

# New frontiers in child labour: Why digital risks demand urgent attention

## 01

### Why this matters for Ministries of Labour

Digital technologies are reshaping both economies and childhoods in ways that challenge traditional child labour frameworks. While connectivity expands opportunities for learning and expression, it also restructures labour markets and introduces new, often hidden, forms of child labour in relation to the digital environment (or '**digital child labour**' for short).

Such activities are difficult to detect, transnational in nature, and largely absent from national labour statistics and inspection mandates. As the digital landscape evolves, so too must regulatory frameworks and practices to uphold children's rights and ensure responsible business conduct in the digital environment.

*The brief offers a rapid overview of emerging risks and priority considerations, prepared for discussion at the Sixth Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labour in February 2026.*

## 02

### What is 'digital child labour'?

There is currently no internationally agreed legal definition of 'digital child labour.' For the purposes of this brief, it is conceptualised as work or services performed that meet **internationally recognized definitions of child labour**<sup>1</sup> and that are **enabled, organised, mediated, or amplified by the digital environment** (including platforms, apps, networks, algorithms, data systems, or digital payment infrastructures).<sup>2</sup> This includes cases that fall within the **worst forms of child labour**,<sup>3</sup> such as technology-facilitated exploitation, trafficking, or involvement in illicit activities.

At the same time, it is important to distinguish digital activities that constitute **play, creativity, expression, and acceptable forms of work**. In this regard, the concept of 'permitted light work'<sup>4</sup> above the general minimum age applies to a range of digital activities that children may engage in, provided they do not compromise education, well-being, or rights. Limited guidance currently exists on the point at which acceptable work may reach thresholds for digital child labour and become unacceptable.

## 03

### What are emerging 'digital child labour' risk areas?

Robust global data on the scale and scope of these issues is largely absent. However, existing literature points to a diverse set of scenarios that may be associated with 'digital child labour' risk. The table

below provides an exploratory illustration of the range of activities that may constitute child labour and worst forms of child labour under existing international standards, as a prompt for discussion and action.

Example*	Description	Potential child labour risks
<b>Web-based work on commercial digital labour platforms<sup>5</sup></b>	Web-based platform work (microtasks/crowdwork) is remote, task-based labour (annotation, transcription, moderation, engagement 'click farms' etc.) mediated by platforms and often governed by automated systems. The number of children who may be active on such platforms is unknown.	Risks of digital child labour emerge in relation to minimum-age breaches, school interference, and hazardous exposure (especially in content-related tasks).
<b>Location-based work on commercial digital labour platforms<sup>6</sup></b>	Location-based platform work (e.g. delivery and other app-mediated services) is physically performed but digitally allocated and managed. Much like the case of web-based work, the number of children who may be active on such platforms is unknown.	To the extent that children are involved, this may constitute child labour via minimum-age breaches, hazardous conditions (traffic/night work/pressure), and worst forms where linked with trafficking/forced labour.
<b>Influencer marketing and monetized content creation</b>	Children's images/voices/performances monetised via platforms (ads, sponsorships, affiliate links). Often mediated or organized by parents or caregivers. Includes cases of children's participation in an adults' influencer marketing or content creation (e.g. commercial 'sharenting'/family vlogging) as well as child-led 'kidfluencing'.	May constitute child labour if production schedules driven by brand collaborations and platform incentives create sustained work demands that interfere with schooling, or where exposure/harassment and loss of privacy/dignity are harmful to development (especially for young children with limited ability to refuse participation).
<b>Competitive eSports and livestreaming</b>	Competitive eSports <sup>7</sup> and livestreaming involve performance labour, audience cultivation, and monetisation through donations/subscriptions/sponsorships, often alongside intensive training schedules and reputational work. eSports labour can involve precarious working conditions across the ecosystem (players, streamers).	May constitute child labour if the workload is excessive, interferes with education, or becomes harmful (e.g. burnout).
<b>Monetized gameplay and game design</b>	Includes 'playbour' (play + labour) <sup>8</sup> and virtual-economy labour including producing in-game value (virtual goods/currency/services) for sale (e.g., gold farming). Also includes the creation of monetisable game content or assets in user-generated platforms (children acting as 'co-developers'/creators).	May shift from play to labour when they involve sustained hours, structured obligations, or exploitation. May constitute child labour where, for example, hours interfere with schooling and where children cannot freely withdraw due to power asymmetries.
<b>Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation</b>	Includes livestreaming of child sexual abuse, production/distribution of child sexual exploitation material, and financially motivated sexual extortion.	Directly within the scope of worst forms of child labour.
<b>Child trafficking facilitated by digital technologies</b>	Digital technologies used to facilitate recruitment, grooming, advertising and coordination for trafficking into exploitation (sexual exploitation, forced labour, servitude).	Directly within the scope of worst forms of child labour.
<b>Children used in illicit digital activities and children recruited and used in armed conflict via digital technologies</b>	Children may be used in cyber-enabled illicit activities (fraud facilitation, account laundering, hacking, scam operations, distribution of illegal content) or recruited and used in armed conflict or for offline criminal activities (e.g. 'Com networks' <sup>9</sup> ) via digital technologies.	Directly within the scope of worst forms of child labour.

