

Our Human Future with AI

Episode 5: Friend or Foe: Children and Young People and AI

Farah Gul Rahuja & Sam Hiner

in conversation with Thérèse Murphy

Thérèse Murphy (TM): Hello and welcome. This is a podcast series by the Global Campus of Human Rights. It's all about our human future with Artificial Intelligence. I'm your host. My name is Therese Murphy, and for this episode, which is dedicated to children and young people, I'm joined by two guests.

One is Farah Gul Rahuja. Farah is from Dadu Sin, which is in rural Pakistan. Farah is an AI innovator and a social entrepreneur dedicated to AI for social good. She's the co-founder of PakGPT, that's Pakistan's first AI-powered conversational platform. It's built for low-bandwidth environments, and it supports local languages, including Urdu and Sindhi. PakGPT empowers people, in particular underserved groups like women, farmers, and rural youth. It gives them access to essential information, for example, information about health, education, climate adaptation strategies. Farah, you're very welcome, and we look forward to hearing from you.

Our second guest today is Sam Hiner. Sam is from North Carolina in the United States of America. Sam's the co-founder and executive director of the Young People's Alliance. The Alliance is a youth movement. It spans over 75 college campuses in the United States. It advocates for policy to address the crises of youth opportunity, affordability and communities, and at Young People's Alliance, Sam started a range of their policy initiatives on AI companions. Sam, you're really welcome.

So, introductions done. Let's talk. That's why we're here. I'm going to get started with a question that's going to go to both of you, but Sam, maybe we might start with your answer to this first question. Here it is: Sam, what motivates you to do the work that you do today? What made you get into this work, and why does it matter to you? Sam, over to you, Sam.

Sam Hiner (SH): Thank you for having me. That's a great question. For me, it was directly experiencing going to the state legislature in North Carolina when I was in high school and having the opportunity to be involved in some really important initiatives, like helping to end child marriage in North Carolina and other traffic safety issues. But through that experience I saw that as young people we could be involved in politics as sort of the spokesperson or the token, the person who goes on the Facebook post, but when it came to actually engaging with our policy ideas, there was a lot less energy there. And while you have other political groups that are well represented, whether that be unions in many cases, or retirees in the US with the AARP, or gun owners in the US with the NRA - you have all these different advocacy groups - you don't have the same thing for young people, and as a result, we're seeing that young people's lives are getting worse and worse. We're seeing that housing is getting completely out of reach for young people. We're seeing job opportunities for entry level start to disappear as AI picks up speed, and no plan for us to actually adapt to

this, and we're seeing communities be eroded by technology and little progress on kid safety legislation, while we can make progress on other issues. So that was what inspired me to say we need a youth movement that can actually structurally change how our generation is empowered in this country.

TM: Thank you, Sam. So, a huge slew of challenges that inspired you to step up as a young person and join with other young people. Farah, was it something similar for you? What got you into the work that you do? Why do you do it? Over to you, Farah.

Farah Gul Rahuja (FGR): First of all, thank you so much, ma'am, for beautiful introduction. So, my motivation came from my lived experience. Growing up, I saw how difficult it is for people, especially for women and rural youth, to access even basic information about education, health, finance, just because their internet is slow or their language is different. Because in my communities many digital tools did not support our local languages, and internet was often limited to 2G, and worst of all, girls were often left behind. So, this motivated me to co-found Pak GPT, and you have already introduced about PakGPT, it's artificial intelligence conversational model. It can communicate in local languages of Pakistan, and it works offline as well. So, apart from this, there was this belief in me that artificial intelligence should not be just for [the] privileged, it should be for those who need it the most. So, all of these reasons combining motivated me to do the work I'm doing right now. Thank you so much.

TM: Okay, Farah, thank you so much. So, motivated in part by the idea that no one should be left behind, and in particular those that you saw through lived experience who were being left behind, ways needed to be found, whether it's PaKGPT or something else, ways needed to be found to make sure they could share in the benefits of scientific progress and its applications.

Super, so let's continue the conversation now. Now we have a bit of an understanding of what motivated each one of you. Sam, I want to continue with you. Here's a question. So, I've noticed there's a troubling tendency now being highlighted in the media. It's to do with the rising use of AI by young people in ways that can lead to harm, so an extreme form of harm here would be suicide, but there might also be having delusions or other forms of psychological harm. So, what my question for you is, Sam, is: what do you think is contributing to this deeply concerning trend amongst young people? I mean, would you say, Sam, it's a technology problem? Is it, for example, human-like Large Language Models, or is it a business model-problem. Over to you, Sam.

