

The Impact of Social Media on Reporting Domestic Violence: Legal Perspectives, Benefits and Challenges



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Introduction

Social media has emerged as a transformative tool in addressing domestic violence, offering victims a platform to bypass cultural, geographical, and institutional barriers. Despite laws like Nigeria's Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015), underreporting persists due to cultural normalization of abuse, fear of stigma, and distrust in legal systems. This paper examines social media's impact on domestic violence reportage, highlighting its ability to empower victims via anonymity, rapid dissemination of information, and viral advocacy (e.g., hashtags, survivor testimonials).

Key findings reveal social media's effectiveness in raising awareness and enabling reporting but caution that poor framing of incidents can perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

Recommendations urge stakeholders to strengthen policy implementation and address systemic root causes, such as poverty and gender inequality, rather than reactive measures. Future research should explore demographic influences on reporting and the efficacy of new technologies in encouraging victim engagement.

Domestic violence, a global human rights violation, encompasses physical, sexual, emotional, economic, and spiritual abuse, predominantly affecting women.

Globally, 35% of women experience intimate partner violence, with Nigeria reporting alarming rates: 73% of women in Lagos face lifetime Intimate Partner Violence (IPV).

Cultural norms in Nigeria often shield perpetrators, framing abuse as a "private matter" and discouraging victims from seeking help due to fear of retaliation or institutional apathy.

Social media's dual role; amplifying marginalized voices while grappling with ethical concerns like algorithmic biases and misinformation underscores its complexity.

Platforms like Facebook and Twitter enable real-time interaction and anonymity, yet challenges persist in balancing public safety with profit-driven content moderation.

Concept of Social Media

Social medias are internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others.

However, the above definition of social media, though comprehensive, is a bit complex, broad, and technical. Consequently, for the purpose of this paper, we will adopt a discipline-specific definition, wherein the definitions of the term social media have emphasis on user-generated content or interaction. Therefore, one of the simplest definitions of social media is that it is “any interactive communication channel that allows for two-way interaction and feedback.”

It has been proposed that social media should not be seen primarily as the platforms upon which people post, but rather as the contents that are posted on these platforms.

Whichever definition of social media is adopted, modern social media are characterized by their potential for real-time interaction, reduced anonymity, a sense of propinquity, short response times, and the ability to ‘time shift,’ or engage the social network whenever suits each particular member. User-generated content is a key feature of social media, allowing for engagement through likes, shares, comments, and discussions.

It is generally categorized into social networking sites (for example, Facebook, X, and LinkedIn), multimedia-sharing platforms (For example, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube), and discussion forums (for example, Reddit, Quora).

These platforms facilitate instant communication, information dissemination, and public discourse on various societal issues, including domestic violence.

Since its inception, social media has transformed how individuals, organizations, and societies interact, communicate, and consume information. Social media is today a place within which we socialize, not just a means of communication. In the context of reporting domestic violence, social media has emerged as a transformative tool, allowing victims and to bypass traditional gatekeepers such as law enforcement and mainstream media.

It allows them to circumvent geographical and social barriers that often disempower and silence victims. Through viral hashtags, multimedia content, and survivor testimonials, social media facilitates awareness, activism, and legal intervention.

Furthermore, it offers anonymity to victims who fear societal stigma or retaliation from their abusers. Social media's role in reporting domestic violence is undeniably complex. On one hand, it functions as a social force that is expected to serve as the voice of the voiceless, oppressed, and the less privileged by amplifying their voices that that might otherwise go unheard. On the other hand, it raises ethical and practical concerns that cannot be ignored. The prioritization of profit-driven algorithms over user public safety, the lack of accountability for harmful content, and the potential for misuse by perpetrators all pose significant challenges.

Concept of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence refers to the pervasive violation of individual's fundamental human rights in a particular marriage or cohabitation. Olaseinde and Ogwuche, explain domestic violence, which also referred to as domestic abuse, spousal abuse, battering, family violence, dating abuse, IPV, as a pattern of behaviors involving the abuse of one partner against another in an intimate relationship, such as a marriage, partnership, dating, or within the family.

Although the terms domestic violence and Intimate Partner Violence are used interchangeably, some scholars assert that they are two different concepts. For example, according to Moorer, while domestic violence occurs within a home and between any two people in that household (a couple, a parent and a child, between siblings, or even roommates), IPV occurs only between romantic partners, whereby one intimate partner, whether current or previous, creates dominance and control over another intimate partner.

This dominance and controlling behaviour include physical or sexual aggression, or financial, emotional/psychological, cultural, spiritual, and reproductive abuse. Notwithstanding the above distinction, Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is still a form of domestic violence. Perhaps the biggest irony of domestic violence is that it occurs mainly between family members in a domestic setting, those who are related by blood or share some form of intimate connection.

