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Ending child marriages through young people's movement building: the case of community champions in Mutasa District, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Despite efforts made to promote gender equality in all spheres of life, women, especially young girls below the age of 18 years from marginalised African communities continue to face a plethora of challenges such as harmful practises and negative gender stereotypes which hinder them from realising their full potential. Included in these harmful practises is the abhorrent act of child sexual exploitation in the name of child marriages. There are several initiatives by different actors to end child marriages and Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) Africa Trust (SAT), Zimbabwe is one Civil Society Organisation (CSO) that has made significant strides in contributing towards ending child sexual exploitation. The organisation works to empower adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) to define their needs and undertakes various forms of advocacy including awareness raising and direct advocacy with key decision-makers. Interventions contribute to reducing self-stigma that disempowers adolescents and young people from realising their full potential. This article discusses an intervention that SAT has spearheaded in a bid to contribute to the end of child sexual exploitation and the role social workers can play to work with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as SAT in ending child marriages.

KEY TERMS: child marriages, child sexual exploitation, movement building, young people, Zimbabwe

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Child marriages, a gross violation of children's rights continue to be practised in Zimbabwe despite the various progressive laws, and regional and international child protection instruments aimed at child protection and to which Zimbabwe is party. It is often legitimised through social institutions such as Christianity (religion) and culture. The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 (CRC) and Children's Act (Zimbabwe) all define a child as any boy or girl who is under the age of 18. The protection of children primarily lies with the custodians of the child usually the parents, extended family members or legal guardians. As duty bearers, the state, through professionals such as social workers, also has a responsibility to protect children. Unfortunately, some of these child marriages are perpetrated with the consent of the parents/guardians. It is important to note that child marriage is any marriage carried out with a girl below the age of 18 years. These child marriages are a part of gender-based violence and continue to trap many adolescent girls in a vicious cycle of human rights abuse and negation of their reproductive health rights. This paper offers a glimpse into the complex issue of child marriages in Mutasa district, Zimbabwe, and demonstrates the transformative potential of youth-led movement building in combating this practice. Through sharing valuable lessons and experiences from SAT Zimbabwe's initiatives, this paper highlights the effective strategies and approaches employed by young people in driving change and promoting a child marriage-free society.

Overview of child marriages

Child marriage is most common in Africa especially in rural areas and among vulnerable socio-economic groups (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2012; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2014; Nguyen & Wodon, 2015). African countries account for 15 of the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage. For example, it has been noted that concerning child marriages, 77% of girls in Niger and over 60% of girls in Central African Republic and Chad, marry before they turn 18 (UNFPA, 2012). According to (UNICEF, 2016), if there were no efforts to prevent child marriage, the number of girls married as children would double by 2050, and Africa would surpass South Asia as the region with the highest number of child marriages in the world. Child marriage has devastating consequences especially on the girl child. A study by the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) in two Indian States revealed that girls who were married before 18 years were twice as likely to report experiencing gender based violence perpetrated by their "husbands" and girls who became pregnant under the age of 15 were five times more likely to die whilst giving birth and contracting HIV than women in their 20s (ICRW, 2016).

According to UNFPA in Zimbabwe (2014), 1 in 3 girls in Zimbabwe and in sub-saharan Africa is a survivor of gender of based violence. The UNAIDS Gap Report (2014) crisply asserts that child marriages are a violation of human rights that affects adolescent girls in all their diversity and this undermines the HIV response. The inter-generational "marriage" exposes girls to HIV infections and estranges them of their reproductive health rights. These harmful practices reduce the chances of girls reaching their full potential and their dreams thus increasing their vulnerability to a cycle of poverty, (Mabemba & Ntombela, 2023). Child marriage results in higher-than-average maternal morbidity and mortality rates for 15- 19-year-olds; higher infant mortality among their children; diminished capacity to responsibly raise their children to be productive citizens.

