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Together for Human Rights



CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN DIGITALISED SOCIETIES AND CONFLICT TIMES:

PERSPECTIVES FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE ARAB WORLD

A decorative graphic at the bottom of the page consisting of several stylized human silhouettes in various colors (orange, yellow, green, blue) holding hands, symbolizing unity and community.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In both Southeast Asia and the Arab world, children are increasingly living at the intersection of rapid digitalisation and protracted conflict. While digital technologies offer significant opportunities for education, participation, and expression, they also introduce unprecedented risks, particularly in contexts of armed conflicts.

This policy brief examines how two forces, **digitalisation and conflict**, are shaping, threatening, and redefining the rights of children across eight countries in two regions: **Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand** in **Southeast Asia**; and **Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Sudan** in the **Arab world**. The paper identifies key risks such as **online sexual exploitation, cyberbullying, misinformation, surveillance, digital exclusion, and recruitment into armed groups**. Weak legal protections, digital illiteracy, and socio-political instability exacerbate these issues. Despite commitments to international frameworks, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international, regional, and national mechanisms, these remain fragmented, under-enforced, and rarely adapted to the specific needs of children in digital and conflict-affected environments.

Drawing on field insights and youth perspectives, this policy brief proposes five strategic policy alternatives to promote child-centred and rights-based digital governance. These include **harmonising national laws with international standards, fostering regional cooperation through ASEAN and the League of Arab States, building inclusive and resilient digital ecosystems, creating national digital emergency platforms, and establishing safe digital learning centres in conflict zones**. The policy recommendations call for **stronger legal safeguards, digital literacy education, equitable access to infrastructure, participatory policymaking, and socio-economic investment to address root vulnerabilities**. Ultimately, the paper urges governments, regional bodies, civil society, and tech companies to adopt a transformative agenda that protects and empowers children, not only as digital users but also as rights-holders and agents of change in fragile and rapidly changing environments.

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INTRODUCTION

Across Southeast Asia and the Arab world, children are experiencing increasing digitalisation while simultaneously facing political instability, armed conflict, and socio-economic inequality. As digital technologies become increasingly embedded in daily life, children's rights are at a critical juncture, as digitalisation poses both opportunities and risks.

Particularly in the contexts of crisis and conflict, **digital technologies exacerbate existing vulnerabilities among children.** Issues such as the digital divide, safety, and literacy urgently need to be addressed and tackled to safeguard our future generations living in conflict. This policy brief explores the intersection of digitalisation and conflict through a human rights lens.

Case studies from two distinct regions: Southeast Asia and the Arab world are selected due to their digital growth and conflict dynamics. It highlights regionally specific challenges and opportunities by drawing upon evidence and rights-based frameworks to assess how these dual forces are shaping children's rights. Moreover, this policy brief seeks to inform policy responses that are contextually grounded and child-centred to support policymakers, educators, civil society organisations, tech platform providers, and regional institutions such as the **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)** and **actors entities in the Arab states** in redefining their existing frameworks for an equitable, inclusive, and just policy that better respects, protects, and fulfils children's rights in the regions.



In Southeast Asia, children are growing up with access to smartphones, social media platforms, online learning tools, and entertainment content from a young age. The region, comprising eleven countries: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam, has been recognised as one of the fastest-growing economies in the world (Asian Development Bank, 2025). While digitalisation offers vast potential opportunities for children's development and participation, they are increasingly exposed to significant risks (Rahamathulla, 2021). These include online grooming, cyberbullying, data exploitation, misinformation, and harmful content, particularly for children from low-income, rural, or marginalised communities who may lack adequate digital literacy and protection.

Although ASEAN acts as a regional intergovernmental entity, facilitating cross-national collaborations, the region's diverse political systems and the non-interference principle complicate the protection of children's rights in digital spaces. In addition, children in Southeast Asia are confronted by vast arrays of conflict, as witnessed through religious extremism in Indonesia, authoritarianism in Myanmar, as well as ethno-religious conflict in the Philippines and Thailand.





The Arab world, comprising **22 member states of the League of Arab States**, is experiencing widespread conflicts that have affected the entire region. However, the nature and intensity of these conflicts vary across countries, particularly within the Middle East. In the context of rapid digital transformation and an increasing reliance on digital spaces in all areas of life, including military, political, social, and economic spheres, there is a growing intersection between digital militarisation and fast-paced technological change. This convergence presents new threats to human rights, particularly about the protection of children. In countries such as Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Sudan, where conflict dynamics and digital realities differ markedly, children's rights are coming under increasing threat. In Palestine, children face a humanitarian catastrophe under military occupation and siege, while Sudan is undergoing complex political and security transitions. Syria and Lebanon are grappling with overlapping crises involving armed conflict, economic collapse, and social instability.

Digital tools offer children significant opportunities for **education** and **social interaction**, with smartphones and online platforms playing a central role in their learning and communication. However, in these four conflict-affected countries, these opportunities often become serious threats. **Children are exposed to online targeting, digital surveillance, recruitment into propaganda or armed groups, disinformation, psychological trauma from harmful content, and blackmail.** The lack of robust legal and security frameworks in these contexts renders children especially vulnerable to such digital risks.

