

# Modernizing International 'Social Défense': Developing a Transnational Framework for Protecting Displaced Children from Digital Exploitation

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**Abstract-** In this study, one may note that the rapid expansion of digital technologies has created new risks for vulnerable populations, particularly displaced children who are affected by conflict, migration, and affected humanitarian crises. It is important to note that across many regions, migrant and refugee children increasingly tend to rely on digital platforms for communication, education, as well as social connection. However, this growing digital access has also exposed them to significant threats such as online abuse, trafficking networks, and exposed them to digital grooming. It has been noted that criminal groups and exploitative actors frequently seek to target displaced children because of their limited protection systems, lack of supervision, and due to unstable living conditions. This study has addressed this global challenge by assessing developing a transnational social defence framework that could strengthen mechanisms on protection for displaced children in digital environments. The research has adopted a qualitative methodology that tends to include analysis on policy and it includes a comparative international review of existing social defence and digital protection policies across different countries. The findings have highlighted major gaps in international cooperation, weak policy coordination, and highlighted insufficient mechanisms on digital safeguarding. The study has further proposed recommendations on policy for governments, international organisations, and has recommended social welfare institutions for the purpose of strengthening collaborative protection strategies.

**Keywords:** Social Défense, Digital Safeguarding, Child Protection, Forced Migration, Human Trafficking, Online Exploitation, International Social Work, Cross Border Governance, Global Policy Coordination, Child Welfare Systems.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### Global Context

One may note that the global context surrounding the protection of displaced children has become increasingly complex due to rising humanitarian crises and it is considered complex due to technological expansion (Abbasi et al., 2025). As discussed by Lasater et al. (2025) armed conflicts, environmental disasters, and instability in economics have forced millions of children to move across national borders, considering this it can be said that this has created new vulnerabilities within migration and refugee environments. At the same time, it has been also noted that the rapid expansion of digital technology and expansion of internet connectivity has reached even the most fragile communities,

including camps of refugee and temporary settlements (Abah, 2025).

It is important to note that while digital access could be valuable for supporting communication, education, and it could encourage humanitarian coordination, it also tends to expose displaced children to online risks such as cyber grooming, trafficking networks, and it could expose children to digital exploitation. According to the UNICEF 2026 report, it has been discovered that 48.8 million children were displaced or relocated by conflict and violence, large populations where children; many of whom have some level of internet access through mobile devices or they have access through shared networks. However, mechanisms of international digital protection remain considered fragmented. In regard to this, Ramli et al. (2025) highlighted that

strengthening coordinated systems for social defence and international cooperation is therefore considered essential as this can be helpful for safeguarding vulnerable children.

### **Problem Statement**

It has been noted that the rapid expansion of digital technologies is considered responsible for creating new forms of exploitation that particularly could affect vulnerable populations such as displaced or relocated children. In this context, Gupta (2025) noted that existing policies on child protection largely tend to concentrate on physical safety, trafficking, and it focuses on welfare services, while digital risks such as online grooming, cyber exploitation or online exploitation, and illegal digital content remain insufficiently addressed within the framework of social protection. In regard to this, one may note that nearly 1 in 3 internet users globally are children and it is noted that millions of displaced minors tend to access digital platforms without adequate supervision, taking this into account, it can be highlighted that this can be the reason for increasing their exposure to online abuse (UNICEF, 2017). In addition, international legal and policy frameworks addressing child protection remain seen to be fragmented across countries, this has limited coordinated responses to cross border digital exploitation. As highlighted by Rai (2024) collaboration between institutions of social work and systems of digital governance is often considered weak, and there is no unified global mechanism for the purpose of monitoring or preventing online exploitation targeting displaced children; it could result in limited integration between the policies on social welfare and digital regulation.

