

**New Media, Civic Participation, and the Enforcement of Child Rights Policies:
A Survey of Civil Society Organisations in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State**

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Abstract

Persistent child labour, trafficking, and inadequate access to justice have continued to decimate the future of children in developing nations including Nigeria. The list of forced underage marriages, sex labour, teenage pregnancies and underage maternal mortality swells unabated. The helpless Children bear the pangs with ignorance consequent upon ineffective implementation of Child's rights policies. This study examined the role of new media and civil society organisations (CSOs) in civic participation and the enforcement of child rights policies in Uyo. The study was anchored on Public Sphere theory. Using a descriptive survey design, data were collected through questionnaire and interviews from 50 respondents across five purposively selected CSOs. Findings indicate that Facebook and WhatsApp are the most commonly used platforms for advocacy; with civic participation reported as moderate and inconsistent. Major challenges include limited funding, weak government support, and low public awareness. The study concludes that new media is effective to some extent in promoting awareness, but less impactful in driving enforcement outcomes. Therefore, the study suggests strengthened public engagement, stronger institutional collaboration, improved funding, and digital literacy as necessities to translate online participation into concrete enforcement of child rights policies.

Keywords: new media, civic participation, enforcement, Child rights, civil society organisation

Introduction

The protection and enforcement of child rights remain a significant challenge across Nigeria, where progressive legal frameworks such as the Child Rights Act of 2003 have not always translated into consistent practice at the state and local levels. Reports continue to document persistent child labour, child trafficking, and inadequate access to justice for children, reflecting the gap between policy provisions and their enforcement (U.S. Department of State, 2023; U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). These lapses highlight the importance of social institutions and civic actors in ensuring that children's rights are not only recognised in law but also protected in daily reality.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have emerged as key actors in bridging these gaps by offering legal aid, public education, advocacy, and monitoring of child rights violations. They often serve as intermediaries between communities and the state, providing services, raising awareness, and demanding accountability from authorities (UNICEF, 2022). However, the effectiveness of CSOs is sometimes constrained by limited resources, weak institutional frameworks, and insufficient collaboration with government agencies, which hinder their capacity to promote child rights enforcement consistently (UNICEF, 2025).

The rapid expansion of new media technologies in Nigeria has opened new avenues for civic engagement and advocacy. Social and digital media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter have increasingly become important tools for mobilising public opinion, disseminating information, and creating pressure for policy enforcement (Bello, 2023). These platforms have reshaped patterns of civic participation by enabling grassroots actors to bypass traditional gatekeepers and engage directly with the public on issues affecting children and other vulnerable groups (Umoh, 2025).

In the specific context of child rights, new media provides unique opportunities for immediacy, low-cost mobilisation, and interactive communication. Advocacy campaigns, online reporting mechanisms, and digital storytelling have been deployed to highlight cases of abuse, pressurise authorities to act, and connect victims with support services (UNICEF, 2025). Despite these potentials, there remains uncertainty over the extent to which digital advocacy translates into tangible enforcement outcomes such as increased prosecutions, improved social services, or enhanced institutional responsiveness (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

Within Akwa Ibom State, and particularly in Uyo, the role of civil society organisations in utilising new media for child rights advocacy has received limited scholarly attention. Assessments suggest that issues relating to child rights often receive sporadic coverage

in mainstream media, and the capacity of CSOs to leverage digital platforms for advocacy and enforcement remains under-documented (Inibehe, 2025). This suggests an urgent need to empirically investigate how CSOs in Uyo are integrating new media into their broader strategies for child rights enforcement.

The study therefore, provides insight into the extent of their engagement with new media, the challenges they face, and the outcomes they achieve. Such an investigation determines whether new media use has strengthened civic participation in child rights advocacy or whether its effects remain largely limited to awareness creation without significant enforcement results.

