



INTEGRATING THE RESPONSE TO CHILD MARRIAGE IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

A feminist vision for collaboration across sectors, and across the development-peacebuilding-nexus, for preventing child marriage and addressing the needs of married girls



PARTNERS

The Women's Refugee Commission

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC), a research and advocacy organization that works to advance equitable and inclusive transformative change for women, children, and young people in the response to crises and displacement, WRC serves as the initiative's coordinating lead and provides technical support to the research and consortium-building components.

Rozaria Memorial Trust

Rozaria Memorial Trust (RMT) is a non-profit that supports girls and women in East and Southern Africa through innovative initiatives that promote education, health, and entrepreneurship. In this initiative, RMT works to conceptualize and translate research into action with partners, fostering strong, local commitment and ownership as well as deeper collaboration and coordination.

King's College London

King's College London (King's) is an academic institution that has a large number of research projects, across all Faculties, which are contributing to progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. In this initiative, King's provides technical support to the initiative's action research on implementing effective child marriage programming across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and sectors.

NOVEMBER 2022

'[We collaborate] to acquire comprehensive, accurate, evidence-informed and appropriate information on addressing child marriage. We collaborate to gain in-depth skills on a range of topics that are important for us to know, including those that may be challenging in some social and cultural contexts. Our collaboration supports us to improve our analytical, communication and other life skills for addressing sexual and gender-based violence, child rights protection, and sexual and reproductive rights, to purposely improve the health and well-being of girls.'

– Grassroots feminist actor from Tanzania

BACKGROUND

In 2021, the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC), Rozaria Memorial Trust (RMT), and King's College London (King's) set out to engage feminist and women-led civil society organisations, experts, and practitioners to learn how best to enhance coordination and collaboration with humanitarian actors to expedite progress towards ending child marriage and supporting already married girls within and across the humanitarian system in East Africa.

This brief presents key learnings from participatory action research used to support an iterative process of reflection amongst 80 grassroots actors in Eastern Africa working with feminist or women-led organisations that engage in child marriage prevention and/or response efforts with crisis-affected communities in the region. Direct quotes from participants are included in italics throughout. The findings presented here focus on the critical nature of integrated responses that support structural changes to the humanitarian system to include development actors in child marriage response and prevention programming.

METHODOLOGY

The participatory action research process consisted of several stages, including a systematic scoping review to explore the effectiveness of existing child marriage prevention and response programming; online participatory workshops to identify core domains necessary to address child marriage holistically;

three rounds of structured surveys to identify shared priorities, divergences and gaps in practice; and qualitative interviews to explore nuances in reported gaps and priorities and divergences in response patterning.¹

Study participants included people working in Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda (unfortunately we did not get any participants working in Eritrea) who specialised in programming-related roles, such as design and implementation, with a focus on women's empowerment, gender and gender-based violence sectors. Through the research process, the voices and experience of these feminist actors and their understandings of gender transformation and patriarchy were elevated to advance discussions on durable solutions to child marriage that are equity-driven and culturally and contextually grounded.

SUPPORT FOR INTEGRATED APPROACHES TO ADDRESS CHILD MARRIAGE AND SUPPORT MARRIED GIRLS

'Collaboration is a road map to achieve sustainable development towards a specific goal. Through collaboration in sectors, we increase productivity towards a common goal, which is to reduce inequalities and achieve equal and empowered societies and communities that respect and protect girls and women rights.'

– Grassroots feminist actor from Kenya

The critical nature of integrated efforts—bringing together multi-sectoral and cross humanitarian-development-peace nexus efforts under one umbrella to address child marriage—was established at the early stages of the research. All study participants agreed, with 83.3% strongly agreeing, that multi-sector coordination and collaboration were essential for preventing child marriage and transforming gender norms. Participants highlighted a myriad of drivers underpinning child marriage in the region, including poverty, gender inequality, poor educational access, poor access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education and care, and conflict—all of which require attention to address child marriage. One participant noted that *'child marriage is a multi-sectorial challenge*

that requires involvement of a significant number of stakeholders and aspect from all the disciplines'. Another participant remarked that *'many health and social outcomes are driven by multiple determinants, meaning that programmes to address these health and social issues must be multipronged'*.

