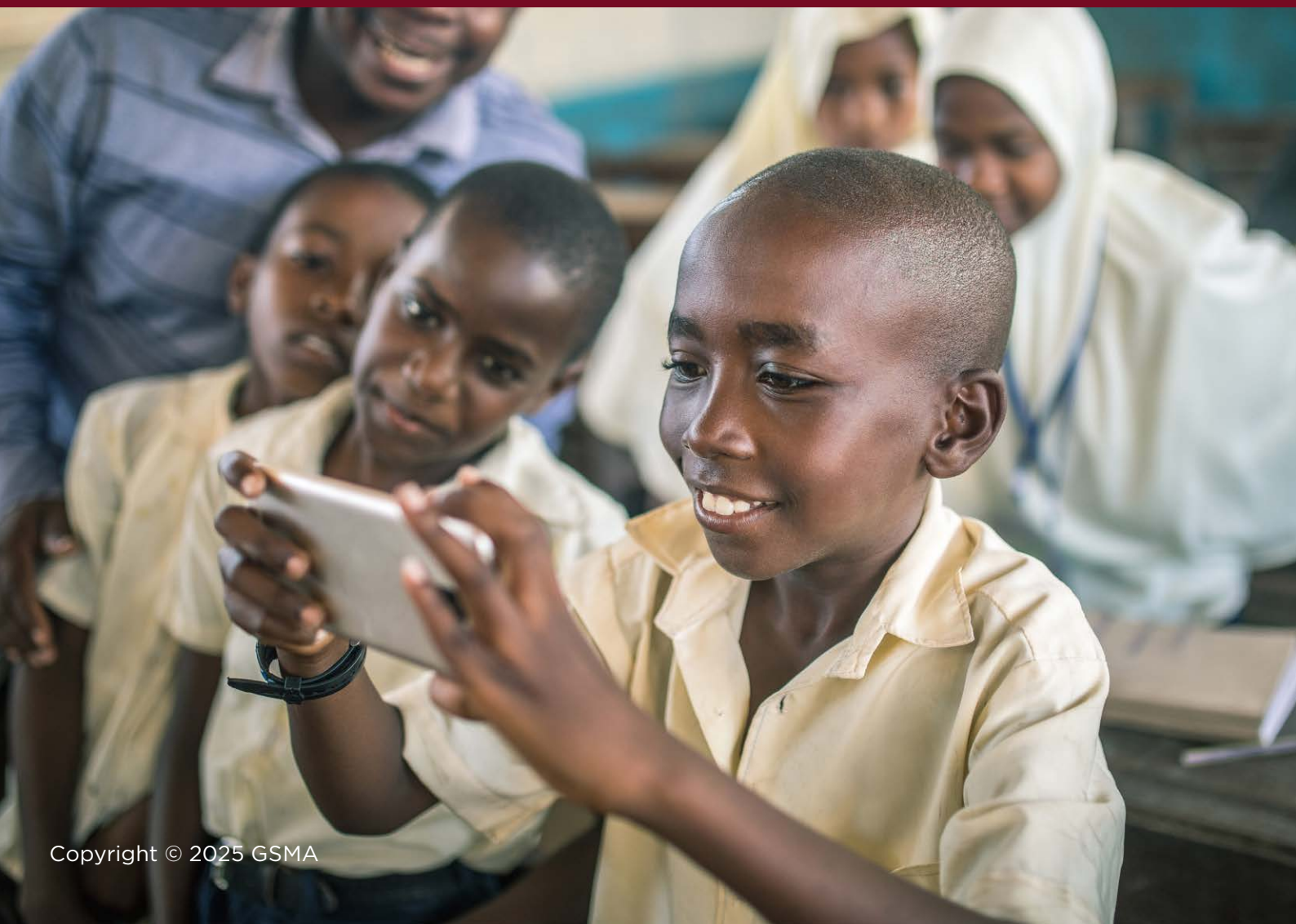
GSMA

Enhancing Child Online Protection in Sub-Saharan Africa

Whitepaper

June 2025



Copyright © 2025 GSMA

GSMA

The GSMA is a global organisation unifying the mobile ecosystem to discover, develop and deliver innovation foundational to positive business environments and societal change. Our vision is to unlock the full power of connectivity so that people, industry and society thrive. Representing mobile operators and organisations across the mobile ecosystem and adjacent industries, the GSMA delivers for its members across three broad pillars: Connectivity for Good, Industry Services and Solutions and Outreach. This activity includes advancing policy, tackling today's biggest societal challenges, underpinning the technology and interoperability that make mobile work and providing the world's largest platform to convene the mobile ecosystem at the MWC and M360 series of events.

