

Social Media Advocacy and Its Influence on Gender-Based Violence Legislation

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Abstract

Social media advocacy has emerged as a critical mechanism for influencing policy, particularly regarding gender-based violence (GBV) legislation. This study quantitatively examined the relationship between social media campaign intensity and legislative responsiveness in 12 African states from 2019 to 2021. Data were collected on 1,450 advocacy-legislation observations, capturing metrics such as hashtag frequency, user engagement, and cross-platform diffusion, alongside legislative outcomes including new bills, amendments, and oversight mechanisms. Multiple linear regression with interaction terms was employed to assess the effect of advocacy intensity, internet penetration, civil society density, GDP per capita, and baseline legislation on policy responsiveness. Results indicated that social media advocacy significantly predicted legislative action ($\beta = 0.253$, $p < 0.001$), with stronger effects in states with higher internet access and robust civil society networks. Subcomponent analyses confirmed that advocacy most strongly influenced the introduction of new bills. These findings support Agenda-Setting Theory and the Advocacy Coalition Framework, demonstrating that social media functions both to elevate issue salience and to facilitate coordinated advocacy networks. The study concluded that online activism, when coupled with structural and institutional enablers, constitutes a powerful pathway for advancing GBV legislation, providing actionable insights for policymakers, civil society organizations, and development practitioners seeking to leverage digital platforms for gender justice.

Keywords: *Social media advocacy; Gender-based violence; Legislative responsiveness; Agenda-setting; Africa*

1.0 Introduction

Social media platforms have increasingly emerged as powerful instruments for shaping public discourse and influencing policy, particularly in the domain of gender-based violence (GBV). Globally, online campaigns have amplified the voices of survivors, facilitated collective mobilization, and placed pressure on policymakers to enact or strengthen legislation addressing GBV (Jenkins, 2018; Tufekci, 2017). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the proliferation of social media usage, even among youth and marginalized communities, has created new avenues for advocacy, awareness-raising, and engagement with policy processes (Boateng, 2020). It has been reported that campaigns such as #SayNoToGBV and #MeTooAfrica have contributed to national conversations on gender-based violence, drawing attention to issues of domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and systemic gender inequality in both urban and rural contexts. The central goal of this study was to quantitatively investigate the influence of social media advocacy on GBV legislation across selected African states, with a focus on measuring both the frequency and intensity of online campaigns and their correlation with legislative responsiveness. The study was framed within the Agenda-Setting Theory and the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). Agenda-Setting Theory posits that media, including social media, can shape the policy priorities of both the public and policymakers by highlighting particular issues and framing their importance (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the context of GBV, social media campaigns can elevate the visibility of incidents, foster public outrage, and signal the need for legislative action. The Advocacy Coalition Framework complements this perspective by emphasizing that policy change is often driven by networks of actors advocates, NGOs, policymakers, and influencers who share beliefs and coordinate efforts over time to influence policy subsystems (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Through this dual theoretical lens, the study conceptualized social media advocacy as both an agenda-setting mechanism and a form of coalition-building capable of influencing legislative outcomes. It has been widely observed that GBV legislation in many African states faces structural, institutional, and socio-cultural constraints. In numerous countries, laws addressing sexual harassment, domestic violence, and human trafficking exist but are inconsistently enforced, with low levels of reporting and weak institutional support for survivors (UN Women, 2020). Social media advocacy has been posited as a tool to overcome these barriers by increasing public scrutiny, mobilizing civil society actors, and generating political pressure for reform (Boateng, 2020). However, the empirical literature on the quantitative impact of online advocacy on legislative change remains limited, particularly in contexts with varying levels of media penetration, political responsiveness, and digital literacy. This gap underscores the importance of systematically assessing the influence of social media campaigns on concrete policy outcomes rather than relying solely on qualitative narratives or anecdotal reports.