Key drivers of child marriages

By no way of justifying child marriages, there are some factors that pre-dispose girls to child marriages. Evidence gathered by Plan International and other global actors has highlighted that the fundamental causes that contribute to child marriage are multifaceted and interconnected. The causes will be different between countries and depend on individual conditions and social settings (Greene, 2018). Girls Not Brides and ICRW (2016) propose that causes of child marriage in all settings are rooted in gender disparities and detrimental social norms that diminish and limit women's and girls' choices. Gender disparities will result in gender-based violence (GBV) and detrimental practices such as child marriages, and female genital mutilation (Girls Not Brides & ICRW, 2016). Besides lack of policy enforcement, regressive cultural and marriage practices have made it difficult to stop child marriages in Zimbabwe (Chitakure, 2016).

Child marriages have been linked to a misplaced desire to "protect" the child. According to Fayokun (2015; 461), among the Hausa-Fulani communities in Northwest Nigeria, parents marry off their children at very early ages 'to ensure they marry as virgins and retain the family honour' and to protect 'the girl child from sexual assault and unwanted out-of-wedlock pregnancies'. According to Kanjanda and Chiparange (2016), most countries with history of war and conflict recorded high incidences of child marriage which was caused by the fact that parents marry off their girls to protect them from sexual abuse, rape and abductions by rebels. Although drivers of child marriage differ between societies and communities, gender roles and social expectations, fear of pregnancy before marriage, as well as prevailing conceptions about Islamic Law all contribute towards child marriage. A study by

Research Advocacy Unit (RAU) in Goromonzi, Zimbabwe, in 2014, found that society treated boys and girls differently, with more emphasis on the girl to fully preserve herself for marriage.

In Zimbabwe, evidence shows that child marriage or early marriage is most common among the christian white garment sect, also known as *Vapostori*, which is believed to constitute 1.2 million of the country's population and believes in polygamy (Sibanda, 2011). The sect places a strong emphasis on the work of the holy spirit. Its songs are expressed in dialect (vernacular) language and are claimed to be inspired by the holy spirit (Dzimiri and Chikunda, 2017). They are distinct in their compulsory shaving of hair by both sexes. In a study conducted by Dzimiri and Chikunda (2017), it was revealed that this sect occupies most districts in Mashonaland and the followers believe that marriages are approved by the holy spirit therefore cannot be disputed by anyone. Girls in this church are married off to older people at very tender ages with minimum education which cannot empower them adequately. In a Parliamentary Portfolio Committee meeting, one chief from Manicaland province of Zimbabwe and a member of the above sect was quoted as having said there is nothing wrong with marrying off underage girls (those below 18 years) (Sibanda, 2011).

Some examples of causes of practises that are linked to child marriages include, *kuzvarira/kuputsira* (pledged marriage). Mabemba and Ntombela (2023) assert that in '*kuzvarira*' mostly happens in poor families where they send off their young girls to wealthy families in return for food and money as part of the bride price (Chae and Ngo, 2017). The term *kuzvarira* refers to 'to be born for someone' and this is sometimes used interchangeably with *kuputsira* which means to 'break or throw away a child' (Muchenje et al, 2016; Andfansi, 1970:20). Pledged marriage is more of a barter trade, as the family of the girl which will be in severe poverty gives a daughter to a wealthy man who in return give the family food and money in exchange for her (Mabemba and Ntombela, 2023). In most cases, the daughter is usually very young and unable to make independent sound decisions. The pledged daughter is allowed to stay with her family until she is ready for marriage at which time the husband takes the girl (Chitakure, 2016). Mabemba and Ntombela (2023) argue that the wealthy family choose the husband among the family members (the girl is not given the chance to choose). It has been noted that in most cases, the girl is married to a very old man. Pledged marriage is among the practices which contribute to girls being married young because of poverty, traditional and cultural beliefs, and lack of proper law enforcement. Currently, such type of practice is forbidden by the law and most people are enlightened and no longer allow their daughters to such kind of practice. The practice is only found in remote rural areas of Zimbabwe where this cultural practice is still happens (Mabemba and Ntombela, 2023).

The marriage of children in parts of Africa and Asia is valued as a means of consolidating powerful relations between families, for sealing deals over land or other property, or even for settling disputes in which case girls are seen purely as commodities at the family's disposal. Feminist political theorists illuminate and question the power relations embedded in these seemingly natural institutions (Tucker, 2014). UNICEF (2014) notes that, across the globe, child marriage is highest in South Asia where nearly half of all girls marry before the age of 18 with one in every six married or in union before age 15. This is followed by West and Central Africa and then Eastern and Southern Africa, where 42 per cent and 37 per cent, respectively, of women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married in childhood. In some parts of South Asia, the practice of families using young girls for marriage to settle family feuds marriage is common. In Pakistan, the practice of '*vani*' requires giving away girls in marriage to relatives of murder victims as compensation for crimes committed or to settle feuds between families or clans.