There was also consensus that essential approaches for working with, and meeting the needs of, already married girls (including subsequently single/divorced/widowed girls) must include a multi-sectoral and a multi-organisational approach. Needs cited by participants included prevention and response services to domestic violence, early pregnancy, social isolation and poor mental health, as well as access to education, marriage registration, justice and livelihoods. Married girls are likely to have multiple needs and risks based on intersecting risks and vulnerabilities (such as educational access, maternal health care and protection from violence). Integrated responses that bring together different sectors to meet the needs of married girls holistically at an individual and community level were considered critical by participants.

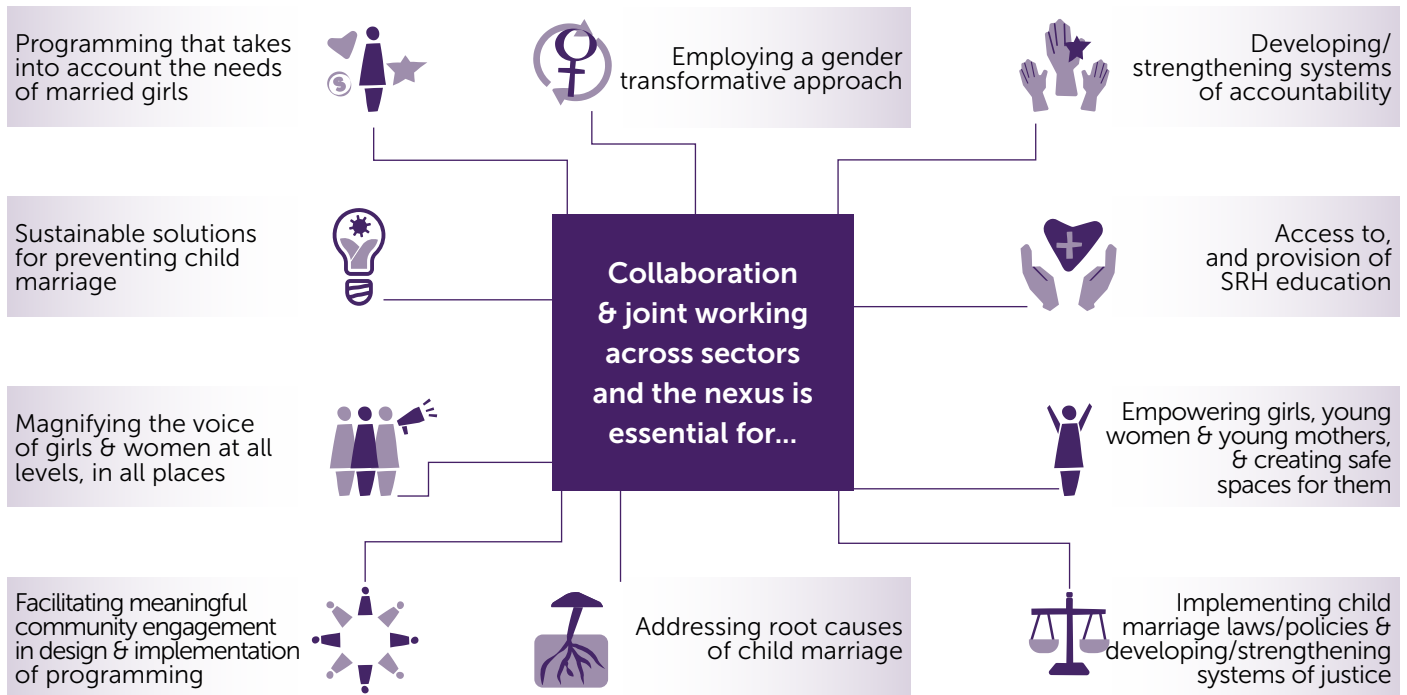
'We are just starting a new project in humanitarian settings and it is clear that effective implementation will require involvement of multiple sectors – e.g., those who work in health, those who work in social protection, government departments that oversee refugee camps, etc. And populations in the humanitarian settings themselves.'

– Grassroots feminist actor from Kenya

Effective integration requires coordination and collaboration across sectors as well as across the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus. It was noted that no one organisation can sufficiently meet the needs for even one married girl or girl at risk of child marriage, let alone the many millions affected across East Africa. This collaboration and joint working across sectors and the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus form the basis of integrated approaches that are essential for addressing the root causes of child marriage through gender-transformative approaches while also meeting the needs of married girls, developing and strengthening systems of accountability, and enhancing access to and provision of SRH services amongst others (see Figure 1).

