

**Recommendations to SADC Heads of State
on
Advancing Digital Rights and Legal Reforms to End TFGBV and Protect Women and Girls in Southern Africa,
following a side event hosted by Equality Now and the Alliance for Universal Digital Rights
at the 7th Southern African Youth Forum
16 August 2025.**

Introduction

[Equality Now](#), an international human rights organisation and co-founder of the [Alliance for Universal Digital Rights \(AUDRI\)](#), works to achieve legal and systemic change for women and girls worldwide.

In 2024, a global policy direction and framework for digital rights governance was set when UN member states adopted the [Pact of the Future](#) with the [Global Digital Compact](#) as one of its annexes. To translate global political commitments into localised, context-specific implementation, it is essential to establish platforms that raise awareness of existing commitments across international legal frameworks, accountability mechanisms and institutions. In addition, sustained advocacy is vital to ensure that governments prioritise inclusion and equality in the design and deployment of digital technology, which is developing and evolving at a rapid pace. At the same time, governments must mitigate the risks arising from digital technology, such as technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), which enables and perpetuates rights violations with impunity.

TFGBV is a growing global concern, involving the use of the internet, social media, messaging apps, email, and even smart devices to perpetrate gender-based violence and abuse. Although there is a digital divide in Southern Africa, where men have greater access to the internet and digital technology than women, women and girls are disproportionately affected by TFGVB. Addressing TFGVB requires a multifaceted approach involving prevention strategies, legal reforms, technological solutions, awareness campaigns, and accessible support services for survivors.

[The SADC Model Law on GBV](#) is an important tool in guiding member states towards developing comprehensive legal frameworks to combat TFGVB. The SADC region has also established a legal framework to address trafficking for sexual exploitation through the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, the SADC Model Law on GBV, and the SADC Strategic Plan of Action on Combating Trafficking in Persons. Trafficking for sexual exploitation is a pervasive form of GBV across SADC countries, and although national anti-trafficking legislation enacted by most member states aligns with the Palermo Protocol, currently these laws do not address the technological dimensions of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Yet, today, traffickers and other offenders on the trafficking chain use the internet and digital technology to recruit, coerce, control and profit from the exploitation of vulnerable women and girls.

Member states can be guided by the [SADC Model Law on GBV](#) in developing and reforming their GBV laws in and ensuring alignment with international and regional human rights laws and standards. The Model Law defines GBV broadly, encompassing, among others, forms such as human trafficking, sexual slavery, sexual

exploitation of children, and online gender-based cybercrimes. The Model Law envisioned a future in which online platforms become a catalyst and amplifier of GBV, including human trafficking and other forms.

While significant progress has been made through the development of legal tools such as the SADC Model Law, challenges remain in implementation, victim protection, and enforcement across the region. This underscores the need for continued cross-border cooperation, capacity building, and efforts to address the underlying vulnerabilities that enable and fuel TFGBV.

Side event: Advancing Digital Rights and Legal Reforms to end TFGBV

Equality Now and AUDRI, in partnership with the [Southern Africa Youth Forum](#), co-hosted a side event on TFGBV on 16 August in Antananarivo, Madagascar. The event focused on how ensuring digital rights for women and girls, and other marginalised groups through legal reforms can contribute to ending TFGBV, with a particular focus on online sexual exploitation and abuse.

The event brought together CSO actors, youth policymakers, and digital rights advocates to reflect on the state of digital rights and TFGBV in Southern Africa. 31 young people and leaders from Madagascar, South Africa, Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho, Eswatini, Tanzania, Ghana, and Kenya attended. Participants called on SADC member states to recognise that women and girls in the Global Majority and the Southern African region are particularly vulnerable to biases and discrimination arising from AI datasets, the effects of climate change from ICT infrastructure and a deepening digital gender divide, worsened by inaccessible emerging technologies. Member states were urged to integrate [the feminist digital principles](#) into all aspects of digital rights and governance. The event emphasised that the principles of an open, free and secure digital environment must be infused with an intersectional feminist perspective to guide the ongoing digital transformation of economies and societies and thus ensure women and girls' equal and meaningful participation free from TFGBV and other harms.

Recommendations for an equal, safe and free digital environment for all

SADC Heads of State were encouraged to consider these 5 key recommendations:

1. Close the Digital Divide

- Accelerate legal, policy, and budget reforms to ensure universal, affordable, accessible, and safe internet access for all, including young people.
- Prioritise rural communities, persons with disabilities, and gender equality in education by teaching digital skills early in all learning institutions.

2. Protect Rights and Safety Online

- Enact, enforce, and strengthen laws safeguarding women, girls, and marginalised groups from TFGBV, misinformation, cyberbullying, and harmful surveillance.
- Ensure oversight is youth- and gender-responsive, guided by frameworks such as the AU's 2024 Child Online Safety and Empowerment Policy.

3. Promote Inclusion and Leadership

- Guarantee equal participation of women, girls and young people in all their diversity in digital governance, entrepreneurship, and technology leadership.
- Re-shape opportunities for young people's access and use of digital technology, with attention to

labour and economic impacts.

4. Uphold Fundamental Digital Rights

- Protect freedom of expression, privacy, peaceful assembly, data privacy, and consent.
- Apply equality-by-design and a human-rights-based approach in all phases of digital technology development.

5. Advance Sustainable Digital Economies

- Develop and implement green digital strategies to reduce the environmental impact of ICT infrastructure and emerging technologies.
- Hold states and corporations accountable for sustainable and inclusive digital economies.