Objectives of the Study

The study is designed specifically to:

- i. Examine how civil society organisations in Uyo use new media to promote child rights policies;
- ii. assess the extent of civic participation in child rights advocacy through new media platforms;
- iii. identify the challenges faced by civil society organisations in enforcing child rights policies; and
- iv. evaluate the effectiveness of new media in influencing the enforcement of child rights policies in Uyo.

Conceptual Review

New Media

New media refers to digital communication technologies that enable interactive, networked, and user-generated content dissemination. Unlike traditional mass media, which primarily operate on a one-way flow of information, new media platforms are characterised by interactivity, immediacy, and participatory culture (McQuail, 2020). Social networking sites, blogs, online news portals, and instant messaging applications represent the key forms of new media, and their growth has reshaped communication landscapes across the globe. These platforms not only facilitate information exchange but also enable the construction of virtual communities that can mobilise around social, political, and developmental issues (Bello, 2023).

The emergence of new media has been particularly transformative in Africa, where mobile technologies have expanded rapidly, creating new opportunities for civic participation and advocacy. In Nigeria, platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and

Twitter are now integral to public discourse and political mobilisation, allowing individuals and organisations to bypass traditional gatekeepers of communication (Umoh, 2025). Studies suggest that these platforms have given voice to marginalised groups, amplifying civic demands and enabling collective action on issues ranging from governance to human rights (Adeyanju & Haruna, 2021). This shift demonstrates how new media has become central to contemporary democratic engagement and social development.

The Interactive nature of new media also creates new possibilities for advocacy and accountability. Scholars note that the ability of digital platforms to archive, circulate, and reframe information has made them critical tools for raising awareness of social issues (Livingstone, 2019). For instance, child rights advocacy organisations increasingly rely on new media to disseminate campaigns, publicise violations, and pressurise authorities into action. However, research reveals that while online visibility is often achieved, the translation of digital activism into tangible policy enforcement remains inconsistent (UNICEF, 2025). This observation highlights both the potential and the limitations of new media as a tool for civic engagement.

Despite its promise, the adoption of new media in advocacy also presents challenges. Issues such as digital divides, misinformation, lack of regulatory frameworks, and unequal access to technology limit the effectiveness of online engagement (Ndukwu, 2020). In contexts such as Nigeria, disparities in internet connectivity and literacy create uneven participation, raising concerns about exclusion of vulnerable populations. Moreover, the transient nature of online campaigns often leads to what scholars describe as "slacktivism," where individuals participate symbolically without contributing to lasting social change (Gladwell, 2019). These concerns necessitate closer empirical examination of how new media is applied in specific advocacy contexts, such as child rights protection.

Civic Participation

Civic participation refers to the active engagement of citizens in political, social, and developmental processes that influence their communities. Traditionally, such participation has taken the form of voting, public demonstrations, community meetings, and involvement in civil society organisations. However, with the growth of new media, the scope of civic participation has broadened to include online engagement, digital advocacy, and networked mobilisation (McQuail, 2020). Scholars emphasise that civic participation strengthens democracy by holding leaders accountable, ensuring inclusion of marginalised voices, and promoting collective problem-solving (Adeyanju & Haruna, 2021).

In the Nigerian context, civic participation has evolved significantly with the diffusion of digital technologies. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter have become arenas where citizens discuss governance issues, mobilise for protests, and demand accountability from leaders (Bello, 2023). This transformation has shifted political discourse beyond traditional spaces, enabling individuals and groups to influence decision-making processes at local and national levels. Evidence suggests that social media-driven civic participation has been particularly influential among young people, who increasingly use digital platforms to advocate for rights, highlight injustices, and campaign for social change (Umoh, 2025).

Nevertheless, the expansion of civic participation through new media is not without challenges. While digital platforms allow for greater inclusivity, issues such as unequal access to technology, misinformation, and superficial forms of engagement undermine their effectiveness (Ndukwe, 2020). Scholars warn of the tendency toward "slacktivism," where online support does not translate into sustained action or institutional change (Gladwell, 2019). These limitations raise critical questions about the depth and sustainability of civic participation in digitally mediated contexts, particularly in areas where institutional frameworks for policy enforcement remain weak.