\*Non exhaustive list

## What are the gaps in evidence and action?

4.1

### Measurement challenges and knowledge gaps

There is no clear picture of the extent of child exploitation and abuse in relation to the digital environment. Specifically for digital child labour, data on prevalence are limited. This measurement gap reflects an underlying lack of conceptual clarity about what constitutes digital child labour itself. Because much digital work takes place outside traditional labour market settings, it falls beyond the visibility of systems that would normally detect, regulate, or prevent child labour.

In the absence of agreed operational definitions, robust measurement is not yet possible. Existing child labour measurement frameworks therefore do not systematically capture whether work is digitally mediated. Similarly, current research on digital labour platforms is generally not designed to identify child participation.<sup>10</sup>

Certain forms of digital child labour, such as microtasking, may be difficult to measure as 'hidden' work may be undertaken by children through shared accounts or without reliable verification of age. Moreover, the digital environment (networks, services, apps, data systems) can increase concealment of the worst forms of child labour, complicating detection and measurement.

There are also limitations in the global representativeness of existing research. One systematic review of livestreaming (e.g. on video

game live-streaming services) as digital labour noted a major finding around the lack of global diversity in current research.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, research on influencer marketing-related risks is significantly shaped by high-income country cases and regulatory debates.<sup>12</sup>

4.2

### Regulatory and enforcement challenges

Current child labour laws and enforcement practices are typically designed for 'offline' contexts with identifiable employers and workplaces.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, digitally mediated work can be dispersed, home-based and/or facilitated by caregivers, cross-border, and governed by platform systems. Additional challenges arise as digital child labour can be 'hidden' within digital value chains and involve multiple actors including platforms, brands, agencies and others – thereby obscuring where responsibility lies. This lack of clarity also generates legal uncertainty for businesses and absence of clear guidance on implementing measures to ensure respect for children's rights in digital business activities.

Worst forms of child labour involving digital technologies often fall under the remit of justice and child protection stakeholders, which requires strong coordination with labour authorities. The criminalisation of technology-facilitated abuse and exploitation has generally been slow across jurisdictions, hampering consistent responses and the protection of children.

## Call to action: Building a forward-looking research and policy agenda

5.1

### Clarifying concepts for a changing landscape

Digital environments have opened new spaces for children's work – some creative and acceptable,<sup>14</sup> others clearly hazardous and harmful to children's well-being. While poverty and economic vulnerability remain important drivers, digital child labour is also shaped by newer commercial, technological and social dynamics, including platform- and influencer-based economies and the commercialisation of children's digital identities. Because many of these activities are framed as play or participation, they can blur boundaries between acceptable activities, permitted light work, and child labour.

Labour authorities need a clearer understanding of how established child labour standards apply when work is mediated by digital technologies. Greater conceptual clarity will help guide policy choices and prevent both overreach and under-protection.

5.2

### Updating existing frameworks for the digital age

Existing child labour frameworks were designed for physical workplaces, not digital ones. Ministries of Labour are uniquely positioned to start bridging this gap and consider whether emerging challenges call for new standards or adjustments to existing ones. This requires asking whether national laws and inspection systems adequately cover digitally mediated work and, if not, what changes are needed to ensure that minimum age standards, prohibitions on hazardous work, and protections against exploitation apply in digital environments.

Establishing clear thresholds is essential, guided by international standards, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital

environment. These frameworks provide a normative foundation to guide enforcement and protect children as work evolves beyond physical settings.