With this urgency, children's rights in Southeast Asia and the Arab World require responsive policies that address the complexity of digitalisation and conflict within the localised socio-political approach. This policy brief, therefore, not only deconstructs issues and root causes but also proposes feasible frameworks by communicating recommendations from the collected voices and the perspectives of young individuals.

Current Issues of Digitalisation and Conflicts Affecting Children in Southeast Asia and the Arab World

This section outlines the current situations that children in Southeast Asia and the Arab World are facing as a result of digitalisation and conflicts. Four countries where children's rights are violated are selected from each region.

Southeast Asia

Indonesia

Indonesia has witnessed a sharp rise in internet access, with millions of children online daily for education, entertainment, and social connection. According to UNICEF Indonesia (2023), **89%** of children in Indonesia have access to the internet. However, this digital expansion has been paralleled by growing threats, most notably in the form of online sexual exploitation and abuse of children. The country has been identified as both a source and destination for live-streamed child sexual abuse content (ECPAT International et al., 2022). While Indonesia has enacted cybercrime and child protection laws, their implementation remains uneven and under-resourced, particularly in rural areas (UNICEF Indonesia, 2023). In conflict-affected provinces like West Papua, children face additional challenges—limited digital infrastructure, online surveillance, and exclusion from digital learning. Furthermore, growing online censorship linked to religious conservatism has limited access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education and gender-inclusive information (Human Rights Watch, 2022), affecting children's rights to identity, health, and participation.



Myanmar

Since the 2021 military coup, Myanmar has encountered political instability and widespread human rights abuses. Internet shutdowns, surveillance, and propaganda have become routine tools of repression (Access Now, 2022). These shutdowns have critically hindered children's access to remote learning and health information during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Ethnic minority children, especially the Rohingya, suffer from statelessness, internal displacement, and a lack of access to education and technology (Bhattacharjee, 2024). Moreover, the recruitment of children in armed conflict, either as conscripted soldiers from the Tatmadaw or ethnic armed groups, has been reported by the UN (UNICEF, 2018) as violating international humanitarian and human rights law. Some of them experience labour exploitation, namely forced labour, as a result of economic stagnation (Human Rights Myanmar, 2025). Moreover, children in Myanmar face criminalisation for expressing their political views against the junta as detention and torture of children continue along with their parents, who are arrested under the Counter Terrorism Law (Human Rights Myanmar, 2025). With these complex situations, children in Myanmar inevitably struggle from trauma while mental health support remains absent (UNICEF Myanmar, 2024).

Philippines

The Philippines has been recognised globally as an epicentre for online child sexual exploitation and abuse, with thousands of cases involving live-streamed abuse for foreign clients (International Justice Mission, 2020). Many of these crimes are committed by family members in exchange for financial compensation, exacerbated by poverty and easy access to digital platforms. Despite the passage of the Anti-Online Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Children and Anti-Child Sexual Abuse or Exploitation Materials in 2022, the Philippines still struggles with implementation due to limited resources, weak monitoring, and gaps in cooperation with global tech companies (Child Frontiers, 2023). The country is still infamous for supplying child pornography to the global pornographic dynamics. Likewise, child prostitution in the sex tourism industry in the Philippines remains a critical issue due to the rise of digitalisation and the COVID-19 pandemic (Celiksoy & Schwarz, 2023). In conflict-affected regions like Mindanao, displaced children are particularly vulnerable to trafficking, recruitment by armed groups, and exclusion from education. Digital disinformation campaigns have also targeted young voters during elections, compromising their rights to accurate information and democratic participation (Arugay, 2022).



Thailand

Thailand's high internet penetration rate has not guaranteed equal access or protection. Migrant, stateless, and hill tribe ethnic children face structural barriers to connectivity, language-accessible digital education, and legal identity, limiting their full access to development opportunities (UNESCO Bangkok, 2022). The government's **Computer Crime Act** and **lese majesté law** have raised serious concerns about freedom of expression and privacy, particularly as they have been used to prosecute youth protestors and silence dissent online during the youth uprising against dictatorship (Zhang, 2022). Children involved in the 2020–2021 youth-led democracy protests reported both digital and offline harassment, including surveillance and legal threats. Simultaneously, online risks such as cyberbullying and grooming are increasing, while child protection systems remain underfunded (Olsen, 2023). Additionally, concerns over digital abuses, such as cyberbullying or cyberstalking, lack a legal procedure for addressing such actions (Sripa & Ninphet, 2024). Moreover, the rights of children in the Deep South provinces: Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat are worsened by the decades-long conflict between the government and the insurgency groups. Violence not only costs their life or the lives of their family members, but it also creates psychological effects in the long run (Save the Children Thailand & Peace Resource Collaborative Foundation, 2025).