In relation to child rights, civic participation is vital because it provides a platform for collective advocacy and oversight of enforcement mechanisms. Through both offline and online channels, citizens and CSOs can mobilise against child abuse, monitor government compliance with child rights policies, and push for stronger institutional responses (UNICEF, 2025). However, it remains unclear how effectively civic participation, especially in its digital forms, contributes to tangible improvements in child rights enforcement within specific contexts such as Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. This uncertainty underscores the need for empirical research into the link between civic engagement, new media, and child rights protection.

Child Rights Policies

The protection of children's rights in Nigeria is primarily guided by the Child Rights Act (CRA) of 2003, which domesticated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. The Act provides a legal framework for safeguarding children from abuse, exploitation, neglect, and discrimination, while also promoting access to education, healthcare, and social services (UNICEF, 2022). Despite this progressive legal framework, child rights violations remain widespread, with persistent reports of child labour, early marriage, child trafficking, and inadequate access to justice (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2023).

The gap between policy provisions and enforcement has raised concerns about institutional weaknesses and the need for stronger monitoring and accountability systems.

Implementation of child rights policies in Nigeria is complicated by federalism, since the CRA requires individual state assemblies to domesticate its provisions. While several states have passed versions of the Act, disparities exist in enforcement, with many states lagging in resource allocation and institutional support (UNICEF, 2025). Research shows that this uneven application has left children in some regions particularly vulnerable, underscoring the importance of both government action and the contributions of civil society organisations in strengthening enforcement mechanisms (Adeyanju & Haruna, 2021).

In Akwa Ibom State, the domestication of the Child Rights Act was an important step towards protecting children, especially in light of historical reports of child stigmatisation and abuse linked to cultural practices. Civil society organisations and international agencies have worked alongside the state government to promote awareness and implementation of the law (UNICEF, 2025). However, challenges remain in translating policy into effective practice. Reports indicate that despite legal protections, cases of child neglect, abuse, and exploitation continue to surface, raising questions about institutional capacity, community engagement, and the role of civic actors in bridging the enforcement gap (Inibehe, 2025).

The situation in Akwa Ibom illustrates the broader Nigerian challenge of ensuring that legal frameworks for child protection move beyond symbolic commitments to real, enforceable mechanisms. While laws exist on paper, enforcement is often undermined by limited resources, inadequate training of enforcement officers, and weak collaboration between government and non-state actors (UNICEF, 2022; UNICEF, 2025).

Child Rights Policies and Enforcement

Nigeria's Child Rights Act of 2003 remains the most comprehensive legal framework for protecting children, aligning with both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. The Act guarantees children protection against abuse, exploitation, and neglect while promoting access to education, healthcare, and justice (UNICEF, 2022). However, the translation of these policy provisions into practice has been inconsistent. National reports show continuing cases of child labour, early marriage, and trafficking, indicating that enforcement mechanisms remain weak (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022; U.S.

Department of State, 2023). This gap reflects systemic challenges within Nigeria's governance structures, particularly at state and local levels.

The federal nature of Nigeria's political system requires that the Child Rights Act be domesticated by individual state legislatures before it can be fully enforceable. Although many states, including Akwa Ibom (CRA 2008) have domesticated the Act, but enforcement remains problematic due to inadequate institutional frameworks, poor funding, and limited coordination across agencies (UNICEF, 2025). Scholars have observed that while the legal framework is robust, actual implementation is undermined by a lack of monitoring, insufficient capacity of child protection institutions, and socio-cultural practices that perpetuate abuse (Adeyanju & Haruna, 2021).

In Akwa Ibom State, the domestication of the Child Rights Law was a response to specific challenges, including widespread reports of child stigmatisation and abuse. Despite this legislative progress, enforcement gaps remain evident, as cases of neglect and exploitation persist in many communities (Inibehe, 2025). Civil society organisations, in partnership with government and international bodies, have attempted to bridge these gaps through advocacy, awareness campaigns, and service delivery. Yet, the effectiveness of such interventions is limited by structural weaknesses and low levels of community engagement (UNICEF, 2025).