Domestic violence is a global issue, affecting people of all nationalities. Research indicates that no one is immune to the risk of domestic violence, whether rich or poor, black or white, male and female, and old or young. However, women tend to be victims of domestic violence more often than men.

For example, 38% of all murders of women are committed by intimate partners; 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence; while a lesser percentage of 28.5% of men have experienced physical or sexual intimate violence.

In a recent study conducted in Lagos, Nigeria, it was found that there is 73.3% overall lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence among women. This is similar to other studies in other parts of the country conducted in Ile-Ife (77.3%) and Benin (76.0%). However, it is higher compared to Ibadan (59.5%) and Sokoto (33%).

Traditionally, violence against women in the home is generally regarded as belonging to the private sphere in Nigeria and is therefore shielded from outside scrutiny. Customarily, the beating of wives and children is widely sanctioned as a form of discipline. Instead of condemning the perpetrator of such crimes, a culture of silence reinforces the stigma attached to the victim.

Not surprisingly, many victims do not report for fear of reprisal from abusers or the belief that the police and the judicial system cannot help. The police are also reported to frequently dismiss complaints of domestic violence as a private matter. Thus, the gross underreporting and non-documentation of domestic violence is primarily due to the underlying cultural factors and unresponsive legal institutions.





Forms of Domestic Violence

There are various forms of domestic violence that a person may be subjected to. They include:

Physical Abuse: This involves visible attacks on victims. It is the use of physical force in a way that injures the victim or puts him/her at risk of being injured. It may include spitting, scratching, biting, grabbing, shaking, shoving, pushing, restraining, throwing, twisting, slapping (with open or closed hand), punching, choking, burning, and/or use of weapons (e.g., household objects, knives, guns) against the victim.

It was found that physical abuse is one of the commonest forms of abuse. Female genital mutilation is also considered to be under physical abuse.

Sexual Abuse: This includes all forms of sexual assaults, harassment or exploitation. It involves forced engagement in sexual acts against the victim's free will or using a child for sexual purposes including child prostitution and pornography. Marital rape also comes under this. Another important aspect of sexual abuse is reproductive coercion, i.e., where the perpetrator refuses to use condoms and forces his partner not to use contraception - thereby exposing them to the danger of sexually transmitted diseases.

Emotional Abuse: Emotional Abuse is a tactic of control that consists of a wide variety of verbal attacks and humiliations, including repeated verbal attacks against the victim's worth as an individual or role as a parent, family member, friend, co-worker, or community member.

Economic Abuse: This involves the control of a partner or ex-partner's money and finances, as well as the things money can buy. Perpetrators control victims by controlling their access to all of the family resources: time, transportation, food, clothing, shelter, insurance, and money.

Factors that Contribute to Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a multifaceted issue with no single cause, but research identifies interconnected risk factors that heighten its likelihood. These factors are often categorized into individual, relational, community, and societal influences. In Nigeria, Ogunkorode's framework highlights seven key drivers, contextualizing global patterns within local realities.

Cultural norms play a significant role, particularly the normalization of gender-based control. Practices such as wife battering or harsh child discipline are deeply entrenched, with institutions like the *umuadas* (female kin groups in eastern Nigeria) enforcing oppressive traditions. Women who resist these norms face ostracization, discouraging abuse reporting and perpetuating cycles of violence.

Low education exacerbates vulnerability. Men with limited education are statistically more prone to perpetrate violence, while undereducated women may lack the agency to challenge abuse. Psychological factors further compound risks: unresolved childhood trauma, poor stress management, or learned acceptance of violence (often from witnessing abuse) can predispose individuals to aggression or passivity.

Political and legal gaps sustain the crisis. Nigeria's 2015 Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP) remains inconsistently enforced, with jurisdiction limited to the Federal Capital Territory unless adopted by states. Weak policy implementation and women's underrepresentation in governance stifle systemic change.

Economic instability fuels tension. Unemployment triggers a "provocative effect," where men facing financial impotence may assert dominance through abuse. Simultaneously, women's economic dependence can trap them in abusive relationships or provoke conflict through stressors like financial nagging.

Gender expectations around procreation also drive violence. Childlessness or bearing only female children is often blamed on women, subjecting them to societal scorn and domestic retaliation. Religious teachings, while not inherently harmful, are weaponized to justify male dominance. Rigid interpretations of spousal "headship" across faiths suppress dissent, framing obedience as a moral duty.

Critically, these factors increase risk but do not guarantee violence. Their interplay varies across contexts, influenced by resilience factors like community support or access to education. Addressing Nigeria's domestic violence epidemic requires dismantling harmful norms, strengthening legal frameworks, and expanding socioeconomic opportunities to disrupt these corrosive cycles.