The Arab World

Palestine

The digital space in the Palestinian context serves as a tool that provides a voice and platforms for storytelling and connecting with global audiences despite the limited digital infrastructure caused by occupation and blockade. This helps children express their identity and resilience. However, it also presents serious risks. Children increasingly rely on digital platforms for learning, expression, and social communication, but in the military and security context, these platforms often become tools for surveillance, control, and spreading fear. In Gaza, the West Bank, and occupied Jerusalem, children face constant online surveillance. Content related to the Palestinian cause is often removed, and accounts are suspended (7amleh, 2024; IFEX.org).

According to a recent study, 87% of children and youth in Jerusalem avoid political expression online, and 58% feel they are being watched by Israeli authorities (Abu Maalla & 7amleh, 2024). Additionally, 58% reported verbal abuse, 42% experienced cyberbullying, 13% were subjected to online extortion, and 10% of girls said they had faced online sexual harassment (Jerusalem Story, 2025). The situation becomes more dangerous during times of military escalation, such as the recent attacks on Gaza (2023–2025), when many social media accounts were deleted due to political content or documentation of events. Content related to Palestine faces constant restrictions, and complete internet blackouts, like those currently happening in Gaza, completely cut children off from psychological or informational support. This isolation also exposes them to incitement and being led into situations that may cost them their lives.

Digital repression also goes beyond the virtual world. Reports indicate that Israeli soldiers search children's phones at checkpoints, delete apps like Telegram, and sometimes even force children to remove their clothes (Jerusalem Story, 2025). Although technology can offer children opportunities for expression, learning, and connecting with others, the digital reality under occupation is often used as a weapon for repression, fear, intimidation, and even death.

Lebanon

In Lebanon, although a large percentage of children have internet access (UNICEF Lebanon, 2025), the digital landscape has been significantly impacted by the recent war. This has made children more vulnerable and reduced their chances of education and digital protection. UNICEF reports show that the war that started recently in 2024 caused the **death of 166 children** and **injured** more than **1,168 others** from October 2023 until it ended. Displacement from their homes and using schools as shelters led to the closure of more than **72 schools**. This stopped about **20,000 children** from continuing their education and put around **1.3 million children** at risk of losing their education twice. With heavy reliance on digital learning as a response, its effectiveness dropped due to frequent power cuts, poor infrastructure, and weak internet networks, especially in the south and refugee camps. Children have also been exposed to threats from using online platforms. In 2018, Save the Children in Lebanon showed that children in the country faced the highest rates of **physical bullying (41%)**, while **6%** were victims of **cyberbullying**. Children's digital engagement in Lebanon shows mixed results. On the one hand, digital tools were a crucial means of learning, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. UNESCO and UNICEF campaigns helped improve digital literacy and provide psychological support to children. On the other hand, bullying and online harassment became very noticeable issues. One study showed that Syrian refugee children faced the highest rates of **verbal bullying (32%)**, while Lebanese and Syrian children experienced **bullying** at almost the same rates, about **21%** and **19%**. Children now face many different risks, from watching harmful images and videos to sharing their own pictures, which can spread around the world in seconds, making them victims of social media.

Syria

The ongoing conflict in Syria for more than a decade has caused significant damage and violations to the state's infrastructure, exposing various segments of society, especially children, to multiple risks, including the destruction of digital infrastructure, which has made internet use a burden and a threat to children's rights and lives. The country suffers from frequent power and internet outages, in addition to strict government censorship and restrictions on freedom of expression, limiting children's opportunities for safe digital learning and community participation. Although the digital space has enabled some displaced families to reconnect and access remote health and psychological services, these benefits have quickly faded in the face of increasing digital threats, particularly given the differing ideologies and environments among the conflict parties. According to the UN Secretary-General's report issued in June 2023, the **recruitment of 2,990 children** in Syria was verified between mid-2020 and the end of 2022, including girls and children under the age of ten by groups such as ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Platforms such as Telegram and YouTube are also used to spread armed propaganda and recruit minors, especially in the north of the country, where Human Rights Watch reported in 2023 that armed groups exploited these apps to recruit children into battles. In the absence of a comprehensive national law protecting children from digital crimes or ensuring their privacy, and with multiple controlling parties on the ground, the digital environment in Syria has become an unregulated arena exploited to indoctrinate and exploit children psychologically, socially, and even militarily.



Sudan

The military conflict in Sudan, which erupted in April 2023, has destroyed state institutions and eroded internet censorship. According to UNICEF, the number of grave violations against children has increased tenfold in two years, making children easy prey in the digital space. Although approximately **50% of children have access to the internet** (UNICEF Sudan, 2025), this access is often precarious. Comprehensive national legislation to protect children online is still lacking, and the country suffers from weak digital infrastructure and frequent internet outages, especially in conflict areas such as Darfur and South Kordofan. Armed groups exploit this unregulated digital environment to recruit children; videos circulated on platforms such as **Telegram** and **Facebook** have shown children being recruited by militias, according to reports from the African Centre for Justice (ACJPS, 2023). The digital space is also used to disseminate violent content and propaganda messages targeting children with promises of money or safety. Children have also been subjected to cyberbullying, with digital literacy weak among parents and teachers.