While child rights policies in Nigeria represent a strong legal commitment to child protection, their enforcement continues to face significant barriers. Institutional fragility, uneven state-level implementation, and resource constraints prevent the full realisation of these rights (UNICEF, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2023).

Civil Society Organisations in Uyo

Civil society organisations (CSOs) occupy a vital space in promoting social development, accountability, and human rights in Akwa Ibom State. In Uyo, these organisations often act as intermediaries between citizens and the government, providing platforms for advocacy, service delivery, and policy monitoring. Their involvement in child rights issues has been especially important, given the persistence of challenges such as child labour, neglect, and abuse despite the existence of formal legal frameworks (UNICEF, 2025). By mobilising communities, educating the public, and engaging with policymakers, CSOs help to bridge the enforcement gaps that government institutions alone have not been able to address.

For the purpose of this study, five civil society organisations in Uyo have been selected based on their active engagement in child rights advocacy and protection. These are

Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN), Save the Child Initiative (SCI), Family Empowerment and Youth Re-Orientation Path Initiative (FEYReP), Street Priests Incorporated, and the Initiative for Youth Development and Child Rights Advocacy (IYDAR). Each of these organisations has made visible contributions in addressing issues affecting children, ranging from direct intervention and rehabilitation to advocacy and awareness campaigns.

CRARN is particularly recognised for its work in rescuing and rehabilitating stigmatised children in Akwa Ibom communities, while Save the Child Initiative has focused on education and health programmes for vulnerable children. FEYReP, founded with the support of office of the First Lady of the State, has carried out large-scale sensitisation campaigns against child stigmatisation and abuse. Street Priests Incorporated is notable for its outreach and rehabilitation programmes targeting street children, while IYDAR has been involved in grassroots advocacy and capacity-building programmes designed to promote children's rights and youth empowerment. Together, these organisations provide a rich context for examining how CSOs employ new media for civic participation and enforcement of child rights policies.

Empirical Review

Okafor and Ekanem (2020) examined how new media platforms influence youth civic participation in governance within South-South Nigeria. Using a survey of 300 respondents across three states, the authors found that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter significantly enhanced awareness and mobilisation around governance issues. However, the study noted that while awareness was high, actual participation in governance processes remained limited, as online engagement often failed to translate into offline political action. The authors concluded that new media had strong potential for democratic participation but cautioned that structural and institutional barriers limited its overall impact. This work is relevant to the present study as it highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of digital engagement in advocacy and governance.

Udo and Effiong (2021) in their investigation, examined the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in advocating for and protecting child rights in Nigeria. Drawing on interviews with leaders of ten CSOs across different states, the study revealed that CSOs have been instrumental in raising awareness of child abuse, influencing policy debates, and providing direct support to vulnerable children. Nonetheless, the research identified persistent challenges such as weak government collaboration, poor funding, and cultural resistance to some child rights provisions. The study concluded that while CSOs have made significant contributions to child rights advocacy, their efforts were

undermined by limited enforcement mechanisms. The relevance of this study to the present research lies in its emphasis on the enforcement gap in child rights advocacy and the role of CSOs in bridging that gap.

Essien and Johnson (2022), explored how digital activism contributes to human rights enforcement in Akwa Ibom State, with a particular focus on social movements and online advocacy groups. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys of 200 respondents with case studies of three prominent advocacy campaigns. Findings indicated that digital activism significantly increased public awareness and exerted pressure on government institutions to act on reported cases of rights violations. However, the study noted that enforcement was inconsistent, as online campaigns sometimes lost momentum without sustained offline engagement. The authors recommended stronger partnerships between CSOs, government, and online activists to improve policy enforcement. This study is directly relevant as it situates new media within Akwa Ibom's human rights landscape, offering insights into the effectiveness and challenges of digital advocacy.

