



GROWING UP IN KARAMOJA, UGANDA

Understanding child marriage and child labour

AUGUST 2026

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Abbreviations

CBO	Community-based organisation
CDO	Community development officer
CFPU	Child and Family Protection Unit (Uganda Police Force)
CCFU	Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda
FBO	Faith-based organisation
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FGD	Focus group discussion
FGM/C	Female genital mutilation/cutting
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPC	Integrated food security phase classification
IPV	Intimate partner violence
KII	Key informant interview
LC1	Village-level local councillor
LC2	Parish-level local councillor
MGLSD	Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PIDR	Participatory intervention development research
PSW	Para social worker
PSWO	Probation and Social Welfare Officer
UBOS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics

Glossary of context-specific terms

Bride capture	Traditional customary practice in which a man or boy (and possibly his friends and relatives) abducts a girl or woman whom he wishes to marry. Compensation and bride price are then paid or forcefully taken during raids by the girl's or woman's parents/guardians if the man or boy does not willingly come to them to express an interest in marriage.
Bride price	Traditional practice of negotiating and transferring assets (typically cattle) to the bride's family of origin as part of fulfilling a marriage commitment. Bride price is typically made in partial or full payments, with the marriage not considered formal until all agreed assets and customs have been accomplished.
Caregiver	Used to refer to the main person caring for a child. This may be their biological parent, but also a step-parent, extended family member or community member.
Cattle raiding/rustling	Stealing cattle, commonly from another sub-ethnic group, often through armed robbery.
Child labour	Work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to their physical and mental development (International Labour Organization (ILO), n/d).
Child marriage	Defined in Uganda's Children (Amendment) Act (2016) as "any union whether formal or informal involving any person below the age of 18 years for the purpose of living as husband and wife." Not permitted under Article 42A of the Act.
Edonga	A traditional cultural dance among the Karimojong people that is popular in seasons of good harvest. It showcases happiness, talent and beauty, and provides an opportunity for adolescents to practice courtship. It is popular on Sundays and on national public holidays and has become closely associated with risk of bride capture.
Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C)	The partial or total cutting/removal of a girl's/woman's genitalia, normally using traditional processes and tools. Attempts to curb it have been popularised, but despite anti-FGM/C government campaigns and policies, the practice is still traditionally practiced in parts of Karamoja (including prevalence rates of over 50% in some areas), especially on teenage girls among the Pokot and Tepeth as a sign of them being ready for marriage.
Hustling	Engaging in multiple jobs or informal activities to make an income.
Karachuna	Refers to the young male warriors or pastoralist youth who act as protectors of their community, livestock and culture. Over the years, the word has been used to generalise all pastoralist youth reformed from cattle raiding/rustling.
Kombucha	In Uganda, a locally-produced fermented tea made with pineapple, ginger and/or other fruits.
Komakech	Term used to refer to a perpetrator/promoter of child exploitation in Kampala who employs children, taking advantage of them for personal benefit, and is known for giving them heavy work. Komakech are also intermediaries associated with child trafficking.
Kraal	A mobile grazing unit where cattle are kept that is typically fortified and located in remote grazing reserves.
Natija	Kiswahili word meaning "outcome" or "result." In Moroto, Karamoja, the term refers to the livestock payment (often eight cows) used to validate forced marriages, usually without the girl's consent.
Western	In the context of this report, western refers broadly to areas outside Karamoja where trafficking activity occurs, including places such as Soroti, Mbale and Kampala. It does not refer to Uganda's Western Region (e.g., Kabale, Mbarara or Fort Portal).



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children in Uganda's Karamoja sub-region face some of the country's most challenging conditions, including the highest absolute poverty rate in the country (74.2%) and recurrent climate shocks that erode livelihoods and heighten food insecurity (UBOS, 2025; Woord en Daad, 2025). In 2023, 45.0% of Karamoja's population experienced crisis-level food insecurity and 112,270 children required treatment for acute malnutrition (IPC, 2024). In the absence of effective and consistent social safety nets, many families resort to potentially harmful coping strategies to meet their basic subsistence needs, including child marriage and child labour.

Recognising the detriment that this can have on children's safety, well-being and future development, AfriChild and the Freedom Fund designed a research study in Moroto and Napak districts of Karamoja to examine the drivers, dynamics and impacts of child marriage and child labour, and to analyse available protection systems. Using a mixed-methods participatory/intervention development research (PIDR) design, the study engaged a diverse range of stakeholders, from children and their caregivers to informal and formal child protection actors. Data were collected using 92 children's life stories, 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) with caregivers, 12 participatory workshops with children, five stakeholder workshops and 35 key informant interviews (KIIs). The qualitative data were complemented by a survey of 266 households, in each of which a randomly selected child and an available caregiver were interviewed.

The study found that households often turn to child marriage or labour to ensure their family's survival when faced with unmet subsistence needs and little or no access to social safety nets. Participants recurrently framed child marriage as widely normalised in Karamoja, particularly for girls. It is shaped by entrenched gender norms that reinforce the practice of bride price in which assets (typically cattle) are transferred from the groom to the family of his prospective bride. In many cases discussed by participants, marrying off a daughter was portrayed as a necessary, albeit harmful, economic survival strategy for impoverished families.

For their part, child participants consistently described child marriage as profoundly harmful, exposing girls to intimate partner violence (IPV), early pregnancy, psychological distress and lost educational opportunities. They also heavily emphasised that decision-making around marriage is largely controlled by caregivers. Since decisions are often heavily influenced by extreme poverty, this means that collective family and clan interests may be prioritised over a girl's best interests. Numerous child participants also voiced concerns that some caregivers seek to marry off their daughters not just to alleviate urgent subsistence needs but rather to increase their individual status or relative wealth. Reflecting child participants' generally negative view of child marriage, several of them said they had resisted arranged marriages, pushing for the right to choose their own partner or prioritise education. This resistance, while often not successful, suggests subtle normative shifts.

The study also found that 61.7% of child survey participants were engaged in child labour, including arduous work in mines, quarries, markets, agricultural and pastoralist work, and domestic work. Under pressure to meet household needs, especially during lulls in seasonal work, child participants also reported migrating to urban centres for work, at times under deceptive conditions that amount to modern slavery. Within the life stories and survey, child participants who worked in Moroto and Napak or migrated for work typically described harmful working conditions, including excessive working hours, hazardous work and limited or no access to education. They also provided numerous accounts of violence and exploitation in the workplace, including withholding of wages, sexual exploitation, physical abuse and deception, all further indicators of modern slavery. Reflecting the extent to which working conditions such as these can impact children's physical and psychological well-being, almost two-thirds of child survey participants reported frequent headaches, stomach-aches or sickness, and over half said they felt too tired to pay attention at work. Yet, despite this, over half (57.9%) reported feeling proud of their work, while many others demonstrated considerable resilience by providing for their families, starting their own microenterprises or using work as a means to fund their own re-entry to education.

Help-seeking was understood to be limited as child marriage and child labour are both widely normalised. Compounding this, child protection systems were also described as being vastly hindered by under-resourcing, limited service coverage, insufficient institutional capacity and reliance on customary justice mechanisms that may prioritise reconciliation over a child's best interests. As a result, child participants' trust in the child protection system was inconsistent at best. Nevertheless, there were signs that some community members, including children, are starting to challenge harmful practices by speaking out against or resisting child marriage and child labour. To achieve change, participants emphasised the importance of locally-driven interventions that draw on cultural messaging and approaches and are supported by community influencers such as religious leaders or community elders. Participants also noted a need for prevention and response programming that addresses systemic drivers, with particular attention given to strengthening the livelihoods of caregivers affected by climate change and supporting children's sustainable engagement in education.



Young women participating in savings group. ©Elijah Eeru/The Freedom Fund

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed to the Government of Uganda and civil society actors. A more detailed description of each is available in Section 9 of this report.

1

Address the structural drivers of child marriage and child labour in Karamoja.

At-risk children's access to education should be promoted through increased, targeted funding for schools in Karamoja, school feeding programs, support with school costs and supplies, programs addressing cultural barriers to girls' education and re-entry programs for out-of-school children. There is also a need to strengthen at-risk households' livelihoods and food security, particularly those headed by women. This can be achieved through income-generating initiatives, targeted economic support, the expansion of conditional social protection programs and the promotion of climate-resilient livelihoods through climate-smart agriculture, livestock restocking and skills training. Partnerships with local businesses can be leveraged to expand young people's access to vocational training and apprenticeships in decent work opportunities, alongside the provision of start-up kits, tools or seed funding and support for savings groups and cooperatives.

2

Work closely with children and community influencers to address harmful norms that sustain child marriage and child labour.

Positive cultural practices that promote child protection, such as songs and storytelling, should be documented and scaled, with child protection messages integrated into cultural gatherings and rituals to reshape community norms. Cultural and religious leaders can be engaged as change agents, while caregiver support groups can be established within existing community platforms, such as savings groups, and used to promote positive parenting practices. Structured community dialogue on the impacts of child marriage and child labour can be facilitated, alongside the provision of training, mentorship and resources to strengthen child- and youth-led advocacy (including survivor-led initiatives). School- and community-based settings can provide vital spaces to educate children on their rights, psychoeducation and trauma-healing approaches, and safeguarding.

3

Strengthen the child protection system's ability to prevent and respond to child exploitation in Karamoja, including improved coordination with civil society actors and community-based protection actors to ensure timely, survivor-centred responses.

Resourcing for the prevention of and response to child marriage and child labour should be increased through expanded national, district and sub-county budget allocations for child protection, alongside advocacy for longer-term donor investment and engagement with private sector allies. This can result in expanded response interventions and increased training and operational support for community-level and statutory responders to strengthen prevention efforts and ensure survivor-centred services. Strengthened coordination between statutory and customary protection actors is also needed to promote timely referrals, joint case planning and more efficient use of limited resources. Community-based monitoring of at-risk children should be strengthened, alongside enhanced coordination between sub-counties, districts and neighbouring Kenya to prevent cross-border trafficking and support safe return.

1. INTRODUCTION

For children in Uganda's Karamoja sub-region, childhood is shaped not by opportunity but by challenges. Widespread poverty, recurrent climate hazards and fragile social protection systems have created an environment in which basic needs often go unmet and children's rights remain unrealised (UBOS, 2025; Woord en Daad, 2025). Karamoja has the country's highest absolute poverty rate and is plagued by crisis levels of food insecurity. Almost half the population of Karamoja is struggling to meet subsistence needs, with many increasingly forced to resort to harmful coping strategies, such as child marriage or child labour (IPC, 2024). At the same time, insecurity from threats of cattle raiding, conflict and climate-related displacement continue to disrupt households' livelihoods and access to basic services (Interpeace, 2024).

In this context, practices such as child marriage and child labour are not isolated phenomena but are part of a broader survival response to chronic economic hardship. In 2016, nationally around one in three women aged 20 to 24 years were married before 18 (UBOS & ICF, 2018), with rates significantly higher in Karamoja (51.5%). Although reported rates have since dropped, Karamoja consistently records some of the highest child marriage rates in the country (UBOS & ICF, 2018; UBOS, 2024; CCFU, 2020). For many girls, this results in early school dropout, increased exposure to IPV and early childbirth (Malé & Wodon, 2023). Child labour is also commonplace in Karamoja and is used to support household survival. Yet, while these practices may provide households with short-term economic relief, they place children at increased risk of physical and psychological harm, including from sexual abuse, as well as reduced educational opportunities (FAO, 2024).

The Freedom Fund is a global fund with the sole aim of helping end modern slavery, including child labour exploitation and early/forced marriage. It focuses its work on hotspots, working in the countries and sectors where it is highly prevalent. In 2024, the Freedom Fund began an inception program in Karamoja sub-region focusing on child marriage and other forms of child exploitation. As part of its commitment to community-led and evidenced-based programming, AfriChild was commissioned to undertake a PIDR study in Karamoja that aimed to:



Enhance understanding of local drivers of child marriage and child labour, including the perspectives of affected children and their peers.



Capture formal and informal protective factors that reduce children's risk of being harmed by child marriage and child labour.



Inform strategies for strengthening child protection systems in Karamoja, providing actionable insights for key stakeholders, including policymakers, funders, and civil society actors including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs) and community members.

Reflecting the Freedom Fund's emphasis on child participation and survivor inclusion, the study gathered substantial qualitative and quantitative data from children aged 10 to 17 years, many of whom were directly affected by child marriage and exploitative child labour. Their voices present powerful accounts of not only their exploitation and impeded rights, but also their remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. To complement their accounts, the study also consulted caregivers and key informants living and working in the Karamoja sub-region.

2. THE KARAMOJA SUB-REGION

Karamoja, located along Uganda's borders with Kenya and South Sudan, is an ethnically diverse sub-region comprising approximately 11 ethnic groups across its 1.5 million population (FAO, 2024; UBOS, 2025a).

Despite the region's cultural richness, it faces deep and persistent structural challenges. Poverty is exceptionally high, with 74.2% of the population living below the national poverty line, more than four times the national average (16.1%) (UBOS, 2025). In 2024, Karamoja also had the highest multi-dimensional poverty rate in the country, with particularly high deprivation in relation to access to cooking fuel and technology, health insurance, housing materials and improved toilet facilities (UBOS, 2026).

The sub-region also experiences chronic food insecurity, particularly during the lean season between harvests when food stocks are low (March to July). This has been exacerbated by reduced crop yields and loss of habitat linked to recurrent droughts, erratic rainfall and floods (IPC, 2024). In 2024, 45.0% of the population in Karamoja had crisis-level food insecurity – up from 27.0% in 2020 – and more than 112,000 children required treatment for acute malnutrition, rising from 89,000 in 2023 (IPC, 2024). The viability of traditional herding, a critical local livelihood, is also being threatened by climate change (GARD, 2026). Eroding household and community resilience, coupled with few alternative income sources, has reinforced many households' reliance on humanitarian assistance where it is available (WFP, 2025).



Our family is very poor and no one has ever gone to school and even my brother... who went to school, died. When we plant crops in the garden, the animals/elephants always destroy our crops from the garden. Even... our father died, and again our mother also became too sickly.

Boy, 12, Napak



If it doesn't rain, there will be nothing else like food to be eaten in the homes. Even if you cultivate, the sun will affect [it] and nothing will germinate and grow.

Girl, 15, Napak

These socio-economic vulnerabilities are compounded by a long history of conflict and insecurity. While disarmament initiatives introduced by the state from 2020 to 2021 initially led to a decrease in violence, localised violence and cross-border clashes with the Turkana in Kenya continue, triggered by cattle raiding and competition over pasture and water. There has also been a significant increase in alcohol misuse since the disarmament (Tufts University, Feinstein International Center, 2022). Drivers of insecurity and conflict include climate change, weak natural resource management, proliferation of firearms, cultural norms, forced displacement and weak rule of law (Meyerson 2024; Conciliation Resources, 2024; Interpeace, 2024).

Against this backdrop, many households struggle to meet their basic subsistence needs. Children, who make up 57.0% of the population, are often disproportionately affected by resultant coping strategies (UBOS, 2025a). For instance, although illegal, child marriage remains a widespread coping strategy to increase household economic resources, particularly affecting girls. Across Uganda in 2016, 7.0% of women 20 to 24 years old were married by the age of 15 and 34.0% by the age of 18. In Karamoja, rates were even higher, with 51.4% of women 20 to 24 years old reporting that they had married by the age of 18. Although reported rates have since dropped, recent studies suggest children in Karamoja consistently face some of the highest child marriage risks in the country, despite the practice being illegal (UBOS & ICF, 2018; UBOS, 2024; CCFU, 2020).

Child labour is also widespread, with some children engaging in paid work outside their household from around ten years of age (FAO, 2024). Available national data show that 55.6% of 5- to 17-year-olds in Karamoja are engaged in work that constitutes child labour, rising to 60.2% when domestic

work that meets this threshold is also included. These figures are the highest in the country and disrupt boys' and girls' school attendance, leading to high absenteeism and low retention rates (UBOS, 2021). Only 23.0% of children in Karamoja remain in education through to Primary Year 7, including just 16.0% in Napak district (FAO, 2024). Further, about two-thirds (65.7%) of adolescents (10 to 19 years) in Karamoja have never attended school, compared with 14.4% of children nationally, and an estimated 74.5% of 6- to 12-year-olds and 70.6% of 13- to 17-year-olds were out of school in 2023 (UBOS, 2024).

Children's right to education is severely constrained by unaffordable costs and logistical challenges. For instance, 73.8% of communities in Karamoja are located more than five kilometres from a government secondary school (UBOS, 2022). These long distances impede access, as caregivers may be unable to spare their children for such extended periods, thereby disrupting opportunities for learning and socialisation. They may also be worried about the safety of children travelling such long distances, or whether the journey is even worthwhile if the quality of the education is considered to be poor and the students are not provided with meals during the school day. Further, many pastoral households have a predominantly transhumant lifestyle that requires seasonal movement. Because the education system does not offer suitable adjustments for these communities, schooling is often disrupted, especially for boys (FAO, 2024). For girls, barriers are even more pronounced, driven by insufficient menstrual hygiene supplies, disproportionate domestic work, child marriage, sexual harassment and cultural beliefs that limit girls' access to education (FAO, 2024; Stites et al., 2022). Children's impeded access to school is reflected in Karamoja's literacy rate, which is the lowest in the country (25.4% vs national average of 74.0%) (UBOS, 2024).

Despite significant challenges, children in Karamoja may also benefit from community-based protective factors. While 19.3% of children are orphans (having lost one or both parents) and 1.5% live in child-headed households with limited formal social protection, extended family and clan networks frequently provide critical informal support, particularly in situations of poverty, displacement or family separation (UBOS, 2024). Informal community-based initiatives, such as mothers' groups or community saving groups, may also provide support at times of need, while NGOs and CBOs sometimes offer assistance to re-access school (see Section 7).

2.1 Research questions

This study aimed to explore the following research questions to better understand child marriage and child labour in Moroto and Napak districts of Karamoja and to support the evidenced-based design of the Freedom Fund's hotspot program strategy.

- 1** What are local drivers and dynamics of child marriage and child labour?
- 2** What are informal and formal protective factors that reduce children's risk of being harmed through these forms of exploitation?
- 3** How can protection interventions and strategies be strengthened to better prevent and respond to child marriage and child labour and inform program strategy and activities?

3. METHODOLOGY

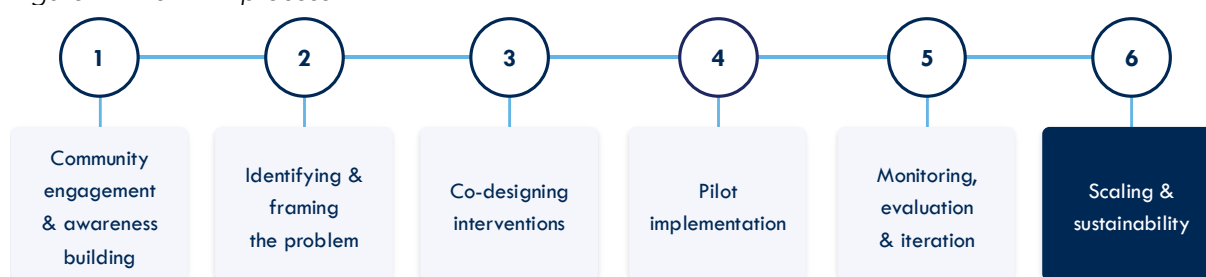
The study employed a PIDR approach, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to understand child marriage and child labour in Moroto and Napak districts. This approach was selected because it actively involves key stakeholders throughout the research process.

This encourages community ownership of the research and future interventions, while close collaboration with local leaders and youth advisors with lived experience of exploitation ensures contextual relevance and sensitivity. By integrating community values into the study design, the approach increases the likelihood that emerging solutions will be locally embraced, while the inclusion of targeted communities in data collection and analysis strengthens understandings of cultural and contextual nuances and increases the reliability and validity of findings (Cargo & Mercer, 2008).

3.1 The PIDR process

The study covered the first two stages of the PIDR approach (Figure 1) as part of a wider inception program focused on child exploitation in which local implementing partners and communities co-designed interventions, piloted implementation and began monitoring programmatic outcomes. The Freedom Fund will scale up the hotspot program through a larger partnership starting in July 2026.

Figure 1: The PIDR process



Step 1: Community engagement and awareness building

The research ran alongside activities supported by small learning grants from the Freedom Fund to six local implementing partners. To tackle child marriage and child labour, these partners carried out livelihoods interventions (with a special focus on climate-smart agriculture), economic empowerment through village savings and loan associations, awareness initiatives and school-based programs. The activities focused on participation by women and youth affected by child marriage, trafficking and child labour. Communities of practice meetings between the partners,¹ coupled with quarterly learning calls with each one, enabled partners and the Freedom Fund to learn together about approaches that were gaining traction in addressing root causes of child marriage and child labour. AfriChild held entry meetings with district government administrative offices to explain the study's goals and community members' intended role and to secure district-level research clearance. An 18-member Youth Advisory Committee was established covering Moroto and Napak districts. Members were selected based on gender, age (mainly 18- to 24-year-olds) and cultural diversity, and included some members with experience of exploitation. The committee advised on methodology, provided community context and history, reviewed research tools, assisted with participant mobilisation, participated in a workshop where they reviewed transcripts, guided the qualitative analysis and facilitated community entry processes.