CURRENT POLICIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

This section outlines relevant global frameworks, regional standards in Southeast Asia and the Arab World, and key implementation gaps, with a focus on how these intersect with children's digital rights and conflict-affected contexts.

International Standards

Four primary international mechanisms form the foundational legal framework for safeguarding children's rights in digital environments and during armed conflict:

- **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989):** The UNCRC remains the most universally ratified human rights treaty. It outlines comprehensive protections for children across 54 articles, which extend to digital spaces and situations of armed conflict, where children are particularly vulnerable and require special protection. The Convention recognises children's rights to survival, protection, development, and participation, emphasising their best interests as a primary consideration in all actions concerning them. It establishes obligations for states to safeguard children from exploitation, abuse, neglect, and harmful practices. Notably, the UNCRC also highlights the importance of access to education, health care, and family life, recognising these as fundamental to a child's holistic development. Furthermore, its provisions emphasise the importance of children expressing their views freely in matters that affect them, thereby promoting their agency and participation in society.
- **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000):** This protocol prohibits the compulsory recruitment and direct participation of children under the age of 18 in armed conflicts. The protocol also mandates states to take all feasible measures to prevent the recruitment and use of children by armed groups distinct from the armed forces of the state. Additionally, it requires states to ensure that children who have been recruited or used in hostilities receive appropriate assistance for their physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration. Monitoring and reporting mechanisms are established under the protocol to enhance compliance, and states are required to submit periodic reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

- **General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in the digital environment (2021):** This document clarifies that children's rights must be fully respected, protected, and fulfilled in digital contexts. It addresses data protection, algorithmic bias, online violence, digital literacy, and equitable access to information. States are urged to adopt national strategies that embed child rights into digital governance frameworks and ensure children's meaningful participation in shaping such policies. The General Comment also highlights the responsibility of technology companies to design child-friendly and safe digital environments. It calls for robust mechanisms to combat online harms such as cyberbullying, exploitation, and misinformation while safeguarding children's privacy and freedom of expression. Notably, the document recognises the digital environment as a key factor in children's learning, creativity, and social connection. It further emphasises protections for children with intersectional identities.
- **The United Nations Security Council (UNSC)** has issued a series of resolutions under the "Children and Armed Conflict" agenda aimed at protecting children from grave violations in conflict zones. One of the most prominent is Resolution 1612 (2005), which established a Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) for six serious violations: recruitment and use of children, killing and maiming, sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, abduction, and denial of humanitarian access. While these resolutions are comprehensive, they do not explicitly address digital threats, such as online recruitment or cyber exploitation, which have become increasingly prevalent in modern conflicts. Nevertheless, it could include digital challenges, especially as children increasingly use online platforms in conflict settings. Security Council resolutions on children and armed conflict, such as Resolution 1612, are legally binding for UN member states, including the Philippines, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Lebanon, Syria, and Sudan. As a non-member observer state, Palestine is not formally bound by these resolutions but tends to implement them in practice. These resolutions are used to hold governments and armed groups accountable for grave violations against children, including recruitment, violence, or potential exploitation through digital means. However, digital-specific risks are still minimally addressed in the existing texts.

In Southeast Asia, all four countries—Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand—have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). They have also ratified the Optional Protocol (2000).

Meanwhile, in the Arab World, Palestine, Syria, and Sudan have ratified both the UNCRC and the Optional Protocol, demonstrating a commitment to upholding children's rights in line with international standards. However, Lebanon has only ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and has not yet ratified the Optional Protocol.

Southeast Asia

Selected Country	UNCRC (1989)	Optional Protocol (2000)
Indonesia	✓	✓
Myanmar	✓	✓
Philippines	✓	✓
Thailand	✓	✓

The Arab World

Selected Country	UNCRC (1989)	Optional Protocol (2000)
Palestine	✓	✓
Lebanon	✓	✗
Syria	✓	✓
Sudan	✓	✓

Despite these international frameworks being widely ratified, it is essential to analyse the regional and national frameworks that inform these countries. The following section outlines how children's rights in digitalisation and conflicts are addressed at the regional and national levels.

Regional Standards in Southeast Asia

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has made incremental progress in formulating child protection norms. While these instruments indicate growing recognition of digital and migration-related risks, they remain non-binding and are shaped by ASEAN's principle of non-interference.

- **ASEAN Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration (2019):** This declaration affirms that migrant children, including undocumented, stateless, and asylum-seeking minors, are entitled to protection, education, and access to essential services. However, the instrument does not specifically address digital vulnerabilities such as exclusion from online learning, digital identity verification, or cyber-exploitation that disproportionately affect displaced children in the region.
- **ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Protection of Children from All Forms of Online Exploitation and Abuse (2022):** This plan represents one of the most targeted regional efforts to address online child protection. It outlines concrete actions such as establishing national hotlines, enhancing digital literacy, promoting regional cooperation among law enforcement agencies, and engaging private technology companies. However, progress is uneven across the region.
- **ASEAN Guidelines for Harmonised and Comprehensive National Legislation Against All Forms of Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (2023):** This document strengthens child protection laws in the digital environment across ASEAN Member States. The guidelines cover the criminalisation of offences, child-sensitive justice systems, procedural standards such as ex officio prosecutions and victim compensation, and the regulation of private sector obligations, including data protection and retention.
- **ASEAN Digital Masterplan (2025).** Although it is not explicitly focused on children, the master plan envisions the region equipped with digital infrastructure and inclusivity. However, the lack of child-specific protection, data privacy protocols for minors, and education initiatives targeting young users means children's rights remain side-lined.