Efforts towards combating child marriages

There are several initiatives that have been instituted to fight the scourge of child marriages. In Bangladesh, young girls have formed child marriage-free zones. In 2016, the U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution to end child marriage globally, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2016). This follows a similar resolution of the United Nations Human Rights Council (United Nations, 2013). Other regional blocs have also made strides in protecting children against child marriages. For example, in 2015, South Asian countries launched the Regional Action Plan to End Child Marriage. In 2013, the African Union launched the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage, which calls for the 'banning' of child marriage among member states (African Union, 2013). Many African countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, and Liberia have since adopted this campaign (www.girlsnotbrides.org). These examples also reflect the extent to which international norms and institutions are influencing child welfare policies and discourses in the Global South (UNICEF, 2016).

At national level, in 2022, Zimbabwe enacted a marriages law which expressly outlaws child marriages. The marriages act [Chapter 5:15] sets the minimum age of marriage at eighteen. Part II Section 2 states that:

(2) For the avoidance of any doubt, it is declared that child marriages are prohibited and under no circumstances shall any person contract, solemnise, promote, Marriages 5 Cap. 5:15 No. 1/2022 permit, allow or coerce or aid or abet the contracting, solemnising, promotion, permitting, allowing or coercion of the marriage, unregistered customary law marriage or civil partnership, or the pledging, promise in marriage or betrothal of a child.

(3) *Any person, other than the child concerned, who contravenes subsection.*

It is important to note that the Constitutional Court judgment of January 2016 directly made it official that child marriages are unlawful and illegal in Zimbabwe. This was a big milestone achieved in the history of child rights, law, and jurisprudence of Zimbabwe in ending child marriages (Mushohwe, 2017). Zimbabwe's Marriage Amendment Bill was successfully passed into law on 27 May 2022. The passing of The Marriage Act legally marked the end of early, forced, and child marriage in Zimbabwe (Mabemba and Ntombela, 2023). However, the law still needs to be fully implemented so that girls are protected.

Zimbabwe is a party to the key regional and international instruments that seek to protect children from harmful practices and sexual abuse. These include the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (the African Children's Rights Charter), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol), Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), all of which condemn the practise of child marriage. The 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act, 2013 makes it clear in section 81 provides for protection against child marriages. Child protection is also governed by the Children's Act.

With other 193 governments, in September 2015, Zimbabwe adopted target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals to end child marriage by 2030. At its 39th Plenary Assembly meeting in Swaziland in June 2016, the Southern African Development Community Parliamentary Forum (SADC-PF) adopted the Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage and Protecting Children already in Marriage (Matendere 2016). Traditional leaders are now also speaking out on CMs. In the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe, Chief Njelele of Gokwe South, Chief Mutasa in Nyanga and Chief Gambiza of Chiwundura have collaborated in rolling out programmes to end child marriage practices in their province. Chief Njelele has introduced secret alert facilities in schools. In addition to state led initiatives against child marriages, civil society organisations are also on board in the fight against child marriage. Organisations such as The Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust (AWET) advocate for ending child marriage in apostolic churches. Despite all the advocacy work done, policy frameworks in place, child marriages persists in high numbers.

Prevalence of child marriages in Zimbabwe

A UNICEF (2016) report indicated that in Sub-Saharan Africa 39 percent of girls are married before the age of 18 while 31 percent of girls in Zimbabwe are married before the age of 18 putting the country among four southern African countries with the highest rates of girl child marriages. Poorest households and those in rural areas are more than four times likely to have girls married before the age of 18 than girls from the 20 percent of the richest households (UNICEF, 2016). Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT) and UNICEF (2019) indicate that 33.7% of girls being married before they attain the age of 18 years. The same research revealed that 2% of boys get married before they reach 18 years.