¹ Further information on the initiative's multi-stage participatory action research is available in a separate briefing.

FIGURE 1. Collaboration and joint working across sectors and across the nexus



There was broad consensus among study participants that collaborative efforts to address child marriage, across sectors, should be prioritised to mitigate risk for adolescent girls and support the needs of already married girls.

Other reasons to collaborate noted by feminist actors include amplified efforts to implement programming across sectors, collective advocacy initiatives, evidence generation and sharing of knowledge and experience (see Figure 2).

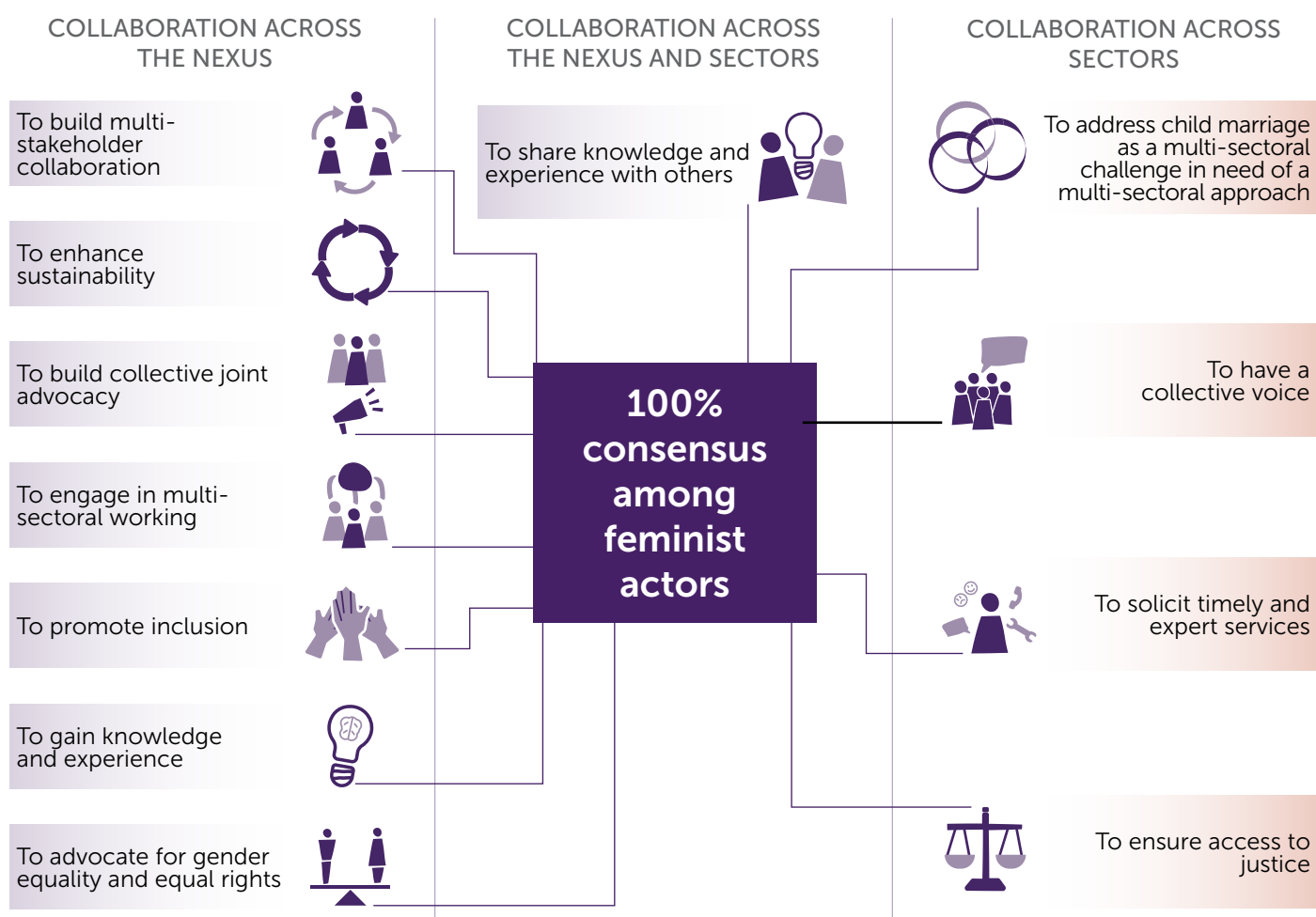
Collaboration can help fasten responses to issues around early child marriage, domestic violence and GBV cases. There is a need to strengthen coordination mechanism among regional, national and local actors through conducting annual, bi-annual, quarterly meetings to inform planning, monitoring and evaluation process. Inclusion of affected persons of concern in regional dialogues and planning can help shape collaboration in cross-sectoral levels.'