At the regional level, ASEAN's child protection frameworks are constrained by weak accountability mechanisms and a lack of enforcement tools. Countries such as Myanmar, which face serious human rights violations, often fall outside effective regional scrutiny. Despite the transnational nature of many online threats—such as trafficking and exploitation—cross-border cooperation remains limited, typically relying on non-binding action plans and occasional training. Critically, ASEAN has yet to fully integrate digital rights and safety into its broader child protection agenda despite post-pandemic childhoods becoming increasingly shaped by digital environments. Civic engagement in policy development is also minimal, with most governments failing to meaningfully include children or civil society actors in digital policymaking processes. The Philippines is a partial exception, demonstrating greater openness to consultation and participatory governance.

National Legal and Policy Frameworks in Southeast Asia

Country	Child Protection Legislation	Digital Protection Laws
Indonesia	Child Protection Law (No. 23/2002, amended 2014)	ITE Law (No. 11/2008, amended 2016); Law on Child Pornography (2008)
Myanmar	Child Rights Law (2019)	Telecommunications Law (2013); Electronic Transactions Law (2004)
Philippines	Special Protection of Children Act (1992); Juvenile Justice Act (2006)	Cybercrime Prevention Act (2012); Anti-Child Pornography Act (2009)
Thailand	Child Protection Act (2003)	Computer Crime Act (2007, amended 2017); Prevention of Online Child Sexual Exploitation Act (2023)

National-level challenges across Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines reveal significant gaps in digital child protection. Legal frameworks remain fragmented, with separate laws and ministries overseeing issues like cybercrime, education, and privacy, resulting in limited coordination and siloed enforcement. None of the countries' data protection laws—whether enacted or in draft form—explicitly address children's rights, with little regulation on consent, profiling, or biometric data, nor do they require child-sensitive platform design. In more authoritarian contexts, particularly Myanmar and, to some extent, Indonesia and Thailand, **digital laws are used to suppress dissent and monitor activists, undermining children's rights to expression and participation.** Regulatory frameworks also fall short in holding digital platforms accountable for protecting children from harmful content, misinformation, and exploitation, with safety-by-design still absent. Digital access and literacy are deeply unequal, especially for rural, Indigenous, refugee, and LGBTQ+ children, with the Philippines showing some progress through targeted programmes, though reach and quality vary. Moreover, none of the four countries are adequately prepared to protect children's digital safety during crises, whether due to conflict, political unrest, or natural disasters—with Myanmar representing a particularly acute case.

Child Protection Policies and Efforts amidst Digitalisation and Conflict (Southeast Asia)

Both state and non-state actors play a significant role towards digital protection in conflict areas in Southeast Asia. These efforts have been made at regional and national levels.

At the **regional level**, the **ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC)** has been committed to promoting responsive and inclusive policies and programmes that ensure the rights of women and children are protected (Han & Paguio, 2022). Moreover, children's voices have been heard through the ASEAN Children's Forum (ACF) as the biannual regional platform where children from ASEAN member states gather to discuss issues affecting their lives, offering a space for children to express their views, and presenting their recommendations to the high-level officials at the regional stage (Han & Paguio, 2022).

In **Indonesia**, Government Regulation No. 17 of 2025 on the Governance of Electronic System Implementation in Child Protection has recently been enacted, establishing an age limit and verification mechanism for children, and providing a reporting mechanism for the misuse of digital products and services that violate children's rights (5Rights Foundation, 2025). However, the steps towards digital protection of children in conflict areas, such as West Papua, have not progressed.

Digital protection efforts in the **Philippines'** conflict areas, such as Mindanao, are notably present in protecting children and young people. The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) in northern Mindanao collaborated with various stakeholders to provide immediate protection, rehabilitation, and long-term support to victims. At the same time, public awareness-raising campaigns were conducted (Rucat, 2025).

In **Thailand**, civil society organisations with government bodies, local schools and universities, and the media sector, developed training programmes, suitable for children and young people in the Deep South conflict areas, that equip critical thinking skills and enable creative ideas of cross-cultural understanding (BangkokBizNews, 2021). Still, children and young people in Thailand's Deep South continuously face difficulties accessing digital space due to poverty and the state's securitisation (National Statistical Office of Thailand, 2023).

Lastly, it is unfortunate that **Myanmar's** efforts in protecting children's rights are limited due to the authoritarian control over the civic space (Lwin, 2023). Specifically, ethnic children living in the armed conflict situation with the junta are not only exposed to digital safety but are also challenged by the inability to access digital space (Arkar, 2024).