¹ Partners were African Youth Alliance Development Organization (AYADO), Children and Youth Resilient Initiative for Localized Development (CYRILD), Grassroots Alliance for Rural Development (GARD), Karamoja Women Umbrella Organization (KAWUO), Nascent Research and Development Organization (NRDO) and the Straight Talk Foundation (STF).

Step 2: Identifying and framing the problem

Following efforts described in Step 1 to establish trust between all parties, the research problem and questions were agreed upon and data were collected. Various qualitative and quantitative methods, described below, were used to gather inputs from community members (including children and caregivers), Youth Advisory Committee members, community stakeholders and partners. These encouraged discussions around the causes, forms and consequences of child marriage and child labour, allowing community members to share their experiences and define local issues. Co-creating the research agenda in this way grounded the identified problems in local communities' realities (McIntyre, 2008).

3.2 Data collection

The study used a rich mixed-methods approach. In phase one, qualitative data were collected in Moroto and Napak districts through participatory methods, including workshops, life stories, FGDs and KIs (Table 1). Findings from phase one informed the design of a second phase, this one quantitative, which comprised household interviews with a child and one of their caregivers. A literature review was also conducted to guide the research design and enhance contextual comprehension.

The Youth Advisory Committee and partner staff and volunteers acted as co-researchers throughout the data collection process, co-facilitating workshops and FGDs and contributing to the preliminary interpretation of emerging findings. This ensured that experiential knowledge informed the research process and outcomes. The partners supported data collection following targeted training, contributed to the research protocol, assisted in designing data collection tools and provided feedback during stakeholder meetings. They, along with the Youth Advisory Committee members, were trained to collect quantitative and qualitative data and participate in data analysis.

3.3 Sampling methods

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants with knowledge or experience of child marriage or child labour. Key informants were selected to represent various statutory, customary and informal roles within the child protection system; these are referred to as "child protection actors." For the household survey, eight villages were randomly selected per district and all households with at least one eligible child (aged 10 to 17 years) were listed, adjusted for an extra 5.0% non-completion rate. For each of the selected 266 households, a randomly selected child and an available caregiver were interviewed.

3.4 Data management and analysis

An online data measurement platform, Rural Senses, was used to aid data collection and analysis. In addition to thematic analysis, the platform's processing feature was used to extract insights on specific themes, provide data visualisation and dashboards and draft thematic reports. Since slang terms and local dialects were not always coded accurately, a manual analysis of the data was also conducted and some interviews were re-translated if there were concerns about the quality of the translation. The research findings were validated in participatory workshops attended by key stakeholders, including representatives from NGOs, CBOs and local authorities. These helped refine priorities for addressing child marriage and child labour and identified practical, culturally sensitive and sustainable interventions. Additional bivariate analyses for associations between child labour and selected household characteristics were conducted using Pearson's chi-square tests.

Table 1: Methods, tools, target population and sample estimates

Method	Participants/ sources	Purpose	Sample size
Secondary data review	Policy and regulatory documents, grey literature, journal articles	- Map forms, drivers and prevalence of child labour and child marriage. - Review legal/policy frameworks. - Identify existing interventions and actors. - Examine cultural and social factors relevant to programming.	83 documents
Life stories	Boys and girls (10-17 years old) with and without lived experience of exploitation	- Capture individual experiences of different forms of child labour and child marriage. - Explore drivers and protective factors. - Examine cultural and social contexts shaping children's experiences.	92 children (41 boys and 51 girls)
Key informant interviews	Participants within the child protection system, including district officials, local leaders, NGO/CBO staff, cultural/religious leaders	- Explore forms and drivers of child labour and child marriage. - Assess interventions. - Understand cultural and social norms underpinning these practices. - Identify key actors and influencers.	35 key informants
Focus group discussions	Parents and caregivers	- Gather community perceptions on forms, drivers and prevalence of child labour and child marriage. - Assess interventions and protective factors. - Explore cultural norms and traditions. - Identify local actors influencing child protection.	12 FGDs (6-8 participants per group)
Participatory workshops	Girls and boys (10-17 years old)	- Identify local strengths, threats and community-led interventions. - Explore traditions and cultural practices as programmatic assets. - Prioritise feasible actions to address child marriage and child labour – methods include community mapping and problem tree analysis, among others.	12 workshops (20 participants each)
Stakeholder workshops	Cultural leaders, district authorities, NGOs/CBOs	- Validate findings. - Prioritise interventions. - Identify gaps, best practices and key actors. - Co-develop sustainable, context-specific strategies.	5 workshops of 20–30 participants
Survey	One caregiver and one child (10-17 years old) per household	- Quantify drivers and prevalence of child labour and child marriage. - Assess patterns of risk and protection. - Triangulate qualitative findings. - Support evidence-based prioritisation of interventions.	266 caregiver-child dyads ²

² Sample based on assuming a 20.0% rate of the key indicators, 5.0% level of significance and 5.0% non-response rate.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Mildmay Uganda Research Ethics Committee (MUREC-2025-778) and fieldwork approval was granted by the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (UNCST, SS3733ES) and relevant district local governments. Research instruments were reviewed to ensure they were culturally sensitive, age-appropriate and adhered to “do no harm” principles. Protocols were developed for responding to distress, safeguarding vulnerable participants (including adult survivors) and making safe referrals to child protection services. Adults were asked for written consent before participating, while children’s participation required their verbal or written assent and written consent from their caregivers. The study’s purpose, participation requirements and potential risks were explained in age-appropriate formats. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, would not affect current or future services, that their responses would remain confidential and they could skip questions or withdraw at any time. Data were stored securely in line with global standards for sensitive data management, and all identifiers were anonymised in datasets and reports to prevent identification.

3.6 Limitations

- The child marriage prevalence reported in the survey was negligible, suggesting the question was not posed in a way that enabled accurate responses. The low rates were likely down to desirability bias, given child marriage is technically illegal and differing understandings of when a child is “married” since “marriage” is traditionally considered final only after bride price has been fully paid, which can take years. It may have been more effective to use participatory peer-led data collection or proxy indicators (such as data on pregnant adolescents using health services), but even these approaches are likely to still be affected by underreporting.
- Caregiver and child survey respondents were disproportionately female due to women and girls being more likely to be at home during working hours.
- There were missing data for a substantial number of the survey variables. While in most cases this amounted to only a couple of missed responses, in a few cases the missing data were more extensive.
- Although the PIDR approach aims to reduce power imbalances, community power dynamics remained a challenge, with local elites (such as male elders and political leaders) often dominating discussions. Gender-sensitive facilitators, single-sex participatory group discussions with children and youth, and age-appropriate activities were used to counter marginalisation of women, girls and younger community members (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).
- Using community members (including the Youth Advisory Committee members) as researchers and data collectors encouraged participants to speak openly about potentially sensitive topics and promoted locally owned research. However, some of the data collectors did not have the required research experience and skills, while others took time to fully understand the study protocol and how to use the Rural Senses platform for recording the interviews and transcribing. To mitigate the risk of insufficient data quality, an intensive data collectors training was provided, coupled with intensive supervision during data collection.

3.7 Sample characteristics: Household survey

Child respondents had a mean age of 13.1 years, were disproportionately girls (58.3% to 41.7% boys) and most had both parents still alive (78.6%). Just over half were attending school (53.8%). Caregiver respondents were predominantly women (88.4%) and parents of the surveyed child (77.1%), with the remainder being grandparents, siblings or other guardians. The most common livelihood among respondents was agropastoralism (45.4%), followed by running a small business or being a trader (41.7%). The latter included small, informal businesses selling charcoal, local beer or small amounts of local produce. In contrast, the most frequently reported livelihood of the primary earner was trading or small businesses (53.4%), followed by agropastoralism (34.6%) (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of child survey participants (10–17 years old)

	Overall (N=266)	Moroto (n=137)	Napak (n=129)
Mean age (years)	13.1	13.4	12.9
Age group			
10–11 years	69 (25.9%)	24 (17.5%)	45 (34.9%)
12–13 years	91 (34.2%)	52 (38.0%)	39 (30.2%)
14–17 years	106 (40.0%)	61 (44.5%)	45 (34.9%)
Gender			
Girls	155 (58.3%)	76 (55.5%)	79 (61.2%)
Boys	111 (41.7%)	61 (44.5%)	50 (38.8%)
Functional difficulties			
No reported functional difficulties	212 (79.7%)	111 (81.0%)	101 (78.3%)
Reported functional difficulties ³	54 (20.3%)	126 (18.9%)	28 (21.7%)
Orphanhood status			
Both parents living	209 (78.6%)	104 (75.9%)	105 (81.4%)
One parent living	47 (17.7%)	25 (18.3%)	22 (17.1%)
No parent living	9 (3.4%)	7 (5.1%)	2 (1.6%)
Unknown	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.7%)	0 (0.0%)
School attendance			
Currently attending school	143 (53.8%)	74 (54.0%)	69 (53.5%)
Not currently attending school	123 (46.2%)	63 (46.0%)	60 (46.5%)
Reasons for non-attendance (multi-response) (n=123)			
Needed to work to help family	25 (21.1%)	17 (27.0%)	9 (15.0%)
Cannot afford fees	16 (13.0%)	8 (12.7%)	8 (13.3%)
School not useful for future	2 (1.6%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (3.3%)
Not interested in school	13 (10.6%)	4 (6.3%)	9 (15.0%)
Other	13 (10.6%)	0 (0.0%)	13 (21.7%)
Unknown	62 (50.4%)	38 (60.3%)	24 (40.0%)
Average days attended school (past 5 days) (n=115)⁴	4.5	4.5	4.6

3 This referred to participants who answered that they experience some difficulty in relation to at least one of the domains of the Washington Group Short Set on Functioning.

4 Twenty-eight (28) responses were missing and excluded from the calculation of the mean.

Table 3: Characteristics of caregiver survey participants

	Overall (N=266)	Moroto (n=137)	Napak (n=129)
Mean age (years)	40.9	37.0	45.0
Gender			
Women	235 (88.4%)	119 (86.9%)	116 (89.9%)
Men	31 (11.6%)	18 (13.1%)	13 (10.1%)
Respondent median age (years)	38 (30–50)	35 (26–45)	42 (35–51)
Relationship to child			
Parent	205 (77.1%)	117 (85.4%)	88 (68.2%)
Other (grandparent, sibling, guardian)	59 (22.2%)	20 (14.6%)	39 (30.2%)
Not specified	2 (0.8%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.6%)
Occupation of the respondent			
Agropastoralism	118 (44.4%)	23 (16.8%)	95 (73.6%)
Trade/small business	111 (41.7%)	89 (65.0%)	22 (17.1%)
Wage labour	24 (9.0%)	20 (14.6%)	4 (3.1%)
Unemployed/not working	10 (3.8%)	3 (2.2%)	7 (5.4%)
Pastoralism	3 (1.1%)	2 (1.5%)	1 (0.8%)
Occupation of the primary earner			
Trading or small business	142 (53.4%)	101 (73.7%)	41 (31.8%)
Agropastoralism	92 (34.6%)	15 (11.0%)	77 (59.7%)
Wage labour	29 (10.9%)	19 (13.9%)	10 (7.8%)
Unemployed/not working	2 (0.8%)	1 (0.7%)	1 (0.8%)
Pastoralism	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Average Household Size	5.4	5.5	5.3

4. INTRODUCTION TO THE FINDINGS

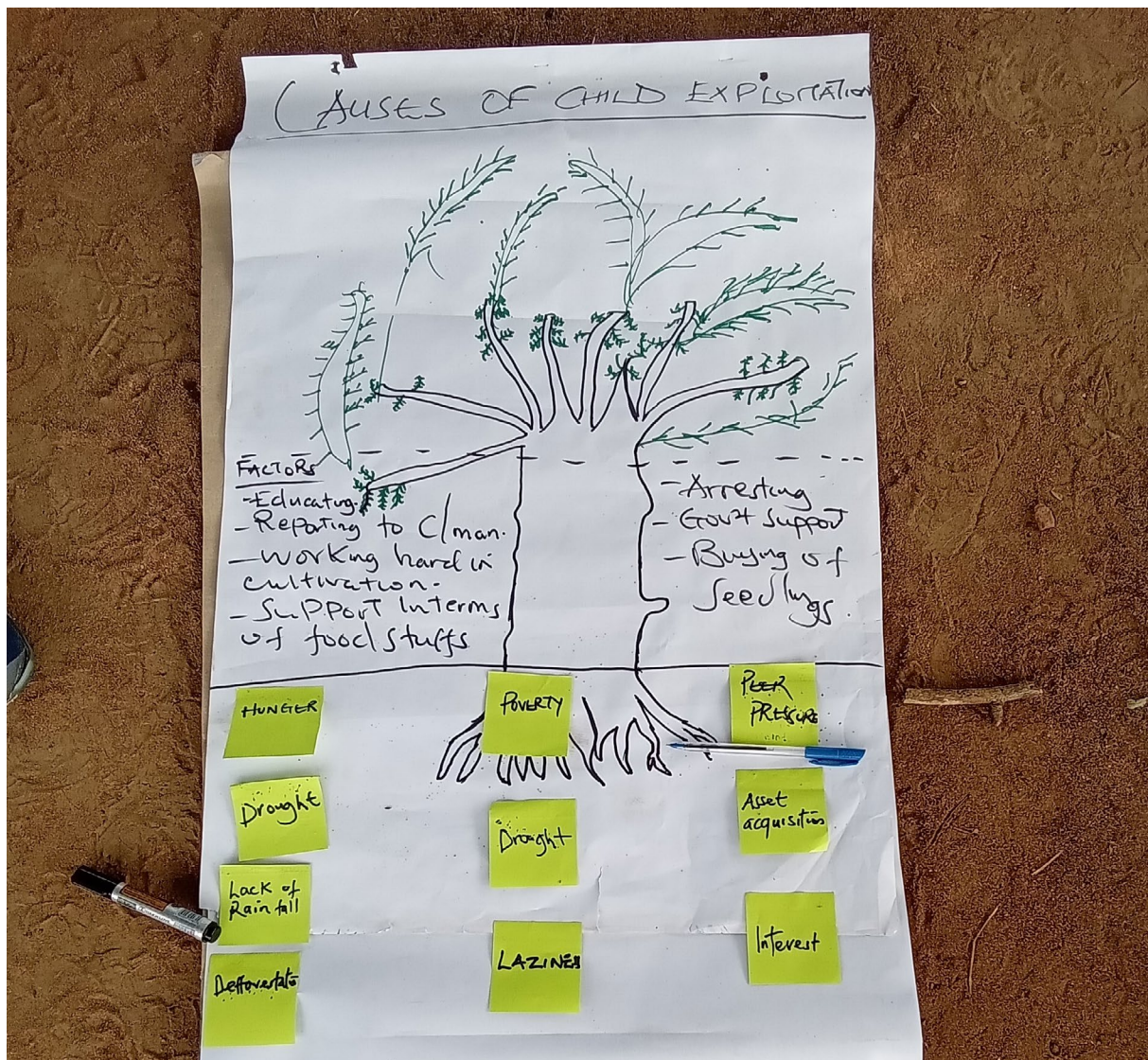


Figure 2: Participatory exercise on causes of child exploitation from children's participatory sessions (Boys, 10-14, Napak)

Although the study initially explored different forms of child exploitation in Napak and Moroto districts, two emerged as particular threats to children's safety and well-being: child marriage and child labour.



We have child labour here. It's too common. We have forced marriage... child neglect, we also have child trafficking.

Village-level local councillor [LC1], Moroto

As noted in Section 2, Karamoja consistently records some of the highest child marriage and child labour rates in the country (UBOS & ICF, 2018; UBOS 2024). Although the unique drivers of child marriage and child labour are discussed in Sections 5 and 6, several structural factors appear to be driving and exacerbating these protection risks, including deep-rooted gender and social norms that normalise both practices, and poverty and food insecurity which accelerate a child's pathway into marriage or labour.

While child marriage and child labour are both longstanding, normalised practices, worsening climate hazards and insufficient climate action interventions are eroding many rural families' already depleted livelihoods, exacerbating household-level poverty and food insecurity. Families are therefore increasingly left with few or no alternatives to meet their basic subsistence needs, heightening the risk that they will resort to child marriage or child labour as a coping strategy. These structural risks are further exacerbated by uneven coverage of child protection and education services, particularly in remote areas, and services that are not adapted to transhumant pastoralism. This leaves affected children excluded from key protective services, with little or no recourse if they are exploited or abused (see Section 7). In some cases, children's engagement in labour or marriage may also be driven by caregivers' personal interests, such as a desire to gain status through the acquisition of additional livestock. These differing dynamics, explored in Sections 5 and 6, provide critical information for child protection actors tasked with designing interventions that drive systemic change while also meeting children's unique personal needs.

Childhood in Karamoja

Most of the primary and secondary data depicted childhood in Karamoja as being fraught with challenges and protection risks. However, despite common challenges, such as systemic barriers to protection and climate hazards, it was also evident that children nonetheless experience different childhoods. For instance, a couple of children described a childhood where they attended school and their caregivers provided for all their needs.

“From the time I grew up, I have never fallen sick and even my parents have never failed to buy me clothes and food. The things of... violence, I have never experienced. Right now what is only stressing me is the issue of school.

Girl, 15, Napak

However, children more typically described childhoods where they worried about basic needs not being met rather than their school performance. Several described worrying about theirs and their family's survival, positioning themselves as “protectors” and “contributors” rather than “protected” children who are dependent on their caregivers. Boys also expressed anxiety about successfully providing for their wife and children following marriage.

“Whenever I go home [from work] for [a] visit to check on [my family], I find some with fever, others with cough. Other worries are on what they are eating tomorrow because even the money I send may all be spent on garden work for digging and weeding.... You wonder how they could survive tomorrow? You just have to wait for the month to end to get paid again.

Girl, 13, Napak

“...when I go to sleep, I begin thinking and worrying on what will I do to help my mother get [food]... or what if I get a wife. How will I feed her together with my family so that my mother can live longer.

Boy, 12, Napak

“I always have thoughts [about] advice from the parents about getting [married]. How will I manage to take care of the family and my parents are... very poor? It worries me.

Boy, 15, Napak

A 14-year-old boy from Moroto expressed a common concern among children forced into adult roles, saying, “It's because we don't have anyone to support us. I wanted to be supported by [someone] taking me back to school because I am still young and I am tired of hustling.” Thus, while some children experience a positive childhood, the challenging economic conditions and lack of adequate social safety nets mean that others are compelled to work or marry to meet basic needs for themselves and their families. This highlights the importance of careful targeting so that children at highest risk of exploitation receive available support.



5. CHILD MARRIAGE

Reflecting Karamoja's high child marriage rates, participants of all ages in Moroto and Napak districts framed child marriage as a normalised phenomenon for adolescent girls, albeit one that is not universally condoned. When caregiver survey participants were asked at what age people normally get married (Table 4), the most commonly cited age category was 15 to 17 years (Moroto 40.9%, Napak, 45.7%). Similarly, when child survey participants were asked at what age adults think a girl is too young to marry (Table 5), the mean age given was 14.8 years, suggesting marriage will be condoned after this age (Moroto 14.8 years, Napak 14.7 years). Echoing national data, child marriage was overwhelmingly framed by adult and child participants as an issue disproportionately affecting adolescent girls in Napak and Moroto districts, both in terms of prevalence and consequences (UBOS & ICF, 2018).

This normalisation of child marriage reflects deep-rooted traditional norms that frame child marriage as an appropriate rite of passage for girls and do not recognise age 18 as a meaningful threshold for adulthood or autonomous decision-making. In marriages where bride price is exchanged, unions are underpinned by generations of traditions, frequently linked to initiation and womanhood rituals that consider marriage as a "normal" and "respectable" mechanism for protecting girls (CCFU, 2020). Therefore, despite being associated with a wide range of harms (see Section 5.3.4), child marriage may be viewed as a way of preserving girls' moral protection and honour, enabling them to make an appropriate transition into womanhood. However, as highlighted within this section, the study found evidence of at least some shifts in attitudes and practices, such as girls marrying without bride price or children framing child marriage as an abuse of girls' rights rather than an acceptable traditional practice. As such, the dynamics of child marriage appear to be changing, presenting new opportunities and challenges for child protection actors committed to eradicating the practice.

