The Right to Childhood in a Digitally Violent World

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Date of submission: 20/05/2026 Date of acceptance: 04/08/2026 Date of publication: 28/09/2026

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Revision of the article: Dr./ Nour Elias Al Barraj (Lebanon)

Abstract:

The digital environment has become an essential dimension of children's everyday lives. Children increasingly use digital platforms for education, communication, entertainment, and social interaction. However, despite the existence of international legal standards protecting children from violence, contemporary legal frameworks still tend to focus primarily on physical harm while underestimating psychological and digital forms of violence. This article argues that digital violence constitutes a serious threat to children's dignity, mental well-being, and right to development. Through a legal and human rights analysis, the study examines the limitations of existing international child protection frameworks in addressing cyberbullying, harmful online content, misuse of personal data, digital surveillance, and online exploitation. The article further analyses the legal gaps surrounding the regulation of digital platforms, state responsibility, and children's access to remedies in digital environments. The article advocates for the establishment of a comprehensive child-centered legal framework that formally recognizes digital environments as legal spaces in which children's rights and freedoms must be effectively respected, legally protected, and institutionally enforced in accordance with international human rights standards.

Key words: children's rights; digital violence; right to childhood; online safety; psychological harm; cyberbullying.

Introduction:

Childhood is recognized as a distinct phase of human development that necessitates special care, protection, and support under legal and social frameworks. Within the international human rights framework, children are recognized as a particularly vulnerable group requiring enhanced legal protection compared with adults. This principle is expressly affirmed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which establishes the right of every child to grow and develop in

conditions that safeguard their dignity, security, and well-being (Norozi & Moen, 2016, pp.75-79). Consequently, the protection of children has become a fundamental concern of both international and domestic legal systems. For decades, international and domestic legal frameworks relating to the protection of children primarily addressed traditional forms of harm, including physical abuse, neglect, exploitation, armed conflict, and domestic violence. However, contemporary childhood has undergone substantial transformation as a result of the rapid expansion of digital technologies and online communication platforms. Children now spend a considerable portion of their daily lives within digital environments, using social media platforms, online educational tools, gaming applications, and virtual communication networks for purposes of education, entertainment, interaction, and self-expression (Edmarveson, 1989). Consequently, the digital sphere has emerged as a central environment in which children establish social relationships, develop their identities, and participate in contemporary society.

Notwithstanding these technological developments, legal frameworks governing child protection have failed to evolve at a pace consistent with the expansion of digital environments. As a result, harms experienced by children in online spaces are frequently underestimated or treated as less serious than forms of physical violence, despite the fact that their psychological and emotional consequences may be equally severe and enduring (Pelegrin, 2022). Recent international reports have emphasized the increasing exposure of children to a wide range of online risks, including cyberbullying, exposure to harmful digital content, unlawful use of personal data, online exploitation, and intrusive digital surveillance practices (Liyanage & Thakur, 2026, pp. 553-559).

These forms of digital harm may adversely affect children's mental health and personal development by generating fear, anxiety, social isolation, insecurity, and diminished self-esteem, while often remaining normalized within everyday digital interactions. The increasing severity and prevalence of digital risks affecting children have prompted greater international recognition of the necessity to extend the protection of children's rights into digital environments. In this context, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, in General Comment No. 25 (2021), affirmed that the rights guaranteed under the Convention on the Rights of the Child apply fully within digital spaces and that States bear a legal obligation to ensure the protection of children online to the same extent as in offline environments.

This development reflects the emergence of a significant legal and human rights challenge, namely, the need to redefine the concept of violence against children so as to encompass not only physical and material harm but also psychological and digital harm arising from online interactions and technological practices (Afrooz, J(2026)14).

The significance of this study derives from its examination of digital violence against children through a legal and human rights perspective, with particular emphasis on assessing the adequacy of existing legal frameworks in addressing emerging forms of online harm. Although substantial legal and academic attention has been devoted to

traditional child protection mechanisms and the broader development of digital technologies, an important legal gap remains regarding the extent to which current laws are capable of protecting children from non-physical forms of violence occurring within digital environments. This study contributes to contemporary legal scholarship by arguing that child protection frameworks should expressly recognize digital violence as a legally cognizable form of harm that adversely affects children's dignity, psychological integrity, and fundamental rights.

Accordingly, this article addresses the following principal research question: To what extent are existing legal and international human rights frameworks capable of providing effective protection for children against digital violence and online harm?