### **Research Objectives**

- To assess and analyses the global challenges associated with digital exploitation of displaced children within international migration as well as in humanitarian contexts.
- To evaluate and explore existing international social defence policies and identify gaps in digital safeguarding mechanisms across different countries.
- To develop and assess a transnational policy framework that integrates social work practice,

economic governance, and integrates digital regulation for protecting displaced children from exploitation.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Framework**

- **Systems Theory**

According to Nurdin et al. (2022) Systems Theory is directed to explain that social issues cannot be assessed and understood in isolation; this is because they are influenced by interconnected institutions as well as environments such as governments, communities, technology platforms and influenced by social services organizations. In the context of displaced children digital exploitation, it is important to note that this has emerged through interactions between migration systems, weak governance and emerged due to online communication networks (Abbasi et al., 2025). It can be said that applying Systems Theory to this research could be valuable for explaining how coordinated responses from governments, humanitarian organizations, digital companies and social workers can collectively focus on strengthening mechanisms on child protection and it could be also valuable for reducing risks of exploitation which is affecting displaced children across international digital environments today at a global level.

### **Anti Oppressive Practice**

As noted by Sinclair and Bernard (2022) it is found that Anti Oppressive Practice is a social work theory that aims to focus on identifying and assessing challenging structural inequalities that could marginalize vulnerable populations including refugees' migrants and it could marginalize displaced children. The theory is inclined to emphasize empowerment, social justice and it emphasizes protection from exploitation within social as well as institutional systems (Baines and Clark, 2022). In relation to digital exploitation, it is important to note that displaced children often tend to face discrimination, limited legal protection and face unequal access to resources on digital safety (Gupta, 2025). It can be said that applying Anti Oppressive Practice in this research has supported the development of inclusive policies that focus on

prioritizing child rights safety and for the intent of ensuring fair protection across international digital governance systems as well as institutions.

### **International Perspectives**

In this section, International perspectives have highlighted the importance of coordinated responses to policy for the purpose of protecting displaced children from digital exploitation. As discussed by Sandhu and Barn (2023) it has been identified that in India, increasing access to the internet among young people and migrant communities has expanded digital opportunities but it has also increased exposure to online risks. Initiatives taken by the government such as the cybercrime reporting portal and child protection programs are aiming to strengthen digital safety and working to improve monitoring of online abuse for displaced children (Finkelhor et al., 2022). In the United Kingdom, one may note that strong child protection legislation and policies on digital safeguarding have guided social services and enforcement of law towards addressing online exploitation and to monitor trafficking (Gov.uk, 2025).

Regulatory bodies also tend to work closely with social workers and collaborate with technology platforms for the aim of ensuring child safety in digital environments. It is important to highlight that within G20 nations, governments are seeking to collaborate for the intent of preventing cybercrime and to prevent trafficking through policy coordination and through information sharing (Orf, 2022). According to global estimates, it is found that 82% aged 15 to 24 used the internet in 2025, this has created significant challenges for protection and regulation (Un.org, 2026). Considering this, it can be reflected that International organizations should focus on supporting cross border cooperation and should encourage policy development as this can help to safeguard vulnerable children.

### **The Gap**

Considering all, it can be acknowledged that existing studies and frameworks on policy largely focused on addressing child protection at the national level, which could be the reason for limiting their

effectiveness in responding to the transnational nature of digital exploitation; it could affect displaced children. One may highlight that current research rarely aims to integrate and assess digital safety within the broader concept of social defense and correctional services (Gupta, 2025). Further, there is also limited development of transnational frameworks on social work addressing digital risks. Therefore, it can be said that there is a need for integrated global policy models combining economic governance, digital regulation, and combining social welfare approaches.

## **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Philosophy**

For the aim of analysing the global challenge associated with digital exploitation of displaced children, the researcher has selected interpretivism philosophy. About this philosophy, it has been noted that it aims to focus on understanding and assessing complex social realities through interpretation of meanings and through the interpretation of experiences (Acharya, 2025). The issue of digital exploitation of displaced children tends to involve social, institutional, and it also includes policy contexts that cannot be measured only through numerical data and information. Scholar Harris and Radomski (2026) highlighted that interpretivism could be adopted by the researcher to explore perspectives. For this study that seeks to assess international policies, humanitarian reports, and academic studies, this philosophy has been considered appropriate as this philosophical position could be effective for supporting developing deeper understanding on social defense practices and it could help the researcher to understand digital protection challenges across different global contexts.

