pageant as a search not simply for physical attractiveness but for a public spokesperson, while PT11 associated the prestige of the title with increased media and public attention to the queen's messages.

The findings above suggest that the *Miss Taraba* crown functions as a form of symbolic capital that can facilitate institutional access. The empowerment reported by participants therefore operates partly through increased communicative legitimacy: the title provides a recognised identity through which young women can enter conversations with actors who possess greater institutional authority.



Converting Visibility into Advocacy

A second theme concerned the conversion of the visibility associated with the crown into advocacy-oriented communication. Former queens reported that their public visibility created opportunities to attract attention to issues affecting women and girls. PT3 described this transition in the following terms:

I realised I could use the crown platform as strategic tool to partner with organizations that promote social issues affecting women because, when I appear during programmes and is given opportunity to speak, attention always shifts to me as *Miss Taraba*, especially when it has to do with secondary school girls.

The account suggests that the communicative value of the crown lies partly in its capacity to attract attention before the advocacy message is delivered. PT5 similarly described a movement from posting images associated with the pageant to using social media and public appearances to advocate women's financial independence, characterising the process as a transition from being “seen” to being “heard”. This pattern was also reflected in stakeholder accounts. PT6 described the Miss Taraba office as a platform through which queens could identify community needs and mobilise attention and resources towards them.

Credibility and Social Mobilisation

The third theme concerned the perceived credibility and relatability of beauty queens as communicators. Participants consistently positioned the queens between formal institutions and community audiences, particularly young people and women. Their accounts suggested that this intermediary position enabled them to communicate sensitive issues in ways that audiences could perceive as less formal or politically motivated than messages delivered directly by government officials. PT2 explained:

When a politician speaks to the youth about staying away from crime or focusing on empowerment, it often feels like a lecture or a campaign stunt. But when I speak, they see a peer who has achieved something. That relatability creates a level of trust that makes my message hit home much harder than a government press release.

Similarly, PT4 attributed the openness of some audiences to her advocacy to the perception that she was a “neutral daughter of the state” without an obvious political agenda. PT5 described the queen as a bridge capable of moving between government institutions and grassroots communities. These accounts were corroborated by institutional stakeholders. PT16 referred to the difficulty sometimes associated with direct government communication and explained that beauty queens could help reduce the distance between government and community audiences. The findings suggest that the communicative credibility attributed to the queens derives from the intersection of relatability, symbolic status and institutional recognition.

RQ 2. *What specific communication strategies do pageant titleholders use to advocate for women's empowerment?*

The findings identified six interconnected strategies: digital advocacy and strategic storytelling, traditional and digital media engagement, grassroots interpersonal communication, institutional lobbying, multi-sectoral partnerships, and school-based outreach.



Digital Advocacy and Strategic Storytelling

Most participants revealed that social media, particularly Facebook, is an important channel for extending the reach of empowerment activities beyond physical events. The queens used posts, live broadcasts, photographs and narrative accounts to document their interventions, publicise beneficiaries' experiences and encourage public participation. PT3 explained:

“I understood early on that my physical presence could only reach a few hundred people at a time, but my digital footprint reached thousands across Taraba and beyond. I used my Facebook page to tell the stories of the young girls I was mentoring in rural Jalingo, ensuring that every post was a call to action for women's rights.”

PT5 similarly described using Facebook Live during school-based activities, while tagging local influencers and community leaders to increase visibility. PT6, an organiser, indicated that queens were encouraged to document rural outreaches because such storytelling demonstrated their activities to wider publics and potential institutional supporters. PT12, a media practitioner, further observed that queens who were effective in their empowerment mandates tended to present their activities through compelling digital narratives and visual evidence. The findings therefore position digital advocacy as an extension of physical engagement rather than a substitute for it.

Traditional and Digital Media Engagement

The queens also exploited their visibility to obtain access to radio, television, newspapers, blogs and podcasts. Participants described this access as an important means of translating the symbolic visibility of the crown into sustained public communication. PT1 noted, “With the crown, doors to radio stations opened without me paying a kobo. I had free airtime on TSBS and several blogs carried my story.” PT4 similarly reported receiving invitations from newspapers, television stations and podcasts, which provided opportunities to discuss issues affecting rural women and small businesses. PT12 explained that queens were attractive to journalists because their activities combined human-interest value with a youthful perspective on social issues. PT15, a blogger, also noted that stories involving queens often generated audience reactions through likes, shares and comments. These accounts suggest that pageantry can facilitate earned or low-cost media access for advocacy communication.