In Zimbabwe, research shows that child marriage is not uniformly prevalent across different geographical regions. Child marriages prevalence rate was highest in Mashonaland Central (50%), followed by Mashonaland West (42%), Masvingo (39%), Mashonaland East (36%), Midlands (31 per cent), Manicaland (30%), Matabeleland North (27%), Harare (19 per cent), Matabeleland South (18%), and Bulawayo (10 %) (UNFPA report, 2010). According to Zimbabwe Demographic Health Survey Report 2010-2011, about one in every four teenagers aged between 13 and 19 had already begun childbearing because of religious beliefs, poverty, and cultural beliefs. As political forces in the 2010s bring religious fundamentalism, nationalism, and right-wing extremism to the forefront of global politics, feminist political theorists find themselves fighting for equality, reproductive freedom and for women's economic and political rights. The "Because-I-am-a-Girl" (BIAAG) report of 2012 confirmed that at one school in Midlands, ten girls in Form 2 and 3 left school due to marriage while in Mashonaland East, 13 girls dropped out of school for the same reason in that year. Kanjanda and Chiparange (2016) also note that, according to report by The Standard Newspaper (21 October 2012), there were increasing cases of girl-child marriages in Mutasa District in Manicaland province where nearly 50 girls dropped out of school each year and got married to older men. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2014), urgent action is needed to take solutions to scale and prevent thousands of young girls in Zimbabwe today from being married in the next decade. It is indicated that in 2010, 231,000 women aged 20-24 were married/in union before age 18. If the present trends continue, 246,000 of the young girls born in Zimbabwe between 2005 and 2010 will be married/in union before the age of 18 by 2030.

As a means of combating child marriages SAT has engaged in various initiatives to contribute to ending child marriages.

About SAT

SAT is a regional organisation with its headquarters in South Africa;. It has a presence in 5 country offices across SADC namely Zimbabwe, Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia ; over 30 community partners; and several regional partners. Country/local presence ensures partnerships and gender transformative, rights-based

programming sensitive to, and connected with local, national, regional, and international networks and agendas; and brings best practices in HIV/SRHR and to communities. SAT contributes to gender transformative systems for SRHR of Adolescent Girls and Young Women (AGYW) in the East and Southern Region (ESA) region, while the SAT 'Girl Plan' innovates girl-centred HIV/SRHR interventions aligned to SDGs 3 and 5.

SAT developed an initiative on AGYW champions movement building in a bid to build agency among AGYW to ensure that they promote the review of policies affecting their health and well-being. These young people have participated in SRHR platforms at their local levels engaging their local stakeholders to ensure that they are actively engaged and informed in matters affecting their health and well-being. This has been done to collectively bring together the voices of AGYW as part of efforts in building bridges towards inclusion and acceptability at the community level addressing harmful practices.

STUDY CONTEXT

SAT has also contributed to the ending child marriages advocacy efforts. Of particular interest is the work conducted in Mutasa District, Manicaland. The primary goal was to build a movement of trained young people who would stand against child marriages in their communities, and these would work with Victim friendly system (Police) and report all cases of child marriages. The programme was preventative in that it trained community champions to act as whistle blowers for any suspected impending child marriage and curative in that champions were also empowered to identify children who had been married off and report these to the police and social services.

About Mutasa District

Mutasa District is among the areas in Zimbabwe popularly known for child marriages. The area is characterised by harmful practices against adolescent girls and young women (AGYWs) which are fostered by religious beliefs. Against this backdrop, Mutasa District is largely dominated by the apostolic sect known as the "Johanne Marange." The religious sect is strongly staunch in polygamous marriages and marries off their adolescent daughters to older men believing that the decisions are inspired by the "Holy Spirit." The Sect prohibits some girls from going to school as they safeguard the girl's sexuality and virginity by practising child marriage. This Sect believes that when girls start to menstruate, they become women in the eyes of the community and therefore marriage is the next step towards giving a girl her identity as a wife and mother. This has seen many adolescent girls and young women succumbing to this harmful practice which denies these girls an opportunity to continue with their education, reduces prospects of economic empowerment and self-agency.