The study hypothesized that states experiencing higher intensity and engagement with social media advocacy campaigns would demonstrate more rapid enactment or amendment of GBV-related legislation. Social media intensity was operationalized through metrics such as hashtag frequency, online user engagement (likes, shares, comments), and cross-platform diffusion, while legislative responsiveness was captured by the passage of new bills, amendments to existing laws, and the

establishment of formal oversight mechanisms. Control variables included internet penetration rate, civil society density, GDP per capita, and pre-existing legal frameworks addressing GBV. Furthermore, the study acknowledged the mediating role of political will, cultural attitudes, and institutional capacity, reporting that advocacy alone may not produce legislative outcomes in the absence of supportive governance structures. By integrating both social media metrics and policy indicators, the research aimed to generate empirical evidence on the conditions under which online advocacy effectively translates into legislative change. In doing so, the study contributed to the broader discourse on digital activism, policy influence, and gender justice, providing insights for advocates, legislators, and international organizations seeking to leverage social media as a tool for social and legal reform.

Through this theoretically informed, quantitative approach, the study sought to address critical questions regarding the efficacy of social media advocacy in shaping GBV policy outcomes, the mechanisms through which digital activism influences formal lawmaking, and the contextual factors that enhance or constrain these effects. By measuring both advocacy intensity and legislative response across multiple states, the research offered a comprehensive assessment of the transformative potential of social media in advancing gender-based justice and informed actionable recommendations for policy and advocacy interventions.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1. Social Media as a Policy Advocacy Tool

The role of social media in contemporary policy advocacy has been increasingly emphasized in scholarly literature. Studies have reported that social media platforms—particularly Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram—enable rapid dissemination of information, facilitate the formation of networks, and amplify marginalized voices, making them potent tools for social mobilization (Tufekci, 2017; Jenkins, 2018). In the context of gender-based violence (GBV), social media has been widely credited with elevating awareness, creating public pressure for legal reform, and shaping both national and regional discourse on women’s rights (Boateng, 2020; UN Women, 2020). Scholars argue that online advocacy can function as a digital agenda-setting mechanism by highlighting the prevalence, severity, and systemic nature of GBV, thus compelling policymakers to respond to public concern. Empirical studies have quantified the reach and impact of social media campaigns. For example, in South Africa, the #TotalShutdown campaign mobilized thousands of users across multiple platforms, correlating with legislative review of sexual harassment policies in universities and workplaces (Gqola, 2015). Similarly, #MeTooAfrica demonstrated measurable engagement, with over 2 million interactions across platforms within six months, coinciding with parliamentary debates on domestic violence legislation in several countries (Boateng, 2020). These findings indicate that online advocacy can generate both social visibility and political pressure, aligning with the theoretical premise that agenda-setting through media exposure can influence policy priorities (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

2.2. Agenda-Setting Theory and GBV Legislation

Agenda-Setting Theory posits that media coverage shapes the public and political attention given to specific issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). It has been widely reported that social media functions as a new form of agenda-setting, capable of accelerating issue salience and influencing legislative action. Empirical research has shown that when GBV incidents are widely shared on social media, the perceived urgency among policymakers increases, often resulting in formal inquiries, bill drafting, or amendments to existing laws (Jenkins, 2018; Tufekci, 2017). In African contexts, several studies indicate that social media campaigns have successfully highlighted gaps in GBV legislation, drawing attention to underreported issues such as domestic abuse, sexual assault, and child marriage (UN Women, 2020). For instance, digital campaigns in Kenya were associated with amendments to the Sexual Offences Act and increased parliamentary oversight, demonstrating the capacity of online mobilization to influence legislative agendas quantitatively. The literature suggests that agenda-setting through social media is particularly effective in contexts where traditional media coverage is limited, and where youth and civil society actors are highly active online (Boateng, 2020).

2.3. Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)

The Advocacy Coalition Framework conceptualizes policy change as the product of coordinated efforts by coalitions of actors who share beliefs and mobilize resources to influence policy subsystems over time (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Within GBV policy, social media advocacy has been reported to facilitate coalition formation, linking NGOs, activists, survivors, academics, and policymakers in shared campaigns (Tripp, 2015). These coalitions engage in evidence dissemination, public mobilization, and lobbying, creating sustained pressure for legislative action. Empirical studies have reported that advocacy coalitions employing both online and offline strategies were more successful in achieving legislative reforms. In Uganda, the #StopRape campaign connected civil society organizations with legislative committees, resulting in amendments to laws on sexual violence and increased funding for enforcement mechanisms (Amnesty International, 2018). The literature emphasizes that coalitions amplify the influence of individual actors, coordinate framing strategies, and sustain attention on GBV issues, thereby bridging digital activism and formal policy outcomes.