Consequences of Domestic Violence



Domestic violence inflicts profound harm on victims and society, perpetuated by victims' dependency on abusers—financial, emotional, or physical—which traps them in cycles of abuse. A study by Project Alert and NOIPolls underscores this dynamic: 75% of respondents believed women would leave abusive marriages if financially independent. The consequences span physical and psychological realms. Short-term effects include injuries like bruises, fractures, or organ damage, while long-term impacts manifest as PTSD, depression, and substance abuse as victims self-medicate to numb trauma. Disabilities from untreated injuries, suicidal tendencies, and irreversible harm from sexual assault compound the devastation.

Children, even when not directly targeted, suffer deeply. Witnessing abuse corrodes their mental health, linking to higher rates of depression, suicidal ideation, and lower IQs. Exposure to violence normalizes aggression, often propelling delinquency or criminal behavior in adolescence.

Societally, domestic violence breeds a culture of brutality. Survivors raised in abusive environments may perceive violence as routine or even entertaining, evident in the normalization of mob justice or youth glorifying political thuggery. This cyclical erosion of empathy and rise in communal violence destabilizes communities, perpetuating intergenerational trauma. Ultimately, domestic violence transcends individual suffering, fracturing societal cohesion and entrenching cycles of harm that demand systemic intervention.



The Legal Framework on Domestic Violence in Nigeria

Nigeria's legal response to domestic violence is anchored in federal laws and institutions, though enforcement remains fragmented due to uneven state adoption and implementation.

The 1999 Constitution enshrines foundational rights, including dignity of the person, freedom from torture, and gender equality, providing a basis for anti-violence litigation.

Key legislation includes the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) 2015, which criminalizes physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse, and bans harmful practices like forced marriage and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

However, its jurisdiction is limited to the Federal Capital Territory unless adopted by states, creating disparities in victim access to justice.

The Child Rights Act (CRA) 2003 prioritizes children's welfare, prohibiting abuse, neglect, child labor, and FGM. It mandates reporting by professionals (e.g., teachers, doctors) and establishes Child Rights Implementation Committees at national, state, and local levels.

Despite robust penalties (e.g., life imprisonment for sexual abuse), enforcement is hindered by inconsistent state adoption.

Electronic evidence from social media (texts, videos, etc.) is admissible under the Evidence Act 2011, but strict conditions—such as certification of device functionality and expert authentication—create barriers for victims, particularly those without legal representation.

Institutions like the National Agency for Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) administer the VAPP Act, offering victim support and maintaining a public sex offender registry. Family Courts, established under the CRA, handle child-related cases, though their effectiveness varies.

The Ministry of Women Affairs coordinates child rights committees, while the Legal Aid Council provides free legal services to low-income victims.

Challenges persist: the police often trivialize domestic violence as a "private matter," and rural or financially dependent victims struggle to navigate legal processes. NGOs (e.g., Project Alert, UNICEF) fill gaps through advocacy and support, while traditional/religious leaders mediate disputes informally, often prioritizing reconciliation over justice.

Lagos State's Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team (DSVRT) exemplifies progress, handling over 6,000 cases by 2021 through tech-driven reporting tools (e.g., AI chatbots) and victim-centered services. Yet, nationally, weak policy harmonization, underfunding, and cultural resistance to formal justice systems undermine accountability.

Ultimately, Nigeria's framework—though progressive on paper—requires stronger state-level adoption of laws, institutional capacity-building, and public sensitization to bridge the gap between legal promise and protection.



Social Media as a Tool for Reporting Domestic Violence

Social media has transformed domestic violence reporting by offering victims anonymity, accessibility, and a platform to amplify their voices. Its global reach—with over half the world's population online—enables survivors to bypass traditional barriers like stigma, geographic isolation, or financial dependence on abusers. Pseudonymous accounts and private forums allow victims to share experiences safely, while hashtag movements like #MeToo and #MaybeHeDoesn'tHitYou raise awareness of non-physical abuse, challenging societal norms and mobilizing public pressure for systemic change.

Anonymity shields victims from retaliation, particularly in patriarchal settings where reporting to family or authorities' risks blame or dismissal. Social media's affordability and 24/7 accessibility connect survivors to global support networks, therapists, and pro bono legal aid—resources often inaccessible offline. Online communities provide emotional solace, reducing isolation and empowering victims to speak out. For instance, Nigeria's #EndSARS movement, which began as online activism against police brutality, evolved into nationwide protests, forcing government action and accountability.

However, social media's impact on legal outcomes remains limited. While high-profile cases like influencer Suraj Oyewale (#Sirjarus) drew swift investigations by Lagos' Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency, most reports fail to translate into lawsuits. Victims face retaliatory defamation suits, police intimidation, and societal backlash. Photographer Busola Dakolo, who accused a celebrity pastor of rape, was ordered to pay damages after a defamation countersuit, highlighting legal risks for survivors. Similarly, activists like Maryam Awaisu (#ArewaMeToo) faced arrests for naming perpetrators, underscoring institutional hostility.