Table 4: Caregivers' perceptions of girls' likely age of marriage

Age (years) at which caregivers think girls are likely to marry	Overall (N=266)	Moroto (n=137)	Napak (n=129)	Men (N=31)	Women (n=235)
Below 15 years	40 (15.0%)	26 (19.0%)	14 (10.9%)	3 (9.7%)	37 (15.7%)
15-17	115 (43.2%)	56 (40.9%)	59 (45.7%)	11 (35.5%)	104 (44.3%)
18-24	93 (35.0%)	53 (38.7%)	40 (31.0%)	14 (45.2%)	79 (33.6%)
Above 25 years	15 (5.6%)	2 (1.5%)	13 (10.1%)	2 (6.5%)	13 (5.5%)
Not sure/Do not know	3 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (2.3%)	1 (3.2%)	2 (0.9%)

5.1 Factors that increase a girl's risk of being married

Although child and adult participants both depicted “all adolescent girls” as at risk of being married young, certain factors appear to increase some girls' risk of being married younger than others. For instance, Pokot communities marry girls as young as 9 or 10 years of age, thereby highlighting the impact of ethnicity, cultural norms and context on child marriage practices (UNICEF, 2020; Eyoku, 2025).

“When you go to Pokot... even a girl of 10 years can be given in exchange... But when you come to these other areas of Matheniko, Bokora, Pian, [it is] 14 years.
Religious leader, Moroto

Physical development was also frequently discussed as a factor that influences when a girl is perceived to be “ready” to marry, with almost half (44.0%) of the child survey participants citing puberty as a sign of readiness. The qualitative data provided further insights, with child and adult participants both noting the importance of visible markers of development, such as breasts.

“I have not yet started developing even breasts. I still stay at home. No man has yet started approaching for courtship. It is what is protecting me [from marriage].
Girl, 16, Moroto

“When they say [a child in school has] reached that adolescent stage, as long as she has breasts, they feel that she's ready for [marriage].
Probation and Social Welfare Officer [PSWO], Napak

This was relevant for all forms of marriage discussed in Section 5.2, including bride capture. The finding aligns with research in Uganda that found that biological markers of the transition from childhood to adulthood often override chronological markers when determining sexual readiness. Girls' sexual development is thus prioritised over their emotional readiness to marry, and legal frameworks for protecting children from marriage risk being overlooked (Kyegombe et al., 2022).

Several child protection actors argued that younger girls with less knowledge and life experience may fetch high bride prices due to a perception that they are more naïve and easier to control. For instance, a Uganda Police Force Child and Family Protection Unit (CFPU) officer from Napak explained, “They say that when a girl is still young, she fetches more ‘bride price’ than when she is mature... They think that these young girls have not experienced much, lack knowledge and are the ones to be taught.” A child protection expert based in Kampala provided a slightly different perspective, noting that parents may seek to “secure” their daughters' futures by ensuring they enter marital unions and begin childbearing early because having children is widely regarded as a source of prestige and social value, despite the heightened risks associated with early childbirth for mothers and babies.

Table 5: Child participants' perceptions of girls' readiness to marry

	Overall (n=211)	Moroto (n=120)	Napak (n=91)	Boys (n=88)	Girls (n=123)
Mean age (years) that adults in your community think is too young for girls to get married	14.8	14.8	14.7	15.0	14.6
Perceived readiness for marriage*	Overall (N=266)	Moroto (n=137)	Napak (n=129)	Boys (n=111)	Girls (n=155)
When one feels ready	141 (53.0%)	74 (54.0%)	67 (51.9%)	65 (58.6%)	76 (49.0%)
At puberty	117 (44.0%)	72 (52.6%)	45 (34.9%)	45 (40.5%)	72 (46.5%)
After completing school	45 (16.9%)	28 (20.4%)	17 (13.2%)	18 (16.2%)	27 (17.4%)
After Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C)	6 (2.3%)	3 (2.2%)	3 (2.3%)	2 (1.8%)	4 (2.6%)
Other	6 (2.3%)	3 (2.2%)	3 (2.3%)	2 (1.8%)	4 (2.6%)
Don't know	40 (15.0%)	7 (5.1%)	33 (25.6%)	15 (13.5%)	25 (16.1%)

*Multiple responses permitted

Across the qualitative data, and mirroring national and Karamoja-focused studies, a further dominant theme was the portrayal of chronic poverty as a key driver of child marriage, with economically vulnerable households frequently described as being forced to resort to marrying off their daughters when faced with unmet subsistence needs (Kinyanjui et al., 2025; Malé & Wodon, 2023).

“The biggest issue is poverty. It pushes someone to say, ‘why am I staying without anything?’... forcing them to marry off their child.
Kraal leader, Napak

“[It’s] poverty that promotes child marriage, giving out young girls when we are still young.
Girl, 10-14, Moroto

Economic shocks such as loss of work, or changing family circumstances such as the death of household earners or family breakdown, were also characterised as possible accelerants of marriage. Child marriage was thus repeatedly framed as a strategy to manage chronic or sudden economic hardship by increasing household assets through the acquisition of bride price and reducing the number of dependent children. However, as discussed further in Section 5.3.3, although many children viewed child marriage this way, others argued that some caregivers were not using child marriage simply to meet basic needs but also for their own personal gain, a difference in motivation that greatly affected how children perceived individual caregivers’ actions.

Child participants also closely tied economic vulnerability to a further risk factor: loss of access to education. Girls’ life stories and data from the child participatory sessions indicated that girls are often forced to leave school prematurely, typically due to inability to pay for fees, school supplies and menstrual hygiene products, thereby increasing their risk of an earlier marriage.

“...when we reached primary four, some [of my peers] lacked school fees... They went to Busia... to do people’s work and for sure they tried until even now. Some of those boys have gotten married... These girls of the community... some have gotten married because there was no money for paying school fees.
Boy, 17, Moroto

“...if the girl reaches her menstruation and she has no pads or the parents didn't buy for her because the parents couldn't afford [them], the girl gets stressed and decides to go home and marry... Like if one is [menstruating] in school, the rest laugh at you because of the stained cloth... So these kinds of things make girls... resort to marrying.
Girl, 10, Napak

A child protection expert also observed that some people value uneducated girls over those who are educated, increasing girls' risk of dropping out of school and subsequently being married. This finding mirrors wider evidence of education being a protective factor against child marriage in Uganda (UNFPA–UNICEF Global programme to End Child Marriage, 2022; Malé & Wodon, 2023). Finally, girls who migrate to urban centres for work were frequently identified by children and particularly by adults as being at heightened risk of child marriage. This was typically explained by their limited supervision and protection from caregivers, both of which were associated with an increased risk of sexual exploitation or abuse and the formation of romantic relationships which could lead to informal marriages or unplanned pregnancies (see Section 5.3.3).

“...when [girls] reach there, they are always harassed at the workplace and they come back home. Some come back with even diseases, others come back with pregnancies.
Woman caregiver, Moroto

“When [children] go to the West, they grow quickly and mature... and they end up married... When they return, they tell you so-and-so got married. Now you wonder, saying, 'so-and-so married even when she was still young'?
Girl, 14, Napak

Yet, while adults typically considered migration to be a risk factor for child marriage, in some of the children's narratives it was also discussed as a coping strategy in cases where caregivers were pushing their daughters to marry. Since children typically described life in urban centres as presenting numerous threats to their safety and well-being (see Section 6.2.2), this highlights the extreme measures girls may take to avoid an unwanted arranged marriage.



5.2 Forms of child marriage

Child marriage is by its very essence a form sexual exploitation; girls are not old enough to legally consent to marriage or sex, families often benefit economically from the union, and sexual and labour exploitation are frequently present (Equality Now, 2024). The qualitative data highlighted that child marriage takes different forms in Moroto and Napak districts, from traditional unions negotiated by families to less structured unions where girls move in with their partners without bride price being paid. Linked to this was an emerging tension between traditional practices and changing social norms, with at least some girls questioning their lack of control over whom or when they married. This does not necessarily result in drastically changing practices or improved outcome for girls, as deep-rooted cultural norms sustain the practice while systemic weaknesses in child protection systems in Moroto and Napak districts limit effective prevention and response (see Section 7). However, the differing dynamics of child marriage do mean that girls' experiences differ, and these differences need to be considered when designing and developing prevention and response programming.

5.2.1 Marriage as a negotiation between families

Child marriage was most commonly discussed by participants in terms of a traditional process in which two families negotiate over bride price. Unions based on bride price are understood as a continuation of ancestral heritage and are often linked to initiation and womanhood rituals, underscoring the social legitimacy of the practice. For instance, a study by the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU) found that men and women in Karamoja viewed bride price as "necessary for achieving a desired femininity, and for bestowing respect and dignity in marriage to women" (CCFU, 2020, p. 17). Bride price can also act as a critical means of wealth distribution within communities.

Several participants noted that in some communities, girls as young as age 10 are betrothed to older men through the exchange of rings, bracelets, necklaces or strings.

“...a rich [man] finds a young child and he books [her] for his child or himself. He will make a child wear... those things that they tie on hands. The child grows while parents keep on teaching her... 'do not allow any man to engage you, you already have yours.' They wait for the child to grow, give the animals to the parents and they marry her off whether the girl accepts or not. It happens when the child has grown breasts at 10 or 15 years.
Boy, 14, Napak

“The man – mostly older – comes and puts a very expensive traditional necklace on her neck. [It] costs 60 cows to book the young girl but he has to wait until the girl grows up mature enough for marriage. They put on that necklace so that another man cannot engage her. She wears that necklace up to like 19 or 20 years old then she can get married to her old man.
FGD with women and men caregivers, Napak

In such cases, the betrothal is negotiated long before the girl is old enough to consent. In most discussed cases, though, caregivers were described as starting negotiations for their daughters' marriage once they reached puberty.

Once bride price is agreed, typically in cattle, the marriage is only considered final after it has been fully paid, with additional payment also traditionally expected when the girl is first pregnant (CCFU, 2020). For every child born before bride price is paid, the husband must pay a fine to his wife's family. A child protection expert noted that bride price can be paid in instalments, with full payment potentially taking years. This leaves girls and women with limited protection from their in-laws during this time. For instance, if a woman dies without bride price being fulfilled, her family may even insist she is buried at her family home rather than the marital home due to the marriage not being recognised. According to another child protection expert who participated in the study, there are also inheritance implications for children as they are not considered as "belonging" to the father unless bride price is fully paid.

Bride price negotiations were typically framed by children and adults as being predominantly driven by male relatives, although community elders and women heads of household were also mentioned as participating in the process.

“It is a father who [arranges the marriage]. The mother may be silent, but the main one is the father... [he] must first identify the boy and the parents of that boy and [decide]... ‘my child is already mature. Let me give out this child’.

Community development officer [CDO], Moroto

“Since [the husband] is the head of the family, all the decisions lie on him. But also women play some role... they know how to influence them, especially when it comes to child marriage... The husband asks to do this, and if she consents, the child is gone.

Labour officer, Napak

As discussed in Section 5.3.1, the children involved may be consulted, but decisions about who or when they marry were framed as often being beyond their control once families decide to negotiate bride price. Although deeply rooted in traditions, and being one of the main ways in which households can acquire substantive assets, children tended to speak negatively of the practice, framing it as one that benefited the family to the detriment of the girls’ individual best interests (see Section 5.3.3).

5.2.2 Marriages triggered by bride capture

Tied to bride price, numerous cases were cited in the life stories, FGDs and KIs of girls who had been married through bride capture, a longstanding traditional practice in which girls are physically abducted by a man or group of men without their consent for the purpose of marriage. After being captured, the girl may be forced to have sex with her intended “husband,” whom she may or may not know, or the families of the girl and the man who captured her may first negotiate compensation and bride price.

“Forcing children to get married when they are still young [is common here] because they already planned earlier with your father. The old man can say, ‘I need your daughter’ and then the parent of the girl says, ‘how many cows are there?’. And then the man says, ‘there are ten cows’... [the parent] will ask you if you want that man. If you say you don’t want [him]... they will send you like... to the borehole... The man will hide [behind a tamarind tree] and when he sees you, immediately [puts] the jerry can on your head. Then he grabs you and you are [abducted].

Girl, 15-17, Napak

A child protection expert confirmed that caregivers sometimes agree for their daughters to be captured without her knowledge in cases where they have already started to negotiate bride price or have been receiving gifts incrementally from a prospective husband. Bride capture may also occur without the family’s or girl’s prior knowledge, in cases where a man desires a girl and arranges to take her as a wife by force. The expert went on to observe that despite now being illegal, bride capture remains a longstanding cultural practice in Karamoja and is widely understood as a legitimate way of acquiring a wife (CCFU, 2020; Akumu & Nguyen, 2023).

Highlighting the extent to which it is still practiced, numerous child and adult participants could describe specific local cases of bride capture, a scenario one para social worker (PSW) in Moroto described as “so common.” High risk places or times for bride capture that were mentioned several times included roadsides during market days, after Sunday prayers and during traditional dances (Edonga), even though Edonga ordinances (community rules) have been introduced to stop the practice in some sub-counties. Girls were also seen as being at risk of bride capture when working outside their homestead, such as collecting firewood or wild gathering of fruit or vegetables.

“...those days of traditional jumping (Edonga), they forced my friend into marriage when she did not want, she even wanted to commit suicide and even to die until they talked to her and they said stay even if it is returning you to school, they will take you to school also. She also accepted and stayed at home until the Millennium program came and they were registered, and she was taken back to school. Yes, she was returned to school.
Boy, 17, Napak

“...here in our communities, we always have that forced marriage. A girl is being caught, maybe when she is just [out] to get firewood from now the mountain, maybe when she is just in the garden. She is forced from the other side, she is taken.
Clan leader, Moroto

While children and child protection actors, in particular, framed bride capture as a form of forced marriage, a social worker with an NGO from Napak argued that while seen as a “process of marriage,” it is “simply rape” due to the girls’ lack of consent.

When reflecting on what normally happens after a girl has been captured (Table 6), 52.3% of child survey participants said that she would marry the man and 42.1% mentioned that bride price negotiations would commence. Only 24.4% of participants said they would expect authorities to be informed. A report by CCFU (2020) noted that the girls’ feelings may be considered when determining next steps, with marriage being suggested in cases where the girl “loves” the man. However, in the qualitative data, participants routinely said that girls are expected to marry their abductors, even if they did not wish to do so, thus subjecting the girl to further abuse and exploitation.

“[Following bride capture]... when you are [a] child and you try to refuse your parents’ sweet talk, you find when they have already accepted the cows and they have been given their livestock... you are forced to accept that man.
Boy, 17, Napak

Several child protection actors noted that compensation will be expected after bride capture, as well as bride price, with compensation amounts of up to eight cows mentioned that reflected other studies (CCFU, 2020). However, a child protection expert noted that the amount of compensation varies, depending on the groom’s economic situation.

Table 6: Child participants’ responses to bride capture

What normally happens when a girl has been captured by a boy/man?*	Overall (N=266)	Moroto (n=137)	Napak (n=129)	Boys (n=111)	Girls (n=153)
The girl’s family will receive a bride price and the girl marries the man	139 (52.3%)	77 (56.2%)	62 (48.1%)	57 (51.4%)	82 (52.9%)
Bride price negotiations to determine if a marriage will occur	112 (42.1%)	58 (42.3%)	54 (41.9%)	42 (37.8%)	70 (45.2%)
The girl escapes from the man’s home	73 (27.4%)	35 (25.5%)	38 (29.5%)	25 (22.5%)	48 (31.0%)
The girl or her family will report to authorities	65 (24.4%)	36 (26.3%)	29 (22.5%)	25 (22.5%)	40 (25.8%)
The girl’s family will refuse to allow the marriage	38 (14.3%)	17 (12.4%)	21 (16.3%)	13 (11.7%)	25 (16.1%)
Other	7 (2.6%)	6 (4.4%)	1 (0.8%)	4 (3.6%)	3 (1.9%)
Don’t know	28 (10.5%)	6 (4.4%)	22 (17.1%)	12 (10.8%)	16 (10.3%)

*Multiple responses permitted

5.2.3 Marriages that occur outside the traditional negotiations

Although child marriage was most frequently discussed in terms of bride price and bride capture, discussions also included marriages that occurred outside formal negotiations.

“If they have been secretly in a relationship without telling the parents that she is in a relationship with the son of so-and-so then they end up marrying.
Girl, 10, Napak

“[Not supporting one's child will] make the girl child just move away and get a man at an early age... Then when she gets pregnant, she starts suffering there. Even the man beats her... when she comes back to her parents they will say, 'You got your man on your own. We didn't force you to marry him'.
Woman caregiver, Napak

This mirrors findings from a report by CCFU (2020, p. 16), where elders noted that in Karamoja, girls “increasingly meet their potential husbands at school or at work in the city. They then no longer involve elders in finding out about each other's family, they may start cohabiting and even marry without a customary marriage.” However, given the significant social value placed on marriage, cohabiting couples may still describe themselves as married.

When reflecting on this deviation from traditional practices, participants tended to discuss marriages initiated by children with less empathy. As indicated by the quote above, some adults framed arranged marriages as offering greater protection due to the girl's family “vetting” her potential husband. While children did not necessarily agree that their best interests were prioritised when husbands were chosen (see Section 5.3.3), deviating from traditional practices means that girls may be blamed if their husbands are abusive or unable to provide for their family. A child protection expert noted that a further risk of non-arranged unions is that they may attract curses from the girl's caregivers, which are believed to detrimentally affect the girl and the marriage.

Cases were also discussed where girls married after becoming pregnant within the context of a relationship.

“There was a boy who had impregnated a girl and even denied that he was the one responsible. Now the parents of the girl reported the matter to police... The boy accepted that he was the one responsible for the pregnancy, and yet the girl was saying the boy was not the one responsible. So, there was some bit of confusion. So, they told them to go back to the village and sort out their issues with the chairman.
Woman caregiver, Moroto

“Some children marry with the hope of getting support from the men but after getting pregnant, these men show their true colours and leave these girls to fend for themselves and end up suffering.
FGD with women and men caregivers, Napak

Other cases were cited where girls had become pregnant after being raped or subjected to sexual exploitation, particularly transactional sexual abuse.

“[My friend asked] me to go with her to meet the boyfriends to sleep with in exchange for money... at the end she conceived and the woman she was staying with chased her away from her home saying she can't manage to take care of her with her pregnancy. She returned home.
Girl, 15, Napak

Getting pregnant outside marriage traditionally carried considerable stigma. However, pregnancy outside marriage is no longer universally stigmatised in many communities as norms are subtly shifting, especially at the national level. However, highlighting that informal marriages afford girls and any resultant children less protection, in several cited cases girls moved in with their partner

after becoming pregnant, only for him to abandon them and their baby. Thus, as illustrated in the earlier quote, some caregivers still try to limit the resultant social and economic harm of unplanned pregnancies by negotiating with the spouse's family to formalise the union.

Marriages that occur outside formal negotiations were most commonly explained in terms of girls' labour migration and reduced parental supervision, or framed as "bad" behaviour. However, several adult and child participants also discussed the role of social media and peers who travel to urban centres in encouraging informal unions, with both described as introducing external influences that encourage deviation from local customs and norms.

 *...social media has spoiled [children]. You find they make their own decisions with their peers and then also go for exploitation.*
CDO, Napak

 *Some children see other big girls getting married, and they also say they want to get married because of the peer influence.*
Boy, 10-14, Napak

A child protection expert also noted that some girls simply choose to marry their boyfriend, explaining that there have been cases of girls and their boyfriends actually arranging bride capture themselves so that they will be "forced" to marry. In such cases, they use traditional practices to ensure they are not married to anyone else, a strategic action that gives them greater power over their futures.

5.3 Key dynamics and effects of child marriage in Karamoja

5.3.1 Girls' involvement in decision-making processes

In cases of traditional negotiation, including after bride capture, girls were typically framed as being largely excluded from decision-making relating to their own marriages. This reflects broader gender norms, with women traditionally not consulted on matters related to marriage, even when it concerns their own unions. In some cases, girls' exclusion is due to early betrothals, with symbolic exchanges predetermining a girl's future spouse before she even reaches adolescence. In other cases, such as bride capture or unplanned pregnancies, girls risk being forced to marry to protect their honour. Yet, even when girls are deemed old enough to marry, child participants frequently depicted decisions about their marriage as being driven primarily by adult caregivers. Reflecting this, in the survey only 13.2% of caregivers in Napak said that girls are often or always involved in the decision for them to marry (Table 7). The percentage was substantially higher in Moroto (52.5%), possibly due to the more urbanised and developed context of that district. However, this still means that almost half the caregivers in Moroto expected girls not to be routinely consulted in this critical decision about their future.

This is not to say that all families exclude their daughters from decision-making nor do all ignore their wishes. However, a labour officer cautioned that even when girls are consulted, this does not necessarily equate to their views being acted on when households are faced with substantive unmet needs and limited or no social safety nets to support them.

 *[Families] sit on their own and then decide the child [who will marry]... a child will only be convinced [by their caregivers saying] 'you can see this is how [our] family is. We are poor... you can even see your sisters. You can see how poor the family is. Why can't you accept that man there so that we get some wealth and our home also gets ok?'*
Labour officer, Napak

Girls may therefore experience overt emotional pressure from their families to marry or internal pressure if they feel their household's dire economic situation gives them no choice but to agree. This sentiment was echoed by several girls who explained their weak decision-making power in terms of their dependency on their caregivers and social expectations to marry and support one's family. This aligns with Akera's (2018) observation that duty to one's parents can pressure girls in Uganda to marry.