2.4. Empirical Evidence on Social Media Influence on Legislation

Quantitative research assessing the impact of social media advocacy on GBV legislation remains limited but growing. Studies that have analyzed hashtags, post frequency, and user engagement report positive correlations between campaign intensity and legislative responsiveness (Boateng, 2020; Gqola, 2015). In Nigeria, analysis of #SayNoToGBV interactions over a three-year period revealed that states with higher campaign activity were more likely to introduce bills addressing domestic violence, sexual harassment, and child protection, even after controlling for GDP per capita and civil society density. Regression models in these studies indicated that a one-standard-deviation increase in online advocacy intensity corresponded to a 0.15

increase in the Legislative Responsiveness Index ($p < 0.01$). Moreover, cross-national analyses suggest that digital advocacy interacts with structural factors such as internet penetration, media freedom, and political will. In countries with higher digital access and active civil society, social media campaigns had stronger predictive power for legislative change, whereas in low-access regions, online activism alone was insufficient to influence policymakers (UN Women, 2020). These findings reinforce the need to consider both digital activism and contextual enablers when assessing the impact of social media on policy outcomes.

2.5. Gaps in the Literature

Despite emerging evidence, several gaps remain. First, most studies rely on descriptive metrics or case studies without systematically quantifying the relationship between social media advocacy and legislation. Second, few studies integrate agenda-setting theory and the Advocacy Coalition Framework within a single quantitative model to assess both visibility and coalition effects on legislative outcomes. Third, regional comparative analyses across multiple states are limited, leaving questions about contextual variation and replicability unanswered. Finally, most research focuses on short-term outcomes, with limited attention to sustained legislative change and enforcement of GBV laws. These gaps underscore the need for quantitative, multi-state studies that examine both online advocacy intensity and coalition dynamics in influencing GBV legislation.

3.0 Methodology

The study was designed to quantitatively assess the influence of social media advocacy on the enactment and amendment of gender-based violence (GBV) legislation in selected African states. It was reported that a cross-sectional, correlational research design was employed, focusing on 12 countries with varying levels of internet penetration, civil society activity, and legislative responsiveness. Data were collected on social media advocacy campaigns, legislative outcomes, and control variables over a three-year period (2019–2021). Social media metrics were derived from publicly available posts, hashtags, and engagement statistics, while legislative data were obtained from official government websites, legal repositories, and NGO reports. The total dataset comprised $N = 1,450$ discrete campaign-legislation observations, representing multiple campaigns and policy outcomes across states.

Variable Specification

The dependent variable, **Legislative Responsiveness Index (LRI)**, was constructed to capture the scope and timeliness of legislative actions addressing GBV:

$$LRIs = (NBs + ABs + OM_s)^3$$

Where:

NBs = number of new bills introduced in state sss addressing GBV

ABs = number of amendments to existing GBV laws

OMs = existence of oversight mechanisms or committees monitoring GBV legislation (binary scaled 0–1)

The primary independent variable was Social Media Advocacy Intensity (SMAI), measured as a composite index:

$$SMAIs = (HF_s + UE_s + CD_s)^3$$

Where:

HF_s = normalized hashtag frequency for GBV campaigns

UE_s = normalized user engagement (likes, shares, comments)

CD_s = cross-platform diffusion, measured as the proportion of posts appearing on at least three platforms

Control variables included internet penetration (IPs), civil society density (CSDs), GDP per capita (GDPs), and baseline GBV legislation index (GBVLIs), which accounted for pre-existing laws.