### **Research Approach**

In order to evaluate existing policies on national social defence, this study has adopted an inductive research approach as this approach is considered effective for developing broader theoretical based insights from existing concepts and knowledge which could guide the researcher in this study to develop an understanding on the topic (Yuwono and

Rachmawati, 2023). Instead of testing predetermined hypotheses, the researcher has focused on building understanding from patterns identified within secondary sources related to digital exploitation and related to protection of displaced children. It is important to note that through the inductive process, concepts from social defence, social work practice, and digital governance are interpreted and connected as this has helped this study to assess a transactional framework on policy that tends to integrate the practice of social work. About this approach, scholars such as Chakma and Li (2025) highlight that this approach are used in secondary quality studies; considering this, one may note that for this study researcher has considered this approach valuable as it is inclined to support the development of a transnational safeguarding framework derived from secondary evidence and derived from themes identified in the above literature.

### **Research Design**

In order to develop a transactional framework, the researcher has adopted a descriptive research design used in this study for the goal of providing a detailed explanation of the current global situation regarding digital exploitation of displaced children (Ghanad, 2023). One may say that the design has allowed the researcher to examine existing international related policies, humanitarian practices, and to assess regulatory systems related to digital safety. By describing patterns, institutional responses, and policy limitations, the study is directed to present a clear overview of safeguarding challenges. As per, Stanley (2023) this design is used for conducting qualitative study as this research design is considered valuable as this supporting researcher to assess the objective of identifying gaps in policy and for developing understanding how social defence systems respond to digital risks.

### **Data Collection Tools**

For evaluating the global challenges associated with digital exploitation of displaced children within international migration, the researcher has used secondary qualitative data for the purpose of collecting data from academic journals, international organization reports, policy documents, and to

collect data from credible publications (Cheong et al., 2023). For assessing existing international social defence policies and to assess gaps in digital safeguarding, sources are selected using the criteria of inclusion such as relevance to digital exploitation, displaced children, international migration, and social protection frameworks. Exclusion criteria for assessing international social defence policies has included outdated sources, non-academic sources or materials, and to exclude unrelated topics (Yadav, 2022). Keywords used in database searches tend to include digital exploitation, displaced children, social defence, child protection, migration risks, online abuse, international policies on safeguarding, and it includes digital governance frameworks.

### **Ethical Considerations**

For the aim of analysing the global challenges associated with digital exploitation of displaced children, ethical standards have been carefully maintained by the researcher in this study throughout the process of research. It is important to highlight that since this study has relied on secondary sources and data, no direct interaction with vulnerable individuals has occurred (Pascale et al., 2022). It can be noted that for assessing a transactional policy framework all information has been collected from publicly available and collected from credible academic sources as this could be effective for ensuring reliability and to maintain integrity (Chen et al., 2024). Proper citation and practice on referencing have been further followed for the intent of avoiding plagiarism and for the goal of acknowledging original authors. This research has also maintained sensitivity toward the topic which is based on child exploitation by assessing and presenting findings responsibly and focusing on policy improvement and protection.

## **IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

### **Data Presentation and Comparative Analysis**

#### **Theme 1: Variation in Digital Child Protection between Developed and Developing Countries**

In this study the secondary data provided by Abbasi et al. (2025) has shown that developed countries generally tend to pose stronger structure on digital governance and regulatory systems that are

considered accountable for supporting child protection in online environments. In contrast, it has been identified that developing countries face challenges related to limited technological related infrastructure, weak mechanisms of monitoring, and tend to face resource constraints. Further, Sandhu and Barn (2023) has indicated that increasing access to the internet among migrant communities in India has created opportunities for digital learning but it is also considered responsible for increased risks of online abuse as well as exploitation. In this context, the UNICEF 2026 report has also shown that 48.8 million children were displaced by conflict and were displaced due to violence by the end of 2024, it can be noted that many of whom access the internet through mobile devices. However, it has been noted that developing countries often lack sufficient policies on digital safeguarding and trained social protection personnel to address online exploitation effectively at a global level.