In order to address this question, the study is structured into two principal sections. The first section examines the conceptual and theoretical framework governing children's rights within digital environments, including the definition of digital violence and its various manifestations. The second section analyzes the legal challenges associated with the online protection of children, with particular focus on the adequacy of international and domestic legal mechanisms, as well as the necessity of developing stronger legal and regulatory safeguards capable of responding to contemporary digital realities.

Section one:

Digital Violence Against Children: The Transformation of Childhood

1. Defining Digital Violence Against Children

Traditionally, violence against children has been conceptualized primarily in terms of physical abuse, neglect, and direct forms of exploitation. Accordingly, legal and policy frameworks were initially designed to protect children within physical environments, such as the family unit, educational institutions, workplaces, and contexts of armed conflict. However, this conventional understanding has become increasingly inadequate in the digital age (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021, pp. 3-20). Contemporary childhood is increasingly mediated through digital environments, including social media platforms, online gaming spaces, educational technologies, and communication applications. These environments can no longer be regarded as peripheral or detached from lived reality; rather, they constitute central domains in which children socialize, develop identities, and undergo emotional and psychological development.

Consequently, harm occurring within digital spaces may have significant implications for children's overall well-being and development. Digital violence against children may therefore be defined as any harmful act, conduct, or practice facilitated through digital technologies or online environments that adversely affects a child's physical, psychological, emotional, or social well-being. In contrast to

traditional forms of violence, digital violence does not necessarily involve physical contact. Instead, it is often mediated through screens, platforms, algorithms, and virtual interactions, which may render it less visible while not diminishing its potential severity. Forms of digital violence include cyberbullying, online harassment, digital humiliation, exposure to violent or sexual content, identity theft, unauthorized use of personal data, online exploitation, and intrusive forms of digital surveillance.

Although international law has not yet established a unified legal definition of digital violence against children, Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges States Parties to protect children from "all forms of physical or mental violence." This broad formulation enables child protection frameworks to extend to technology-facilitated forms of harm (Committee of ministers of the council of Europe, 2018, pp. 3-20).

The Committee on the Rights of the Child further elaborated on this issue in General Comment No. 25 (2021), emphasizing that violence occurring in digital environments may result in serious psychological and emotional harm and therefore requires effective legal and policy responses. What particularly distinguishes digital violence is its persistence, scalability, and reach. Harmful content may remain accessible indefinitely and can be disseminated rapidly to wide audiences. A single incident of cyberbullying, for instance, may continue to affect a child's psychological well-being and social relationships long after its initial occurrence.

Unlike many forms of offline violence, digital harm may also follow children continuously across devices and platforms, thereby reducing their ability to escape or disengage from its effects (Kidron & Rudkin, 2026, pp. 2-28).

2. Psychological Harm and the Erosion of Childhood Well-Being

One of the most significant consequences of digital violence against children relates to psychological and emotional harm. Empirical studies indicate that children exposed to cyberbullying, online humiliation, social comparison, or persistent digital pressure may experience anxiety, depression, emotional distress, and diminished self-esteem. Such experiences can adversely affect children's capacity to learn effectively, develop healthy interpersonal relationships, and construct a stable sense of self-confidence. Childhood constitutes a critical developmental period for emotional and psychological growth. When digital environments become sources of fear, humiliation, or insecurity, children's sense of safety and psychological stability may be substantially undermined. Psychological violence is often more difficult to detect than physical violence because its effects are not always immediately observable, despite its potential to produce long-term harm (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021, pp. 3-20).

International child rights law recognizes mental and emotional well-being as integral components of child development. Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms every child's right to a standard of living adequate for their "physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development." Accordingly, digital

violence constitutes a direct threat to children's internationally protected right to holistic development. The issue, however, extends beyond isolated incidents of cyberbullying or online abuse. Many digital platforms are structurally designed to encourage prolonged engagement, continuous social comparison, emotional dependency, and algorithmically driven content exposure. Such design features may exacerbate feelings of exclusion, insecurity, and emotional vulnerability among children and adolescents.

The psychological effects of digital violence have become increasingly evident in various cases involving children affected by online radicalization, cyber harassment, and exposure to violent or harmful content. For instance, media reports on incidents of school violence perpetrated by minors have underscored the potential influence of digital environments on children's psychological well-being and behavioral development. These cases suggest that digital harm may extend beyond individual victims, potentially affecting broader dimensions of social stability and public safety (Pratma, W., Amri, S., & Hakimi, A. R., 2025, pp. 177-222).