Model Estimation

Multiple linear regression was used to quantify the relationship between SMAI and legislative responsiveness, with interaction terms included to account for moderating effects of internet penetration and civil society activity:

$$LRIs = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SMAIs + \beta_2 IPs + \beta_3 CSDs + \beta_4 GDPs + \beta_5 GBVLIs + \beta_6 (SMAIs \times IPs) + \beta_7 (SMAIs \times CSDs) + \epsilon$$

Where:

β_0 = intercept

β_1 – β_7 = regression coefficients

ϵ = error term

The interaction terms were intended to test whether the effect of social media advocacy on legislative responsiveness was amplified in states with higher internet access or stronger civil society networks.

Statistical Procedures

Descriptive statistics were first computed to summarize LRI and SMAI across states. Pearson correlations were conducted to examine preliminary associations between

variables, while Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) analysis ensured multicollinearity was not problematic (VIF < 5 considered acceptable). Multiple regression analysis employed robust standard errors to account for heteroskedasticity, and adjusted R² values were calculated to assess model fit. Statistical significance was assessed at $\alpha = 0.05$. Additional analyses included subcomponent regressions for LRI, examining new bills, amendments, and oversight mechanisms separately, to identify which legislative dimensions were most sensitive to social media advocacy. Sensitivity analyses were performed by excluding outliers and re-scaling SMAI components to ensure robustness of results.

Ethical and Analytical Considerations

It was reported that all social media data were publicly available and anonymized to protect individual users. Legislative data were sourced from official public records. No personal identifiers of campaign participants were included, ensuring compliance with ethical standards. Data analysis was conducted using Stata 17, with confidence intervals computed at 95%. This quantitative methodology allowed the study to rigorously test the hypothesized relationships between social media advocacy intensity, contextual factors, and GBV legislative outcomes.

4.0 Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (N = 1,450 observations)

Variable	Mean (SD)	Min	Max
Legislative Responsiveness Index (LRI)	0.541 (0.182)	0.12	0.94
Social Media Advocacy Intensity (SMAI)	0.463 (0.154)	0.08	0.87
Internet Penetration (%)	48.6 (15.4)	18	85
Civil Society Density (CSD, standardized)	0.000 (1.00)	-2.21	2.35
GDP per Capita (USD, log)	8.72 (0.67)	6.90	10.12
Baseline GBV Legislation Index (GBVLI, 0–1)	0.421 (0.197)	0.10	0.82

The descriptive statistics showed that the mean legislative responsiveness was moderate (0.541), reflecting variability in the adoption, amendment, and monitoring of GBV legislation across countries. Social media advocacy intensity averaged 0.463, indicating moderate online activity and engagement. Internet penetration and civil society density displayed significant variability, highlighting differing structural and socio-political contexts across states.

Table 2: Bivariate Correlations

Variable	LRI	SMAI	IP	CSD	GBVLI
LRI	1				
SMAI	0.421**	1			
IP	0.319**	0.372**	1		
CSD	0.356**	0.298**	0.287**	1	
GBVLI	0.295**	0.208**	0.312**	0.225**	1

p < 0.01

Correlations indicated moderate positive associations between legislative responsiveness and social media advocacy intensity ($r = 0.421$, $p < 0.01$). Internet penetration and civil society density also showed significant positive relationships with both LRI and SMAI, suggesting that structural factors may amplify the effectiveness of online advocacy. Baseline GBV legislation was positively correlated with LRI, indicating that countries with pre-existing legal frameworks were more responsive to advocacy efforts.

Table 3: Multiple Regression – Legislative Responsiveness Index

Predictor	β (Unstandardized)	Robust Error	Std. t- value	p- value
Constant	0.192	0.028	6.86	0.000
SMAI	0.253	0.034	7.44	0.000
Internet Penetration (IP)	0.0021	0.0006	3.50	0.001
Civil Society Density (CSD)	0.061	0.019	3.21	0.002
GDP per Capita	0.027	0.012	2.25	0.024
Baseline GBV Legislation Index (GBVLI)	0.154	0.027	5.70	0.000
SMAI \times IP	0.0012	0.0005	2.40	0.017
SMAI \times CSD	0.0010	0.0004	2.50	0.013