Grassroots Interpersonal Communication and Community Relations

Beyond mediated communication, the findings revealed that the queens engaged directly with women and young people in markets, community squares, schools and rural communities. PT5 explained:

My most effective strategy was going directly into the local markets and community squares to sit with the women. I didn't go there as a celebrity in a gown; I went as a daughter of the soil who happened to have the Government and stakeholders' ear because of my crown.

PT4 described combining structured town-hall and school programmes with informal interactions in markets, where she could discuss women's concerns while distributing food and educational resources. PT10, a stakeholder, similarly emphasised the value of direct engagement with young women through youth programmes. The findings indicate that interpersonal



communication complemented the broader reach of mass and digital media by creating opportunities for dialogue and relationship building. Thus, the crown functioned not only as a visibility mechanism but also as a relational resource for grassroots engagement.

Institutional Lobbying and Persuasive Communication

Another theme that emerged from the analysis is institutional lobbying as another strategy through which queens attempted to convert their public visibility into support for women's empowerment initiatives. Participants described courtesy visits to government ministries, traditional institutions and other decision-making structures as opportunities to seek resources, institutional backing and attention to women's issues. PT1 stated:

I strategically used my courtesy visits to the Ministry and the Traditional Rulers to do more than just take photos for the media. I used those few minutes of audience to lobby for better support for the widows' empowerment programme I was running through my foundation.

PT6 similarly described the pageant platform as providing access to institutional spaces in which queens could advocate for issues such as women's representation in local structures. This finding extends the understanding of pageantry beyond public visibility. The crown provided symbolic legitimacy that could facilitate access to otherwise difficult-to-reach institutional actors.

Multi-Sectoral Partnerships

Partnership development emerged as an important strategy for addressing the resource limitations associated with independent advocacy. Queens collaborated with NGOs and other development-oriented organisations on initiatives relating to menstrual hygiene, education, health and support for vulnerable groups. PT4 described a partnership with an NGO for a state-wide menstrual hygiene campaign involving the distribution of sanitary pads and the construction of private wash facilities in three rural schools. According to the participant, the *Miss Taraba* platform provided public visibility and cultural access, while the NGO contributed technical expertise and financial resources.

PT6 similarly reported that queens were encouraged to align their advocacy mandates with relevant organisations, particularly where external support could strengthen school and community interventions. PT7, a media practitioner, also identified partnerships with NGOs as a recurring feature of initiatives involving food distribution, educational materials and behaviour-change campaigns addressing issues such as drug abuse, trafficking and menstrual hygiene. The findings suggest a complementary resource relationship: pageant winners contribute visibility, community access and public legitimacy, while partner organisations may provide technical knowledge, funding and logistical capacity.

School-Based Outreach and Interpersonal Advocacy

School visitation emerged as a targeted strategy for reaching adolescent girls with messages on education, menstrual hygiene, career development and the risks associated with early marriage. PT4 stated:

My most successful campaigns weren't on the radio; they happened in schools. I visited schools to distribute sanitary pads and talk to girls about the importance of staying in school.



PT1 similarly viewed direct school engagement as a means of communicating with girls without relying on the distractions and competition for attention associated with social media. PT10, representing the organisation, explained that queens were encouraged to seek formal clearance from the Ministry of Education before accessing schools, thereby providing an institutional pathway for school-based advocacy. School visits created opportunities for direct interaction, questions and immediate clarification. The combination of information and material support also allowed the queens to address both informational and practical dimensions of empowerment.

RQ 3. *What is the perceived effectiveness of beauty pageants as strategic communication tools for women's empowerment?*

Participants' accounts identified three interrelated dimensions of perceived effectiveness: direct material support and economic intervention, health and girl-child education advocacy, and advocacy against gender-based violence.

Direct Material Support and Economic Intervention

Most of the participants associated the effectiveness of the *Miss Taraba* platform with its capacity to translate advocacy messages into tangible support for disadvantaged women, children and rural communities. Former queens described using their visibility and institutional access to mobilise funds, provide business start-up capital, distribute educational materials and support vulnerable households. PT1 explained:

I believe the platform is highly effective because it allowed me to move beyond just talking about empowerment to actually implementing it. During my reign, I was able to identify several women in rural areas who had the skills but lacked the small capital to start their own businesses. By using my title to solicit funds, I provided them with seed capital that changed their family's economic status. We also distributed hundreds of school bags and notebooks to ensure that orphans and vulnerable children remained in school.