Regional Standards in the Arab World

The League of Arab States has adopted several frameworks and initiatives to promote children's rights in general. However, regional cooperation on protecting children in the digital world remains fragmented and often lacks effective enforcement mechanisms. Regional tools, agreements, and initiatives in the Arab world remain limited when it comes to protecting children in the digital space within the context of conflict. Among the most prominent regional agreements and laws for protecting children in the digital world during armed conflict are:

- **Arab Charter on Human Rights (2004):** The Charter provides for the protection of children and their right to education and security but does not include specific provisions on digital rights or online safety for children. General human rights obligations theoretically apply to digital contexts, but practical guidelines remain absent, especially in conflict-affected countries such as Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Sudan.
- **Arab Plan of Action for Childhood (2004–2015, revised in 2018):** This plan outlines goals to protect children from violence and exploitation, including during times of conflict; however, it does not explicitly address online exploitation, digital recruitment, or children's digital privacy. No updated version reflects the post-pandemic reality or takes into account children's safety in virtual environments.
- **Arab Cybersecurity Strategy (elaborated by the Arab ICT Organisation – AICTO, 2024):** This strategy focuses on national cybersecurity frameworks but does not address child protection or the enhancement of digital skills. In conflict zones, this gap increases children's exposure to cyber threats, misinformation, and digital surveillance. Furthermore, there are no precise mechanisms to protect displaced or stateless children in the digital space. The importance of this strategy stems from the growing importance of cybersecurity in the current digital age, where cyber threats pose a serious threat to individuals, institutions, and countries. However, challenges such as scarce resources, the rapid evolution of threats, and a lack of skills persist, necessitating intensive efforts from all Arab countries to mitigate these risks.
- **Digital Cooperation through ESCWA and LAS (2022):** ESCWA and the League of Arab States have jointly promoted digital transformation agendas and strategies for inclusive access. However, children are rarely recognised as a distinct group in digital inclusion policies. Digital protection in conflict zones remains peripheral despite the growing reliance on online learning and social platforms by displaced and vulnerable children in countries like Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Sudan.

At the regional level, despite the transnational nature of digital threats such as child exploitation and digital recruitment, cross-border cooperation within the Arab region is limited and relies primarily on non-binding declarations and sporadic workshops. Children's digital rights and digital safety have yet to be fully integrated into the regional child protection agenda despite the growing importance of the digital environment in children's lives during and after conflict.

National Legal and Policy Frameworks in the Arab World

Country	Child Protection Legislation	Digital Protection Laws
Palestine	Juvenile Protection Law (No.4/2016)	Cybercrime Law (2018)
Lebanon	Law (No. 422/2002) for the Protection of Juveniles in Conflict with the Law or at Risk	Electronic Transactions and Personal Data Law (2018)
Syria	Child Rights Law (Law No. 21 of 2021)	Cybercrime Law (2022)
Sudan	Child Protection Act (No. 19 of 2010)	Cybercrime Law (2018)

National laws in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Sudan are showing a growing focus on combating various forms of digital crimes, including fraud, hacking, and defamation. However, these laws lack clear and direct provisions aimed at protecting children in the digital world, especially in times of conflict when the risks of child exploitation are heightened. Current laws generally focus on combating cybercrimes without detailing or specifying mechanisms to protect children's privacy or digital rights. In Palestine, the Anti-Cybercrime Law (2018) includes provisions addressing the **exploitation of children in pornographic material** but does not comprehensively address other digital issues related to children. Lebanon enacted the Electronic Transactions and Personal Data Law (2018), which penalises the online exploitation of children but does not provide specific digital protection. Syria (Cybercrime Law 2022) has general legislation and does not contain provisions specific to children. In Sudan, the Cybercrime Law (2018) does not include specific provisions to protect children. This shortcoming highlights the need to develop specialised legislative frameworks to protect children digitally, especially in light of the challenges posed by armed conflict.

Child Protection Policies and Efforts amidst Digitalisation and Conflict (The Arab World)

State and non-state actors in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Sudan have launched programs, projects, and initiatives to protect children from online dangers and ensure their digital safety.

In **Palestine**, there is an interest from some ministries, like the Ministry of Social Development, in protecting children, including in the digital space, despite the ongoing political and humanitarian crisis. The Ministry has condemned violations against children, such as the exploitation of children in the media campaign (2024) targeting UNRWA. In cooperation with other governmental bodies, including the police, the Ministry of Telecommunications, UNICEF, and civil society organisations, the Ministry works on developing mechanisms to protect children from violence, exploitation, and homelessness, and on activating the national child protection helpline (131). These efforts reflect a broader governmental approach to child protection, including, but not limited to, safeguarding children in the digital sphere. Additionally, several initiatives have been launched to protect children online during times of conflict. One of these efforts is the Keeping Children Safe Online (KCSO) programme by World Vision in the West Bank (World Vision, 2016). It provides training for children, parents, teachers, and law enforcement personnel on digital safety and how to report online abuse. ActionAid Palestine, in collaboration with the 7amleh Centre, also held cybersecurity workshops to raise awareness among young people about data privacy and online safety. In January 2025, 7amleh published a report about digital safety for children in East Jerusalem. However, in Gaza, efforts are very limited due to the siege, tight restrictions, and ongoing genocide.