– Grassroots feminist actor from Uganda

While 'integrated working' is clearly desired and considered as essential by feminist actors for addressing child marriage effectively in East Africa, participants did not use the term 'integrated working' at any stage, nor did they describe frequently 'working together' with other sectors to design, develop and implement programmes and interventions or develop a shared agenda to address child marriage. Participants rather spoke about coordination and collaboration to share information, research and experience, to reduce duplication of efforts and to learn what others are doing. Participants frequently referred to working with others on advocacy campaigns and messages, but not necessarily with those from other sectors or across the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus.

Participants also spoke about the need for 'holistic', 'joined up', 'multi-level' working rather than 'integrated working'. While participants had a vision for integrated working, the different terminology used indicates a disconnect between humanitarian practice and grassroots experiences. Developing shared understandings and shared terminology which draws on the perspectives of grassroots actors is critical for humanitarian practitioners as they reach out to development actors for durable and holistic solutions to end child marriage and support girls who have already experienced child marriage.

FIGURE 2. Reasons for collaboration across sectors and the nexus



CURRENT STATE OF COLLABORATION ON CHILD MARRIAGE RESPONSES

The table below describes the current state of collaboration on child marriage responses as

perceived by participants. Improvement is particularly required at the national and East African regional level. Only a minority of study participants (under 40%) noted that collaboration is currently working well at any level, across sectors and across the nexus (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. Current cross-sector and cross-nexus collaboration on child marriage responses at different levels

	Perceived collaboration among participants		
	Working well	Sufficient	Needs improvement
Local/community level	37.2%	20.9%	41.9%
	27.9%	32.6%	39.5%
Sub-national level	23.3%	34.9%	41.9%
	25.6%	34.9%	39.5%
National level	18.2%	20.5%	61.4%
	16.3%	27.9%	55.8%
East African regional level	9.3%	18.6%	72.1%
	9.3%	32.6%	58.1%

LESSONS LEARNED ON COLLABORATION

Study participants frequently mentioned siloed working as a barrier to effective collaboration across sectors, raising concerns about 'lack of access or relationships with other sectors' and 'those in other sectors not understanding or appreciating the need for a multi-sectoral approach to ending child marriage'. Study participants also noted that their most functional relationships were with other feminist or women-led organisations, or with those in the same sector, as shown in Figure 4 below.

ENABLING INTEGRATED APPROACHES TO ADDRESS CHILD MARRIAGE

Participants noted several factors essential to collaboration that would enable integrated programming that effectively addresses child marriage across sectors and across the nexus (see Figure 5). These factors and their linkages to each other are discussed in the following paragraphs.