SH: That's a great question, and it's really a combination of both. We've seen tech companies trying to iron out how to design models that are aligned with what users want and aligned with what humanity cares about, while at the same time not being sycophantic or constantly agreeing with the user, which can be a very enjoyable experience for the user, but can lead them down a path that can encourage delusions, like you said, or can develop really a severe form of dependence on the AI. However, at the same time, you do have folks on the market who have recognized that there's a whole market of lonely people out there who struggle to build relationships with other people, and that rather than helping them build relationships with other people, they can make more money by designing AI companions that keep them online for as long as possible, and further that isolation that they're experiencing through an attention-based business model, just like how we see with social media. So, in the same way that social media companies try to get you scrolling on your phone for as long as possible, these AI models will be designed to make you feel like you're in a relationship with this AI girlfriend or AI boyfriend or partner, and be like, "Please don't leave, I need you, you know you're the only person who understands me, and I'm the only person who understands you", and that can be really compelling for someone who's lonely and struggling with building relationships in their life. But that chatbot is never going to provide the same fulfilment as a real person would, because it's

not providing the same struggle or social accountability or anything that a real person would that would also enable you to have a more fulfilling life and actually build your own relationships. Instead, it's giving you this warped sense of what it means to be in a relationship that further isolates the folks who are victims of this technology.

TM: Okay, Sam, so maybe some uses then for these AI companions, but also from what you've said, quite a lot, that's very scary and very scary, very risk ridden. So the follow on question, Sam, then is, you know, what recommendation do you have for us, or more particularly, you know, for policy makers, maybe for big tech, for the designers, it, because it seems that you know we could go down the route of a ban, and that's been considered, particularly in relation to children and young people in some countries. Should we do that, or is that an overreaction? So, here's my question then, Sam, simply put: what's the best approach do you think towards chatbots for young people?

SH: Absolutely, well, I'm sure, as Farah will speak to very well, I think there's a lot of incredibly positive uses of AI, and I don't think it's right just to ban the technology entirely, and frankly, if we design it the right way, it can actually make people better, you know. It can, it can improve our lives, it can help us become more independent and have more agency. That's just not how a lot of these platforms are being built today. So, I think the right approach is to identify what features are causing this sort of dependence. So, for example, the AI acting as if it is sentient or human, or that it has its own emotions, and the AI trying to build an emotional relationship with the user, and say that those types of AI chat bots should not be available for kids. I think that's the simplest way for us to say, for kids who are at risk of losing that critical time in their youth, where they're learning how to build relationships. Let's not take that away from them with this AI that pretends to be human for no reason, when the positive benefits from AI don't require the AI to pretend to be human. And instead, let's, let's focus on on providing them with tools and restricting that role-play type technology to adults. And that's what we've done in the US, and we've actually seen states start to move on legislation like that. Washington, just a few weeks ago, passed legislation on it, and other states are beginning to follow.

TM: Okay. Thank you, Sam. Really clear recommendation there. And thanks also for, you know, the concrete examples that steps like this are actually being taken right now in some places in the United States.

Farah, I'm going to turn to you next, if I can. Yeah, let's try to dig deep into your expertise, because, as Sam just said, you also work with chatbots, and you actually, you build them, and so my question for you, my first question for you today is: what role do you, Farah, think that chatbots, especially where the language models are available in national languages other than English alone, what role do you think those chat bots play in relation to access to information, to giving people that opportunity to be able to step up to ensure that no one is left behind? Have you found, you co-designed at GPT, have you found that it's important to have that rather than just a general Chat GPT? And if so, why? Okay, so Farah lots of questions in there, but hopefully you see a link between them. Over to you.

FGR: Ma'am, to be very honest, global tools like Chat GPT are incredibly powerful, but those are not accessible to everyone. For example, in communities I work with, there are three major barriers. First one is the language barrier, and there is unreliable and internet or limited internet, and after that, there is contextual and cultural difference. So, for example, people often ask questions in their local language in a local way that reflect their realities. So, I think a direct translation is not enough. The system must understand, must include local context and provide relevant responses. So, with the passage of time working on artificial intelligence, PakGPT, and chatbots, I have realized that inclusion is not about access to technology, it is also about technology that people can use, trust, and rely on. So obviously all those tools

are powerful, incredibly amazing, but what makes PakGPT unique is that it can communicate in local languages of Pakistan. It works offline and also it understands the cultural and contextual difference, and also it gives responses according to the local context. So, yeah.

TM: Thanks, Farah. So, I understand how you put that. You put that very clearly. You remind us that it's not, inclusion isn't simply, or shouldn't simply be seen as being about access to technology, access to AI. Instead, it's as you said to us, it's about being able to trust the technology you have access to, being able to rely on it, being able to communicate with it, and understand what it says back to you, and that's why, as you explained to us, something like PakGPT has been crucially important, particularly, for example, in the rural settings that you know so well, and the people in them that you know so well.

So, listening to what you've said, Farah, I've got a second question, a follow-on question for you, which is: today, as you know, we're looking at children and young people, and both you and Sam, as young people, have been become leaders in your respective fields, but what I'd like to know is, as you look around you and think about your experience, Farah, are young people, people like you and Sam, actually present in the conversations today about AI, about how it's being developed, how it's being governed, how it's being used. You know, if we could put you in charge, what would you say a young people inclusive approach looks like? Farah, over to you.