We invite you to find out more at **www.gsma.com**

Follow the GSMA on Twitter/X: @GSMA

This is a Whitepaper of the GSMA

Security Classification: Non-confidential

Access to and distribution of this document is restricted to the persons permitted by the security classification. This document is confidential to the Association and is subject to copyright protection. This document is to be used only for the purposes for which it has been supplied and information contained in it must not be disclosed or in any other way made available, in whole or in part, to persons other than those permitted under the security classification without the prior written approval of the Association.

Copyright Notice
Copyright © 2025 GSM Association

Disclaimer
The GSM Association ("Association") makes no representation, warranty or undertaking (express or implied) with respect to and does not accept any responsibility for, and hereby disclaims liability for the accuracy or completeness or timeliness of the information contained in this document. The information contained in this document may be subject to change without prior notice.

Antitrust Notice
The information contain herein is in full compliance with the GSM Association's antitrust compliance policy.

Contents

About this whitepaper 3

Introduction and background 4

Current Status of Child Online Protection in Sub-Saharan Africa 6

Key Insights from the Roundtable Discussion 8
Data collection and research 9
Legislative, policy and technical frameworks and solutions 9
Empowering children through education and awareness 10
Multi-stakeholder collaboration 10

Moving the needle: Considerations for better protecting the children of Sub-Saharan Africa in the digital environment 11
Take a child and youth-centric approach to addressing online safety issues 12
Critical role of government and regulatory frameworks 12
Invest in digital literacy education and online safety 13
Enhance public-private partnerships 13

Conclusion 14

Appendix 16
Address given by Jemima Kasongo, 19 - U-Reporter, DRC 16

About this whitepaper

This whitepaper captures key insights from a multistakeholder roundtable on Child Online Protection (COP) in Sub-Saharan Africa, held during the Ministerial Programme at MWC 2025. It explores the current state of COP in the region and presents strategic considerations to strengthen digital safety for children. By highlighting key discussions and actionable considerations, this paper aims to guide efforts toward a safer online environment for children across Sub-Saharan Africa.

GSMA™

Introduction and background

The digital landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is evolving rapidly, bringing unparalleled opportunities for economic growth, education, and social development. The wider African continent is poised to become home to 1 billion children by 2055[1] and GSMA estimates that already around 18% of children aged 5-7 in SSA access the mobile internet[2] with more coming online every day. The region is making significant strides toward universal internet connectivity, making it increasingly well-positioned for children and young people to harness the full range of associated opportunities.

Mobile technology can be used to improve children's lives and enhance their fundamental rights as identified in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child[3] and in the GSMA UNICEF report 'Enhancing Children's Lives through Mobile'[4]. However, the digital environment also presents the opportunity for children to be exposed to a growing number of potential harms.

IPSOS research, commissioned by MTN Group in 2024, offers useful insights into the specific online behaviours and vulnerabilities of children in Sub-Saharan Africa[5]. It confirms that while digital connectivity offers clear opportunities relating to education and social interaction, it can also expose children to risks including cyberbullying, harmful content, and online exploitation.

Recognising that the task of ensuring a safer digital environment for children and young people in SSA requires collaboration among governments, private sector stakeholders, and civil society organisations, GSMA and MTN Group convened a Ministerial Roundtable on Child Online Protection in Sub-Saharan Africa at Ministerial Programme, MWC 2025, to:

Highlight the importance of Child Online Protection as an integral part of a country's digital transformation strategy.

Encourage dialogue and collaboration between governments, private sector (including telecom and technology companies), and civil society organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa, to enable robust and harmonised responses across the region.