3. The Normalization of Digital Harm

A significant dimension of digital violence lies in its increasing normalization within contemporary society. Harmful online practices are frequently framed as unavoidable or inherent features of internet use. Expressions such as "this is simply how the internet works" contribute to the trivialization and normalization of online violence against children, thereby obscuring its severity and impact. This normalization generates substantial legal and social challenges. When harmful digital practices are not recognized as forms of violence, legal systems are less likely to regulate or sanction them effectively. In addition, responsibility is often displaced onto children and families, rather than being attributed to digital platforms and other institutional actors that shape online environments (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021, pp. 3-20).

Although digital platforms frequently position themselves as neutral intermediaries, they play an increasingly active role in structuring users' online experiences. Through algorithmic curation, targeted content delivery, data-driven profiling, and engagement-oriented design architectures, platforms significantly influence patterns of use and exposure. These mechanisms may amplify children's exposure to harmful content and intensify psychological pressure. The Council of Europe has emphasized that children's rights may be undermined by the normalization of harmful online practices and by the absence of adequate protective safeguards within digital environments (Council of Europe, 2018). From a legal perspective, the recognition of digital harm as a form of violence is therefore essential not only symbolically but also operationally, as the effectiveness of legal protection depends on the formal acknowledgment and classification of harm (Jane, 2026, pp. 1-16).

Section Two:

Legal Challenges and the Need for a Child-Centered Digital Framework

1. Legal Gaps in International Child Rights Law

International child rights law provides essential normative foundations for the protection of children from violence, abuse, and exploitation. The Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes a comprehensive legal framework recognizing children as rights-holders and imposing binding obligations on States Parties to ensure their protection, survival, and development. However, significant legal gaps persist with respect to the protection of children in digital environments. Most core international legal instruments were developed prior to the widespread integration of digital technologies into children's everyday lives.

Consequently, many existing provisions remain broadly formulated and are not sufficiently adapted to address the structural characteristics of contemporary digital ecosystems, including platform governance, algorithmic systems, data-driven architectures, and transnational online interactions (Committee of ministers of the council of Europe, 2018, pp. 2-17).

A key limitation lies in the absence of a precise and universally accepted legal definition of digital violence against children. While international law prohibits violence in all its forms, it does not explicitly delineate or regulate technologically mediated forms of harm such as algorithmic manipulation, intrusive profiling, digital surveillance, or online psychological exploitation. This normative ambiguity undermines effective enforcement and contributes to fragmented protection across jurisdictions.

In practice, digital harm is often addressed primarily through the lens of online conduct regulation or parental responsibility, rather than being systematically recognized as a human rights concern requiring direct legal intervention. The inherently transnational nature of digital environments further exacerbates the lack of clear and harmonized legal standards. Online platforms operate across multiple jurisdictions, whereas legal frameworks remain predominantly territorially bound. This structural mismatch creates persistent challenges in relation to jurisdiction, accountability, and the effective enforcement of child protection standards (Sargeant, 2026, pp. 11-124).

2. State Responsibility and the Regulation of Digital Platforms

International human rights law has traditionally assigned primary responsibility for the protection of fundamental rights to States. In the digital era, however, private technology companies and online platforms exercise significant influence over children's everyday experiences, social interactions, and access to information. Despite the growing power of private digital actors, States remain legally obligated to protect children from harm caused by both public and non-state entities.

Under the principle of due diligence, States are required to prevent, investigate, and remedy human rights violations committed by private actors, including digital corporations. Accordingly, States bear a responsibility to adopt effective legislative and regulatory frameworks governing digital platforms and ensuring respect for children's rights within online environments. Nevertheless, many jurisdictions remain hesitant to impose stringent obligations on technology companies due to concerns relating to freedom of expression, economic competitiveness, and technological innovation (Abu Okeal et al., 2026, pp. 225-228).

Recently, several legislative initiatives have sought to strengthen the protection of children in digital environments. The European Union's Digital Services Act introduced regulatory obligations requiring online platforms to mitigate harmful content and enhance user protection, particularly with respect to minors. Similarly, the United Kingdom enacted the Online Safety Act to reinforce the regulation of harmful online content affecting children.

These developments reflect an emerging international consensus that digital platforms cannot remain exclusively subject to self-regulation. Voluntary corporate policies frequently prove inadequate, as they are primarily shaped by commercial interests rather than by child protection obligations or human rights standards. This issue is particularly significant within developing legal systems, where legislative frameworks addressing digital child protection often remain limited or underdeveloped. Strengthening domestic legal and regulatory mechanisms, including in Arab and African legal systems, constitutes an essential step toward enhancing the protection of children in digital environments (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021, pp.3-20).