About the project

The project sought to build a core set of youth advocates who can empower other AGYW to be strategic and vocal about advancing an advocacy agenda that aimed at ending child marriages. The initial youth selected for this program were equipped on advocacy and supported to engage other youth in their communities, including their peers from the apostolic sect. This led to the establishment of a critical mass of young women who could stand against child marriages and act as whistle blowers for any girl that was suspected to have been married off. As more and more young people were enrolled as community champions, the influence and reach of the agenda also increased. SAT's movement building of young women in Mutasa District has rescued adolescents from these marriages and solicited support for them to return to school.

As the voices and demands of these young women were amplified through the advocacy and coalition work as well as through social media strategies, more local and national level policy makers became aware of the demand and benefits of protecting girls against child marriages. Connections were made by the AGYW to the community structures. The voices and advocacy of these AGYW managed to put a face to the practical realities of today's young women, and thereby address outdated norms, reduce stigma, and increase political commitment through the application of an evidence-based advocacy agenda on ending child marriages.

The case study

One of SAT's biggest assets is human capital in the form of young people. SAT engaged a robust network of 25 community advocates comprised of AGYW who received mentorship and training in advocacy and movement building. These were selected through a competitive process that was guided by existing community youth structures. A comprehensive needs assessment was conducted to allow the training to be responsive to the needs of the AGYW. Training was intended to sharpen their skills so they could actively interrogate existing policies on ending child marriages and hold duty bearers accountable where these policies are not being implemented. This core group of AGYW advocates represented a cross section of young women who would then increase their numbers by mobilising and engaging with like-minded organizations and individuals in the community for movement and coalition building. An increase in the number of organisations and individuals speaking out against child marriages would ensure that a strong movement was created. The AGYW advocates were supported to

engage directly with policy makers and duty bearers at the national, district and local levels, to advocate for more integrated service delivery and cooperation in initiatives aimed at ending child marriages. The AGYW also generated advocacy messages that were shared on social media and blogs. This enabled them to share their advocacy asks at multiple levels and to build regional solidarity for a shared agenda to improve the responsiveness of preventive aimed at ending child marriages.

In view of the Champions interventions on “Reducing Child Marriages” in Mutasa District, the champions went on a relentless campaign engaging local stakeholders and the traditional leadership including Chief Mutasa sensitizing them on the need to uphold the rights of the girl children and keep them in safe schools. A multi-sectoral approach was emphasised. The multi-sectorial approach comprises the Victim Friendly Unit (VFU) which is the police department responsible for escorting children for medical examination following abuse, explaining the ensuing process, and referring them to specialised clinics and working with the local social work department as well. Through the Champions model, the Mutasa district champions raised the red flag against this ill-practice and emphasised the need for traditional and local leadership engagement in a bid to secure the girl child future as panacea for social and economic development. They also noted with concern the need to deal away with these harmful practices and provide safe spaces to empower and develop agency amongst the AGYWs on their reproductive health and well-being.

The Paramount Chief Mutasa supported this initiative and took a lead role in championing the reduction of child marriages in his district and enacted by-laws as part of stringent measures to bring to justice any perpetrators of such violence against AGYWs. He also hinted on the need for the communities to be pro-active in supporting the girl children to continue with their education and to ensure that parents/guardians are supportive to this cause and shun such archaic harmful practices that continue to retrogress efforts in building an egalitarian society that has respect for the girl child just, the same as the boy child is accorded rights and freedoms to be in school and contribute to development of the society. Chief Mutasa is the patron in Mutasa District to ending child marriages. He has written an article on best practices to ending child marriages and has presented his paper in different national and regional fora. By-laws have been developed which spell out how child marriages will be addressed, and this includes the referral to the justice system.

The SAT AGYW champions’ initiative has built a powerful movement of dynamic young leaders across Zimbabwe who continue to champion SRHR issues for young people. The initiative has increased participation of other young people in the selected communities of Insiza, Bulawayo, Masvingo, Mutasa, Chiredzi and Harare who are now pro-active in championing gender equality and addressing all forms of child gender based violence. The programme has also enabled peer to peer discussions sharing comprehensive sexuality information and education resulting in increased knowledge from young people in the selected communities. The champions have been actively engaging local stakeholders such as parents, Health District Officers, Chiefs, Headman and the Districts Administrators among others to gain support in protecting adolescent girls and young women against harmful practices. The increased peer to peer engagement has built the capacity of more youth led community centred programmes where the champions have recruited other AGYW cadres in the community spearheading the fight against child marriages and other harmful practices. The movement building programme has shifted norms in how adolescent girls and young women are treated and valued at community level as they have become influential role models and leaders. These AGYW cadres in communities have taken spaces in the community council meetings making influence in promoting gender equality.