In **Lebanon**, the government has developed several child protection policies, including the National Child Protection Strategy of 2012 and the Child Safeguarding Policy for Daycares (2025), in collaboration with international and local organisations. These policies aim to protect children from all forms of violence and exploitation and to ensure a safe environment for children in nurseries. However, despite these efforts, the 2012 National Strategy has not been effectively followed up on or implemented, and the overall child protection system in Lebanon remains fragmented and poorly coordinated between official and non-governmental actors, which limits the capacity to respond effectively to child protection needs, especially amid ongoing crises. In addition, the focus of some organisations has been on stopping cyberbullying and building legal protections. UNICEF Lebanon has run school campaigns to protect children from harmful content. The SAWA Initiative, supported by the EU and organisations like Terre des Hommes, offers mental health and digital safety support for refugee children.

In **Syria**, both governmental and non-governmental efforts have been made to protect children during conflict, including initiatives to provide safe environments for children in both digital and physical spaces. One example is the use of Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) in conflict areas as part of the broader humanitarian response, where children receive psychosocial support and protection from violence, including awareness about digital risks. In Syria, the Violet Organisation and ActionAid ran workshops in northwest Syria to support education and recovery using digital tools. However, there are no clear or stable governmental policies or legal frameworks dedicated to protecting children online, and such efforts often fluctuate due to the ongoing instability and fragmentation within the Syrian regime. These examples represent part of the broader child protection efforts, including, but not limited to, digital protection, and remain inconsistent and heavily dependent on the humanitarian context and the presence of international organizations.

However, in **Sudan**, due to the ongoing conflict, many digital education projects and initiatives have been halted, and there are no clear efforts to protect children online. In general, some positive efforts focused on training, awareness, and advocacy have been made; however, these efforts are still limited, and the risks to children in digital spaces remain very serious.



Policy Alternatives

To address these persistent challenges, five strategic policy alternatives are proposed in each region – Southeast Asia and the Arab World, specifically for the countries mentioned in this policy, to offer pathways to strengthen protections and promote children’s rights in both digital and crisis-prone contexts.



Alternative 1: Strengthen and harmonise national legal frameworks with child-centred digital protections

One of the most urgent regional challenges is the absence of coherent legal systems that centre children's rights in digital governance. While some countries have introduced laws on cybercrime or online safety, these often overlook the specific risks and vulnerabilities that children face in digital spaces. This alternative proposes a comprehensive revision and harmonisation of national digital protection laws and child protection frameworks in alignment with the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**, its Optional Protocols, and **General Comment No. 25** on children's rights in the digital environment. Core reforms should include legal prohibitions against live-streamed abuse, online grooming, and the non-consensual sharing of images; mechanisms to address harmful content and contact; and robust safeguards against online violence, exploitation, and harassment. Independent oversight mechanisms—such as digital rights ombudspersons for children—should be established to monitor implementation, handle complaints, and ensure institutional accountability. In practice, Indonesia can enhance its legal approach by incorporating child-specific protections into existing digital safety regulations and ensuring their implementation through training for law enforcement and digital regulators. The Philippines, with its **Anti-OSAEC Law**, can expand child-centred protections to address emerging digital harms beyond exploitation. Thailand should strengthen its cybercrime and child protection legislation to safeguard minors better online, particularly those from vulnerable groups such as migrant and stateless children. In Myanmar, although reform is currently unfeasible under military rule, civil society actors in exile, supported by international partners, can begin developing future-oriented digital protection frameworks rooted in children's rights for eventual post-conflict rebuilding.

Alternative 2: Establish regional digital child protection cooperation through ASEAN regional integration

Given the cross-border nature of digital risks—such as online exploitation, trafficking, and disinformation—national reforms must be complemented by stronger regional coordination. ASEAN has acknowledged some of these risks but lacks binding commitments or effective enforcement mechanisms. This alternative calls for ASEAN to move toward a binding regional framework on children's digital rights. Actions could include developing a **Regional Charter or Convention on the Rights of the Child in Digital Environments**, aligned with General Comment No. 25; creating a Regional Child Rights and Digital Safety Observatory to monitor data, platform compliance, and state efforts; and establishing cross-border protocols for investigating and responding to online child exploitation, particularly in conflict-affected zones. Indonesia and the Philippines, given their existing national frameworks and regional influence, can play leadership roles in advocating for such mechanisms. Thailand, with its history of hosting regional dialogues, can serve as a key convenor and technical partner. While political conditions currently constrain Myanmar's participation, ASEAN's regional response must still include strategies to protect displaced and stateless children in exile or refugee contexts.





