

CHILDHOOD ONLINE: NEW HORIZONS AND THREATS TO CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

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Abstract: *The digital era presents new opportunities and challenges for childhood globally. Children increasingly interact, learn, and express themselves through digital technologies, opening up new horizons for their development and participation. However, these digital spaces also expose children to novel threats to their fundamental rights, such as online abuse, privacy violations, and harmful content. This thesis examines the international and national legal frameworks designed to protect and promote children's rights in the digital environment. It analyzes key instruments including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and relevant Council of Europe recommendations, alongside national responses and legislation. The study explores both opportunities and risks in the digital world and concludes with recommendations to strengthen legal protections, enhance digital literacy, and ensure child participation in policy-making. The imperative to uphold children's rights online is crucial to ensuring a safe, inclusive, and empowering digital future for all children.*

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, digital technologies reshape all facets of life, including childhood. Online spaces offer children immense opportunities for learning, creativity, and social interaction. Yet, these new horizons are accompanied by significant threats to fundamental rights protected under international human rights law. Children, as a vulnerable group, require special protection from online exploitation, abuse, privacy infringements, and harmful content. This thesis examines how international and national legal frameworks address children's rights in the digital environment, highlighting both progress and gaps. It also explores the balance between enabling digital participation and safeguarding children from risks.

The most authoritative framework is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted unanimously in 1989 by the UN General Assembly. The UNCRC enshrines children's civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, and its provisions apply equally online [1]. Article 16 guarantees the child's right to privacy, while Article 17 mandates access to information from diverse sources, including digital media. Article 19 obligates states to protect children from all forms of violence, explicitly capturing online abuse. The Committee on the Rights of the Child's

General Comment No. 25 further clarifies states' responsibilities to protect children in digital contexts, emphasizing internet safety, digital literacy, and data protection.

Complementing the UNCRC, the Council of Europe has issued the Recommendation CM/Rec (2018) 7 on the rights of children in the digital environment. This recommendation guides member states to respect children's rights by integrating child-friendly digital policies, protecting from risks such as online grooming and cyberbullying, and fostering digital skills and participation [2]. Other international legal instruments reinforce these protections, such as the Convention on Cybercrime, which criminalizes online child exploitation and mandates international cooperation [3]. The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) imposes strict rules on processing children's personal data, enhancing their privacy rights [4].

National responses vary but typically translate international norms into tailored laws and policies. For instance, the United Kingdom's Children and Families Act 2014 and the establishment of the UK's Internet Safety Strategy include provisions for online child safety education and platforms' accountability [5]. Australia's eSafety Commissioner Act of 2015 creates a statutory office focused on online harms to children and adults, enforcing content removal and promoting digital education [6]. Many countries have enacted laws requiring online platforms to implement age verification, content moderation, and reporting mechanisms for child abuse material.

Nevertheless, effective enforcement challenges persist due to rapid technological innovation outpacing legislation, jurisdictional complexities of the internet, and limited resources for monitoring and intervention. Cooperation between states, technology companies, and civil society is imperative for coherent implementation. National strategies increasingly emphasize cross-sector collaboration, awareness-raising, and capacity-building to empower children and caregivers to navigate digital risks safely.

Digital technologies open unprecedented opportunities. Children access vast educational content, engage in social networking, and participate in civic discourse, amplifying their voices and agency. Children with disabilities or living in remote areas benefit from digital inclusion, enhancing their social integration. International frameworks recognize children's right to participation, encouraging the design of child-friendly digital environments and supporting digital literacy initiatives tailored to different developmental stages [7]. These opportunities enable children to develop critical thinking, creativity, and global awareness, essential for thriving in a digital society.

The digital environment also brings serious risks. Online violence, including sexual exploitation, bullying, and exposure to harmful content, undermine children's dignity and safety. Automated profiling and data harvesting raise concerns about privacy, surveillance, and targeted advertising that may manipulate or discriminate against children. Misinformation and extremist content threaten children's mental health and social cohesion. Online platforms often lack sufficient transparency and

accountability mechanisms to protect vulnerable users effectively [8]. The fragmentation of legal protections and enforcement mechanisms across jurisdictions exacerbates these threats.

Uzbekistan has taken significant steps to enhance the protection of children's rights in the digital age. In 2025, the country has been developing comprehensive legislation aimed at regulating online platforms and safeguarding user rights, with a strong emphasis on protecting children from harmful content, false information, and illegal material promoting hatred or violence. This draft law, prepared by the Agency of Information and Mass Communications in coordination with government bodies and civil society, aims to establish clear legal guarantees for users, promote transparency, and foster cooperation between regulators and digital service providers [9].

Moreover, Uzbekistan recently enacted the Law "On Protecting Children from All Forms of Violence," effective from May 15, 2025. This law represents a milestone in creating a legal framework to systematically combat violence against children, including online abuse, and is supported by a National Action Plan spanning 2025–2035 that outlines comprehensive prevention and response strategies across sectors [10]. The government's commitment to international initiatives, such as the Bogotá Call to Action, further reinforces the country's dedication to improving child protection mechanisms and raising awareness.

By integrating these measures, Uzbekistan can leverage its ongoing legal reforms to create a safer, inclusive digital future where children's rights are effectively protected and promoted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To safeguard children's rights online, concerted action is required at multiple levels. Internationally, states must harmonize legal frameworks, share best practices, and support capacity-building for regulatory bodies. National governments should enact and enforce robust child protection laws, encourage industry responsibility through clear legal mandates and incentives, and invest in digital literacy education that empowers children and caregivers alike. Children's participation in the development of policies and technologies must be central, ensuring their perspectives shape the environments they inhabit. Multi-stakeholder partnerships between governments, technology firms, educators, NGOs, and children themselves can foster innovation in creating safe, inclusive digital spaces [9].

The digital revolution presents a complex duality for childhood, simultaneously expanding horizons and amplifying vulnerabilities. Upholding children's rights within this evolving landscape requires integrating international human rights standards with dynamic national laws and policies. Only through collaborative, child-centered approaches can the promise of digital inclusion be realized without sacrificing safety and dignity.

However, challenges remain in fully addressing the complexities of digital risks facing children. In this context, Uzbekistan could consider the following tailored recommendations: enact specific provisions within digital legislation focused on children's rights online, ensuring alignment with international standards such as the UNCRC and Council of Europe guidelines; implement nationwide digital literacy programs targeting children, parents, educators, and policymakers, enabling safer and more informed use of the internet; strengthen multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration, involving government bodies, technology firms, civil society, and international partners to develop child-safe digital environments; establish formal mechanisms for child participation in digital policy development to ensure their needs and perspectives are represented; enhance capacities of regulatory authorities to monitor compliance and enforce laws against harmful online practices affecting children.

ENDNOTES/REFERENCE :

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