Theoretical Framework

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which is suitable for exploring how civil society organisations (CSOs) in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, utilise new media to enhance civic participation and the enforcement of child rights policies. The design enabled the researcher to obtain first-hand information from respondents on their experiences and perceptions.

The population of the study consisted of staff and volunteers of five purposively selected CSOs actively engaged in child rights advocacy within Uyo. These organisations include the Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN), Save the Child Initiative (SCI), Family Empowerment and Youth Re-Orientation Path Initiative (FEYReP), Street Priests Incorporated, and the Initiative for Youth Development and Child Rights Advocacy (IYDAR). Together, they formed a relevant population because of their established track record in child rights protection and policy engagement.

From this population, a sample size of 50 respondents was determined, with 10 drawn from each organisation. The purposive sampling technique was employed because it ensures that only participants directly involved in child rights advocacy and familiar with the use of new media are included in the study. This choice of sample size and technique is justified as it allows for manageable data collection while still providing diverse perspectives from multiple organisations.

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire, complemented by semi-structured interviews with key informants from the selected CSOs. The questionnaire provided quantitative data on the extent of new media usage and civic participation, while the interviews offered deeper qualitative insights into the challenges and successes of enforcement efforts. This combination strengthened the validity of the findings and ensured that both numerical and narrative evidence informed the analysis.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1

The most commonly used new media platform by CSOs for child rights advocacy

Variable	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Facebook	18	36
WhatsApp	12	24
Twitter (X)	10	20
Instagram	7	14
Others	3	6
Total	50	100

The result shows that Facebook (36%) is the most widely used platform for child rights advocacy among CSOs in Uyo, followed by WhatsApp (24%). Twitter and Instagram have moderate use, while other platforms are minimally used. This indicates a preference for platforms with wider reach and accessibility.

Table 2

The frequency of engagement of members of the public with child rights advocacy posts online

Variable	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Very often	9	18
Often	15	30
Sometimes	16	32

Rarely	7	14
Never	3	6
Total	50	100

Engagement levels vary, with most respondents indicating participation occurs “sometimes” (32%) or “often” (30%). Only 18% reported very frequent engagement, suggesting that while new media facilitates participation, public involvement is moderate and inconsistent.

Table 3
Major challenge organisation faces in enforcing child rights policies

Variable	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Limited funding	20	40
Weak government support	12	24
Low public awareness	10	20
Poor digital infrastructure	5	10
Other challenges	3	6
Total	50	100

Limited funding (40%) emerged as the biggest challenge facing CSOs in Uyo, followed by weak government support (24%). This highlights that financial constraints and insufficient institutional collaboration significantly hinder child rights enforcement efforts.

Table 4
Effectiveness of new media in influencing child rights policy enforcement

Variable	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Very effective	8	16
Effective	17	34
Moderately effective	15	30
Less effective	7	14
Not effective	3	6
Total	50	100

Findings indicate that 34% of respondents consider new media effective, while 30% rate it as moderately effective. However, only 16% perceive it as very effective, suggesting that while new media contributes positively, its influence on actual enforcement is limited and still evolving.

Discussion

To examine how civil society organisations in Uyo use new media to promote child rights policies. Findings showed that Facebook (36%) and WhatsApp (24%) are the dominant platforms used by CSOs for child rights advocacy in Uyo, while Twitter, Instagram, and other platforms are used less frequently. This pattern suggests that CSOs prefer platforms with wider accessibility and community reach. This finding is consistent with Okafor and Ekanem (2020), who found that Facebook and Twitter were instrumental in mobilising youth participation in governance, although participation often stopped at online awareness creation.

By applying Habermas's (1962/1989) Public Sphere theory, these findings demonstrate that new media platforms serve as digital public spheres where advocacy discourse occurs. However, as in the reviewed study, the potential of these platforms has not fully translated into structural change or strong enforcement of child rights.

