



# AI, Platform Accountability, and the Urgent Need to Protect Children Online in Zimbabwe

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## Platform Governance Failures, AI and the Cost to Children in Zimbabwe

What we are witnessing globally with generative AI systems is not merely a technical failure. It is a platform governance failure—and Zimbabwean children are not immune to its consequences.

Recent international incidents involving AI systems generating non-consensual and sexualised imagery, including images of women and, in some reported cases, children, expose a serious and predictable risk. The response by technology companies has largely been reactive: adjusting safeguards after harm has occurred, restricting access in selected regions, and shifting responsibility to users once damage is already done. This approach is fundamentally inadequate.

From a Zimbabwean perspective, this raises urgent concerns. As internet penetration increases and more children gain access to smartphones, social media, and AI-powered tools, the risks of online sexual exploitation, deepfake abuse, cyberbullying, grooming, and image-based abuse are rapidly escalating. Our regulatory frameworks, child protection systems, and digital literacy levels are still catching up—making children especially vulnerable.

Globally, governments and regulators in Australia, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and parts of Asia have begun investigations, imposed temporary bans, and explored criminal liability for unsafe AI deployment. These actions send a clear message: generative AI systems must anticipate misuse, not merely respond after harm occurs.

Zimbabwe cannot afford to be reactive. The absence of visible harm today does not mean children are safe—it often means harm is unreported, hidden, or poorly understood. When AI tools can manipulate real images of real people at scale, the impact on children is immediate, personal, and long-lasting. These

harms do not stay online; they follow children into schools, homes, and communities.

At Children of the Digital Age Zimbabwe (CODAZIM), we see the real-world consequences of unsafe digital environments every day. Our work with communities, educators, civil society, and regional partners consistently shows that failures in technology design and governance disproportionately affect children. Innovation and technological progress should never come at the cost of a child's dignity, safety, or future.

AI companies cannot credibly claim neutrality when their products are designed in ways that invite abuse, lack robust guardrails, and prioritise speed over safety. Child protection and consent safeguards are not optional features—they are essential. Blaming users is no longer defensible when foreseeable misuse has been evident from the outset.

Zimbabwe has an opportunity—and a responsibility—to act. Strengthening online child protection policies, embedding digital safety education in schools, supporting law enforcement capacity, and holding platforms accountable must be national priorities. As the country advances its digital transformation agenda, a clear duty of care toward children must be built into technology governance from the start.

This is not about resisting innovation. It is about ensuring that progress is ethical, inclusive, and safe. Children deserve digital spaces that protect them—not systems that expose them to harm.

The question before us is clear: Will the technology sector learn from these global failures, or will governments be forced to impose stronger boundaries to protect children? For Zimbabwe, the answer must place children first.

## About the Author

Mussolini Salem Mugumbate is the Founder and Director of Children of the Digital Age Zimbabwe (CODAZIM), a child-focused organisation dedicated to advancing online child safety, digital literacy, and responsible technology use in Zimbabwe and beyond. He works at the intersection of child protection, cyber safety, and emerging technologies, advocating for stronger platform accountability, ethical AI, and child-centred digital policies. Through CODAZIM, he collaborates with government institutions, civil society, and regional partners to ensure that Zimbabwean children are protected, empowered, and respected in the digital age.

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