



Refugee Law Project

School of Law, Makerere University
A Centre for Justice and Forced Migrants



PRESS STATEMENT ON THE DAY OF THE AFRICAN CHILD

Access to the digital environment for children: Building safer and inclusive digital spaces for refugee children with special needs and disability.

Refugee Law Project (RLP) joins the rest of the world to commemorate the Day of the African Child (DAC) 2023 under the theme *'Protecting and Promoting Children's Rights in the Digital Era'*. The DAC was instituted in 1991 in honor of the 1976 student uprising in Soweto and serves as a platform for recognizing and addressing the challenges faced by children in Africa. It calls for reflection, commitment and action towards upholding the rights of children across the continent. As we commemorate this day, RLP celebrates all children especially those in the most vulnerable situations including but not limited to; children living with disabilities and other disabling conditions, refugee children, unaccompanied and separated minors for the effort they are making to enjoy and promote their rights and the rights of others as they exercise their child appropriate responsibilities.

The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC), selected this theme in recognition of the invaluable opportunities that the internet accords children in regards to enjoying and exercising their rights. These rights, however, tend to expose children to harm and online abuse including sexual exploitation online, cyber bullying, and exposure to age inappropriate information.

According to the Internet World Statistics (IWS), it is estimated that the penetration of internet in Africa is now at 43% and is projected to increase in the near future due to the continuous rise of social media platforms and online communication tools like Skype, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, Tik-Tok, and others. As of May 2022, it was estimated that a third of the 590 million internet users in Africa are children who use online communication tools to connect with friends, family, share content and engage in online communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the adaption of virtual education systems which were aimed at reaching learners during and sometime after lockdown. Many schools in Uganda including those hosting refugee children with special needs and disability started using different online platforms like Zoom, Teams, Google Meet, WebEx, among others, to continue making learning possible. While this was a much-needed innovation that saved the day for some children, many were left out including children from rural areas, children from poor families that could not afford internet connectivity or smartphones for internet connectivity and its additional gadgets, which hindered their right to accessing education like other children.

The rise of the digital environment in Uganda's education sector has caused some significant rift between access to learning for children with disabilities such as visual impairments and other invisible disabilities which became hindrances to furtherance educational opportunities and progress for these children. Difficulties that children with special needs face include high costs and technological skills required to access E-learning platforms and issues associated with the digital environment like cyberbullying. It is therefore important that as we pursue digitalised means of increasing children participation in different activities, relevant stakeholders innovate to include categories of children that are left out due to their vulnerabilities. In order that no child is left behind it is of utmost importance to put in place safeguards that protect all children especially those disadvantaged so that they benefit from online opportunities and learning.

The question of the safety of the children while online has largely remained an unresolved dilemma. And yet, without proper, intentional mechanisms, children are at risk of harm from online predators, exposure to age inappropriate content, violation of privacy and identity violations, information overload and excessive screen and online sexual exploitation. One of the silent potential harms that is never probably give enough attention is digital addiction. With different platforms available such as Skype, WhatsApp, twitter, Tik-Tok, Instagram among others, which bombard children with instant emotionally exciting materials all the time. Unless these are controlled, children may get hooked online, lose concentration on other meaningful and productive tasks. These, notwithstanding, the strenuous unfiltered information can cause emotional harm to children. This has a potential to affect children's mental and psychosocial wellbeing in the long run.

Refugee Law Project is making efforts towards safer and inclusive child friendly spaces including the digital spaces. Interventions RLP has put in place include creating child safeguarding mechanisms, educating and working with children, awareness raising and working with caretakers, working with schools, and different community structures to equip them with reliable digital information and media literacy skills to protect and regulate the kind of information and images children can access. RLP is collaboratively working with state and non-state actors to advocate for more inclusive programming particularly inclusive education. In commemoration of the day of the African Child, RLP will be joining the National commemorations taking place at Royal Suites, Bugolobi hosted by Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD). We shall also be holding a Live TV Talk show on NBS Morning breeze during which we will further discuss issues of child safeguarding in the digital era. On Tuesday 20th June 2023, children's debate will be held to raise awareness and amplify children's voices and issues.

Call to Action

We can no longer push back the wheel, Artificial Intelligence and digitisation are here to stay. Children will find themselves in these spaces at some point. While we support children to take advantage of digital opportunities, we should put in place measures that protect them against certain vices inimical to the wholesome growth of children. As such, RLP recommends the following:

1. State and non-state actors raise awareness about the opportunities and risks of digital spaces to children's rights and well-being.
2. State and non-state actors should be mindful and support the most vulnerable of children including children with disabilities and refugee children to be carefully included in enjoying the opportunities that come with digital spaces.
3. The government should put in place measures that regulate internet service providers to mitigate unfiltered information and promote parental guidance options to safe guard children on online spaces.
4. The government and development partners to increase investment in projects that promote safer digital spaces for children.

"AI in education has the power to level the playing field, providing equal access to quality education and customized learning experiences for all learners, regardless of their background or circumstances." - Arne Duncan, Former U.S. Secretary of Education"

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