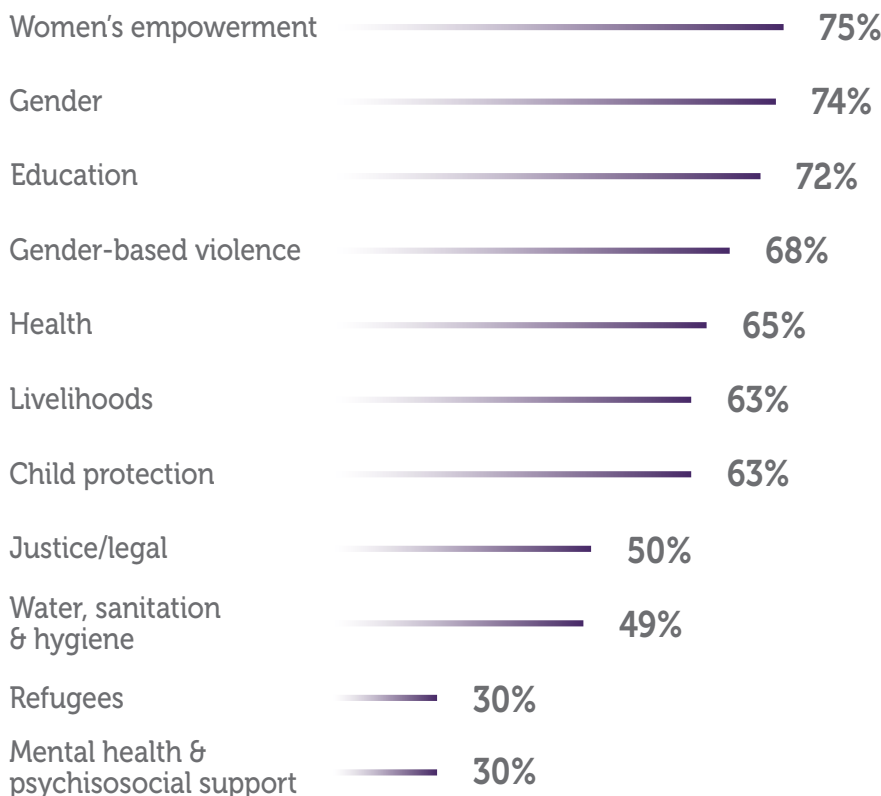
Agreeing and displaying a commitment to collaboration is particularly important for cross-sector working because it indicates to others that different sectors are openly engaged in working to address child marriage. Participants expressed the desire for sectors to engage with a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or another type of written

'...It should not just be the health sector talking, or education or child protection, but it should encompass everyone. So I'm looking at the question and we're talking about all these sectors should be at the same table condemning it or at the same table supporting the survivors and creating the space that is needed. And of course amplifying the voice.'

– Grassroots feminist actor from Kenya

agreement to delineate what issues sectors are addressing/collaborating on and the responsibilities of each sector. Establishing commitment also instils and nurtures a sense of unity and ownership which may result in increased engagement and budgetary allocation to issues such as child marriage. Participants associated the act of unity with having a shared vision or a common agenda, with one participant stating (see above) that 'working out of the vision and agenda across sectors' is critical to successful collaboration when working in humanitarian crises.

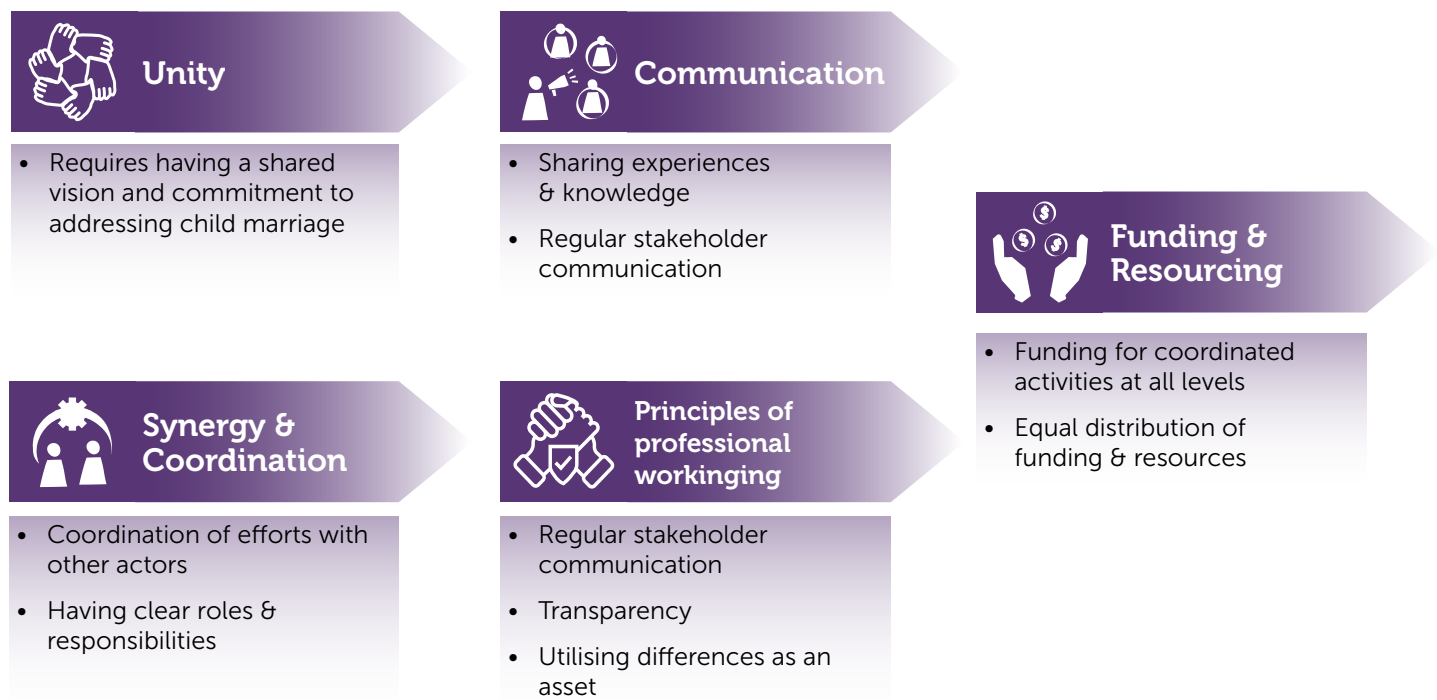
FIGURE 4. Relationships with other sectors that are working well/sufficient to address child marriage