Similarly, PT5 described mobilising philanthropists to provide food, educational and health-related assistance to vulnerable communities:

I used the influence of my crown to partner with local philanthropists to provide food items like rice and oil, and I personally ensured the payment of school fees for several young girls who had been sent home because their parents couldn't afford the bills.

Another former queen reported using the platform to mobilise food, clothing and medical supplies for widows and children in rural communities. From this perspective, the crown provided a form of symbolic and relational capital that could be converted into material assistance. Stakeholders reinforced this interpretation. PT6 observed that the more visible and successful reigns tended to be those associated with concrete “economic pet projects”, while PT17 argued that the provision of business grants and educational materials moved the platform beyond message dissemination towards direct developmental intervention.

These accounts suggest that the perceived effectiveness of pageantry derives partly from its ability to connect communication with resource mobilisation.



Health Sensitisation and Girl-Child Education Advocacy

A second dimension of perceived effectiveness concerned health communication and the promotion of girl-child education, particularly through menstrual hygiene campaigns and school-based outreach. Participants described queens as occupying a socially accessible position that enabled them to address sensitive issues that may otherwise be difficult to discuss openly in some communities. PT4 explained:

The effectiveness of my communication was most evident during our menstrual hygiene tours in the local secondary schools. Many of these girls had no idea about proper hygiene or were using unsafe materials, but because they saw me as a role model, they were willing to listen and learn without feeling ashamed. We didn't just talk; we provided sanitary kits and educational pamphlets.

PT2 similarly described the crown as providing an entry point into communities where menstrual and reproductive health could be treated as sensitive subjects. According to the participant, presenting the queen as an educated yet culturally respectful role model helped facilitate conversations with girls and parents about menstrual health, school retention and early marriage. A stakeholder perspective reinforced this interpretation. reported that queens were particularly effective when addressing health and educational issues that formal institutions sometimes found difficult to communicate in rural settings:

The queens acted as the perfect social ambassadors because their presence alone generated excitement and curiosity, which they then used to deliver serious messages about menstrual hygiene and the long-term benefits of girl-child education (PT6).

PT9 similarly described the queens as effective social mobilisers whose presence generated positive community reception during health and education interventions. The findings suggest that the communicative value of pageantry in this context lies partly in social mediation.

Advocacy Against Gender-Based Violence

The third dimension of the perceived effectiveness involved advocacy on gender-based violence (GBV), particularly domestic violence and sexual violence. Participants described queens using their visibility to bring otherwise private and socially sensitive cases into public discourse and to establish communication with government and security institutions. PT2 explained:

I used my title to shine a light on the dark issues of domestic violence and rape that many women in our state suffer in silence. The crown gave me the courage and the platform to demand meetings with the Commissioner of Police and other security heads to discuss how we can better protect victims.

Similarly, PT1 described using formal advocacy visits to the Ministry of Justice and security agencies to draw attention to cases of domestic and sexual violence. The participant associated the subsequent media attention with increased public accountability. From the organisational perspective, PT6 viewed the platform as a mechanism through which queens could connect affected women with state institutions:



We have seen several Miss Taraba queens who used the platform as a unique catalyst for institutional action, especially regarding sensitive issues like domestic violence and rape that are often shrouded in cultural silence.

PT8, a media stakeholder, similarly observed that cases involving queens often attracted greater media attention than ordinary reports of gender-based violence. According to the participant, this visibility could place the concerns before security agencies and other relevant authorities. These accounts position the queen as a symbolic intermediary between affected women, the media and public institutions. The communicative effectiveness reported by participants therefore rests on the capacity of pageantry to convert individual or community concerns into publicly visible issues requiring institutional attention.

RQ 4. *What communication barriers hinder beauty pageants from functioning as strategic tools for women's empowerment in Taraba State?*

The findings identified five interrelated barriers that constrained the queens' ability to utilise the *Miss Taraba* platform effectively for women's empowerment: financial constraints, socio-cultural and moral prejudices, institutional neglect, prestige-purpose conflict, and inadequate training in social advocacy and strategic communication.

Financial Constraints

Financial constraints emerged as one of the most prominent barriers to the implementation of empowerment initiatives. Participants reported that the prestige associated with the *Miss Taraba* title was not matched by a formal financial structure to support the queens' advocacy mandates. PT3 explained:

The most frustrating part of my reign was having these big dreams for the women in my state but having zero naira in an official budget to execute them. I quickly realised that the crown doesn't come with a bank account; I had to spend months begging for sponsorship just to buy basic drugs or school materials for the rural areas.