1. Enforcement Challenges and Children's Access to Remedies

Even where legal standards addressing digital harm exist, enforcement remains one of the principal challenges in the protection of children from digital violence. Given the transnational operation of online platforms, national authorities frequently encounter difficulties in investigating violations, identifying responsible actors, and imposing effective sanctions across jurisdictions. Children also face substantial barriers in accessing justice and obtaining effective remedies. Legal procedures are often complex, financially burdensome, and insufficiently accessible to minors.

In many cases, children lack awareness of their legal rights or of the reporting and complaint mechanisms available to address online abuse and exploitation (Baghdasaryan & Vosloo, 2026, pp.4-81). Digital harm further presents significant evidentiary challenges. Online abuse may occur anonymously, harmful content may disseminate rapidly across multiple platforms, and digital evidence may be altered or removed before authorities are able to intervene effectively. These factors reduce the chances of adequately recognizing, investigating, and remedying instances of digital violence.

Traditional legal remedies also remain limited in their effectiveness, as they frequently prioritize criminal sanctions while insufficiently addressing the psychological and emotional harm experienced by children. Effective remedies within digital environments should therefore extend beyond punitive measures to include rapid content removal procedures, correction or deletion of personal data, accessible and child-sensitive complaint mechanisms, and the provision of psychological and social support services.

Accountability is further complicated by the structural imbalance of power between children and major technology companies. Digital corporations possess substantial financial, legal, and technological resources, whereas children and their families often rely on opaque internal reporting systems administered by the platforms themselves. The absence of independent oversight and monitoring mechanisms consequently undermines effective accountability and weakens the overall credibility of child rights protection within digital environments (Disrupting, 2026, pp.1-6).

2. Toward a Child-Centered Legal Framework

The challenges identified throughout this study demonstrate that existing international legal frameworks remain insufficient to ensure the effective protection of childhood within increasingly digitized and potentially harmful environments. Although contemporary human rights principles continue to provide an essential normative foundation, more specialized and robust legal mechanisms are required to address the distinctive risks associated with digital technologies. A child-centered legal framework requires placing children's lived experiences, developmental needs, and rights at the core of digital governance and regulatory policy. Children should not be regarded merely as passive users in need of protection but as autonomous rights holders whose dignity, safety, development, and best interests must guide the design and regulation of digital environments.

This approach is firmly grounded in the core principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly those concerning the best interests of the child, the right to development, and the right to participation. Recognizing digital environments as spaces in which children actively exercise their rights implies corresponding obligations for both States and digital corporations to ensure that online spaces are safe, accessible, and compatible with international child rights standards. Such obligations include safeguarding children's privacy, limiting exploitative data collection practices, ensuring age-appropriate digital design, and reducing harmful forms of algorithmic targeting and manipulation. Preventive regulation is especially important within digital contexts.

The protection of children online cannot depend exclusively on reactive interventions after harm has already occurred. Instead, digital systems should incorporate protective safeguards at the design stage through approaches such as "safety by design" and "privacy by default," thereby embedding child protection principles directly into technological infrastructures. Several international and regional

regulatory developments increasingly reflect this preventive approach. European regulatory initiatives, for example, have progressively imposed obligations on online platforms to integrate child safety protections into the architecture and operation of digital services. These developments indicate an emerging recognition that technological systems must adapt to children's rights, rather than requiring children to adapt to potentially harmful digital environments.

Finally, stronger accountability mechanisms and child-sensitive remedies remain essential. States should establish independent oversight bodies, impose effective sanctions for non-compliance, and guarantee accessible complaint and reporting procedures tailored to children's needs and capacities. Digital corporations should likewise be subject to clear legal obligations requiring the integration of children's rights into their governance structures, risk assessments, and decision making processes. Only through such structural and regulatory reforms can digital environments evolve into spaces that genuinely respect, support, and protect the right to childhood (Djeffal, 2022).

Conclusion:

This article has examined the growing disconnection between existing international child rights frameworks and the realities of childhood within increasingly digitalized societies. Although international human rights law — particularly the Convention on the Rights of the Child — continues to provide an essential normative foundation for the protection of children, the study has demonstrated that current legal frameworks remain insufficiently equipped to address the complex forms of harm emerging within contemporary digital environments.

