

# Why Regulatory Pathways Matter and Where to Focus Now

Governments and those working with them – private sector and civil society – are under pressure to improve online safety in a rapidly evolving digital environment. In this context, progress does not come from a single model law. Instead, durable gains come from aligning mandates across agencies, strengthening survivor-centered reporting and redress, addressing data and capacity gaps, and embedding prevention, including safety-by-design, into regulatory practice. Realistic, context-sensitive regulatory pathways that governments can take now and over time to reduce online harms while protecting rights include:

## 1. Re-Envision Public Sector Readiness as a Continuous, Collective Practice

Online safety governance is not a static policy domain. Technologies, platforms, and harms evolve faster than traditional regulatory cycles. One-off training or isolated centers of expertise are insufficient. What has proven more effective is treating readiness as a continuous learning process, supported by:

- Ongoing capacity building across regulators, law enforcement, courts, and social services
- Shared learning spaces that allow institutions to adapt together rather than in isolation
- Matrixed approaches that recognize online safety as a cross-cutting responsibility rather than a single-agency mandate

## 2. Layer Protections to Reflect Different Risk Profiles Across Populations

Online harms do not affect everyone in the same way. Effective regulatory pathways recognize this by layering protections rather than relying on a single approach. Child online safety has advanced most rapidly because it benefits from clearer consensus, definitions, and enforcement mechanisms. Adult online safety remains more fragmented. Regulatory pathways that gain traction tend to:

- Maintain strong, enforceable protections for children
- Develop tailored approaches for adult harms that combine prevention, redress, and accountability
- Avoid treating all online harms as interchangeable or equally solvable through content removal



### 3. Combine General Safeguards with Targeted Measures

Across contexts, women, journalists, human rights defenders, and marginalized groups experience online harms more frequently and with greater consequences. General safeguards are necessary but insufficient. The most promising pathways combine:

- Baseline protections that apply across platforms and services
- Targeted operational measures that reflect gendered patterns of abuse and risk
- Clear escalation mechanisms for coordinated or systemic abuse

### 4. Engage Commercial Technology Actors as Partners in Implementation

Platform power and data asymmetries are real, but treating technology companies solely as adversaries is not productive. Regulatory pathways that advance tend to engage the private sector as implementation partners within clear public frameworks, rather than as voluntary self-regulators or purely regulated entities. This engagement works best when:

- Expectations are procedural and risk-based rather than overly prescriptive
- Regulators focus on transparency, reporting, and prevention rather than content decisions alone
- Collaboration is anchored in public interest outcomes and accountability

### 5. Use Safety-By-Design to Align Incentives and Expand Adoption

Safety-by-design has emerged as a practical lever precisely because it aligns public goals with private incentives. When safety is embedded into design choices, reporting systems, defaults, and data practices, it can:

- Increase user trust and engagement
- Reduce downstream enforcement burdens
- Support safer adoption of AI, digital public infrastructure, and emerging technologies

## 6. Engage the Public Through Co-Designed Education and Awareness

Digital literacy, public awareness, and education are often treated as secondary or discretionary, particularly in resource constrained settings. The evidence here suggests the opposite: they are foundational to prevention and system effectiveness.

## 7. Build Public Demand as a Driver of Safer Digital Systems

Finally, public demand matters. When users understand risks, trust reporting systems, and expect safer digital environments, demand itself becomes a regulatory force. Regulatory pathways that strengthen transparency, usability, and public engagement help generate this demand. Over time, it can:

- Reinforce political will
- Support compliance and adoption
- Unlock more productive and inclusive use of digital technologies

Taken together, these insights explain why regulatory pathways are increasingly relevant. They offer a way to move forward without waiting for perfect conditions. They help governments prioritize coordination, prevention, and survivor-centered outcomes while remaining adaptable to change.