Table 7: Caregivers' perceptions regarding girls' participation in marital decision-making

How often do girls participate in the decision for them to marry?	Overall (N=266)	Moroto (n=137)	Napak (n=129)	Men (n=31)	Women (n=235)
Always	50 (18.8%)	44 (32.1%)	6 (4.7%)	6 (19.4%)	44 (18.7%)
Often	39 (14.7%)	28 (20.4%)	11 (8.5%)	5 (16.1%)	34 (14.5%)
Sometimes	82 (30.8%)	38 (27.7%)	44 (34.1%)	10 (32.3%)	72 (30.6%)
Rarely	55 (20.7%)	17 (12.4%)	38 (29.5%)	6 (19.4%)	49 (20.9%)
Never	38 (14.3%)	8 (5.8%)	30 (23.3%)	4 (12.9%)	34 (14.5%)
Unknown	2 (0.8%)	2 (1.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.9%)

Despite this, the study found that some girls are taking active steps to resist child marriage by seeking refuge with teachers, NGOs, local elders or the police. For instance, one 11-year-old girl from Napak explained how she reported her brother to the local chairman when he tried to arrange a marriage for her, while a 17-year-old from Moroto explained how she and another local girl had refused their caregivers' demands to marry. Similarly, a local government official said:

 *[At] certain times you will find the girl, after refusing the one they are forcing her to marry... she makes her own choice and marries the one she wants.*
Local government official, Moroto

Further evidencing their own agency, girls also described adjusting their work schedules to increase their chances of staying in school or running away from home to avoid the threat of marriage. These actions reflect girls' desire for education and control over their personal lives, as well as their willingness to challenge gender norms that prioritise marriage and domestic responsibilities over schooling. However, in the absence of tangible social support for their decision-making and right to education, avoiding one form of exploitation, such as child marriage, can expose them to other forms.

Additionally, for every girl who tried or was able to resist, many more saw no alternative path, with their limited agency restrained by webs of obedience, poverty and cultural control. As such, their lack of resistance should not be interpreted as compliance, but rather as a survival strategy in an environment where challenging authority can lead to punishment or social ostracism. This mirrors findings from a study considering girls' agency in Karamoja, where girls stressed that to exercise agency, they must first feel safe (Kinyanjui et al., 2025). Highlighting the pertinence of this statement, participants gave numerous examples where girls were pressured to marry through the use of physical violence, with resistance framed as being "spoilt" or disrespecting their families.

 *...she was always beaten and asked why she can't accept that man and she's again chased away from home. She later comes back... thinking maybe the father has forgiven her. This is the father who continues to beat asking her why she can't accept the rich man with many animals.*
Girl, 14, Napak

 *One [young girl] refused her husband. But her people forced her and she accepted. She went up to there and she escaped, until her people beat her and she accepted again.*
Boy, 15, Moroto

The cases described by participants demonstrated that the perceived threat to a girl's honour, combined with social expectations embedded in family negotiations, economic pressures and threats of violence, severely curtailed many girls' ability to resist unwanted marriages.

5.3.2 Power inequalities within a marriage

In many child marriages in Karamoja, the intersection of gender and intergenerational power inequalities further increases girls' risk of abuse and exploitation, particularly when they are married to significantly older men. This was a concern emphatically raised by child protection actors.

“A girl can either be forced to marry an old man just because he's rich... So the girl has two options: either to run away into hiding or to commit suicide... climb a tree, fall down and die, or may[be] get a rope and hang herself. And that has been happening. It's very true, very, very bad, and that's one of the worst things about forced marriage at an early age.
Community leader, Napak

“They don't care whether [the husband] is a young man or an old man or sick... so long as they have identified a man with cows... They take cows and they... give the child to marry.
CFPU, Moroto

Some cases were cited of girls being betrothed to boys or youth, particularly in cases where girls had migrated for work and married a peer. However, where bride price was agreed, husbands were typically portrayed as older men, even as old as 70 years, who had sufficient assets for bride price and could therefore provide for the girl and any subsequent children. The latter is critical in light of Karamoja's widespread poverty and weak or absent social safety nets.

When considering the often-significant age, gender and economic differences between spouses, several participants noted that these disparities increased girls' risk of being abused and controlled.

“A young girl cannot make decisions in the house. When a man says I want a child every year, she has no voice to say no. She can't say, 'let's do family planning'.
PSWO, Kampala

Girls in marriages with large age gaps were therefore understood to be at heightened risk of many of the harms described in Section 5.3.4, including reproductive coercion, IPV and early childbirth. The latter may be exacerbated by an obligation to one's family to have children to secure further bride price payments and to avoid the stigma of remaining childless. Rujumba and Kwiriringira (2019) also note that a husband's control over economic resources in Karamoja places girls, as well as women, at heightened risk of economic abuse, including denial of assets and one's right to earn an income. A health official argued that a large age gap between spouses can also increase a girl's risk of IPV due to her being denied the chance to fully experience childhood.

“...When you are 18 years and because you marry in this place where they value cows, you marry a man of 45, 50. The parent just... exchange because there are animals there... She doesn't stay happily in her marriage... Sometimes some of them are being abused by being beaten. Why should they go playing? You know, they didn't finish that kind of childhood 'character.' They go [on] doing certain things that are not pleasing that old man. So, one time you realise one [girl] was beaten because [her spouse asks]... 'why did she go with other girls in the river and play there?'... She's still practicing her childhood character, and she's being beaten by her adult [spouse] who had already passed those stages.
Health official, Napak

This example highlights that girls who are married are forced into the adult roles of “wife” and “mother,” cutting short their opportunity to be children.

Living in polygynous households was also seen as a risk factor for IPV and family violence. One study found that 54.7% of households in Karamoja include one or more co-wives who typically live in separate huts within a family compound (UBOS, 2023). A 10-year-old girl from Napak also described how her adult aunt was physically abused by her husband due to conflict over resources with her co-wife, whereas a 16-year-old from the same district explained that her father had stopped supporting her family, instead only supporting his other wives and their families. Although the statements were largely anecdotal, various media reports in recent years have highlighted the

challenges facing women and girls in polygynous marriages in Karamoja as economic conditions worsen. This forces co-wives to compete over dwindling resources, which may lead to increased conflict (*The Patriot*, 2024; Eyoku, 2025). Similarly, Rujumba and Kwiringira (2019) and CCFU (2020) noted that violence against and conflict between married women is often linked to power and status differences in marriage, including age differences among co-wives and the higher value assigned to earlier wives.

5.3.3 Perception that families are the main beneficiaries of child marriage

When adult and child participants discussed caregivers' motivations for "marrying off" their children through bride price exchanges, socio-economic vulnerability and food insecurity were frequently cited as key drivers. With climate change threatening traditional livelihoods, girls become an asset that can be "liquidated" to address hunger (GARD, 2026). Yet, many child participants also framed some caregivers' actions as not just driven by poverty and food security, but also being driven by personal gain, seeking "riches" or status through the acquisition of as many cattle as possible or by using a bride price paid to him to acquire another wife.

“Parents force their young daughters to get married early because they also want to get rich through [bride price]. The parents will see other parents being given cows then the colleagues will say, 'so-and-so, why are you suffering like this when your daughter has grown? At least [find] some man to take her and they give you some animals. Sell and buy something so that it multiplies and you also get rich.'”
Girl, 15, Napak

“He was forcing the child to get married because he saw another man's daughter being married off and her father became happy that the daughter had earned him animals. He also wanted to acquire animals so that he can marry another wife.”
Girl, 14, Napak

Children spoke disparagingly about caregivers who were perceived to act this way, framing their behaviour as deviant since they were seen to be exploiting their daughters, putting their own needs and desires before their child's welfare.



It is important to note that the study did not directly ask caregivers who had married their children before age 18 about their reasons for doing so, so the prevalence of such motivations is unknown. Further, it is also possible that children's narratives did not reflect the full complexity of their caregivers' decisions, particularly in contexts of high unmet needs and limited social safety nets. Nonetheless, child protection actors also observed that some caregivers appear to be driven by motivations other than subsistence needs, such as acquiring similar assets to peers. A community development officer (CDO) noted that the assets acquired through bride price can also bestow status.

 *[Parents] want to gain from the eight cows – get prestige that I also have [as many] animals as elder so-and-so. [So] they decide to give away their daughter to even an old man of say 95 years. A man who has done everything on this Earth and [is] waiting for death, you give this young girl of 14, 15, 16 years, not knowing you are handing the girl to suffering.*
CDO, Moroto

Similarly, a business owner from Moroto stated that it is normal in his area for caregivers to marry 14-year-old girls to 70-year-old men on account of them “being greedy,” implying that their desire for assets overrides the girls’ best interests. This suggests that at least some caregivers are exploiting traditional bride price practices to acquire wealth and prestige, rather than using child marriage as a last resort, a distinction that is critical when devising prevention and response programming.

5.3.4 Child marriage as inherently harmful to a child’s current and future well-being

Numerous threats to girls’ immediate and long-term safety and well-being were highlighted, particularly by child participants and child protection actors. These included risks to girls’ physical, psychological and sexual/reproductive health, and to their longer-term social and economic prospects.

5.3.4.1 Intimate partner violence and domestic/family violence

IPV is common in Karamoja and across Uganda, with a national survey indicating that both men and women may consider it justified in some circumstances (Rujumba & Kwiringira, 2019; CCFU, 2020). Reflecting this, child marriage was frequently linked to IPV or family violence in Moroto and Napak districts, with girls who were not yet married anticipating that they might experience IPV after marriage.

 *...if they say you have been officially married... when you go there, [the husband] starts beating you until you become pale and white... When you try coming to your parents, they say, ‘No, go to your husband.’ They do not [allow] you to come back to your parents’ home.*
Girl, 13, Napak

This quote clearly highlights why child marriage can be a form of modern slavery, with restrictions on a girl’s ability to leave serving as a key indicator of trafficking. Another girl described how she had been forced to marry an abusive man following her mother’s death as she had no one to care for her and her siblings.

 *I thought I would get a good husband who will look after us with my siblings... now he started beating [me]... Since my husband got his second wife with one child, he started beating me. But people just come to rescue me. Even when people talk to him to stop beating me, he does not listen... When he talks and you delay to respond, he starts beating.*
Girl, 15, Moroto

Her experiences align with research on child marriage in Uganda, which found higher likelihood of physical violence in child marriages than adult marriages (Fokukora et al., 2023).

In several life stories, children also reported that parents may inflict physical violence on girls who either refuse to marry or try to leave their spouse, even in cases where they are experiencing severe IPV. Examples were also given of girls who had been forced into abusive marriages, yet when they sought help from their family, they were sent back to the husband because the bride price had been

paid. Highlighting the cultural importance of bride price, one CDO from Moroto commented, “Once the parents get natija (the livestock payment used to validate forced marriage), that’s the end of the story of that child.” This highlights the extent to which girls can be trapped in violent marriages, creating a reality in which marriage is synonymous with suffering rather than security. IPV and family violence were also occasionally linked to the presence of multiple co-wives, a well-recorded risk factor for IPV in Uganda and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Ahinkorah, 2021).

5.3.4.2 Sexual and reproductive health risks

Child marriage was also recurrently linked to sexual and reproductive health risks, particularly those associated with early childbirth. This mirrors 2025 health data showing that 17.1% of first antenatal centre visits in Moroto and 15.0% in Napak involved teenage girls, figures that likely underestimate early pregnancies due to barriers impeding healthcare access.⁵ However, participants of all ages were acutely aware that early childbirth can lead to physical complications for both mother and child, including obstetric fistula or premature birth, due to the mother’s young age.

“ [Child marriage] leads to school dropout and death because when somebody is pregnant when she’s still young, delivering will be a problem, will lead to [her] being operated [on] and that child might die.
Girl, 16, Moroto

“ There was a girl who went [to bigger cities to the west of Karamoja] to work. Then she met a man there, she got pregnant. Giving birth became a problem – she [received a C-section]. Unfortunately, she died as well as [the] baby. Two dead bodies were brought here to Karamoja for burial.
Woman caregiver, Napak

The risks of early childbirth have been well-documented, with girls aged 15 to 19 years in Africa twice as likely to die in childbirth than women in their twenties (UNFPA, n/d). These risks are likely exacerbated in remote locations, such as hard-to-reach areas of Moroto and Napak districts, where girls often have more limited access to healthcare, including antenatal and maternal health services.

Within the qualitative data, sexually transmitted infections and FGM/C were also discussed. A village-level local councillor (LC1) from Napak noted that girls “can get infected... when they are forced to marry.” This is due to many girls having little or no control over family planning, with risks of infection likely higher in cases of bride capture or polygynous marriages (Mercy Corps, 2024). Several participants also noted that FGM/C retains cultural significance in some communities, where it is considered a requirement for marriage. Although only 2.3% of child survey participants associated FGM/C with readiness to marry,⁶ child protection actors highlighted that this view persists among the Tepeth and Pokot,⁷ where FGM/C defines a girl’s social identity and girls may even be sent to Western Pokot in Kenya where it is easier to arrange (Rujumba & Kwiringira, 2019).

“ The old women are basically promoting FGM through their culture. That is the Pokot. Like they say whatever they... perform on girls is to prepare them basically for marriage. And to them, any girl who has successfully gone through FGM is ripe for marriage.
Religious leader, Moroto

“ I understand even the men will say, the person who is not cut, they cannot marry. That one is dictated by culture.
CFPU, Moroto

5 Data accessed from the DHIS2 database. <https://dhis2.org/>.

6 This compares with statistics from the 2011 UDHS, which suggested rates of between 5.0% and 7.0% for Karamoja, although rates could have declined (see <https://www.unfpa.org/ms/data/fgm/UG>).

7 Tepeth and Pokot communities practice Type II and Type III FGM/C, respectively, which are the most severely mutilating forms of the practice.

FGM/C has a plethora of harmful effects, potentially harming girls' psychological and sexual and reproductive health (Pallitto et al., 2025). Yet since girls who are not cut risk being considered unmarriageable, there is tremendous pressure to conform to social norms in communities where FGM/C is practiced. Reflecting this, one businessman from Moroto noted that *"girls who have already been mutilated, they advise other girls that this is the way they do it and they advise the others that if you don't do it, you will not find a man."* This highlights the critical importance of working with community influencers to challenge dominant norms that sustain harmful traditional practices rather than simply condemning such practices.

5.3.4.3 Psychological impacts

Child participants frequently associated child marriage with hopelessness, sadness, isolation and fear, which could potentially lead to suicide ideation. Supporting this, several cases were cited where local girls had died by suicide after being forced to marry or subjected to IPV.

“ There were again two girls who committed suicide because of the issue of marriage. Their parents had forced them to get married to men because they had promised to bring animals... So what these girls did was just to end up committing suicide. One girl was 14 years old and the other was 16 years old and they were buried.
Woman caregiver, Moroto

“ ... another man came and married her officially and they brought cows to her aunt's home... And this child, when she saw that she was being quarrelled to all the time because of those cows the man paid as dowry, she got tired of the stress and [died by] suicide.
Boy, 16, Moroto

As noted earlier, several participants also stated that once bride price is paid, girls “belong” to their husband's family and may be prevented from returning home. Inability to leave a situation of exploitation is an indicator of modern slavery and reduces girls' access to emotional support. With traditional marriages signalling a lifelong commitment in Karamoja, the psychological impacts of girls being trapped in abusive marriages which they cannot easily leave cannot be overstated.

5.3.4.4 Loss of education and future opportunities

Echoing national data, where child marriage and pregnancy account for 15% to 20% of school dropouts (UNFPA, 2020), child marriage was also associated with fewer future opportunities in life. Child participants explained how girls are often forced to leave school, perhaps even as soon as marriage arrangements begin, finding themselves married before they realise the impact on their futures.

“ ...a girl will say, 'I wish I had not gotten married – even me, I would be in that class. I would manage to help our family. Now our family would not be [poor]. I would not be carrying the burden now by myself'... Why I have mentioned this issue is because my sister got married and now the way her life is, it really pains me. Now when I see her, I just cry.
Girl, 10, Napak

“ We are all five in our family... only one [is] in school. The rest are not schooling and they are all married.
Girl, 13, Napak

Loss of education following marriage is associated with poorer educational outcomes and lower literacy (Malé & Wodon, 2023), limiting girls' economic independence, social mobility and life opportunities while curtailing their childhood and reinforcing intergenerational cycles of poverty.

6. CHILD LABOUR

Child labour was the most visible and socially normalised form of child exploitation in both Moroto and Napak districts. Within the life stories, work conditions that met the threshold of child labour were described as extremely common in both the districts and as a normalised, socially accepted survival strategy rather than a moral concern.

The survey found that 61.7% of children aged 10 to 17 years were engaged in child labour (Table 8), with girls reporting higher engagement than boys (65.2% to 56.8%). This is considerably higher than the national average of 39.5%, despite the national statistics being gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic where child labour rates were elevated (UBOS, 2021). Rates were notably higher in Napak (66.7%) than in Moroto (56.9%), but not statistically significant, possibly due to sampling differences, such as the predominance of remote rural households in Napak compared to more urban or peri-urban populations in Moroto. Napak district's deeper rural poverty, reliance on family labour-intensive livelihood structures, greater exposure to food insecurity and climatic shocks, and reduced access to schooling may also have contributed to the higher rate.

Table 8: Prevalence of child labour by gender and location

	Total (n=266)	Moroto (n=137)	Napak (n=129)
Total child labour⁸	164 (61.7%)	78 (56.9%)	86 (66.7%)
Only hazardous work (10-17 yrs)	124 (46.6%)	57 (41.6%)	67 (51.9%)
Gender			
Girls (n=155)	101 (65.2%)	42 (55.3%)	59 (74.7%)*
Boys (n=111)	63 (56.8%)	36 (59.0%)	27 (54.0%)

* $p < 0.05$

8 For 10- and 11-year-olds, child labour constitutes more than one hour of economic work (paid work) or more than 21 hours of unpaid household services per week, or any amount of hazardous work. For 12- to 14-year-olds, child labour constitutes more than 14 hours of economic work or more than 21 hours of unpaid household services per week, or any amount of hazardous work. For 15- to 17-year-olds, child labour constitutes more than 43 hours of economic work per week and any amount of hazardous work.

Child work as a core element of children's socialisation

Although children's risk of more harmful and exploitative child labour is heightened by several structural and household-level factors (see Section 6.1), work is a core part of children's socialisation in Moroto and Napak districts. Participants of all ages noted that domestic tasks are framed as natural and necessary rites of passage for children as young as 5 years old, underpinned by beliefs that hardship and early responsibility build resilience and prepare children for adulthood. As one 16-year-old boy from Moroto explained, *"My father fed me until now, when I have grown, he told me to look after the goats."* Within many households, being a "good child" was also closely associated with obedience and productivity, while several caregivers spoke negatively of children who are "idle." Some children did attempt to resist child labour. Yet, in contexts where child work is "normal" and expected, resistance to any form of work, even work that exceeds the threshold for child labour, is extremely difficult.

The role of work in gender socialisation was also emphasised. Given that boys will be future heads of households, protectors and custodians of cattle wealth, hard work was described as a process through which boys gain respect, maturity and identity within their clan and prove their masculinity. Girls similarly reported that domestic labour is treated as preparation for marriage, covering roles such as cooking, cleaning, childcare and gardening/weeding. Reflecting this, a caregiver from an FGD with women and men in Napak explained how some caregivers assign their daughters heavy work carrying charcoal so that *"when she grows, she knows how to work in marriage."*

6.1 Factors increasing the risk of child labour in Moroto and Napak districts

Across the quantitative and qualitative data, most of the consulted children felt at risk of child labour due to the harsh economic conditions and widespread food insecurity in Moroto and Napak districts. However, analysis of bivariate associations between socio-economic factors and child labour, along with a thematic analysis of the qualitative data, found that several key factors increase a child's risk of locally engaging in child labour or migrating for work. These include the age of the child, disability, food insecurity, multi-dimensional poverty, access to education, household demographics and district of residence. Gender, discussed later, was found to affect the type of work undertaken and accompanying risks.

6.1.1 Age and disability status

Although the minimum employment age under Uganda's Children (Amendment) Act (2016) is 16, and 18 for performing hazardous work in both this and the earlier Employment Act (2006), adult and child participants tended to view 8- to 15-year-olds as most at risk of child labour. Alongside external drivers, such as poverty and food insecurity, this was explained in terms of their physical readiness. For instance, a 17-year-old boy from Moroto recalled how, years earlier, his mother had said, *"You are the only boy who is strong in this family. Go and look for money."* However, even children who had been deemed "big enough" to work nonetheless suffered physical injuries due to the strenuous nature of their work (see Section 6.3.3). Participants also described how some children as young as age 4 engage in physically and emotionally demanding activities for little or no pay that extend beyond socialisation, such as begging or domestic chores that exceed their physical or emotional capabilities. In the survey, child participants who reported having some form of functional difficulty, as per the Washington Group short set of questions (which are used to estimate degree of disability), also reported higher levels of child labour and hazardous work than those without any form of functional difficulty (Table 9). This was statistically significant. Thus, a child's vulnerability to child labour should be viewed through an intersectional lens that considers their individual characteristics.