Model Statistics: Adjusted $R^2 = 0.486$, $F(7,1442) = 185.32$, $p < 0.001$

The multiple regression analysis demonstrated that social media advocacy intensity was a significant positive predictor of legislative responsiveness ($\beta = 0.253$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that states experiencing higher levels of online advocacy campaigns tended to enact new bills, amend existing legislation, and establish monitoring mechanisms more rapidly. Internet penetration ($\beta = 0.0021$, $p = 0.001$) and civil society density ($\beta = 0.061$, $p = 0.002$) were also significant, suggesting that structural enablers enhanced the translation of online mobilization into policy outcomes. GDP per capita and baseline legislation had smaller but statistically significant effects, indicating that economic resources and pre-existing legal

frameworks moderated legislative responsiveness. Interaction terms were significant: the positive interaction between SMAI and internet penetration ($\beta = 0.0012$, $p = 0.017$) indicated that the effect of online advocacy was stronger in countries with higher digital access. Similarly, the interaction between SMAI and civil society density ($\beta = 0.0010$, $p = 0.013$) suggested that advocacy campaigns were most effective when supported by organized civil society networks.

Table 4: Subcomponent Analysis – Legislative Actions

Dependent Variable	SMAI β	IP β	CSD β	Adjusted R ²
New Bills Introduced	0.212**	0.0019**	0.058**	0.462
Amendments to Laws	0.198**	0.0020**	0.060**	0.451
Oversight Mechanisms	0.187**	0.0023**	0.065**	0.434

** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Subcomponent analyses revealed that social media advocacy had the strongest effect on the introduction of new bills, followed closely by amendments to existing laws and the establishment of oversight mechanisms. Internet penetration and civil society density consistently amplified these effects, confirming the importance of structural and networked factors in enhancing advocacy impact.

Interpretation

The results indicate that social media advocacy is a significant driver of legislative responsiveness in addressing GBV. States with higher campaign intensity demonstrated more proactive policy action, including the drafting of new bills, amendments, and the creation of monitoring mechanisms. Interaction effects demonstrated that structural factors specifically internet penetration and civil society density moderate these relationships, highlighting the importance of enabling contexts for digital activism to influence lawmaking. These findings support both Agenda-Setting Theory and the Advocacy Coalition Framework: online campaigns elevate issue salience while simultaneously connecting advocacy actors into coalitions capable of influencing legislative outcomes. The analysis quantitatively substantiates the role of social media as an effective tool for policy influence, while also underscoring that its success is contingent upon broader political, technological, and organizational factors.

5.0 Conclusion

The study investigated the quantitative influence of social media advocacy on the enactment, amendment, and oversight of gender-based violence (GBV) legislation in selected African states, reporting that advocacy intensity, internet penetration, and civil society density were significant determinants of legislative responsiveness. It was found that social media campaigns substantially elevated the visibility of GBV

issues, thereby shaping public opinion and signaling policy priorities to legislators. The analysis demonstrated that states with higher levels of campaign activity, measured through hashtag frequency, user engagement, and cross-platform diffusion, were more likely to introduce new bills, amend existing laws, and establish monitoring mechanisms addressing GBV. Interaction effects indicated that the impact of online advocacy was amplified in contexts with greater internet access and more robust civil society networks, underscoring the importance of structural enablers in translating digital activism into policy outcomes. The study also revealed that pre-existing legal frameworks and economic resources moderated legislative responsiveness, suggesting that advocacy effectiveness depends not only on visibility and mobilization but also on institutional readiness. These findings supported both Agenda-Setting Theory and the Advocacy Coalition Framework, showing that social media functions as an agenda-setting mechanism by increasing the salience of GBV issues and as a coalition-building tool by linking activists, NGOs, and policymakers in sustained advocacy networks. Implications of this research are multifaceted: policymakers and legislators are encouraged to engage with online advocacy channels to understand public priorities; civil society organizations should coordinate campaigns strategically to maximize policy influence; and development agencies should invest in internet infrastructure and digital literacy to enhance the efficacy of online mobilization. Ultimately, the study concluded that social media advocacy constitutes a measurable, impactful pathway for advancing GBV legislation, providing evidence-based guidance for leveraging digital platforms in the pursuit of gender justice across diverse political and socio-cultural contexts.

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