Alternative 3: Build resilient, child-centred digital ecosystems through cross-sector collaborations

Legal and institutional reforms must be accompanied by **community-level investments** that build resilience and empower children to navigate digital environments safely. This alternative emphasises a bottom-up approach by integrating digital citizenship and safety education into school curricula, focusing on child-friendly content related to privacy, consent, misinformation, and civic participation. Supporting child- and youth-led digital advocacy can also ensure that the voices of young people shape the digital spaces and policies that affect them. Collaboration with technology companies is essential to promote child-sensitive design, including default privacy settings, culturally relevant content moderation, and transparent complaints processes. The Philippines and Thailand can expand existing digital literacy programmes in schools, involving both children and caregivers. Indonesia can prioritise community-based awareness initiatives, particularly in underserved rural areas. In Myanmar, while formal systems are compromised, international NGOs and civil society in exile can support children in refugee camps and displacement settings with offline and online tools to foster digital resilience and ensure access to safe, rights-based digital learning environments.

Alternative 4: Establish National Digital Emergency Platforms for Children During Conflict

Given institutional gaps or weak coordination during conflicts, this policy proposes the establishment of national digital emergency platforms, managed by ministries or child protection councils, dedicated to receiving and reporting complaints from children (or their guardians) about digital threats in times of conflict. These threats include digital blackmail, targeted incitement or hate speech, and forced interruptions of digital education. In Palestine, these platforms can be integrated within relevant ministries and in cooperation with organisations like Zamleh. In Lebanon, this mechanism could be linked with the Ministry of Telecommunications and strengthened through partnerships with international and local organisations. Similarly, in Syria and Sudan, it can be enhanced in stable areas and supported in collaboration with organisations such as UNICEF or Plan International, along with local child protection committees. The goal is to provide a safe communication and reporting channel for children at risk during times of conflict or emergency.



Alternative 5: Safe Digital Learning Centers in Conflict and Displacement Areas

This alternative involves establishing **"safe digital learning points"** in **schools, shelters, youth centres, or displacement gathering sites such as tents in Gaza**. These centres would enable children to use the internet within a supervised and protected environment overseen by trained facilitators. Located inside schools or shelters, the centres provide children with access to educational and recreational content that is both safe and age-appropriate. This alternative serves as an effective means to strengthen children's digital resilience, particularly in refugee camps or areas where official services are lacking.

Policy Recommendations

Drawing on insights from youth participants in our workshop, community members, and civil society actors, the following recommendations offer practical and rights-based interventions for both regions.

- Integrate UNCRC General Comment No. 25 into national legal and digital protection frameworks: Governments must revise existing laws or enact new legislation reflecting the principles of General Comment No. 25, ensuring child-centred digital governance. As youth participants emphasised, this must extend beyond consent mechanisms to include more vigorous enforcement and increased public awareness of rights and responsibilities, particularly for children in non-parental care.
- Mandate nationwide media and digital literacy education for children and caregivers: Digital literacy should be made compulsory in school curricula, supported by the Ministries of Education and Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and tailored to various age groups. Participants called for interactive, values-based education, not just technical training, including modules on digital empathy, critical thinking, cyberbullying, and hate speech prevention. This should also extend to grandparents and guardians, especially in households where parents are absent due to migration or work.
- Ensure equitable digital access and infrastructure, especially in remote and marginalised communities: Digital protections mean little without connectivity and devices. In some rural areas, children share a single device among five students, and electricity or signal coverage is unreliable. Governments, in partnership with the tech sector, must close this digital divide by prioritising infrastructure investment, device distribution, and low-cost internet access in underserved areas.

Policy Recommendations

- Develop child-inclusive online safety strategies with multi-stakeholder input: National action plans must incorporate children's voices and reflect the realities of their communities. As highlighted in the workshop, families, educators, tech developers, media professionals, and influencers all play a crucial role. These strategies must include awareness campaigns on issues like online scams, fraud prevention, and responsible screen time, with children actively engaged in co-designing responses.
- Enforce laws against child labour and exploitation in the digital economy: Children's increasing presence on influencer platforms, live streams, and online marketplaces requires labour protections and age restrictions. Participants voiced concern over the commercialisation of childhood and the lack of regulation around digital child performers. Governments must act swiftly to regulate this space, protect children from exploitative practices, and support families economically to reduce incentives for digital child labour.
- Establish precise reporting mechanisms and responsive protocols for online abuse: Children must have access to safe, confidential, and child-sensitive channels for reporting online harassment and exploitation. These systems should be supported by trained personnel in schools, community centres, and local law enforcement. Caregivers and educators should also be equipped to recognise, report, and respond effectively, as participants emphasised gaps in frontline adult knowledge and support.
- Foster a culture of responsible media use and content creation: Application developers and content creators should adopt age-appropriate design standards, while influencers and media professionals must adhere to ethical codes regarding child content. Government ministries and media associations should promote responsible digital storytelling, positive role modelling, and civic values, addressing the concerns of youth participants about toxic online content and misinformation.
- Tackle structural poverty and inequality as root causes of digital vulnerability: Ultimately, participants linked digital risks to broader socio-economic disparities. Governments must address underlying issues—such as poverty, lack of education, and parental absence—through comprehensive social policies, economic inclusion programmes, and community support systems. Digital rights cannot be fully realised without justice in the offline world.

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