PT4 similarly described the tension between public expectations and the absence of institutional funding:

There is a massive disconnect between the public's expectation of a Queen and the reality of having no official stipend or project fund to actually carry out the empowerment mandates we promised.

PT1 reported having to rely on personal savings and family assistance to sustain some of her interventions, while PT5 highlighted the absence of a structured financial pipeline for post-coronation projects. The accounts indicate that inadequate financing shifted part of the queens' attention from advocacy to fundraising. Financial constraints therefore affected not only the scale of projects but also their continuity and sustainability.

Socio-Cultural and Moral Prejudices

Participants also identified socio-cultural perceptions of beauty pageants as a significant barrier to the credibility of queens as advocates for women's empowerment. Some former queens reported encountering religious and cultural objections to pageantry, as well as perceptions that



contestants were primarily concerned with appearance and popularity rather than social development. PT2 explained:

Many people in our society, particularly those with very rigid religious views, still perceive beauty pageants as something inherently evil. There is a persistent and damaging stereotype, especially among men, that views contestants not as social advocates, but as individuals seeking cheap popularity who have nothing to offer but their bodies.

Beyond moral objections, participants described public objectification as another challenge. PT5 argued that the emphasis placed on physical appearance could overshadow contestants' intellectual and developmental contributions:

Instead of the platform being seen as a scholarship or leadership opportunity, it is often treated as a beauty parade... This culture of objectification creates an atmosphere where our intellectual contributions to development of the society are overshadowed by a narrow focus on our physical appearance.

Participants also raised concerns about sexual harassment and exploitation. PT3 reported that some contestants and queens could become vulnerable to individuals who offered sponsorship or career opportunities in exchange for sexual access. PT7, a media practitioner, similarly alleged that some actors within the pageant environment facilitated exploitative relationships between contestants and influential individuals. These accounts indicate that the credibility of pageantry as an empowerment platform can be weakened by the tension between its developmental aspirations and perceptions of beauty, sexuality and commercialisation.

Institutional Neglect and Limited Post-Coronation Support

A further barrier was the perceived absence of sustained institutional support after the coronation. Former queens described a gap between the visibility accorded to the title during ceremonial events and the practical support available for implementing empowerment programmes afterwards. This included limited logistical assistance, weak institutional coordination, inadequate introductions to relevant authorities and insufficient professional mentorship. PT2 described the post-coronation experience as follows:

It felt like once the coronation night was over and the lights went out, I was left entirely on my own to figure out how to be an advocate in a very difficult environment.

PT1 similarly reported that queens were expected to engage government agencies and manage advocacy activities without adequate institutional guidance:

I was expected to magically know how to draft legal petitions for domestic violence victims and how to coordinate with security heads without any formal introduction or institutional cover.

PT4 further recalled instances in which organisers were available for ceremonial appearances but less accessible when logistical or institutional support was required for community outreach. The findings point to an implementation gap between symbolic appointment and institutional enablement. The crown may provide visibility and recognition, but these assets do not automatically translate into the organisational capacity required for sustained advocacy.



Without mentorship, logistical support and institutional linkages, queens may struggle to convert their visibility into structured programmes and long-term interventions.

Prestige–Purpose Conflict

While former queens emphasised structural constraints, organisers, government stakeholders and media practitioners identified a different barrier: the possibility that the prestige associated with the title could compete with its empowerment mandate. Participants reported that some queens became more focused on ceremonial appearances, personal visibility and social-media popularity than on community advocacy. PT6, a pageant organiser, observed:

A serious challenge we have observed is that some of the queens become so carried away by the prestige, the red carpets, and the public fanfare of being Miss Taraba that they lose sight of the actual community empowerment mandates they were elected to serve.

PT17 similarly argued that the platform's developmental value could be weakened when queens prioritised ceremonial activities over rural advocacy, institutional engagement and community interventions. From the media perspective, PT14 reported that some queens appeared more interested in publicity-oriented activities than in substantive empowerment programmes. This theme introduces an important dimension to the findings: barriers to effective advocacy were not exclusively structural. Stakeholders also perceived individual role orientation and commitment as influential. The tension is therefore between the symbolic and performative dimensions of the crown and its substantive developmental responsibilities. When visibility becomes an end in itself rather than a means of advancing advocacy objectives, the communicative value of the platform may be weakened.