Key Finding:

While there is potential for relationships across all sectors to be improved, for the grassroots feminist actors we engaged with, they note a particular weakness in their relationships with those working to improve mental health and psychosocial support and with those who work specifically with refugees.

FIGURE 5. Essential enablers to support collaboration across sectors and across the nexus



All aspects received 95-100% agreement

Synergy and coordination were referenced frequently in relation to cross-sector collaboration. Synergy is seen as essential to ensure efforts are not duplicated and that sectors are joined up in their responses. It was suggested that there should be a platform that *'brings together actors from different sectors to jointly contribute to programming from inception to implementation'*. The establishment of clear roles and responsibilities of each sector was also thought to be essential for supporting cross-sector engagement to ensure that all sectors *'know what they are doing and why they are doing it'*. Overall, participants felt that sectors should be more in tune with one another and that efforts to combat child marriage can only be strengthened through proactive coordination.

Study participants agreed that sharing experiences and knowledge is one of the primary reasons they engage in cross-nexus working. Additionally, grassroots feminist actors expressed that exchanging experiences and knowledge is a key enabler to support effective collaboration across the nexus. Development actors may have an established relationship with local communities and relevant stakeholders at multiple levels, which is valuable for humanitarian actors when responding to specific contextual issues or needs. Ensuring that there is not a gap in information sharing and increasing the reach of communication across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus is critical as actors may possess valuable knowledge

relevant to working within particular communities. One participant expressed that effective collaboration across the nexus includes *'having an active community of practice in the child marriage space. Learning what other partners or government agencies are doing to address ending child marriage'*. Sharing knowledge is also a key element of relaying important information regarding available resources and support across the nexus.

Regular stakeholder involvement is viewed as a key component that supports effective communication across sectors. Engaging in timely and frequent communication with stakeholders includes communicating with those at all levels impacted by or working to address child marriage (e.g., local community leaders, girls, activists, police officers, and ministries). The study found that grassroots feminist actors place considerable value on frequent, timely and regular consultations, reflective opportunities or coordination meetings between sectors. Regular communication was felt to include *'speaking with government agencies and partners in different sectors either about current needs of girls, or updates on how we are responding, and where the gaps still exist'*. Enabling and organising regular stakeholder communication allows for a sense of shared accountability amongst actors and sectors and reinforces commitment to action and integrated coordination.

LESSONS LEARNED ON COLLABORATION

While the study found high levels of consensus for practical mechanisms to facilitate effective collaboration across the nexus and across sectors, higher levels of agreement were given to the need for relationships built on trust, transparency and utilising differences as an asset. These principles of professional working were of considerable value to participants when collaborating with other actors and stakeholders. These principles were most commonly referenced in relation to engaging in collaboration across the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus, and this may be directly linked to the power and resource dynamics found within humanitarian and development contexts. In essence, it's not just what we do to collaborate, but also the nature of that collaboration which is equally critical to ensure that relationships and communication pathways are transparent and strong.