Picture 1: AGYW Community champions engaged in advocacy training at Mazvikadei Campsite. Source: Advocacy Training Workshop with AGYW champions at Mazvikadei Campsite (consent to take photos was granted by participants in the photo).

Working with community leaders

Traditional, religious and cultural leaders are the custodians of values and norms and for any meaningful development there is a shift of change of societal values and norms. Therefore, their engagement is the beginning of development. A buy in by these leaders goes a long way in the success of a development project. The leaders need to revisit their values and create those which support women economic empowerment and the proposed project. These were targeted with specific awareness raising and advocacy efforts including dialogue and awareness raising on the impacts of child marriages on girls.

KEY RESULTS

Building of a strong movement

A strong movement was established which created a protective web within the community. Movement building was the anchor of the programme. As more and more young people were brought on board, it meant there were more young actors who were on the lookout for child marriages. In a space of 3 months, 5 girls were retrieved from potential child marriages. The community champions had noticed that these girls had missed school at the start of a term. One of the key indicators that the champions were made aware of as part of their training was that, if a girl child missed school, they needed to find out why. When they did enquiries, it was found that the girls had been pledged to marriage. An alarm was raised with the local leadership and police and the girls were removed from the exploitative situation. The champions had also been trained on the importance of identifying support systems that would be necessary to support the children once they were removed from the abusive relationships. Social Services and the extended family networks were particularly important in this regard as the children required to be placed in places of safety. Social workers played a pivotal role in protecting survivors of child marriages in Zimbabwe by providing counselling and psychological support, conducting assessments and referrals to connect survivors with essential services, facilitating healthcare, and legal assistance, collaborating with communities, organizations, and stakeholders to raise awareness and challenge harmful practices and providing safe shelter and alternative care arrangements for survivors in need.

Increased reportage of child marriages

As a result of community sensitisation by the champions on the ills of child marriages, the community witnessed an increase in the number of cases that were brought before the Chief's courts and police. The buy-in by the traditional leadership was very important as it meant that the Chief would also raise the issues in his courts whilst at the same time reports were made to the police.

Increased agency by AGYW

As a result of the training the AGYW received, they reported feeling more confident to stand for their rights and to support each other in the prevention of child marriages. All the AGYW who participated in the programme were keen to go to school and had high professional aspirations.

Shifting community attitudes

There was a significant shift in attitudes around the rights and welfare of girls. Community, religious, leaders and parents started to shift in the way they viewed the role of women and girls. Group sessions with the community members showed a change in shift and attitudes with more appreciation of protecting girls and ensuring they attended school.

LESSONS LEARNT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

1. Meaningful participation of young people is key to changing norms and practices.
2. Engaging traditional and religious leaders is critical in addressing harmful practices.
3. Movement building is a key factor in creating change in attitudes and practices. It requires the participation and support of influencers and community leaders.
4. A multi-sectoral approach is important to ensure that children who were removed from child marriages had emotional, material and support including that of the extended family.

5. Social workers can play a significant role in engaging men and boys for positive masculinities is critical in addressing child sexual abuse. Men can be sensitized and be instrumental as champions of change in addressing harmful practices perpetrated against the girl child.
6. Sustained political commitment from policy makers and community leaders is critical in creating a conducive environment that respects the fundamental freedoms and rights of adolescent girls and young women.

The protection of children is a key function of the social work profession. It is important for social workers to be part of the referral pathway in the fight against child marriages. Specifically, social workers should:

- Provide psychosocial support to survivors of child marriages.
- Provide support to the police by compiling comprehensive probation reports.
- Work with NGOs to identify and place children in places of safety in circumstances where children are pre-disposed to abusive settings.

Declaration

The authors contributed to the conception, structure of the paper, contributed to discussion, and interpretation of available literature. The authors contributed to the development of the initial draft and contributed to the full article and the submitted version.

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