Table 9: Prevalence of child labour and hazardous work in relation to a child's functional difficulties (disabilities)

	Hazardous work (10–17 yrs) (n=124)	Total child labour (10–17 yrs) (n=164)
Functional difficulties		
Does not experience at least one functional difficulty (n=212)	88 (41.5%)	120 (56.6%)
Experiences at least one functional difficulty (n=54)	36 (66.7%)*	44 (81.5%)*

* $p < 0.01$

6.1.2 Food insecurity and poverty

Across the qualitative and quantitative data, food insecurity was described as a major factor pushing children to work, with many child participants reporting first-hand experiences of being asked to work when food was insufficient.

“Hunger is what makes children also run away from home... the mother says, ‘the children are starving, where can we go?’ So, they tell children to go and take care of people’s children so that the family can receive some money.
Boy, 14, Napak

“Children go to Kampala... because of hunger and when they go there, they go to beg.
Girl, 14, Napak

This was supported by the quantitative data, which found that households that rarely or never had enough food to eat reported higher rates of children in hazardous work (54.2%) and total child labour (68.1%) than those who sometimes or always had food to eat, which suggest that chronic food insecurity is a key driver (Table 10). Similarly, 68.4% of respondents cited food security as an issue affecting the care of children within their households (Moroto 70.8%, Napak 65.9%).

Table 10: Prevalence of child labour and hazardous work in relation to availability of sufficient food

	Hazardous work (10–17 yrs) (n=124)	Total child labour (10–17 yrs) (n=164)
Household members have enough food to eat		
Rarely (1–3 months) or Never	39 (54.2%)	49 (68.1%)
Sometimes (4–6 months)	50 (42.0%)	70 (58.8%)
Always (12 months) or Often (7–11 months)	35 (46.7%)	45 (60.0%)

Within the qualitative data, food insecurity was frequently linked to local climate hazards, such as droughts and floods, that have disrupted food production, contributed to rising food costs and depleted livelihoods. For instance, a 16-year-old boy from Napak explained, “After cultivation at home, the drought was bad and there was no food... Then hunger came... That’s when I decided to go to Mbale.” Similarly, around three in four surveyed households (overall 77.8%, Moroto 74.5%, Napak 81.4%) reported that drought or irregular rain had negatively affected their household. More than one in five (22.6%) also mentioned climate events as issues that most affect their household’s ability to care for their children, particularly in Napak, where there has been notable flooding leading to crop destruction and poor harvests (Moroto 16.8%, Napak 28.7%). This highlights a need for a

multifaceted response to child labour that recognises the impact of changing environmental factors on many rural households' livelihoods and incorporates climate adaptation programming. Closely linked to food insecurity, and reflecting other studies on child labour in Karamoja, multi-dimensional poverty was also routinely depicted as a key driver of child labour due to families having insufficient resilience to cope with economic shocks (FAO, 2024; ILO, 2024).

“Poverty. Sometimes when the mother says [so], you also go to Kampala for some months to look for money to help the family, and then you come back.
Girl, 15, Napak

“It's poverty that made me work. I am being beaten, chased away from people's homes... being denied food. That's why I left for Kampala [for] begging.
Boy, 14, Napak

Given the widespread poverty, over a third of surveyed households (35.3%) reported receiving some form of social support such as food, cash or services. Child labour was higher among households that did not have access to any form of social support (access 52.1%, no access 66.9%), an association that was statistically significant (Table 11). This was the same for hazardous work (access 36.2%, no access 52.3%). This suggests that at least some social support may boost households' economic resilience, even if just for a limited period, reducing reliance on child labour.

Table 11: Prevalence of child labour in relation to access to support

Access to support	Hazardous work (10–17 yrs) (n=124)	Total child labour (10–17 yrs) (n=164)
No access to support (n=172)	90 (52.3%)*	115 (66.9%)*
Access to support (n=94)	34 (36.2%)	49 (52.1%)

* $p < 0.05$

6.1.3 Access to education

Not attending school was frequently cited as a risk factor for child labour and also an effect. Over half the child participants were not attending school at the time of the survey (overall 53.8%, Moroto 54.0%, Napak 53.5%). Of those not attending, 68.0% in Moroto and 25.0% in Napak said that this was because they needed to work to help their families. This disparity may be due to additional challenges accessing school in the more rural setting of Napak. A notably higher percentage of children not attending school reported being in situations of child labour compared to those attending school (69.1% vs 55.2%), with the relationship between school attendance and child labour found to be statistically significant (Table 12). A similar, statistically significant relationship was observed between school attendance and participation in hazardous work (60.9% not attending, 34.3% attending).

Table 12: Prevalence of child labour and hazardous work in relation to school attendance

School Attendance	Hazardous work (10–17 yrs) (n=124)	Total child labour (10–17 yrs) (n=164)
Not attending school (n=123)	75 (60.9%)**	85 (69.1%)*
Attending school (n=143)	49 (34.3%)	79 (55.2%)

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.001$

A relationship between dropping out of school and increased risk of child labour was also cited by child participants in the life stories, with one girl saying:

“ I was chased away because there is no one to support in terms of paying school fees, buying scholastic materials and pads for girls at school. This is what forces children to think of going somewhere to look for work. And they end up going to Nairobi Sometimes, the girl can go to her friends to borrow pads [but] what about again next time?
Girl, 15, Napak

Illustrating that children recognised education as a protective factor, several cases were discussed where children had proactively looked for work to cover their own school supplies and fees, sometimes dropping out to do so, because their caregivers were struggling or unwilling to cover these costs.

“ Meeting the school fees and requirements is the biggest problem I face in school, because whenever I step in school, they ask for money. The reason I miss classes [is] to first go and look for some work to get money. The work I do is digging, weeding or making chapati [a type of flatbread] to get school fees and that is done during school hours. That is what makes my [school] life hard.
Boy, 16, Napak

“ The main reasons for my return [to]... bush herding and casual labour was because of school... I said let me go and look for money for first term, that's why I left... I got money which helped me to complete first term only.
Boy, 16, Moroto

Children were vocal about the value they placed on education, consistently framing it as a pathway out of intergenerational poverty and food insecurity. Their willingness to juggle school and work or even drop out of school to save for their next stage of education demonstrates notable agency and resilience, even if these efforts were sadly not always sustainable.



6.1.4 Household demographics

Various household demographic features emerged in the children's life stories as risk factors for child labour. Although not indicated in the survey data,⁹ being an orphan or a stepchild was framed by several child participants as a risk factor due to resources traditionally being first allocated to biological children within households, particularly when these are scarce.

“The father also has his own children in another home... he has to send [money for school fees] to his children first before he sends [it] for me... he is not the one who has produced me.
Boy, 15, Moroto

There was also a statistically significant association between household size and child labour [$p < 0.001$]. A higher proportion of children in smaller households (consisting of two to four people) met conditions for child labour than in medium or bigger households (Table 13).

Table 13: Prevalence of child labour by household characteristics

	Hazardous work (10–17 yrs) (n=124)	Total child labour (10–17 yrs) (n=164)
Orphanhood status		
Both parents living	99 (47.4%)	134 (64.1%)
One parent living	21 (44.7%)	25 (53.2%)
No parents living	4 (44.4%)	5 (55.6%)
Household size		
Small (2-4)	53 (58.2%)*	70 (76.9%)**
Medium (5-6)	44 (38.6%)	59 (51.8%)
Large (7 or more)	27 (44.3%)	35 (57.4%)
Relationship to caregiver		
Parent	90 (46.4%)	120 (61.9%)
Grandparent	22 (55.0%)	27 (67.5%)
Other relative	9 (31.0%)	14 (48.3%)
Non-relative	3 (100.0%)	3 (100.0%)

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Within the qualitative data, changes in household composition also emerged as a risk factor for child labour, particularly events that threatened households' economic stability or changed children's status within the family, such as family breakdown/divorce, remarriage of caregivers, imprisonment of the main breadwinner or death of a caregiver.

“[My parents] fought. They went to the Chairman, they separated... My mother's leg was even broken as a result of the fight. She went to the other house and the little money that she had [ran out]. I had to... look for casual labour.
Boy, 17, Moroto

“When our mother left us, it was now our uncle who was taking care of us. But when [he] was arrested, [his] wife and I used to look for work in people's homes so that we were able to buy something to eat.
Boy, 15, Moroto

⁹ Although all children living with non-relatives reported conditions that met child labour, they were only three in total.

Limited social safety nets meant that rather than having time and support to process these often highly complex and potentially traumatic life changes, children were expected to immediately look for work and to provide for themselves and their families.

6.2 Types of child labour

Child labour in Karamoja is diverse, ranging from domestic work and pastoralist activities to hazardous work in mines or markets. The types of labour undertaken by children in Napak and Moroto districts and those who migrated to urban centres varied considerably, largely shaped by the local labour market, the child's age and gender norms.

6.2.1 Type of work

Across Moroto and Napak districts, children described working in roles of differing risk and intensity. In Moroto, boys and girls regularly discussed working in mines (in locations such as Rupa, Tapac and Katikekile), digging and washing ore in unsafe conditions or carrying heavy sacks of stones that pushed the limits of their physical capacity. Boys and girls also reported working in local quarries crushing stones, carrying heavy loads and performing other strenuous tasks under hazardous conditions.



On the mountain these children do the following: breaking stones, loading stones on trucks, rolling stones, digging stones... carrying sand with basins.

Boy, 15-17, Moroto

Boys and girls also reported working in markets selling goods and transporting heavy produce. A CDO in Moroto observed, *"If we walk out to our markets, here you will realise that children [are] at large carrying very big baskets of food to go and sell for somebody."* Although some children complained about the strenuous nature of market work, one boy from a participatory session with 15- to 17-year-olds said it was "good" work due to its ready availability. Given it is still heavy labour, this indicates that children may be forced to prioritise income over working conditions.

Most boys and girls in Moroto who participated in the survey also reported undertaking regular household work (girls 98.7%, boys 93.4%), although it was not clear if it was paid or unpaid. On average, these children reported spending 5.3 hours per week on domestic work, with collecting firewood (89.8%), cleaning utensils and the house (86.1%) and washing clothes (79.6%) being the most reported types of work (Table 14).

In Napak, child labour was more heavily shaped by subsistence agriculture and pastoral responsibilities, with seasonal farming demands creating peak periods during which children are relied upon for planting, weeding, harvesting and guarding fields from animals.



I come back home to support... people in weeding, harvesting because if I don't work hard by supporting in garden work, who will give me food in their home?

Girl, 15, Napak



My life was at the kraal. When cows return from the kraal, they instruct you to either... dig or plough in the garden with the oxen. When the crops grow, [I] am expected to support my mother in weeding the crops.

Boy, 14, Napak

Given the precarity of livelihood opportunities in Napak due to climate hazards, children described being expected to drop out of school to support their families during these periods. Although boys and girls both reported supporting agricultural work, in pastoralist communities the task of caring for livestock fell to boys as young as 9 or 10 who were expected to herd and guard livestock from armed cattle raiders in remote, unsecured grazing areas.

Domestic labour is also common in Napak, with most child survey participants reporting that they undertake some form of household work, albeit a higher percentage of girls than boys (girls 100%, boys 90.0%). Reiterating girls higher level of engagement in domestic work, a woman caregiver observed, *“The girls are the most exploited because they are good at domestic work like carrying, lighting fire, laying the bed, sweeping and all domestic related work.”* Boys described caring for livestock or collecting water, while girls spoke of cooking, washing dishes, childcare, helping in the gardens and water collection. The qualitative findings were supported by the survey findings, where collecting firewood (88.4%), cleaning utensils and the house (85.3%) and cooking for the household (79.8%) were the most commonly reported household work. This highlights how children, and girls in particular, take on adult responsibilities to increase families’ overall productivity. The amount of domestic work reported by children in Napak was also significantly higher than in Moroto (10.8 hours per week vs 5.3 hours), possibly reflecting the more predominantly rural setting in Napak, where domestic tasks such as fetching water or firewood may be more time-intensive. Child labour in Napak district is thus embedded in household survival tasks that are less visible than Moroto’s mining and market work but are also demanding and developmentally disruptive.

Table 14: Household work undertaken by children in Moroto and Napak districts

	Overall (N=266)	Moroto (n=137)	Napak (n=129)
Any household work	256 (96.2%)	132 (96.4%)	124 (96.1%)
Girls	154 (99.4%)**	75 (98.7%)	79 (100.0%)**
Boys	102 (91.9%)	57 (93.4%)	45 (90.0%)
Type of household chore			
Fetching water or collecting firewood	237 (89.1%)	123 (89.8%)	114 (88.4%)
Cleaning utensils/house	228 (85.7%)	118 (86.1%)	110 (85.3%)
Cooking for the household	210 (78.9%)	107 (78.1%)	103 (79.8%)
Washing clothes for your household members	199 (74.8%)	109 (79.6%)	90 (69.8%)
Caring for children/old/sick in your house	182 (68.4%)	99 (72.3%)	83 (64.3%)
Shopping for the household	141 (53.0%)	88 (64.2%)	53 (41.1%)
Other household tasks	80 (30.1%)	43 (31.4%)	37 (28.7%)
Mean hours spent on household chores per week (n=81)	7.8	5.3	10.8*

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

6.2.2 Type of work for children who migrate for work

In the quantitative and qualitative data, children routinely reported migrating for work. Of the 70 child survey participants who reported living elsewhere for three months or more, 32.9% reported that they had moved for work or to look for work (Table 15). Similarly, among those in this group who reported migrating away from their household for three months or more in the past 12 months, 44.4% had moved for work; of these, only 38.9% reported that the decision to migrate had been their own, with the same number saying their family was the decision-maker. Of the 35 children who planned to migrate in the next 12 months, the main reason given was to work (80.0%).

Similarly, in the qualitative data, children routinely discussed migrating to work in urban centres or mining/quarrying sites. This was often in circumstances that aligned with conditions of human trafficking due to deceptive recruitment (see Section 6.3.2) and exploitative and abusive working conditions.

 ...Those of komakech... they are the ones who give heavy work by deceiving you.
Boy, 16, Napak

These findings align with a recent study by the International Labour Organization (ILO) that found that children are routinely trafficked from Karamoja under the guise of accessing work opportunities in nearby towns, further regions and even other countries such as Kenya (ILO, 2024).

“ [Some were saying] they are going to Nairobi, while others said they will go to Kampala. There were others who said they are going to Soroti to look for casual labour work, others said they are going to Moroto to look for casual work... Most of them really went to Moroto and Kampala, while others went to Nairobi.

Girl, 15, Napak

“ Recently I went to Lobulio where I got something that enabled me to buy some goats and some money that I used for cultivating the garden.

Boy, 13, Moroto

This echoes findings from a study by Gochoki and Otieno (2023) which highlighted that thousands of women and girls are trafficked each year from Karamoja to Nairobi, often with promises of domestic work, only to be forced into situations of labour and commercial sexual exploitation.

Children's urban migration for work has previously been described as being driven by food insecurity, avoidance of marriage or other abuse and the promise or hope of better opportunities (ILO, 2024). Child participants in this study also cited caregiver pressure as a factor, although there was also evidence of some caregivers actively discouraging migration. The qualitative data suggest that children start migrating for work from as young as 10 years old. Child participants who had previously migrated described undertaking casual work in markets, domestic work or begging. Some had work already lined up (such as domestic work) when they began their migration, whereas others travelled hoping to find work. They recurrently described high-risk living conditions, including living with abusive employers or in shared accommodation in insecure locations. The qualitative data also indicated that some children lose contact with their families, typically in cases where contact is prohibited, which is an indicator of human trafficking.



Table 15: Migration among children aged 10 to 17 years by district

	Overall	Moroto	Napak
Ever lived elsewhere ≥3 months (n=266)	70 (26.3%)	32 (23.5%)	38 (29.5%)
Reason for moving (n=70)			
Work/looking for work	23 (32.9%)	6 (18.8%)	17 (44.7%)
School	12 (17.1%)	6 (18.8%)	6 (15.8%)
Family moved	12 (17.1%)	5 (15.6%)	7 (18.4%)
Drought/food shortage	5 (7.1%)	4 (12.5%)	1 (2.6%)
Conflict	2 (2.9%)	1 (3.1%)	1 (2.6%)
Marriage	1 (1.4%)	1 (3.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Other	7 (10.0%)	2 (6.3%)	5 (13.2%)
Don't know	8 (11.4%)	7 (21.9%)	1 (2.6%)
Left household ≥3 months in past 12 months (n=266)	36 (13.5%)	13 (9.5%)	23 (17.8%)
Reason for leaving household (n=36)			
Work	16 (44.4%)	2 (15.4%)	14 (60.9%)
Family sent me	5 (13.9%)	2 (15.4%)	3 (13.0%)
School	4 (11.1%)	1 (7.7%)	3 (13.0%)
Drought/food shortage	3 (8.3%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (13.0%)
Other	2 (5.6%)	2 (15.4%)	0 (0.0%)
Unknown	6 (16.7%)	6 (46.2%)	0 (0.0%)
Decision-maker for migration (n=36)			
Myself	14 (38.9%)	1 (7.7%)	13 (56.5%)
Family	14 (38.9%)	4 (30.8%)	10 (43.5%)
Refused/unknown	8 (22.2%)	8 (61.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Tricked or forced to migrate (n=36)	5 (13.9%)	1 (7.7%)	4 (17.4%)
Plans to migrate in next 12 months (n=266)	35 (13.2%)	13 (4.9%)	22 (8.3%)
Reason for planned migration (n=35)			
Work/better work	28 (80.0%)	12 (92.3%)	16 (72.7%)
Further/better education	3 (8.6%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (13.6%)
Join/be close to family	3 (8.6%)	1 (7.7%)	2 (9.1%)
Other	1 (2.9%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (4.5%)

6.3 Key dynamics and effects of child labour

More than half (61.7%) of child survey participants described work conditions that went beyond child work and instead met the threshold for child labour. The working conditions described by these children included physical and sexual abuse, deception, financial exploitation and long hours in often hazardous conditions. Thus, while the Children (Amendment) Act (2016) prohibits children (under 18) from engaging in a comprehensive list of hazardous work, the study nevertheless found clear evidence of children engaging in work that threatens their safety. A further recurring theme, discussed first, was that some children felt they had very little choice over when and where they work.

6.3.1 Opportunities for agency and resistance

Across the life stories, children held differing views on the extent to which they could influence decisions related to their labour. In several cases, they spoke proudly about growing a viable business that was developing into a more sustainable livelihood. For instance, a 13-year-old boy from Moroto explained that while he initially started work to meet unmet basic needs, he had used his earnings from working in a gold mine to buy livestock and start cultivation. His strategic decisions and careful planning had allowed him to go some way towards shaping his own future.

However, when discussing why children engage in child labour, participants across all age groups overwhelmingly framed children's decisions to work as heavily constrained by external factors such as unmet basic needs and subtle or more forceful pressure exerted by caregivers. When describing caregiver pressure, different dynamics emerged, with several child participants describing how some caregivers used physical violence to force their children to work.

 *If you don't accept to go for casual work, they beat you and you start thinking of escaping but now where [would you go]?*
Girl, 10, Moroto

It should be noted that it is not clear how many caregivers used violence to exert pressure to work, but in cases where violence or threats of violence were used, it was extremely difficult for children to resist child labour. In other cases, children described being emotionally pressured to fulfil their "duty" to their family through labour.

 *When your mother says, 'why are you staying at home? People's children have gone to look for some casual work, why don't you also go and look for it?' Then you say, 'but mother you want me to go yet they say that place is bad. They kick and call people devils.' She says, 'what about those who have gone and brought food home, are they kicked'? Then you say, 'those ones also say that they are being kicked but it is God's grace that they are alive'.*
Girl, 14, Napak

Strong socio-cultural expectations of obedience to elders, reflected by the phrase *Omuzadde Tasobya* ("a parent never does wrong") (Atino, 2024), further constrain children's ability to refuse to work. A child protection expert noted that this may even be more pronounced in Karamoja, where some caregivers use curses which are believed to have lasting negative effects on a child's future in response to perceived disobedience or rebellious behaviour.

Although child participants recurrently depicted caregivers as pressuring children to work, albeit using different degrees of pressure, this does not necessarily reflect all caregivers' actions or mean that caregivers wish for their children to work in arduous conditions. Many caregivers rely on children's labour to sustain household survival, especially in contexts of poverty, food insecurity and weak or absent social safety nets. However, discussions with caregivers indicated that many do not support children's involvement in hazardous labour. This suggests that limited livelihood options are pushing children into work that their families might not otherwise choose.

Child participants also described how peers influence children's decisions to engage in work that constitutes child labour, whether by letting them know of a work opportunity or by actively encouraging and facilitating their migration to a worksite.

