

# The new face of child protection in digital age

Child protection in Uganda is undergoing a profound transformation as digital technologies increasingly shape how children live, learn and interact. The rapid spread of mobile phones, internet connectivity, and digital platforms has introduced both unprecedented opportunities and complex risks for children. In this evolving digital environment, protecting children can no longer rest solely on traditional systems and institutions. Instead, it requires shared responsibility, co-ordinated action, and a rethinking of child protection approaches to ensure they remain relevant, rights-based, and responsive to modern realities.

Uganda's digital transformation has significantly reshaped childhood experiences. Increased access to mobile devices and online platforms has broadened children's exposure to information, communication, education, and social engagement. Digital learning platforms, social media, and online creativity tools have enhanced educational access, encouraged innovation, and enabled civic participation, especially in urban and peri-urban settings. For many children, digital spaces have become essential arenas for learning, self-expression, and connection. However, this expanded access has also blurred traditional boundaries of supervision, placing children in virtual environments that extend beyond the direct control of parents, schools, and communities. As a result, digital spaces



have emerged as critical settings where children's rights can either be fulfilled or violated.

Alongside the benefits of digital inclusion, the online environment has introduced new and increasingly complex forms of harm. Online sexual exploitation and abuse, cyberbullying, exposure to age-inappropriate or harmful content, online grooming, and digital fraud are becoming more prevalent. These abuses often occur in hidden, anonymous, and transnational forms, making them particularly difficult to detect, prevent, and respond to. Children from economically disadvantaged households may be especially vulnerable due to shared or unsupervised device use, limited parental oversight, and low levels of digital literacy. These risks challenge traditional child protection systems that were primarily designed to address offline harms such as physical abuse, neglect, and exploitation within familiar community settings.

A key challenge in protecting children online is the widening digital literacy gap between children and adults. Many parents, caregivers, teachers, and community leaders lack adequate knowledge of digital platforms, online behaviours, and

warning signs of harm. In contrast, children often navigate digital spaces with greater confidence and fluency. This imbalance weakens adult supervision and limits meaningful guidance and protection. Consequently, child protection in the digital age requires more than control or restriction; it demands informed engagement, respectful communication, and mutual trust. Creating safe and supportive spaces for dialogue enables children to share their online experiences, develop critical thinking skills, and seek help when they encounter risks or abuse.

Uganda's child protection system is gradually adapting to these emerging digital realities, but significant gaps remain. Law enforcement agencies, social workers, and judicial actors often face capacity constraints when dealing with technology-facilitated abuse. Challenges such as collecting and preserving digital evidence, identifying anonymous perpetrators, and handling cross-border cases require specialised technical skills, legal knowledge, and resources that are not always available. These limitations underscore the need for stronger intersectoral co-ordination among child protection agencies, law enforcement, ICT regulators, educators, and the justice system. In parallel, legal and policy frameworks must be harmonised and strengthened

to ensure child-sensitive responses that emphasise prevention, accountability, and survivor-centred support in digital contexts.

The changing nature of childhood in the digital age calls for a holistic and forward-looking approach to child protection in Uganda. Such an approach must integrate prevention, protection, participation, and partnership across multiple sectors. It requires sustained investment in digital literacy for both children and adults, capacity-building for professionals, and ethical engagement with technology companies to prioritise child safety by design. Families and communities must remain central to protection efforts, reinforcing values, guidance, and support as children navigate both online and offline spaces.

Above all, this transformation requires a fundamental mindset shift. Online and offline harms are deeply interconnected, and children do not experience their lives in separate digital and physical worlds. Protecting children in the 21st century, therefore, means safeguarding their rights across all environments. As Uganda continues its digital journey, evolving and adaptive child protection systems will be essential to ensure that digital spaces become empowering environments where children can learn, connect, and thrive without leaving any child unprotected in an increasingly connected world.

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