Explore mechanisms and methods to advance the region-wide agenda on Child Online Protection.

1 https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Children-in-Africa.pdf

2 https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/The-State-of-Mobile-Internet-Connectivity-Report-2024.pdf?utm_source=website&utm_medium=button&utm_campaign=somic24

3 https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/unicef-convention-rights-child-uncrc.pdf

4 https://www.gsma.com/mpoweryouth/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/GSMA_UNICEF_Enhancing-Childrens-Lives-Through-Mobile_-May-2019_LOW-RES.pdf

5 https://www.mtn.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/MTN_Child-Safety_Consolidated-Executive-Summary-final-drft-01-ex-MD.pdf

GSMA™

Current Status of Child Online Protection in Sub-Saharan Africa

In 2024, IPSOS undertook research with parents and children in Zambia, South Sudan and Nigeria to address the scarcity of research into children's digital lives in SSA, and related safety considerations. Headline findings included the following:

- In Nigeria, over 50% of children surveyed reported experiencing bullying or harassment online, with many refraining from seeking help due to fear of judgment or punishment; Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Gmail, Chat sites, and TikTok were significantly associated with online harassment amongst those surveyed[6].
- In South Sudan, unrestricted access to inappropriate content without adequate parental guidance was linked to heightened stress and behavioural issues among children; Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram were significantly associated with online harassment amongst those surveyed[7].
- In Zambia, parents and educators highlighted the urgent need for support in navigating online safety measures; Facebook and WhatsApp were significantly associated with online harassment and bullying amongst the children surveyed[8].

Regarding, online child sexual abuse and exploitation specifically, a regional Disrupting Harm research (INTERPOL, UNICEF Innocenti and ECPAT) report published in 2023, found that across six Sub-Saharan African countries, 1 in 10 internet-using children had experienced some form of digital sexual abuse in the past year alone[9].

Whilst these findings indicate that children in Sub-Saharan Africa are currently facing a significant level of risk in the digital environment, there is growing momentum in the region to tackle this issue. For example:

- In 2023, the African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child dedicated the annual 'Day of the African Child' to the theme of 'the Rights of the Child in the Digital Environment'. This called on stakeholders to help to uphold children's rights by closing the digital divide and protecting children online;
- In 2024, the African Union adopted a Child Online Safety and Empowerment Strategy which outlines key principles, goals, and strategies for creating a safer digital environment for children in Africa;
- The African Union Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection (Malabo Convention) included clear wording on offences relating to child sexual abuse material.

This increasing momentum is also reflected in the growing number of initiatives undertaken by mobile network operators in the region. Examples of industry-led initiatives include:

- MTN Group's "Help Children be Children" initiative, focusing on promoting online child safety via child champions, preventing online child abuse and exploitation, and empowering children with the tools to navigate the digital world safely.
- Safaricom, UNICEF and the Directorate of Children Services launched the Spot it, Stop it – a campaign to promote awareness about all forms of violence against children and to advocate for change.
- Airtel Africa and UNICEF have a partnership to improve digital learning access for children in Africa, including initiatives to promote online safety and education.
- Orange's "For Good Connections" initiative provides tools and services to protect young users from online risks such as screen addiction and cyberbullying. In Mali, in collaboration the Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) Internet Society, Orange trained 20,000 children in basic online safety practices and screen time management, with plans to extend this iniative.

There is a clear opportunity to build on this growing momentum, working with urgency to field a robust and regionally harmonised response. Importantly it should be informed by the shared knowledge and experience of a full range of stakeholders, including young people themselves.

6 https://www.mtn.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Nigeria-Lagos-Let-Children-be-Children_M.H_Final-ex-MD-09-Dec.pdf
7 https://www.mtn.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/South-Sudan-Let-Children-Be-Children_M.H_Final-ex-MD-09-Dec.pdf
8 https://www.mtn.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Zambia-Let-Children-Be-Children_M.H_Final-ex-MD-9-Dec.pdf
9 https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/3841/file/Online-Risks-Harm-Children-ESA-2023.pdf

GSMA™

Key Insights from the Roundtable Discussion

Given the increase in children's digital activities and rising online threats, addressing issues and enhancing efforts relating to Child Online Protection in Sub-Saharan Africa is crucial. Recognising this, the roundtable convened a range of key stakeholders. The roundtable opened with a call to action from Jemima Kasongo (age 19), a youth advocate and U-Reporter from the Democratic Republic of Congo (see Appendix for full transcript). The following themes were the highlights of the subsequent roundtable discussion.