 *Why I started that work is because I didn't have anything... My friend... told me to go with him to [town] to look for work. I got work from there and I was paid. My friend told me to use the money I have got to buy anything I wanted to buy.*
Boy, 13, Moroto

 *...when their parents tell them not to go to Nairobi, their friends convince them about the good life they experience in Nairobi, and the children decide to escape in order to join their friends in Nairobi without the parents noticing.*
Boy, 16, Napak

In other cases, peers who had migrated to urban centres were described as indirectly encouraging other children to follow suit due to their showing a healthier, more “groomed” appearance upon their return.

“By the time they come back, they are grown and mature, looking stunning and beautiful and men begin eyeing and engaging them. Some get married... The rest [of the children] are also influenced by their looks and wish to go [with them] the next time when they return.
Girl, 15, Napak

These quotes remind us that children may be encouraged to seek work or migrate through direct or indirect peer pressure. Yet, these decisions typically still reflect survival strategies rather than true autonomy, highlighting the constrained agency of children in the Karamoja context.

6.3.2 Deceptive recruitment

In general, child participants appeared acutely aware of the risks associated with child labour. However, children and child protection actors did cite cases where children had been deceptively recruited, typically when migrating for work. In the survey, five children reported that they had been tricked or forced to migrate, and more examples were given in the life stories. Most reported being taken to urban centres, like Kampala or Nairobi, with the promise of schooling or employment, only to find themselves in conditions of domestic servitude, begging on the streets or working long hours in markets.

“I was in Primary three, when I lost my father... then some woman came to convince me to go with her to Kampala. I accepted because there was no one to pay for my school. [We] went to Kampala, and luckily enough, my sisters were also there. This lady started beating me; she could send me for begging, and when someone gave me 10,000 Shillings [USD 2.77¹⁰], she quickly ran to grab it. I could spend the entire day without eating, with sustained beating [inflicted] using her hands.
Girl, 11, Napak

“They will deceive the child [10 to 17 years old] and say, ‘you come and we go’. They take that child to Kampala just for [placing on]... the road to street beg.
Girl, 15-17, Napak

Although a few children did attend school after migrating, most reported facing verbal, physical or sexual abuse, and many were not allowed to leave or contact their families, an indicator of trafficking.

Deceptive recruitment was predominantly discussed in relation to work obtained via intermediaries, such as relatives, neighbours or brokers, who promised children education or employment opportunities in urban centres. A few examples of peers misleading other children were also cited. Relatives, especially aunts and older sisters, were described as persuading caregivers to release children into their care under the pretence of sending them to school or helping with childcare, only to force them into domestic work or begging. Several child protection actors said that caregivers may unknowingly consent to or otherwise enable trafficking after being misled by relatives or recruiters.

“These people here come and deceive the parents of these children in the pretence that [they are] going to stay with your child... all of a sudden you find that these children [are] found in the streets.
Labour officer, Napak

10 The average exchange rate during the period of data collection (June 2025) was USD 1 = UGX 3,608.18. Source: [USD UGX Historical Data – Investing.com](#).

“When the child goes to Western [region], the mother is convinced that the girl will be treated well, and yet when reaching there, it's the opposite. Like they are paid less, or even the money is left to pile, and in the end, they say that the money has been stolen by this girl. They are beaten and sent back to her parents without anything.

FGD with women and men caregivers, Napak

These accounts from children, caregivers and child protection actors collectively reveal a pattern of recruitment through deception, facilitated by social trust and weak monitoring systems.

6.3.3 Hazardous working conditions

Reinforcing the findings of a child labour brief that about 23.0% of Ugandan children are exposed to hazardous working conditions, with the problem being particularly acute in Eastern Uganda (ZEF, 2025), hazardous work emerged in the study as a prominent concern for children working in Moroto, Napak or urban centres outside their home area. Child survey participants reported experiencing numerous work-related injuries, with the most frequent being head, back and neck injuries (28.2%), deep or long cuts (20.3%) and bruises or swelling (18.1%). Potentially life-threatening situations were also disclosed, from near-drownings and electric shocks to being hit or crushed by something heavy. Over a third of the surveyed children (39.1%) reported not feeling safe at work (Table 16).



Table 16: Workplace safety, violence, injuries and psychosocial and self-rated health among children ages 10 to 17 years

	Overall (N=266)	Moroto (n=137)		Napak (n=129)	
		Boys (n=61)	Girls (n=76)	Boys (n=50)	Girls (n=79)
Workplace safety and conditions					
Don't feel safe at work	39.1%	41.0%	43.4%	32.7%	38.5%
Not allowed to leave workplace if ill, injured or wish to quit	38.0%	31.2%	47.4%	38.0%	34.2%
Ever punished for mistakes made at work	24.8%	21.3%	31.6%	32.0%	16.5%
Workplace violence					
Threatened with harm	23.7%	26.2%	26.3%	24.0%	19.0%
Physically hurt (slapped, punched, kicked, etc.)	19.2%	21.3%	29.0%	18.0%	8.9%
Ridiculed, insulted or made to feel ashamed	17.7%	19.7%	23.7%	16.0%	11.4%
Work-related injuries					
Head, back or neck injury	28.2%	21.3%	27.6%	36.0%	29.1%
Deep or long cut	20.3%	18.0%	23.7%	14.0%	22.8%
Bad bruises, bumps or swelling	18.1%	29.5%	17.1%	16.0%	11.4%
Injury from a fall	15.4%	19.7%	17.1%	18.0%	8.9%
Bad burn (not sunburn)	13.9%	14.8%	19.7%	8.0%	11.4%
Hit or crushed by something heavy	9.0%	9.8%	11.8%	6.0%	7.6%
Animal or snake bite	5.6%	3.3%	7.9%	6.0%	5.1%
Eye or ear injury/damage	4.9%	3.3%	6.6%	4.0%	5.1%
Near drowning	4.1%	0.0%	2.6%	14.0%	2.5%
Broken bone	3.8%	6.6%	2.6%	6.0%	1.3%
Lost a body part (finger, hand, arm, leg)	1.5%	3.3%	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%
Electric shock	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.5%
Any other injury reported	3.8%	8.2%	1.3%	4.0%	2.5%
Psychosocial and self-rated health					
Frequent headaches, stomach-aches or sickness	63.2%	49.2%	56.6%	68.0%	77.2%
Felt proud of the work done	57.9%	44.3%	44.7%	66.0%	75.9%
Felt too tired to pay attention at work	54.5%	49.2%	57.9%	50.0%	58.2%
Felt unhappy, downhearted or tearful	37.9%	34.4%	54.0%	24.0%	34.2%
Often worried, nervous or easily scared	35.7%	31.2%	43.4%	28.0%	36.7%
Don't have someone to talk to about problems	33.5%	34.4%	36.8%	32.0%	30.4%

*Multiple responses permitted

In the life stories, children provided more detailed information on the types of hazards they faced on a daily basis, with certain forms of labour in each district understood to be especially risky. For example, in Moroto, mining and quarrying was portrayed as extremely dangerous, with falling rocks causing serious injury and even death.

“The bad thing with gold mining is you have to dig deep down. Sometimes stones and sand falls on you and you get hurt. That’s why some people have even died.
Boy, 17, Moroto

“Recently there was another child who went with the aunt to the mining site and the stone fell on her and she died instantly.
Girl, 16, Moroto

Similarly, in Napak, guarding livestock, a task assigned to children as young as 9 years old, was frequently cited as high-risk due to the threats to safety posed by armed cattle raiders.

“My uncle took me to the kraal. Every day the enemies [raiders] used to come. One time they came again and got us while shepherding. They chased us and they shouted and shot me on the cheek. Here. That is what I underwent... the bullet had remained inside me but [the hospital] removed it... the enemies wanted to kill... me.
Boy, 16, Moroto

These and numerous other testimonies reveal that children routinely face life-threatening risks while safeguarding livestock that they do not own and may not benefit from economically (Interpeace, 2024). Some domestic work was also framed as potentially life-threatening due to localised hazards, with a 16-year-old girl from Napak describing being bitten by a snake while collecting firewood.

Children also described being expected to do work that exceeded their physical size and strength, putting them at risk of excessive tiredness and physical injuries. This was most graphically described in relation to Moroto’s mining and quarry sectors, where several children described being expected to carry weights that strained them to the point of vomiting blood. For instance, a 16-year-old girl from Moroto said, “By carrying lighter things, I try to avoid carrying heavy stones because it can affect me and I start vomiting blood.” Physical exhaustion was also associated with other heavy labour, including carrying produce at markets and carrying water and other manual domestic work. A 14-year-old girl from Napak, who had developed ulcers and coughed up blood from carrying heavy jerry cans for her aunt, captured the mental toll of undertaking work that threatens one’s health when she disclosed, “Sometimes when I fall very sick, I feel like getting the rope to hang myself.”



Illegal child labour

Some labour is hazardous not just due to the working conditions but also the threat of arrest due to the activity being illegal. Highlighting the limited livelihood opportunities in Karamoja, exacerbated by climate hazards, several children depicted illegal brewing as a potentially long-term, profitable livelihood.



I am supposed to do my business of selling alcohol... I will be selling local wines and the kombucha... My business is progressing.... My heart wants to do business which is progressing even if it's soda.

Boy, 15, Moroto



I want to go back to Kampala... I think doing casual labour. Like when you cultivate, you can sell what you've produced and start [a] business. Like brewing. If you borrow money from the group, you buy maize, sorghum, cassava, and flour, all of which will be used for brewing. And when you get profit, you return what you credited with interest on top of it.

Girl, 13, Napak

Other children reported begging in markets,¹¹ scavenging, stealing or participating in cattle raids.



My mother... roams looking for some money to buy for food for the house. Sometimes she goes to beg and at times we also go to beg leftovers after people have finished drinking alcohol. It's what we eat as food.

Girl, 14, Moroto



Twelve is a prime age for the young boys to be lured to participate in [cattle] raids, the age of 12 and above.

Local government official, Moroto

Highlighting linkages between child marriage and child labour, the local government official quoted here explained that boys may join cattle raids to acquire bride price; this is often part of boys' socialisation as "warriors." However, since raids may involve firearms, the activity places them at risk of serious injury or even death.

6.3.4 Long working hours

Compounding the often-heavy physical toll of children's labour, one of the most common features of their reported working conditions, regardless of their type of work or whether it occurred locally or in urban centres, was long working hours. Several participants noted that for girls, this often comes on top of domestic labour.



Work is too much... you return back... when you are very tired. You again have to fetch water for cleaning the house, washing the clothes... doing all the household work in the evening, at around 7, when it's late, maybe at 8:00 PM, like 9:00 PM or 10:00 PM.

Girl, 13, Napak



In Karamoja, children have always herded animals. It is how they learn responsibility. But now, with poverty, they work too much and miss school. Things have changed.

Man caregiver, Moroto

11 Begging was criminalised under The Kampala Child Protection Ordinance 2019 in efforts to stop child exploitation.

The caregiver quoted above alluded to a shift in work patterns, with deteriorating economic conditions exacerbated by climate hazards, meaning that work that was once used to teach children responsibility now consumes excessive amounts of time, including time previously allocated for schooling. In addition to depriving children of their right to education and play, long working hours also drain their energy. Over half of the child survey participants (54.5%) said they were too tired to pay attention at work, which further increases their risk of serious injury when participating in hazardous labour.

6.3.5 Withheld or unfair compensation and imposition of debt

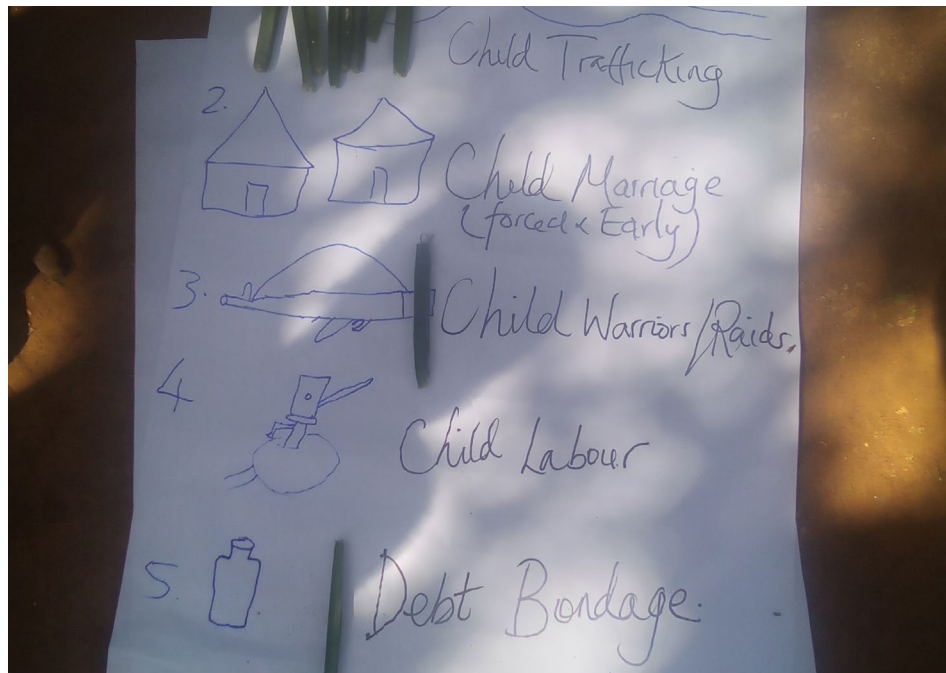


Figure 3: Types of exploitation identified by caregivers participating in an FGD in Moroto

Whether working locally or migrating for work, children recurrently reported being offered unfair compensation. Some were paid in cash for their casual work, or a combination of cash and food, or just food or alcohol. For instance, an 11-year-old girl from Moroto district noted, "When they say come we go to the garden, it is only alcohol. There is no money [that] they work for." Children also frequently reported receiving less than the market rate due to their age. Moreover, as a 14-year-old girl from Napak district noted, children from rural villages risk being paid below the market rate upon arrival in urban centres when they are "still ignorant" of the market or desperate for money. In many life stories, children said that caregivers or intermediaries confiscated some or all of their wages. Capturing this, a 13-year-old girl from Napak explained how her employer paid her 2,000 Ugandan Shillings (USD 0.55) but "my mother takes all the money when I am paid." Another 13-year-old girl from Napak explained how a girl in her local area had started burning wood to make charcoal for sale to raise school fees, but after raising 70,000 Ugandan Shillings (USD 19.40), the money was taken by her aunt.

Several other children explained that wages were taken by an intermediary, such as those who profited from mobilising children to work in urban areas. For instance, a 14-year-old boy from Napak said, "When I could succeed in begging for money worth 30,000 [Ugandan Shillings] (USD 8.31) or even 10,000 (USD 2.77), they removed it from me." The intermediaries may be family or community members, with one PSWO from Napak citing a case where a local council member had been implicated in cases of trafficking for the purpose of child labour. Other children said that wages were withheld by employers for simple mistakes, potentially leaving children paying off debts.

“ If a cow goes into someone’s garden and the owner gets you, it’s you they will first beat when you are shepherding. Then when you come home, they again deduct from your monthly pay or they tell you to go to the garden [to labour].
Boy, 15, Napak

A few adult participants also referred to possible debt bondage, with an NGO worker from Moroto saying, “Maybe there is a debt that this man or this woman is supposed to pay... but instead uses the children as a way of paying a debt [through labour].”

6.3.6 Physical abuse

The survey found that 19.2% of children reported being physically abused at work under the guise of “punishment.” The life stories provided vivid accounts of such abuse, ranging from being beaten or burnt with an iron to having food withheld. For example, numerous boys from Napak district who were guarding livestock described how they were beaten by the owners (family or third party) if any animals were lost on their watch, even when this was due to armed cattle raids. Other children reported being beaten for small errors or for not earning enough money when begging in urban centres.

“ One day I forgot where the kraal was and a cow got lost. The owner of the cows was not happy with me. He beat me then he told me to go to the house and eat food but his wife told me that there was no food for me.
Boy, 16, Moroto

“ [I was] beaten for not begging enough... [The woman exploiting me] began beating me saying if I don’t go for street begging and bring money for food, she would deny me food. If you bring like 5,000 [Ugandan Shillings] (USD 1.39), you are beaten. In case you bring like 10,000 (USD 2.77), she becomes happy and you are not beaten that day.
Boy, 14, Napak

It was noticeable that children spoke casually about being beaten, with many normalising this as an “adult” response to behaviour that does not meet expectations. This likely reflects the continuing use of physical violence against children within homes and communities in Karamoja (UBOS & ICF, 2018). For children who migrated to urban centres for work, physical violence also occurred in their living environments or when travelling home, with several reporting being robbed at transport terminals.

“ When you have worked your money like 100,000 (USD 27.71) to 300,000 (USD 83.14), at the railway line in town near where they sell water containers, they grab people’s money and if you are strong, they beat you badly or even stab you.
Girl, 14, Napak

Based on the life stories, in addition to loss of their hard-earned money, this type of robbery places some children at risk of further physical abuse from their family upon their return.

6.3.7 Psychological abuse

The survey found that 17.7% of child participants reported some form of verbal abuse or shaming at work. Meanwhile, qualitative data showed that children who migrated for work also experienced discrimination and stigma, especially ethnic discrimination when they moved outside Karamoja but within Uganda.

“ Some bosses can feed you well but others when you go say, ‘Karamojas I don’t want Karamojongs’. When you go, some abuse, then when you move they [call you] ‘rubbish’.
Girl, 16, Napak

Several children described being excluded from work opportunities, being given lower pay for the same work compared to other ethnic groups or being subjected to overt ethnically motivated violence and verbal abuse. A few narratives also suggested that girls may face gendered stigmatisation upon their return from migration, labelled prostitutes due to the assumption that they may have engaged in sexual activity while away from their caregivers’ supervision.



Finally, the survey data indicated that a high proportion of children are experiencing possible physical manifestations of psychological strain: 63.2% of children reported frequent headaches or sickness, 54.5% felt too tired to pay attention at work, 37.9% felt unhappy, downhearted or tearful, and 35.7% often felt worried, nervous or easily scared. This suggests that the multifaceted stresses and abuses experienced by children from Moroto and Napak districts, either locally or when they migrate, is having a profound impact on their psychosocial well-being.

6.3.8 Sexual abuse and exploitation

Mining sites in Moroto were occasionally cited by key informants as high-risk environments where adolescent girls are at risk of sexual exploitation due to their interactions with adult men who wield significant control over access to work, income and necessities. A 16-year-old girl from Moroto also noted that there is a risk of harassment when going to fetch or sell firewood, while a 15-year-old girl from Napak described experiencing unwanted sexual touching while working as a domestic worker.

“ [In the family where I worked] there are boys... Whenever they get me mopping the house, they start bad touches on me and when I try to report them to their mother, she instead starts shouting at me like I am accusing her children.
Girl, 15, Napak

Several participants observed that girls may also be forced to “marry” their employer.

“ Some go to Western [region] and they end up married there. Their mothers tell them to go... When they come from there, they talk about their experiences, like being maltreated and mishandled. Some are forced to be married by their employers who are men.
Girl, 15, Napak

“ These very children who work in those households are sometimes forced into sexual acts against their will and they end up becoming their wives.
Kraal leader, Napak

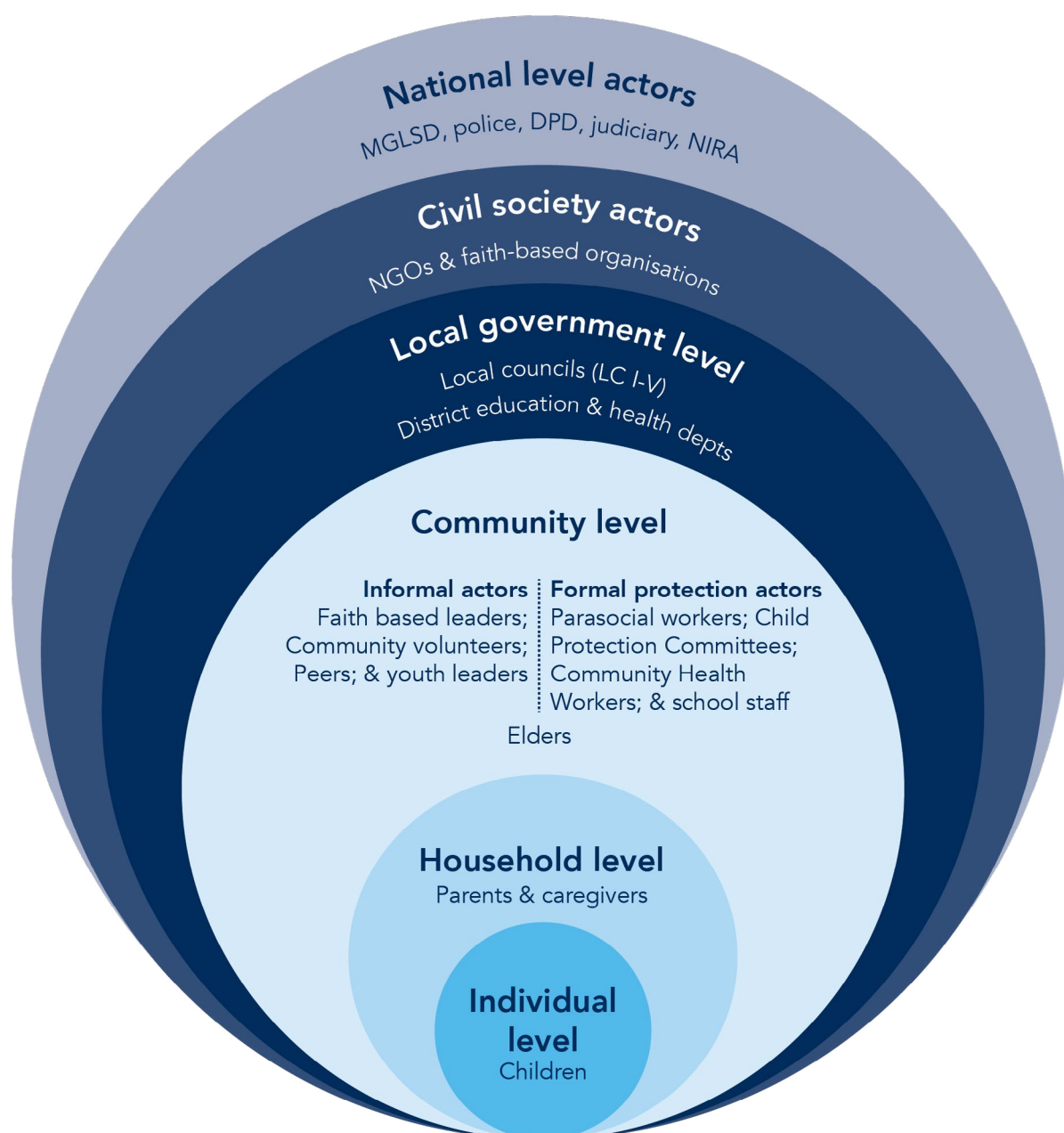
Abuse of domestic workers illustrates the heightened risks associated with work in private households, where employers exert significant control over children’s movement and safety. Children who migrated for work also explained how unsafe living conditions placed them at heightened risk of sexual violence, robbery or other physical violence, with one 15 -year-old girl from Napak normalising this risk by saying, “When I go to Moroto [town] for casual labour... I just slept on the street. Whenever the boys try to rape, I make an alarm people come to rescue.” The impacts of sexual violence are severe, notably psychological and physical harm (including sexually transmitted infections) and unwanted pregnancies, leading to possible stigmatisation and loss of education.