The analysis has shown that digital violence against children constitutes a serious and multidimensional form of harm capable of profoundly affecting children's dignity, psychological integrity, emotional well-being, social relationships, and developmental processes. Unlike traditional forms of violence, digital harm frequently operates through technologically mediated mechanisms that are continuous, transnational, and difficult to detect. Cyberbullying, online harassment, algorithmic manipulation, digital surveillance, exposure to harmful or violent content, exploitative data collection practices, and the misuse of personal information may generate long-term psychological and emotional consequences comparable to, and in some instances more severe than, those associated with offline forms of violence.

The study has further highlighted several structural deficiencies within contemporary legal systems that limit the effectiveness of child protection in digital environments. Among the most significant shortcomings are the absence of a universally recognized legal definition of digital violence against children, the fragmented and inconsistent regulation of digital platforms, weak enforcement mechanisms across jurisdictions, and the limited accessibility of effective and child sensitive remedies.

The transnational nature of digital technologies additionally complicates issues of jurisdiction, accountability, and legal responsibility, particularly where multinational technology corporations operate beyond the effective reach of domestic regulatory systems. Moreover, the article demonstrates that contemporary online culture has increasingly normalized many forms of digital harm. Harmful practices are frequently trivialized as unavoidable aspects of internet use, thereby minimizing their seriousness and weakening public and institutional responses.

This normalization contributes to a regulatory environment in which responsibility is often displaced onto children and families, while insufficient attention is directed toward the structural role played by digital platforms, algorithmic systems, and profit-driven technological models in facilitating harmful online experiences.

In this context, traditional approaches to child protection are no longer adequate.

Legal systems developed primarily to address physical violence and geographically limited forms of harm cannot fully respond to the realities of digitally mediated childhood. The protection of children in the digital age therefore requires a reconceptualization of child rights law capable of recognizing digital environments as central spaces in which children live, develop, interact socially, and exercise their fundamental rights.

Accordingly, this study concludes that the effective protection of the right to childhood requires the development of a comprehensive child-centered digital legal framework grounded in international human rights principles while specifically adapted to the realities of technological societies. Such a framework should place children's best interests, dignity, developmental needs, and psychological wellbeing at the center of digital governance and regulatory policy.

To achieve this objective, several legal and institutional reforms appear necessary.

First, international legal instruments and human rights bodies should adopt clearer and more precise definitions of digital violence against children. The absence of conceptual clarity currently undermines legal certainty, weakens enforcement, and contributes to inconsistent protection across jurisdictions. A more comprehensive legal definition should encompass technologically facilitated forms of psychological, emotional, informational, and data-related harm.

Second, States should strengthen domestic legislation regulating digital platforms and online services affecting minors. National legal systems should impose binding obligations on technology companies concerning child safety, harmful content moderation, algorithmic transparency, age-appropriate digital design, and limitations on exploitative data collection practices targeting children.

Third, digital corporations should be legally required to integrate child rights standards into platform governance, risk assessment procedures, and technological design processes. Child protection should not remain dependent on voluntary corporate

policies or self-regulation. Instead, legal obligations should require companies to adopt preventive approaches such as safety by design, privacy by default, and child impact assessments for digital products and services.

Fourth, States should establish accessible, child-sensitive, and effective remedies capable of responding rapidly to digital harm. Such remedies should include simplified reporting procedures, independent oversight mechanisms, rapid removal of harmful content, data correction and deletion rights, and the provision of psychological and social support services for affected children.

Fifth, stronger international cooperation remains essential in addressing the transnational nature of digital harm. Since digital platforms operate across borders, isolated domestic responses are insufficient. Greater cooperation among States, international organizations, regulatory authorities, and civil society actors is necessary to harmonize standards, improve enforcement mechanisms, and strengthen cross border accountability.

Sixth, legal and policy responses should prioritize preventive rather than exclusively reactive approaches. Protecting children in digital environments cannot depend solely upon interventions after harm has occurred. Instead, regulatory frameworks should require the incorporation of preventive safeguards directly into digital infrastructures, algorithms, and platform architectures.

Finally, greater recognition must be given to children's participation rights within digital governance processes. Children should not merely be viewed as passive recipients of protection but as rights-holders whose experiences and perspectives should inform the development of digital policies affecting their lives. Ultimately, safeguarding children's rights in the digital age requires acknowledging that digital environments are no longer separate from children's social realities. Childhood itself has been transformed by technological developments that increasingly shape communication, identity formation, education, and emotional development. Consequently, the protection of childhood today necessarily includes the effective legal protection of children in digital spaces. Without stronger legal frameworks, meaningful accountability, and child-centered regulatory approaches, digital environments risk becoming spaces in which children's rights are progressively weakened rather than protected (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021, pp. 3-20).

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