To assess the extent of civic participation in child rights advocacy through new media platforms

Data revealed that most respondents reported moderate levels of engagement, with 32% indicating public participation occurs "sometimes" and 30% saying it happens "often." Only 18% reported "very often." This suggests that civic participation is present but inconsistent. This aligns with Okafor and Ekanem's (2020) conclusion that while awareness through social media is high, active participation often falls short. Within the framework of the Public Sphere theory, the finding reinforces the idea that while digital spaces have opened opportunities for dialogue, barriers still exist that prevent consistent and deeper forms of participation. This underlines the gap between digital interaction and practical policy enforcement.

To identify the challenges faced by civil society organisations in enforcing child rights policies

The major challenge identified was limited funding (40%), followed by weak government support (24%) and low public awareness (20%). These findings corroborate Udo and Effiong (2021), who reported that CSOs in Nigeria struggle with poor funding, limited institutional collaboration, and socio-cultural resistance to some child rights provisions.

From a Public Sphere Theory perspective, these challenges reveal that while digital platforms can create spaces for advocacy, effective participation requires resources and structural support. Without these, the deliberations in the public sphere cannot translate into concrete enforcement of policies, reflecting a limitation in the digital advocacy process.

To evaluate the effectiveness of new media in influencing the enforcement of child rights policies in Uyo

The findings showed that 34% of respondents considered new media effective and 30% rated it moderately effective, but only 16% considered it very effective. This indicates that new media contributes positively but is yet to become a strong driver of enforcement. Essien and Johnson (2022) made similar observations in Akwa Ibom, finding that digital activism raised awareness but did not consistently sustain momentum to influence enforcement. Through the lens of Public Sphere Theory, this finding reflects the limitation of the digital public sphere, where discourse may generate visibility but lacks the structural mechanisms to ensure enforcement. This underscores the need for synergy between online advocacy, offline action, and institutional support.

Summary of Findings

- i. Civil society organisations (CSOs) in Uyo predominantly use Facebook (36%) and WhatsApp (24%) as their main new media platforms for child rights advocacy, while platforms like Twitter and Instagram are less utilised.
- ii. Civic participation in child rights advocacy through new media is moderate and inconsistent, with most respondents indicating engagement occurs only "sometimes" (32%) or "often" (30%).
- iii. The biggest challenges to the enforcement of child rights policies include limited funding (40%), weak government support (24%), and low public awareness (20%).
- iv. New media was found to be moderately effective in influencing the enforcement of child rights policies, with 34% rating it effective and 30% moderately effective, though only 16% considered it very effective.

Conclusion

The study concludes that while new media platforms have become vital tools for CSOs in Uyo to promote child rights advocacy, their potential is not fully realised in terms of concrete enforcement outcomes. Civic participation, though present, remains inconsistent and largely confined to awareness creation rather than tangible policy action. The major barriers of inadequate funding, weak institutional collaboration, and insufficient public awareness undermine the effectiveness of CSO advocacy. It is obvious

that the new media contributes to visibility and dialogue within the public sphere, but its role in actual policy enforcement is limited without strong offline mechanisms and supportive structures.

Recommendations

- **Diversify Platform Use:** CSOs should expand beyond Facebook and WhatsApp to maximise the advocacy potential of platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, which offer broader visibility and diverse engagement opportunities.
- **Strengthen Public Engagement:** CSOs should adopt interactive campaigns, online petitions, and virtual forums to convert online awareness into active civic participation and offline policy action.
- **Improve Funding Mechanisms:** Sustainable funding partnerships with international donors, private organisations, and government agencies should be developed to reduce financial constraints on child rights advocacy.
- **Enhance Institutional Collaboration:** CSOs should build stronger alliances with government bodies, law enforcement, and community leaders to ensure that online campaigns translate into enforcement of child rights policies.
- **Promote Digital Literacy and Awareness:** Training programmes should be initiated to improve community members' ability to engage effectively with new media platforms for advocacy and rights protection.

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