7. RESPONDING TO CHILD EXPLOITATION

7.1 Introduction

Uganda's child protection system consists of laws, policies, institutions, services and community mechanisms to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect and exploitation of children. However, the study found that while some duty bearers are successfully protecting children, others are less effective at doing so. This results in an inconsistent system that is heavily reliant on individual actors' motivation, knowledge and skills to recognise exploitation and provide a survivor-centred and trauma-informed response. This section describes key child protection actors in the Karamoja sub-region and explores factors that either support or impede prevention of and response to child marriage and child labour.

Figure 4: Key actors within the child protection system in Karamoja



7.2 Key actors within the child protection system

The child protection system in Karamoja is complex, covering a wide range of duty bearers and other protection actors in both formal and informal roles.

7.2.1 Individual level

Children are typically placed in positions of dependency and submission to adults due to social and cultural norms. However, the study found that they can effectively advocate for their rights in formal and informal settings (see Section 7.3.3) and exercise agency by reporting or resisting exploitation and supporting peers (see Section 7.3.5).

7.2.2 Household level

Parents and caregivers are responsible for supporting children to realise their basic rights, including their right to protection. They hold considerable authority over children, which may be used either to protect or exploit/abuse them. Participants' narratives suggest that some caregivers provide for their child's needs yet also exploit them, making exploitation harder to detect. Others request or pressure children to marry or engage in child labour in cases where families are unable to meet their basic needs due to harsh economic conditions and inadequate social safety nets. In situations where a girl is married, the power exercised by her caregivers typically shifts to her in-laws, who can have a significant impact on the girl's opportunities and well-being. Co-wives can also have a potentially large impact on the girl's well-being within the household, including her and her children's access to household resources.

7.2.3 Community level (informal actors)



There are community volunteers who are supported by FIDA. They help in reporting cases. There is a chairman's committee that handles issues of children. They have different roles and responsibilities, and there is specifically one that handles all issues related to children. From our village here in Naagis, there are people called the para social workers who are active. Whenever issues arise, they report cases to them and to chairman. They help people in that, whenever there is a meeting, even children have known them.

Man caregiver, Moroto

These actors operate alongside or support formal/community systems:

- **Local elders and leaders, including kraal leaders, Karachunas and traditional community leaders** can draw on their significant power in communities, as custodians of community cultures and values, to endorse child protection efforts, prevent unsafe work, report trafficking or abuse, and strengthen community acceptance of child protection measures. However, they can also reinforce harmful practices by promoting child labour or marriage, reinforcing customary legal frameworks that are not child-centred and administering abusive physical "punishments" (see Section 7.3.4).
- **Faith-based leaders** possess considerable moral authority in communities, which can be used to either reinforce or prevent exploitative practices such as child labour and child marriage. Through preaching and counselling, they can challenge harmful norms, encourage children's education and mobilise community-based protection.
- **Community volunteers (other than PSWs)** participate in community-based mechanisms, such as mothers' groups that can help to raise awareness about child exploitation and identify and refer at-risk children. However, they typically lack adequate training to address more complex cases.
- **Peers, youth and survivor leaders** can motivate children to remain in school, alert children and community members of specific risks by sharing experiences of exploitation, and collectively resist harmful practices such as early marriage (see Section 7.3.3). However, peers can also influence children to turn to harmful coping strategies like child labour (see Section 6.3.1).

7.2.4 Community level (actors with specific protection responsibilities)

Community level structures are locally anchored mechanisms that serve as the frontline for prevention, early identification and referral of child protection cases.

- **Para social workers** are trusted local volunteers who are responsible for monitoring at-risk children, reporting protection cases and coordinating with PSWOs or NGOs to ensure timely intervention. Often the first point of contact for families, PSWs can provide guidance on child protection matters and mobilise community awareness campaigns. However, they are often not as extensively trained as paid workers and may become inactive if not supported through an NGO project.
- **Child protection committees** are part of the government structures established under the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) to support the work of PSWs and CDOs.
- **Community health workers (CHWs)** are health focal points in the community who are responsible for identifying children at risk of protection or health issues, referring them to relevant services and sensitising communities on health and protection topics (such as FGM/C), although most rely on NGO support. They are also called “Health Centre 1” in the community, providing immunisation support, outreach and referrals. They work closely with PSWs and are particularly well placed for identifying girls who have married early.
- **School-based structures (teachers and support staff)** identify and monitor children at risk of child labour or marriage, report absenteeism, address school-related abuse and refer children to relevant services. In Napak, informal networks linking teachers with parish chiefs, police and NGOs have rescued children living or working on the streets and prevented early marriages. Yet, there have been reports of education actors abusing their power by physically abusing children in their care (Batte, 2025).
- **Businesses and employers** are responsible for providing decent work conditions, including adhering to laws on child labour. When engaged as allies, they can promote positive labour practices. However, some exploit children and expect them to work in hazardous or abusive work environments, and they are often not held accountable for doing so (see Section 6).

7.2.5 NGOs, CBOs and faith-based organisations (FBOs)

NGOs, CBOs and FBOs complement government efforts by providing technical expertise and delivering direct services to exploited children (rescue, rehabilitation and reintegration). They also deliver prevention programs, including awareness-raising, school sponsorship, parenting skills, climate action initiatives, livelihoods programming and cash/microfinance support. Although they are responsible for coordinating with state and community actors, the study found that coordination is not always effective and quality may vary.

7.2.6 Local government level

- **Local councils** are administrative structures of the community with a mandate to link the community with government authorities. In collaboration with traditional leaders and other community structures like PSWs and child welfare committees, they support reporting, mediation and monitoring of child rights to respective authorities. However, some reinforce unlawful and harmful customary mechanisms that are not in children’s best interests or solicit bribes, impeding survivors’ access to justice (see Section 7.3.4).
- **District education and health departments can support child protection through the provision of health and education services**, including monitoring of schools, reinforcing teachers’ code of conduct and supporting the linkage of vulnerable children to education opportunities.
- **District community-based departments are responsible for providing child protection case management.** Through the PSWOs and sub-county Community Development Officers, they facilitate assessments, capacity building, community outreach, referrals and case monitoring. Further, labour officers are responsible for raising awareness of and monitoring compliance with child labour laws and investigating cases of exploitation and hazardous work. However, all these positions are typically vastly under-resourced, which significantly limits their effectiveness (see Section 7.3.2).

7.2.7 National level actors

- **The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD)** is responsible for policy development and coordination and technical support. The ministry's Department of Youth and Children Affairs coordinates child protection actors/actions, provides policy direction and oversees/delivers programming. The Directorate of Labour, Employment and Occupational Safety and Health, also within the ministry, holds primary responsibility for addressing child labour issues in the country. The mandates of this national departments are centred in the District Community Based Development Office.
- **Uganda Police Force – Child and Family Protection Unit (CFPU)**, which operates at national and local government levels, is responsible for investigating and prosecuting crimes against children, rescuing children and providing initial protection interventions. Police are not always sufficiently trained to provide survivor-centred support to children so their work may be viewed as punitive even when implementing a protective mandate (see Section 7.3.5). Some solicit bribes, thereby impeding access to justice (see Section 7.3.4).
- **The country's Judiciary and the Directorate of Public Prosecutions (DPP)** operate at national and local government levels, and are responsible for investigating and prosecuting offenders, including child offenders. Both focus on legal enforcement, with the judiciary issuing orders on custody, abuse and exploitation. As discussed in Section 7.3.4, bureaucratic systems, delays and costs of accessing these services can impede access to justice.
- **The National Identification and Registration Authority**, which operates at national and local government levels, is responsible for civil registration (including births, deaths, adoption orders granted by courts and marriages, among others).



7.3 Factors affecting prevention of and responses to child exploitation

While the research findings identified numerous examples of enabling factors that support preventative or protective responses to child marriage and child labour in Moroto and Napak districts, they also highlighted significant barriers. This section focuses on key factors that appear to influence the effectiveness of child protection efforts, focusing on prevention and response initiatives.

7.3.1 Extent to which protection programming addresses drivers of child marriage and child labour

Caregivers and child protection actors stressed the need to provide interventions that address structural drivers of child marriage and child labour, such as cultural norms, poverty, depleted livelihoods, food insecurity and unequal access to education. For instance, caregivers who depend on daily casual labour often view their children's earnings as essential to household survival, so this cannot simply be removed from the equation without a viable alternative source of income.

“It's because of lack of capital or money to engage in income generating activities. If an NGO or partner could come up and support in these ventures, it would be good.
Kraal leader, Napak

“[The best way to help children] is by taking them to school and while they are in school, [provide] continuous guidance and counselling... to make them understand education is good and to... Introduce some of them to hands-on activities like tailoring, building, carpentry.
Woman caregiver, Moroto

Similarly, child protection actors noted that to prevent re-exploitation or further abuse, “rescued” children require integrated, holistic support that combines case management and counselling alongside interventions that strengthen household livelihoods and access to education.

A number of positive examples were given where families and children had received support from NGOs and some state actors that had enabled them to overcome key drivers of child marriage and child labour. This support included school sponsorship, school feeding programs, vocational training, awareness raising on child rights and microfinance to start a small business.

“Children [engaged in child labour] were ‘rounded up’ [by an NGO] and taken to school... Some children were taken for vocational skilling. Others were given start-up money to start small businesses of selling salt, sugar... It also supported parents who were involved in the fight against child labour.
FGD with women and men caregivers, Moroto

“[An NGO] took me to school and even I finished that course, those two courses. [Another NGO]... they came and gave me - surrendered their land to me for soil. [It] is big... like three acres... I have cultivated sorghum.
Girl, 17, Moroto

In these cases, support extended beyond the children's immediate needs, strengthening their resilience to help them withstand future economic shocks without (re)turning to child labour. Nevertheless, even though these quotes highlight possible benefits, the use of terms such as “rounded up” highlights that for some caregivers, the support offered may be helpful while also leaving them feeling disenfranchised.

Furthermore, other examples were given of less sustainable interventions where the support did not have longer-term benefits. For instance, in some cases, educational support was provided without first addressing the cultural norms undermining the value of children's, and particularly girls', education and ensuring caregiver buy-in.

“ One [supported] group got a motorcycle, the other... got a grinding mill. Then they told them that the little that they [earn] should be used to support their children like buying books, pens... One thing that is alarming us... is that children have again resorted to going back to the mines. If there could be some NGOs or stakeholders that could come again and help us support these parents in talking to these children and maybe... taking them to school, we would be very grateful.

FGD with women and men caregivers, Moroto

Other participants noted that some school reintegration interventions are time-limited, leading to children dropping out once support ends, undermining their hopes and trust in protection actors.

“ Some NGOs come... lie [to] you. Like, ‘we want to take you back to school to study.’ And when you go to school, [they] will maybe pay one term only and you will be surprised to be chased away from school... There will be no way of telling the mother also to bring the money... she is very poor. There is nowhere she will get [the money as] she has to feed those other people at home.

Girl, 11, Napak

Finally, participants gave examples of where support had been provided that started to address drivers of child labour but was not comprehensive enough to have a real impact. For example, a 17-year-old girl from Moroto described how an NGO had provided a six-month training course on baking. Yet, no subsequent support was given to buy equipment and stock to start her own business. As her mother could not financially help, she returned to hazardous labour, selling firewood and burning charcoal.

7.3.2 Availability of protection services

Across the qualitative data, formal protection services were recurrently described as having uneven coverage, particularly in rural, hard-to-reach areas. This has left some children with limited direct access to government actors, justice processes and life-saving health services, particularly during rainy seasons when infrastructure may be further hindered.



“ Maybe your father said this or your father did this to you. Like gave you out for marriage while you are still young. Here, [there] is nowhere you can run to. There is no nearby office that you can say can handle that issue... it is very far - you have to go up to Kangole.
Girl, 16, Napak

“ The child can be raped from up the mountain and the village is down here so the child cannot access health services.
Man, miner, Moroto

A PSWO from Napak noted that the absence of a local court means cases are heard in Moroto, but the distance to the court and delays mean some survivors withdraw their complaints. Children living in under-served areas are thus forced to rely more on informal protection systems, which can be supportive but are also not always child-centred (see Section 7.3.4). The uneven service coverage makes it particularly difficult for children to report cases where their caregiver is the perpetrator as they may not have money to travel to the nearest child protection service. Adult and child participants also frequently raised concerns about the distance to schools, which are important for preventing and detecting child labour and child marriage but remain inaccessible for many children in rural areas.

Recognising these challenges, the government, NGOs, CBOs and FBOs have adjusted programming to improve coverage. Proactive outreach mechanisms, such as mobile teams, school-based monitoring and home visits, were emphasised as effective methods for reaching children in remote areas. However, a recurring theme in the qualitative data was that these efforts are hindered by resource constraints that restrict the scale, reach and sustainability of interventions, particularly in remote locations where a single officer may be responsible for large geographic areas. District officials, PSWs and NGO workers described how inadequate budgets impede outreach, timely home visits, follow-up assessments and monitoring of at-risk children.

“ Napak is very big, huge. You cannot reach all of the community without resources... We are forced to target hotspot communities... with the little resources that we have. As we are doing that phasing... the other children are still exposed to abuse, exploitation and all that.
PSWO, Napak

“ You know these districts are vast... this distance there in kilometres is very huge... Now look at the fuel... we get little fuel, almost around 200 litres to run a district for a month.
CFPU Officer, Napak

The CFPU representative noted that reaching remote outposts requires 40 to 50 litres of fuel, quickly depleting their monthly fuel allowance if cases arise in these areas. As a result, efforts are often focused in areas known to have high levels of child protection issues, leaving survivors in remote communities, where cases are harder to detect, at greater risk of exclusion from comprehensive protective services. This reflects continuing under-resourcing of the national child protection system, restricting swift or consistent responses (The AfriChild Centre, Makerere University & ChildFund International, 2022).

In Napak and Moroto districts, NGOs also serve as vital first responders, complementing state actors by providing direct services and referring children to statutory support. Yet, while numerous child participants reported receiving support from NGOs, adult and child participants alike criticised the uneven coverage of these services. For example, a Kraal leader from Napak complained that “we don’t have any NGOs helping us” on child marriage and sexual exploitation. In children’s life stories, school sponsorship was commonly described as particularly under-resourced and hard to access. Those children who were sponsored expressed gratitude for the opportunity to stay in school, while many others framed being sponsored as a “wish” that was granted to just a lucky few.

“ I want to go to school, it’s my prayer I get some sponsor who can support me.
Girl, 16, Moroto

“ I wish I could [get] an NGO that can sponsor my education. I would also be better in future.
Boy, 17, Napak

As sponsorship support typically comes from a few NGOs that have international support, money is clearly finite. Reflecting this, child participants also complained that NGO support often ends abruptly when resources end. As a 16-year-old boy from Napak commented, *“Well wishers like NGOs who used to support with education have all disappeared, so we are not sure of our future now.”* Short-term, donor-driven projects such as these often fail to maintain impact once external support ends, highlighting the need for long-term commitment and locally grounded strategies.

7.3.3 Recognition of child marriage and child labour as exploitation

Although Uganda has a relatively comprehensive statutory legal system for responding to child marriage and child labour (see Annex B), it is not always clear how civil, religious and customary law provisions interact. For instance, the Children (Amendment) Act (2016) set the minimum marriage age as 18 years, yet different ages, or no ages at all, are provided in other legislation (Girls not brides, n/d). Similarly, while the Children (Amendment) Act (2016) sets the minimum employment age at 16 years, national surveys such as National Labour Force survey still use the earlier Employment Act definition of child labour which allowed “light work” between 12 and 14 years. This can create confusion over which provisions actually apply and affect whether a child is understood as requiring protection.

When reflecting on barriers impeding protection, several child protection actors argued that community-level understandings of child protection laws and local bylaws in Karamoja can be limited. One PSW from Moroto argued that inadequate community sensitisation on bylaws means that *“the community is not aware [of legislation].”* Similarly, a PSWO from Napak argued that communities *“lack information on the legal laws.”* Further, although Uganda’s legal framework defines a child as a person under the age of 18 years, childhood is often defined by social and biological markers such as puberty rather than by age (see Sections 5 and 6). This increases the risk of children not being recognised as minors and being excluded from child protection measures.



Encouragingly, many children were clear that the labour expected of them went beyond what was reasonable and ethical, with some willing to complain to caregivers or local elders about their treatment. This suggests at least some recognition of child labour as a form of exploitation.

“ I got a small child carrying a big heavy jerry can and she was just like around 7 years old. But I helped her to carry the heavy jerry can.
Boy, 10-14, Participatory workshop, Napak

“ Children are really overworked... making children carry heavy loads of firewood [into] town... The child can become crippled.
Boy, 15-17, Participatory workshop, Napak

Similarly, despite being a longstanding, normalised traditional practice, bride capture was condemned by numerous children, as well as by adults, for being harmful and exploitative (see Section 5.2.2). Some girls clearly did understand it was a violation of their rights since they sought help from local child protection actors (see Section 7.3.5). Thus, while for some community members child marriage remains a normal part of childhood, other participants' accounts indicate possible shifts in social norms, especially among educated and urbanised youth or those living in areas with NGO or government presence. Child participants' condemnation of bride capture also shows that children do not necessarily internalise socialised norms and practice, and can be power catalysts for shifting attitudes, influencing peers and holding systems accountable when given space and support to do so.

7.3.3.1 Efficacy of approaches for shifting social norms

When reflecting on attempts to shift community norms relating to child marriage and child labour, child protection actors and caregivers cited several successful approaches, including community dialogue.

“ [Reflecting on child labour], we were ignorant before, not knowing that our actions were harmful to the children who were in the mines beside us doing the work. There were two NGOs that came... They said it's bad when children are around mines working beside parents. [One NGO] brought together mothers, fathers, children, caregivers, and we dialogued until we stopped bringing children to the mines... [The NGO] played a bigger role by changing people's attitudes who were quarrelling as to why [NGOs] had intervened, saying that it was a personal affair between them and their children. But later on, they were receptive.
FGD with women and men caregivers, Moroto

Alongside NGO-led initiatives, caregivers also discussed various community-led protection initiatives, such as mothers' groups and grandmother-led committees, that support community-level dialogue to reframe child marriage and child labour as exploitation. Critically, a dialogue-based approach recognises that sustained engagement with all key stakeholders is required to address systemic issues.

Several child protection actors also emphasised the value of working with child survivors to increase communities' understanding of the impacts of child marriage or child labour. In Moroto, a local government actor explained how former child labourers are invited to join community committees, noting that “they tell their experiences and influence [their communities] positively.” Similarly, a PSWO from Napak explained how a child marriage survivor now speaks on radio shows and is a “champion” for children who have been exploited. This reiterates the intrinsic benefits of partnering with survivors on awareness and advocacy, letting their authentic voices and expertise drive campaigns (Withers & Ngallo, 2025; 100million.org, n/d).