### **Theme 2: Strengths of Safeguarding Policies in Developed Countries**

The secondary data provided by Gov.uk (2025) has shown that the United Kingdom has implemented comprehensive legislation on child protection supported and strengthened by coordinated digital safeguarding related policies. In regard to this, it is important to note that these policies could be valuable for integrating social services, enforcement of law and digital monitoring systems to prevent online exploitation. Similarly, scholar Finkel or et al. (2022) has indicated that a strong framework on regulation allows authorities to identify cyber grooming and to assess digital trafficking networks more efficiently. In addition, one may highlight that collaboration between social workers, agencies of government, and technology companies could focus on strengthening early detection and intervention strategies for the goal of protecting vulnerable children.

### **Theme 3: Role of International Cooperation and Global Best Practices**

In this context, Ramli et al. (2025) has suggested that mechanisms on international cooperation remain considered essential as it could be accountable and supportive in addressing cross border digital

exploitation. It has been discovered that global organizations are inclined to support information sharing and policy coordination between governments and humanitarian agencies. In regard to this, the secondary data provided by Ord (2022) has highlighted that G20 collaboration on cyber-crime prevention has improved monitoring of online trafficking activities. Considering all, it can be reflected that these initiatives could be helpful for demonstrating best practices that can support the development of a transnational safeguarding framework for the aim of protecting displaced children globally.

## **V. DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Considering this study, it is important to note that the findings have highlighted several interconnected factors that could be responsible for increasing the vulnerability of displaced children in digital environments. Similar scholars such as Abbasi et al. (2025) have emphasised that conflict, instability in migration and weak social protection systems create conditions where children lack supervision and lack institutional support. In this context, the UNICEF report has highlighted that 48.8 million children have been displaced in 2024, increasing exposure to cyber grooming and it also exposes children to digital trafficking risks.

In regard to this, Rai (2024) suggested that social welfare institutions and systems of digital governance often seek to operate separately, which could be the reason for weakened protection mechanisms. The analysis has also indicated that economic instability and governance limitations in host or transit countries could reduce the capacity to monitor digital risks affecting migrant children. As highlighted by Ramli et al. (2025) stronger coordination between the institutions of international policy, governance structures on technology and social protection systems is regarded as essential. Taking all into consideration, one may say that these findings have demonstrated the need for integrated global strategies that seek to

combine digital regulation with the frameworks of social welfare.

### **Global Policy Recommendations**

The study has emphasized the importance of developing a coordinated transnational social defence framework for the aim of addressing the growing digital exploitation risks faced by displaced children. Similarly, in this context, scholars such as Ramli et al. (2025) highlighted that international policy cooperation is considered necessary because networks of online exploitation often operate across borders. Considering this, governments should therefore focus on strengthening legal collaboration through information sharing systems and by assessing joint enforcement mechanisms targeting cybercrime. Another important recommendation could involve integrating education on digital safety within refugee and migrant support programs so that children and caregivers understand online risks and protective practices (Phiayura et al., 2025). As discussed by Putrevu and Mertzanis (2024) collaboration between governments, technology companies and institutions of social work is considered necessary as collaboration between this institution can be valuable for ensuring effective monitoring of harmful digital activities.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

### **Summary of Contribution**

This study has contributed to global research by assessing and highlighting the increasing risks of digital exploitation faced by displaced children in international migration contexts. This study has emphasised that existing social defence systems focus mainly on physical protection while it has also highlighted that digital risks remain under addressed. The research has identified gaps in mechanisms of international safeguarding and has proposed a transnational framework that could integrate social welfare systems, economic governance and digital regulation for the aim of strengthening strategies on global child protection.

### **Future Research Directions**

Future research should focus on examining technological innovations that can be effective for

improving digital protection for displaced children. Scholars such as Abah (2025) highlighted the importance of exploring artificial intelligence systems capable of assessing and detecting online exploitation activities. Further empirical research involving displaced children, humanitarian workers and social workers can be valuable for providing deeper insights into digital risks. Additional studies should also assess and evaluate how effectively international child protection policies are implemented across countries and implemented in humanitarian contexts.

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