5.3

### Strengthening data and research

While the measurement of child labour is a well-established field, the digital dimensions of child labour and related manifestations are not yet clearly defined for measurement purposes. Dedicated measurement tools have yet to be developed to capture these emerging forms. Ministries of Labour have an important role to play in helping to develop operational definitions and taxonomies, and in advancing the data collection tools needed for inclusion in relevant data sources such as surveys and administrative records.

5.4

### Promoting coordination across sectors and borders

Given the transnational nature of the digital environment, learning and exchanging across borders are essential. Coordinated approaches that connect labour law with complementary areas, such as consumer protection, advertising standards, online safety, data protection and governance, and platform regulation, can strengthen children's protection. This requires collaboration across sectors, including online safety and technology regulators, justice systems, child protection agencies, and industry. Robust industry engagement can further support a more holistic approach, contributing to a 'smart mix' of voluntary and mandatory measures that foster business respect for child rights<sup>15</sup> and promote a shared understanding of challenges and appropriate solutions.

5.5

### Centring children's rights and voices

The way forward must meaningfully include children and young people in research and policy design, consistent with international child rights law.

## Endnotes

- 1 Refer to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols, the ILO Minimum Age for Admission to Employment Convention (No. 138) and the universally ratified ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182). While Article 32 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (the right to protection against economic exploitation) is often interpreted as the child's right to protection against child labour, some argue that economic exploitation should be understood as broader than child labour. This is especially relevant in the context of the digital environment where children are exposed to a myriad of economically exploitative practices: Lievens, E, et al. (2019). "[The child's right to protection against economic exploitation in the digital world: Submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child.](#)" This paper focuses on 'child labour' and does not explore the broader concept of 'economic exploitation'.
- 2 See UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 25 (paras. 112–116), which notes that children creating and sharing content may become economic actors in the digital environment, exposing them to risks of exploitation. States parties are urged to review laws and policies to ensure that children are protected against economic, sexual and other forms of exploitation and that their rights with regard to work in the digital environment and related opportunities for remuneration are protected.
- 3 The worst forms of child labour comprise categories set out in Article 3 of ILO Convention No. 182. These entail all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery including the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; the commercial sexual exploitation of children; the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in relevant international treaties; and work that, by its nature or circumstances, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.
- 4 Refer Article 7 of ILO Convention No. 138.
- 5 This typology of work is drawn from the ILO's report "[Digital labour platforms and the future of work: Towards decent work in the online world](#)" (2018). While the report focuses on adult workers, it also highlights indirect impacts on children through conditions of parents engaging on commercial digital labour platforms.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Christopher McCutcheon and Michael Hitchens, "[eSport and the Exploitation of Digital Labour.](#)" *Journal of Fandom Studies* 8, no. 1 (2020): 65–81.
- 8 Catherine J Archer and Kate Mirandilla Delmo, "[Children's 'Playbour' as Influencers on Social Media: An Investigation into the Legal and Ethical Issues Surrounding Kidfluencers.](#)" *Communication Research and Practice* 11, no. 3 (2025): 401–16.
- 9 National Crime Agency (UK), "[Sadistic Online Harm Groups Putting People at Unprecedented Risk, Warns the NCA.](#)" accessed January 21, 2026.
- 10 "[Digital Labour Platforms and the Future of Work: Towards Decent Work in the Online World | International Labour Organization.](#)" September 20, 2018.
- 11 Jiaru Tang, "[Live-Streamer as Digital Labor: A Systematic Review.](#)" *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, n.d.; Daniel R. Clark and Alisa B. Jno-Charles, "[The Child Labor in Social Media: Kidfluencers, Ethics of Care, and Exploitation.](#)" *Journal of Business Ethics* 201, no. 1 (2025): 35–62.
- 12 Francis Rees, "[Famous at Five: Risk Assessing Digital Child Labour.](#)" *Information & Communications Technology Law* 34, no. 3 (2025): 219–40.
- 13 See, for example, van der Hof et al. (2020). "[The child's right to protection against economic exploitation in the digital world.](#)" *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 28(4), 852, recommending a comprehensive review of child labour law to align protection and participation rights with online child work.
- 14 The 'acceptability' of children's participation in online environments depends on whether the underlying business models and design practices are rights-respecting and age-appropriate. See further: Lievens, E, et al. (2019). "[The child's right to protection against economic exploitation in the digital world: Submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child.](#)"
- 15 See further: UNICEF, UN Human Rights (2024) "[Taking a Child Rights-Based Approach to Implementing the UNGPs in the Digital Environment: A contribution to the B-Tech Project.](#)"

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