Data collection and research

One clear theme that emerged during the roundtable discussions was the limited availability of regional data and research to inform efforts to address online harms. There is insufficient research on regional policies, the specific harms SSA children face online, and the level of financing required to implement effective solutions. Accelerating research across the African continent is essential to deepen insights at both regional and national levels, and to track how these dynamics evolve in tandem with technological advancement. Without this data, participants reflected that it becomes difficult to design targeted interventions, allocate resources efficiently, or measure progress.

Legislative, policy and technical frameworks and solutions

The significance of the African Union's Child Online Safety and Empowerment Strategy and its implementation was highlighted. This strategy underscores the importance of establishing criminal justice and legal frameworks, as well as creating local regulations and codes of practice to mitigate the risks that emerging digital technologies pose to children.

Additionally, the role technology can play in enhancing online safety should also be explored and integrated within legal and policy frameworks. Delegates noted the potential of artificial intelligence to enhance online safety and stressed the importance of local content in native languages to make safety tools more accessible. However, they also noted that to strengthen these kinds of technical solutions, it is important to also evolve legal frameworks to cater for emerging technologies and encourage cross-sector collaboration.

Empowering children through education and awareness

A recurring discussion point was the lack of scalable online safety education and awareness initiatives within the region. IPSOS research showed that adolescence and daily internet use were drivers of risky online behaviour. Many parents are unaware of the dangers and educators often lack the training to help children navigate these issues safely. It was acknowledged that evolving digital threats combined with the lack of educational programmes increase children's vulnerability to digital risks. There was strong agreement that embedding child online protection into school curricula - exemplified by initiatives like Google's programme in South Africa[10] – is critical to fostering digital literacy among children and should be scaled across more countries in Africa. Additionally, wider public awareness campaigns could support parents' digital literacy skills while also fostering a culture of openness between parents and their children.

Multi-stakeholder collaboration

Participants acknowledged that promoting children's online safety requires a multi-stakeholder approach. Effective collaboration should actively involve policymakers, mobile network operators, regulators, and civil society organisations, each playing a distinct role in strengthening protections. For example, telecoms providers working with Child Helplines can enhance young people's access to real-time support services. Moreover, it was highlighted that industry leaders could wield their influence to drive the expansion of child protection portals, helplines and tools. This could help elevate the issue's prominence at the regional level and position it as a priority on policy agendas. Also, it was observed that the current shortfall in funding for child online safety initiatives could be addressed through cross-sector collaboration, such as the education initiative undertaken by Google and the South African Government.[11]

10 DBE and Google enter into partnership to fight cybercrimes targeted at school-going children

11 https://www.westerncape.gov.za/education/article/online-safety-curriculum-learners-and-parents

GSMA

Moving the needle: Considerations for better protecting the children of Sub-Saharan Africa in the digital environment

Based on the discussions held during the roundtable, the IPSOS research and the call to action presented by our youth speaker, the GSMA has developed the following important next steps for the SSA region:

Take a child and youth-centric approach to addressing online safety issues

Governments should include children in policy development as it is important for creating safer digital environments.

- Listening to young people's lived experiences, as well as their proposals for remedying issues, will ensure that policies and solutions are child-centric, relevant and more likely to succeed.
- Organisations like UNICEF can support with the inclusion of young people's perspectives into policy and framework development.

Critical role of government and regulatory frameworks

Governments should move faster to adapt their frameworks and guidance to incorporate the African Union Child Online Safety and Empowerment Strategy for Child Online Protection – whilst also ensuring these frameworks are responsive to emerging technologies such as AI – including:

- Consideration of the specific needs of children, taking a child rights-based approach, within wider digital regulations addressing emerging technologies.
- Legal frameworks which hold perpetrators involved in online child abuse and exploitation accountable;
- Frameworks or guidance that are adapted to local contexts, considering cultural, social, languages and economic factors.