Police apathy further undermines justice: in Anambra State, only 12 of 155 reported rape cases were investigated, with zero convictions. Despite Lagos State's pioneering efforts—like the AI-powered Ask INU chatbot and a self-reporting portal—tech-driven solutions remain nascent, and rural areas lack equivalent resources.

Ultimately, social media empowers discursive communities, offering victims validation and visibility, yet systemic barriers—stigmatization, legal retaliation, and institutional inertia—persist. While platforms democratize advocacy and foster solidarity, they cannot substitute robust legal reforms, improved policing, or accessible justice systems.

For Nigeria, bridging this gap requires harmonizing online activism with institutional accountability to transform awareness into actionable protection.

Challenges of Social Media as a Tool for Reporting Domestic Violence

While social media offers anonymity and awareness-raising potential, its role in combating domestic violence is hindered by systemic flaws. Agenda-setting and framing theories reveal how platforms shape public perception. When users dismiss abuse as a “private matter” or engage in victim-blaming, social media trivializes the issue, reducing its urgency in public discourse. Similarly, media framing often prioritizes sensationalism over substance, portraying male victims as culpable or female perpetrators as justified, distorting societal understanding of abuse.

Algorithmic biases exacerbate harm by prioritizing engagement over safety. Platforms profit from divisive content, amplifying anger-driven posts and abusive material, including revenge porn or harassment. This “toxic techno culture” thrives on misogynistic subcultures that manipulate algorithms to spread harmful ideologies.

Despite policies against abuse, lack of accountability persists. Legal shields like Section 230 in the U.S. allow platforms to evade responsibility for user-generated harm, enabling lax moderation and enabling harassment campaigns.

Jurisdictional complexities further obstruct justice. Global platforms operate across conflicting legal systems, complicating evidence collection and prosecution. Even domestically, inconsistent adoption of laws like Nigeria's Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act leaves victims in non-compliant states without recourse. Social media evidence faces admissibility hurdles, requiring stringent authentication under laws like Nigeria's Evidence Act, which many victims cannot navigate without legal aid.



Privacy risks deter reporting. Victims sharing abuse details risk “context collapse,” where personal trauma becomes public spectacle, inviting further harassment. Perpetrators exploit platforms to humiliate victims, leveraging viral content’s permanence to inflict lasting psychological harm. Additionally, victims’ digital histories are weaponized in legal proceedings to discredit their claims.

Ultimately, social media’s profit-driven architecture, coupled with fragmented governance and cultural biases, undermines its potential as a tool for justice. Without systemic reforms, transparent algorithms, cross-border legal cooperation, and platform accountability, online spaces will continue to amplify abuse rather than alleviate it.

Recommendations, and Conclusion

To address Nigeria’s domestic violence crisis, a multi-pronged approach is essential. Legal reforms must prioritize the nationwide implementation of the VAPP Act/Laws and Child Rights Act/Laws, ensuring uniform protection across states.

Institutional measures should, integrate tech-driven tools (e.g., Ask INU chatbot, self-reporting portals) to streamline reporting. Law enforcement requires sensitization training to handle cases empathetically, while specialized courts and rehabilitation programs for perpetrators can disrupt cycles of abuse.

Societal reorientation is critical to dismantle harmful cultural norms. Collaborative campaigns led by governments, NGOs, and community/religious leaders should challenge gender stereotypes and promote gender equality through workshops and media engagement.

Empowering survivors via vocational training centers and preemptive policies addressing root causes such as poverty and illiteracy will reduce vulnerability.

Social media’s role must be recalibrated: platforms should amplify positive framing of domestic violence to shift public perception, while algorithms must prioritize safety over profit to curb toxic content. Strengthening privacy protections and jurisdictional cooperation is vital to address challenges like revenge porn and cross-border legal conflicts.

Future research should explore emerging trends like Technologically-Facilitated Abuse (TFA), assessing how tools like doxing or revenge porn exploit digital spaces. Comparative studies across Nigerian states could identify cultural and regional barriers to reporting, while demographic analyses (age, gender, socioeconomic status) may reveal disparities in social media engagement.

In conclusion, while social media has amplified awareness and solidarity through movements like #MeToo, systemic gaps—cultural inertia, fragmented laws, and platform negligence—limit its impact. Combating domestic violence demands harmonized legal frameworks, institutional accountability, and societal transformation. By leveraging technology ethically and centering survivor autonomy, Nigeria can shift from reactive punishment to proactive prevention, fostering a future where safety and dignity prevail.

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