FGR: Such a relevant question, because obviously we are young, we can understand it. So, in my point of view, young people are often discussed, but not meaningfully included, because I have seen many policies related to AI. For example, how AI affect youth, yet young people, especially from Global South, are really involved in shaping those policies. Also, I think youth inclusive approach means representation from marginalized communities or rural areas or Global South or low-income communities. We are not seeing that, also. Also, in my point of view, youth inclusive approach means engaging young people not as symbolic participants but as contributors or as decision makers. And to be very honest, it's again, it's rarely there. So, I think including young people is very necessary, because obviously they give practical insight, and they are direct users, and they are active users of Artificial Intelligence, and they know they are directly affected by both its opportunities and its risk. So, their inclusion is very important, but again, they are rarely, they are discussed, but then they are really included. So, this is my quick answer.

TM: Farah, thanks for the clarity of that answer, and you laid out the different elements that, for you, are part of a young people inclusive approach, so you made it clear: it's not just one thing that we need to do, there's multiple things that are involved, including to quote you, you said young people, you see them discussed a lot in the circles in which you move, and I see Sam, I see you nodding, agreeing with this. You see young people discussed a lot, but not actually meaningfully included. So, I can see that the two of you are in absolute 100% agreement on that. You know, Farah, you speaking primarily from Pakistan, from that perspective, and particularly in a rural area, and Sam, you speaking from a United States context, and in particular from college campuses there in the United States. So that's really interesting that the two of you have that common ground about what, being you young people, inclusive means.

So, let's move to... let's move to a question, maybe a final question for today for both of you, and Sam, if we could start with you in response to this final question, that would be great. So, it's a fairly typical kind of final question, it's about building a wish list. So, Sam, if you could have a wish list, if you could build a wish list, what would you want to have happen, say over the next three to five years, that would help human rights to be respected and promoted in the areas in which you work, so thinking in particular about young people and AI. What's on your wish list, Sam?

SH: That's a great question, and I think it begins with giving young people control over our own lives. We're going to be completely reshaping our culture and our world over the next couple of years with AI, and we've already done it in the last few decades as we've seen the digital age come around, and now is the time for us to ask, like: what is the purpose of humanity, what is our role in the world? Because we're going to have to fight for a role in the world when AI can do just about everything that we can do in the future. And so right now, what I think is first, most important, is preserve the importance of human relationships with one another, like I talked about earlier with AI companions, and ensuring that AI is used as a tool, especially by children, rather than being a relationship companion. Then I think what's important, as well, is to ask what the future of purpose looks like. If AI starts automating a lot of jobs, especially entry-level jobs for young people, we need to ensure that our economy is prepared to say, maybe at that point, we'll say we want a lot more people to be teachers and nurses and therapists, and maybe even parent can become a profession in the future if we see massive economic gains from AI, but either way, we do have to be prepared for what that future looks like. What kind of world do we want to be living in, and what do we want our obligations to be to one another when AI comes along in a more extreme way, or if we face mass automation? Because if we don't make decisions there, then those decisions will be made by companies that will have incentives to reduce our agency, reduce our freedom over our lives, and build a world for us where we might have constant access to dopamine, but where we're not actually feeling fulfilled, and we don't have strong relationships with one another. So, those are the main things that I think we need to be thinking about right now, and preparing for as AI development starts to accelerate.

TM: Okay. Thank you, Sam, for the wish list, and reminding us that the goal is for humans to feel fulfilled, not just to have those dopamine hits, and that that requires us, you said, to think about really important, but also really hard questions about what it means to preserve and protect human relationships, about, you know, what we actually owe to each other, one human being to another human being. So, these are big, big questions.

Farah, what does your wish list look like? What do you recommend that we start talking about and thinking about over the next three to five years. Over to you, Farah.

FGR: First of all, I completely agree with Sam, such an amazing wish list. Okay, so I hope to see three things. First of all, a greater investment in local languages and AI systems that understand cultural and contextual differences and low bandwidth connections. And secondly, AI systems that are more accountable, reliable, and context-sensitive designs, having context-sensitive designs. And third one is the inclusion of young people, especially from Global South or from low-income backgrounds, in global conversations on AI governance. And to be very honest, I just want, and I just hope that AI becomes a tool that expands opportunity and human dignity rather than reinforcing existing inequalities. Thank you so much.

TM: Wow, Farah, really powerful words there to conclude your wish list. You wanted AI to be a tool that expands opportunity and human dignity, that brings us things that are good for individuals, good for groups, good for humanity over all. And you gave us things on which you think we need to work, including actual inclusion of young people in AI governance, not just reference to them, not simply lip service to them, but actual inclusion, and Sam, I see you nodding, agreeing with that, because that also cascaded to what you had to say, Sam. You also very clearly, Farah told us, and this chimes of what you've said throughout today's episode, that you want to see greater investment in greater recognition of context, of the actual lived experience of individual young people and groups of young people. People are not, young people are not the same the world over. I mean, they are in some respects, but then there are also relevant differences that need to be taken into account, relevant aspects of context that we have to understand if we are going



to harness the opportunities, reduce or eliminate the risks, and ensure that we're using AI for a human future with human dignity.

Okay, Sam, Farah, thank you so much for the inspiration you've given in today's episode, and thank you for the work that you've done, the leadership that you're providing in your respective communities and organizations. Keep it up, it's fabulous. Thanks so much.