Invest in digital literacy education and online safety

More investment should be made in digital literacy and online safety education as a critical element for the protection of children in the digital ecosystem. Including, for example:

- Coordinated strategies involving all main players in the internet ecosystem, which will enable better coverage and access to child protection resources. This can include child helplines and educational materials;
- Integrating AI-driven safety tools into platforms to detect harmful content, harassment, and cyberbullying in real time;
- Prioritisation of content in localised African languages to maximise impact and ensure accessibility across diverse communities.

Enhance public-private partnerships

All stakeholders, including governments, industry, and international organisations, should be encouraged to establish collaborative partnerships to execute child online protection initiatives. Importantly,

- A truly collaborative approach would involve stakeholders from government agencies, industry, NGOs, schools, and young people themselves, in the development and execution of these frameworks;
- Strong partnerships between mobile network operators, technology companies and legislators are crucial for enhancing platform safety for minors, and public-private partnerships can bolster private-sector capabilities, particularly when supporting law-enforcement efforts;
- By working closely with industry stakeholders, governments can drive the adoption of child protection measures, including improved content moderation, appropriate age assurance mechanisms, and real-time reporting tools;
- Co-funding models between the public and private sector can enhance much needed research in Sub-Saharan Africa as well as access to vital portals, helplines and digital tools to ensure that children stay safe online.

GSMA™

Conclusion

The responsibility for comprehensive child online protection measures is shared across all stakeholders. Governments can implement robust regulations, ensuring that digital platforms adhere to safety standards. Industry leaders can leverage their technological abilities to innovate and provide tools that offer security and education. NGOs can advocate for vulnerable groups, amplifying the voices of those who may otherwise go unheard. Schools can educate children about the complexities of the digital world, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to navigate safely.

Above all, young people themselves must be involved in this process. By empowering them to share their stories and insights, we can create measures that are truly reflective of their needs and experiences. Together, we can transform the digital landscape for the children and youth of Sub-Saharan Africa, so they are free to explore, learn, and grow in a safer digital environment. Let us build on this momentum to bring about meaningful change that will protect and empower future generations.

"The responsibility to act is ours - collectively and urgently. A safer digital future for the children of sub-Saharan Africa depends on the steps we take today."

Jemima Kasongo

Appendix

Address given by Jemima Kasongo, 19 - U-Reporter, DRC

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Jemima Kasongo. I am the Coordinator of the U-Report Community in Lubumbashi and an online fact-checker in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is a honor to speak today as a youth change-maker about a crucial issue: online safety for children in sub-Saharan Africa, drawing from my personal experience.

We live in an era where technology opens doors to incredible opportunities, yet it also exposes our children to serious risks. Having personally experienced online violence, I know firsthand the fear and harm it can cause. However, through initiatives such as the Web Fact Checkers program and U-Report, I have not only overcome these challenges but have also learned how to use social media in a more responsible and empowering way.

To create a safer digital environment for children, I urge us to take meaningful action through the following points:

- Strengthen collaboration between local organizations, governments, and tech companies to develop comprehensive online safety education programs.
- Launch awareness campaigns to educate both parents and children about digital risks and best practices for safe online behavior.
- Advocate for strong legal protections that shield children from online abuse while ensuring their privacy rights are upheld. At the same time, we must invest in initiatives that harness the power of youth, involving them actively in shaping solutions.
- Expand access to reliable digital infrastructure, ensuring that every child, including those in rural areas, benefits from safe and equitable online opportunities.

The responsibility to act is ours – collectively and urgently. A safer digital future for the children of sub-Saharan Africa depends on the steps we take today.

Thank you for your attention.

Jemima Kasongo
U-Reporter, Democratic Republic of the Congo

GSMA

1 Angel Lane, London, EC4R 3AB, UK
Tel: +44 (0)207 356 0600
Email: info@gsma.com