Inadequate Training in Social Advocacy and Strategic Communication

The final barrier concerned inadequate professional preparation for the responsibilities associated with the role. Participants reported that queens were often expected to perform complex communication and advocacy functions including fundraising, proposal writing, stakeholder engagement, public speaking and institutional lobbying without structured training. PT5 explained:

When I won the crown, I was suddenly expected to know how to speak to governors, how to write proposals to NGOs, and how to manage large-scale sensitisation programmes without any prior training.

The participant added that much of the required knowledge had to be acquired through trial and error. PT17, a government stakeholder, similarly identified gaps in social advocacy, strategic communication, fundraising and partnership development, while PT13, a media practitioner, highlighted limited exposure to resource mobilisation and professional advocacy practices. The findings suggest that possessing the crown does not necessarily equip a winner with the competencies required to function effectively as a strategic communicator.

Discussion of Findings

The findings demonstrate that beauty pageantry in Taraba operates beyond symbolic representation by providing titleholders with institutional access, communicative authority and social visibility. This supports Hinojosa and Carle's (2016) argument that pageantry can create



pathways to political engagement and leadership. Within Kabeer's (1999) framework, the title constitutes a social resource that expands women's capacity to exercise agency. However, the findings also suggest that this authority is relational rather than inherent: the crown creates access, but its conversion into empowerment depends on institutional recognition and the queen's ability to use that access strategically. This aligns with Kukuczka and Liebelt's (2024) notion of "aesthetic citizenship", in which the visibility of the female body can be mobilised for civic communication and social purposes.

The study further shows that queens employed a multi-channel communication strategy, combining digital storytelling, radio and television, interpersonal engagement, institutional lobbying, school outreach and NGO partnerships. Facebook extends the reach and visibility of local interventions, consistent with Ofori-Birikorang et al. (2021), but the Taraba findings extend this literature by demonstrating the continued importance of face-to-face communication. Unlike predominantly mediated pageant advocacy, queens use cultural proximity, local relationships and direct interaction to connect empowerment messages with rural audiences. This suggests that digital visibility is most effective when integrated with interpersonal and institutional communication rather than treated as an end in itself. The findings therefore position pageantry as a hybrid communication platform in which mediated visibility and grassroots engagement reinforce one another.

The findings also indicate that beauty pageants serve as interventions that move from symbolic empowerment towards substantive outcomes, including business support, educational materials, menstrual-health interventions and GBV advocacy. This finding extends Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework by illustrating how resources and agency may translate into reported achievements. It also supports Azuah and Apuaa's (2020) view that pageantry can contribute to social change when its visibility is deliberately aligned with empowerment objectives. However, the qualitative evidence primarily demonstrates reported interventions and perceived effects rather than independently measured long-term outcomes. The significance of pageantry therefore lies less in the crown itself than in its capacity to convert visibility into resources, relationships and institutional attention.

Furthermore, the findings expose several challenges undermining beauty as an empowerment platform. These include limited funding, weak post-coronation support and inadequate advocacy training, which constrain queens' ability to convert visibility into sustained interventions, as well as cultural prejudice, objectification and reported risks of sexual exploitation. These findings reflect the hidden labour associated with pageantry identified by Michael et al. (2021). The findings also resonate with Balogun and Hoang's (2018) discussion of the "political economy of embodiment", in which women's empowerment can coexist with the commodification and regulation of female bodies. Thus, pageantry presents a dual condition: the crown can expand women's communicative agency while simultaneously reproducing the gendered and institutional constraints that limit that agency.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how beauty pageantry can function as a form of social capital that converts the visibility of the crown into women's access to media, institutions and grassroots



advocacy spaces. The findings imply that pageantry can contribute to women's empowerment when its symbolic visibility is supported by institutional partnerships, professional training, sustainable funding and safeguards against exploitation. However, the study is limited by its qualitative design, purposive sample and exclusion of beneficiaries, which restricts the assessment of broader and longer-term empowerment outcomes. Future research should therefore employ larger mixed-methods or comparative designs that incorporate beneficiaries' perspectives and measure the sustained effects of pageant-led empowerment interventions.

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AI Use Disclosure:

ChatGPT was used for brainstorming, while QuillBot was used for paraphrasing and editing. The author verified all outputs and takes full responsibility for the content.