Funding and resourcing were mentioned repeatedly as key enablers to support strong collaboration in relation to multi-level and multi-sector working. Participants felt that there needs to be funding for coordinated activities at all levels, with a particular emphasis on *'funding to work at subnational, national and regional levels, especially for organizations working at community level'* as most coordination events are held in capital cities and often *'limit participation to the usual suspects and often not the young women and girls who have lived experience'*. Similarly, it is essential that efforts are made to ensure funding and resources are more evenly and equally distributed across sectors that are directly engaging with girls and married girls. An interesting reflection was provided from one respondent who felt that once the issue of resourcing

across sectors is addressed, everyone will *'believe and understand that saving a girl child is the right thing to do'*. This highlights the urgency for resource provision and availability to join up sector resources and shift the focus to supporting girls' lives and protecting their rights holistically.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

The study highlighted several critical barriers preventing effective collaboration across sectors and across the nexus. Participants often referenced the interconnected enablers for collaboration as the solution to the current barriers they face in their work on child marriage.

Inadequate planning for collaborative activities was a recurring barrier in relation to cross-sector and cross-nexus engagement. There is the sense that in cross-sectoral working *'interventions [are developed] independently of other sectors'*. This is a critical issue as sectors may approach the issue of child marriage with different perspectives and risk creating gaps in response and prevention work and duplicating efforts. When working across the nexus, attention needs to be given to lack of cross-border engagement and *'coordination of action at national level[s]'*. Differing priorities and the dominance of large or international organizations are key barriers preventing the coordination and collaboration of actors working to address child marriage. This is particularly challenging in the cross-nexus context as grassroots organisations feel that within the collaboration they *'provide very little in the relationship and big brothers and sisters bulldoze [them] left and right to undertake initiatives*

FIGURE 6. Barriers to collaboration across the nexus and across sectors



* All aspects received 78-89% agreement

that are not tailored towards the community needs' and often there are considerable difficulties to building trust amongst diverse and larger stakeholders due to a 'fear of the big players in humanitarian, development and peace-building contexts'. This study found that the fear and lack of trust among actors, and particularly

sectors, leads to intense 'competition', 'selfishness' and ultimately 'fragmented interventions' that do not sufficiently support community or gender-transformative initiatives.

LEARNINGS FOR ACTION

- Collaboration and integrated working across sectors, and across the nexus, to address child marriage is experienced as patchy (at best) across the region by grassroots feminist actors. Organisations/actors are most likely to actively and frequently collaborate with like-minded actors in their own sector. Investment is required in pioneering work to facilitate meaningful, inclusive and effective spaces for cross sector and cross nexus collaboration and integrated working.
- While collaboration might be considered as a necessary (or even optional) process to develop and facilitate responses to child marriage, engagement in multi-agency cross-sector and cross-nexus spaces, at all levels, was often considered as a type of intervention in itself for grassroots feminist actors; because of the opportunity this provides to advocate for gender equity, a gender-transformative approach and for the voices of girls and women to be prioritised and heard at all levels. At every level, grassroots actors use spaces of collaboration that include key stakeholders/actors/agencies to increase their commitment to ending child marriage and meeting the needs of married girls. Dedicated and equitable funding for collaboration across sectors and across the nexus is therefore required.
- Not all actors have equal access to the collaborative spaces, to information-sharing platforms, to conferences, networks or meetings and not all organisations have equal power, voice and influence in collaborative spaces, or when working together. Mechanisms that facilitate cross-sector and cross-nexus working must become more inclusive of smaller organisations with fewer resources, those based in rural areas and those with limited fluency in the dominant language (i.e., insert comma please English). This might include grants to fund in-person participation or strengthen online engagement, always providing translation, meeting over WhatsApp rather than Zoom or Teams.
- The amplification of girls' voices in collaborative spaces is critical and requires strengthening.
- The creation of Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) can be useful way to increase ownership and commitment, to help build trust, to establish a shared vision and common goal underpinned by shared principles, particularly as child marriage is not always understood in the same way across different sectors/actors
- Increased mechanisms for collaboration can create more transparency about what different sectors are doing, and plan to do and the impact of their work. This also increases systems of accountability, where sectors and organisations have to account for what they are doing to address child marriage. Complementary spaces for conflict management are also required to support these processes.
- Empowering governments to lead on coordination mechanisms at local and sub-national and national levels that bring together governmental and non-governmental actors from different sectors is critical for meeting their responsibilities to end child marriage as part of commitments made to the Sustainable Development Goals, and through the African Union.