Participants also stressed that prevention efforts should be tailored to the social and cultural context. In both districts, examples were given of awareness campaigns that had successfully drawn on Karamoja's rich oral traditions, using culturally appropriate methods (such as storytelling, drama, songs and local ceremonies) to reinforce protective norms linked to child exploitation and school

attendance. This highlights how cultural legitimacy and normative authority can strengthen child protection messaging when aligned with rights-based principles.

“Like there is a story about FGM. They say that a young girl was mutilated and later she failed to [bear children].

Man, Artisan miner, Moroto

“Like traditionally we put [on] this thing called Edonga. We sing songs, we go to that place that is most affected and we tell them [the] dangers of child exploitation through singing or dramas as a group. So, we go as a group. We tell them – even we show dramas. That is what we do as a community.

Man, Artisan miner, Moroto

Performances are often held publicly, fostering dialogue among adults and children, and can also reach community members with lower literacy. This participatory storytelling allows communities to see harmful practices reflected back at them, prompting contemplation and dialogue. Yet, as highlighted by the first quote above, one of the challenges of traditional stories and songs is that they may reinforce harmful cultural norms, such as the feminised stigma of being infertile, despite condemning other harmful practices.

Finally, culturally tailored messaging delivered by respected local actors, like elders or religious leaders, was seen as effective in challenging social norms. Elders have moral authority and community-wide legitimacy enabling them to shape norms and influence behaviours in ways that state actors often cannot. For instance, a CDO from Moroto explained how they record local leaders reading awareness raising material on child exploitation and share it in areas with no radio coverage because communities “listen to it... of course being their leader and being somebody whom they elected, they will always listen to him.” This example shows how leveraging customary authority can disrupt harmful practices and redirect community responses toward children’s well-being.

However, despite seeing some changes, several child protection actors highlighted that huge barriers remain, even when these approaches are used to promote normative change. For example, an LC1 from Napak observed, “The NGOs come in and say let’s stop [child marriage and child labour] but we still say it’s our culture.” Echoing this, a CPFU officer from Moroto recounted how they had implemented a community-based initiative that aimed to achieve a community commitment to stopping child marriage. Yet, at the end, an older man complained that girls were currently choosing their own husbands and argued that “it’s us to choose for them men [who have cows],” noting that this has been the case for generations. Similarly, in a scoping study exploring causes of child marriage in Uganda, Akera (2018) noted that early marriage may be sought by girls who view it as an avenue towards social standing, economic security or health and wellness. Thus, while the approaches described in this section provide glimpses of optimism, changing such deep-rooted norms takes time and requires sustained, locally-driven engagement.

7.3.4 Efficacy of statutory protection systems

Although Uganda has a comprehensive legal framework for addressing child exploitation (see Annex B), a recurrent theme among children and adults was that even where statutory services were available and accessible, they were often ineffective. Some cases were discussed where participants felt that justice had been successfully achieved. Yet, child protection actors considered national child protection directives to be largely invisible in rural and informal settings where poverty, cultural norms and limited institutional presence leave children without meaningful safeguards. A local government official noted that “the impact of [the directives] has not yet been felt really,” while many discussions highlighted a substantial gap between statutory provisions and children’s lived realities.

“My dad’s brother had a case [where a girl died by suicide after being forced to marry]. The body was taken to the police together with her parents. They were allowed to go home for burial. After the burial, the girl’s parents were taken for interrogation and then released. They were advised not to force girls into marriage against their will. The man that the girl was forced to marry was not arrested, since the family was left to grieve.

Boy, 15, Napak

Several participants said that nothing happens after cases are reported, with system delays or corruption forcing people to withdraw their cases.

Both child and adult participants frequently cited corruption as a factor that undermines survivors' access to justice in the statutory as well as customary systems (see Section 7.3.4.1).

“ [The police] will say you first go and start from chairman. And when you come to chairman, again he will also say... he wants something so that [he] can give you this thing.
Girl, 16, Napak

“ Some parents fear going to police because they know once they go there they cannot get any help. Nowadays, the law doesn't protect people and give people justice. So once a child is forced to marry, they go to police and there's nothing that can happen. Maybe they will tell them to look for this amount of money to go and arrest the other person once the other person pays, [but a bigger] amount, [and] they are released. This makes it hard for parents to protect their children from forced marriages.
Field coordinator, Moroto

The issue of corruption impeding child protection in Uganda is longstanding (Walakira et al., 2025). With child marriage and child labour more likely to affect children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the expectation that a bribe will be required can prevent children from even initiating cases.

Some types of exploitation also appear less likely to receive statutory protection than others due to systemic barriers. For instance, while labour laws require safe, regulated conditions for adolescent workers, these are seldom implemented in the informal economy where most child labour occurs. Domestic servitude also remains largely hidden from inspection or monitoring, in part due to the limited resources for doing so, with one community leader in Moroto explaining, “Who will inspect a home? The work is inside; we just hear stories when the child runs.” This lack of oversight allows abuse to occur unchecked and prevents exploited children from accessing legal remedies or protective services. Child marriage cases that were discussed in the qualitative data most typically relied on customary systems due to social norms that frame this as a “traditional” issue, potentially impacting girls' access to more survivor-centred support.

7.3.4.1 Impact of legal pluralism

Against this backdrop, the study found that communities still strongly rely on customary systems, particularly where cases of exploitation are grounded in tradition, such as bride capture. In Karamoja, deep-rooted traditions and the possibility of compensation and bride price, coupled with apparent apathy in the statutory system, reinforce the authority of customary systems over statutory obligations, particularly in rural and pastoralist areas where state institutions have limited presence.

“ The customary laws are basically looking at the child as an adult... It's a negative influence, because parents look at the benefits... the community justice system is also a bit biased because it is all about compensation not reconciliation.
Local government official, Moroto

In Karamoja, customary systems are the traditional processes of decision-making and well-being overseen by traditional leaders, including clan leaders or councils of elders. Customary systems are neither inherently protective nor inherently harmful, functioning as hybrid governance structures whose impact depends on how their authority is mobilised. Yet, the availability of a system that is more likely to offer compensation, whether through traditional bride price or punitive payments, increases the risk that caregivers will choose the option that best serves their household's interests rather than those of the child, particularly in communities deeply affected by poverty and insecurity. When forms of exploitation are supported by social norms and traditions, customary processes may actively undermine statutory protections and perpetuate further harm. For example, after bride capture, families typically negotiate compensation and bride price with the abductor through customary systems, leading to the girl being forced to marry her abuser. In the survey, 42.1% of child

participants said families would typically negotiate bride price following bride capture, with 52.3% saying that the girl's family will receive bride price and she will then marry the man.

“If you force someone's daughter or someone's child, if he or she doesn't want [this], they fine you... like those forced marriages. If you force a child and the clan people realise it without their notice, so the parents will be fined... that Natija (compensation)... will be taken from the parents and also the boy who has taken the girl will be fined by the girl's clan... because they say the boy stole somebody's daughter.

Community leader, Moroto

Further highlighting how customary approaches may not align with child rights, several cases were cited where the LC1 had “disciplined” children for actions linked to their exploitation through the use of beatings. These included a case of suspected theft in shared work-related housing that resulted in all children being beaten. In such cases, children's exploitation is re-framed as deviant behaviour on the part of the child that requires correction rather than protection and underscores the vital importance of frontline child protection actors being able to recognise abuse and exploitation. Finally, participants also brought up examples where community elders punish perpetrators, described by one male caregiver as “disciplining men who do bad things to children in the [community] meetings.” Yet, since the perpetrator remains in the locality if such an approach is used, they can continue to exploit or retaliate against the child.

7.3.4.2 Capacity of protection actors to handle cases of exploitation

Karamoja's child protection system relies heavily on community leaders and volunteers acting as bridges to statutory actors and NGOs. Child protection actors praised volunteers' dedication, with one PSWO from Napak noting that “PSWs are basically within that very village... meaning they know the unique issues that affect children in those communities.” This dedication comes despite some receiving death threats after intervening in cases of child marriage. Yet, some participants also raised concerns about protection actors' technical capacities, particularly when they are community-based.

“The LC1s. They are not really trained on these things. You find our work becomes difficult... you find an LC1 is very negative [and] it really weakens us.

PSW, Moroto

“There are issues of capacity gaps with stakeholders who... should be the frontline to offer services to children...

PSWO, Napak

Many PSWs lack sufficient formal training in case management, psychosocial support, trauma-informed care and legal procedures. This limits their ability to identify abuse, assess risks or intervene appropriately, making signs of exploitation easier to miss or misinterpret. Further, although PSWs are approved by local government, programs of regular support (for example for transport needs) and continuous mentoring for PSWs are sporadic, depending on outside donors.

Given the complexity of child marriage and child labour cases, there is a need for sufficiently capacitated actors who are well-versed in coordination so that survivors received holistic support. In cases where coordination appeared effective, children were supported to access key gatekeepers to vital protection services, including access to justice.

“They wanted to force [a girl] to marry because they had already given her parents animals. So, she came to school, where we have [people in authority who can support]. We asked the girl, ‘has the guy [had sex with her]?’ She said no. We took her to the police. And after that, we went for the parents. The police went to arrest the parents... We have ladders from a teacher to a senior man, then to the head teacher, to the LC1 and then to police.

Man caregiver, Moroto



KATANGA, She Girls.
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“ There was a forced marriage; the girl sneaked [out] at night and came to me and I referred her to the police... From the police she was taken to [name of FBO].
Community leader, Napak

A child protection expert from Kampala stressed that multi-stakeholder child protection committees at district and sub-county levels can support effective coordination, providing a platform for sharing information, identifying at-risk children and developing integrated interventions. Such coordination ensures that actions are complementary, expertise is maximised, resources are effectively utilised and interventions reach the most at-risk populations.

7.3.5 Trust in the child protection system

Likely influenced by the child protection systems' perceived ineffectiveness and risk of corruption, child participants across the life stories voiced differing levels of trust in child protection actors. Some expressed a clear willingness to seek help from statutory and customary actors if needed. This was typically in situations of being forced to leave school, to marry or to engage in particularly hazardous or abusive work.

“ What will help us is... if... you can go to the police and say my mother wants to force me [to marry]... but I don't want [this]. Police will save you. There was one on the other side of Lokopo. The boys raped her and she called 116... those people helped her and those men were arrested by the police.
Girl, 15-17, Napak

“ Whenever my elder brother tells me to go and get married, I tell them 'no, I don't want to go for marriage', and when he insists, I run to the chairman to report. When someone comes to say they want to date me just to deceive me, I report to the chairman.
Girl, 11, Napak

These girls' narratives highlight how positive experiences with the system, whether first- or second-hand, help build trust. However, across the life stories, child participants often placed their trust in specific individuals rather than the system as a whole. This may affect children's access to support if these individuals leave their roles and may also mean that some children lack access to a trusted local advocate.

Further, the survey and life stories also highlighted that many children do not appear to trust protection systems to afford them justice or protection from further violence. Reflecting this, when child participants were asked what boys or girls might do if faced with a marriage that they were determined to refuse, 69.9% said they could run away and 33.5% said migrate (Table 17). Only 25.6% said that boys or girls would appeal to adults. Even if these responses were affected by low availability of formal services, the finding still suggests a lack of trust in community-based actors' ability to provide support, including their caregivers.

Table 17: Children's possible actions if they wish to refuse a marriage

Child participants' perceptions about what boys or girls may do if they are determined to refuse marriage*	Overall (n=266)	Moroto (n=137)	Napak (n=129)	Boys (n=111)	Girls (n=155)
Running away	186 (69.9%)	98 (71.5%)	88 (68.2%)	70 (63.1%)	116 (74.8%)
Migration	89 (33.5%)	37 (27.0%)	52 (40.3%)	35 (31.5%)	54 (34.8%)
Appealing to adults	68 (25.6%)	39 (28.5%)	29 (22.5%)	36 (32.4%)	32 (20.6%)
Other	15 (5.6%)	6 (4.4%)	9 (7.0%)	5 (4.5%)	10 (6.5%)
Don't know	39 (14.7%)	16 (11.7%)	23 (17.8%)	18 (16.2%)	21 (13.5%)

*Multiple responses permitted

In some cases described within the life stories, this apparent lack of trust appeared to derive from actual negative experiences of the system. Numerous child participants who had migrated for work described children being “arrested” or “captured” by PSWOs, NGOs or the police, including during public order operations in urban centres where they may be apprehended for loitering, public nuisance or “vagrancy.” Following these sweeps, children are typically taken to police stations before being connected with PSWOs. Although children should not be arrested for child labour but instead removed from hazardous situations for their own protection,¹² the public orders are used to “clean” the streets in a process that is typically hard to distinguish from being arrested.

Some child participants also seemed ill-informed about actions taken once they are placed under statutory care and protection. Children may be taken to remand homes or approved care facilities run by the state, NGOs or FBOs that may provide temporary shelter, psychosocial support, non-formal education, life-skills training and/or support for family tracing and reunification. As highlighted below, it seems that children do not always fully understand the process; this can cause considerable distress in cases where the child's freedom of movement is restricted, institutions are fenced or guarded, stays are involuntary and information about their legal status is limited.

“When I came to this school... Most children were crying... but for me, there was no need to cry because they had not taken me there to kill [me] or whatever. We were taken to school to improve our lives or my life. Only one thing: when we had no clothes, that's why we said, 'have they brought us here to suffer?' That's why many of us climbed over the fence... We stayed, but two girls I remember escaped. First one girl escaped; they brought her back, and she was beaten, but she escaped again... For us, the three big girls, we didn't have pads, but they brought them; it's only shoes and sweaters that have not been brought... We told them those who will not go to school will have their parents put in jail... From the time those children escaped, none of us ever talked of escaping from school.

Girl, 15, Napak

This girl went on to describe how both she and her family accepted that, while not ideal, the institution presented her with an opportunity to attend school that she would otherwise be denied given the structural barriers impeding universal access to education for children in Karamoja. This highlights that when children and families are faced with extreme poverty, coupled with a sense of powerlessness when faced with state and civil society systems, they may be forced to take decisions that they would not otherwise choose. However, while she saw the benefits, it is clear that other girls did not wish to stay but were forced to do so. Experiences such as this likely weaken future trust in the child protection system.

¹² The Employment Act (2006) and the Children (Amendment) Act (2016) mandate labour officers, police and PSWOs to remove children from hazardous or exploitative work. Similarly, where child trafficking is suspected, anti-trafficking legislation allows them to be held for assessment and referral to appropriate services.

7.3.6 Level of support to access protection services

Caregivers were recurrently portrayed as gatekeepers who can either enable or impede access to protection. Highlighting the potential for caregivers to serve as critical champions of child protection, one man caregiver from Moroto described parents as the *“support root of the household.”* Numerous cases were also cited by children where caregivers had stepped in to either prevent or respond to their child being exploited; these efforts included caregivers fighting to keep their children in school, even if this meant taking on debt, and caregivers reporting instances of abuse to relevant authorities or directly challenging perpetrators. Echoing this, many caregivers spoke about the importance of protecting their children and sustaining their education.

However, as noted in Sections 5 and 6, child participants also described how some caregivers encourage or force children to engage in child marriage or child labour to help meet their household's basic needs, making it extremely hard for children to seek support in such circumstances. A 14-year-old girl from Moroto stated that it can be hard for protection actors, even statutory ones, to intervene in cases where caregivers are supporting a harmful practice, noting that when told not to send their children to work, caregivers *“insist, saying ‘what are we then supposed to eat?’”* Reflecting this, a caregiver who participated in a mixed-gender FGD in Moroto advocated that police should stop *“involving [themselves] in matters of children,”* lamenting that *“police listen to the child more than the parents.”* This highlights a fundamental challenge of implementing child protection laws in contexts when social norms frame child rearing as a private issue and, according to one child protection expert from Kampala, underscores the importance of engaging directly with caregivers to challenge social norms and support sustainable livelihoods in cases where exploitative decisions are driven by extreme poverty and inadequate social protection.

On a more positive note, across the life stories and participatory sessions child participants provided examples of cases where individual community members or extended family had also proactively helped when they felt caregivers were not acting in their child's best interests. A 10-year-old girl from Napak noted that her neighbours watch out for her and check on her well-being, saying *“They will be concerned and ask where [I have] gone.”* Another 17-year-old girl from Moroto noted that a woman within her community paid her school fees and provided shelter during the school holidays to avoid the hard labour expected by her parents. Other children noted that extended family members stepped in to help when their immediate caregivers were pushing them to marry or engage in hazardous labour. Informal protection mechanisms can thus provide safety nets for the children, but as these are provided through goodwill, the support is not uniform and may be withdrawn at any time.

There were also examples of children stepping in to support each other when caregiver support is unavailable, particularly when navigating the risks of migration. Mirroring the ILO's (2025) paper on trafficking of children from Karamoja, including for the purpose of labour, children described how their peers helped them to adapt to unfamiliar environments, including helping them find work and places to stay and advising them about risks. This highlights the extent to which children may step in to protect one another when caregivers are either not in the vicinity or are unwilling or unable to provide support.

8. CONCLUSION

Child marriage and child labour remain critical child protection risks in Karamoja. While the dynamics of child labour and child marriage differ, they have common underlying drivers, including poverty, food insecurity, climate change and cultural and social norms. Compounding this, weak social protection and limitations in prevention and response services give rise to further barriers such as uneven coverage, under-resourcing, mistrust and gaps in institutional capacity. Encouragingly, though, many community members, including leaders, youth and children themselves, are increasingly questioning harmful practices and seeking alternatives. There is evidence of some children directly resisting harmful practices through advocacy and collective action and others pushing back in quieter ways, voicing concerns about marriage or labour within their families or discouraging their peers from migrating for work. Efforts to reduce child marriage and child labour in Karamoja must therefore recognise and build on children's voices, ensuring that interventions listen to children and support their resistance while helping them to stay safe. Given the central role played by caregivers in decision-making relating to either child marriage or child labour, interventions are needed that not only raise awareness about children's rights but also offer caregivers economic alternatives to these practices that are often vital to the household's economic survival.

Community allies also play a vital role in addressing exploitative child labour and child marriage. Elders and religious leaders, who have strong social legitimacy, can help open dialogue, challenge harmful norms and promote protective behaviours, particularly in rural settings where state enforcement is limited. To be effective, interventions should therefore engage rather than bypass customary leaders, aligning their influence with national and international child rights frameworks to strengthen protection and ensure greater congruence between legal provisions and actual lived experiences. There is a need to shift beyond reactive measures towards prevention and system strengthening, scaling up community-based initiatives, strengthening links with formal child protection structures and embedding child protection within broader social development efforts. Lasting change is most likely when solutions are locally owned, culturally grounded and centred around children's voices.



The members of the Lia theatre group are survivors of child labour in quarrying. ©Elijah Ecu/The Freedom Fund

9. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF UGANDA AND CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS

Address the structural drivers of child marriage and child labour in Karamoja

Expand at-risk children's access to education

- Increase targeted national funding for schools in Karamoja to overcome educational disparities with the rest of Uganda, including school feeding programs to address high food insecurity.
- Subsidise school costs for economically vulnerable children and provide support for essential supplies and transport.
- Expand re-entry and accelerated learning programs for children who have dropped out due to work or pregnancy and engage community leaders to address cultural barriers to girls' education.
- Increase access to safe boarding facilities for children living in unsafe households or remote areas.

Strengthen livelihoods and food security of at-risk households

- Provide targeted economic support and income generation initiatives to households where children are at high risk of exploitation, particularly women-headed households.
- Promote climate-resilient livelihoods through climate-smart agriculture inputs, livestock restocking programs and skills training to reduce food insecurity.
- Expand social protection programs such as regular cash transfers, savings groups (targeting women) and safety nets, where possible linking assistance to school attendance and reduced reliance on child labour.

Expand youth skills and employment pathways

- Invest in vocational training and apprenticeships for young people in partnership with local businesses.
- Provide start-up kits, tools or seed funding for youth enterprises and support youth savings groups and cooperatives to strengthen financial resilience and reduce reliance on hazardous work.

Work closely with children and community influencers to address harmful norms that sustain child marriage and child labour

Promote positive cultural practices

- Work with communities and children to document and scale traditional practices that promote child protection, such as clan-based care for orphans, storytelling and ceremonies that emphasise the value of education. Integrate child protection messages into cultural gatherings, rituals and sermons to reshape community norms.

Leverage cultural and religious leaders' influence and engage them as change agents

- Expand partnerships with elders, clan heads and faith leaders to reinterpret harmful cultural norms and practices and promote messages that discourage child marriage and child labour.
- Work with elders to develop community bylaws that develop alternatives to bride price.

Facilitate community dialogue on child marriage and child labour

- Support structured discussions on the impacts of child marriage and children's right to education and a childhood free of labour exploitation.
- Ensure that male decision-makers are actively engaged.

Strengthen child- and youth-led advocacy

- Provide training, mentorship and resources to enable children and youth, including survivors, to advocate for their rights relating to child marriage and child labour with targeted statutory bodies and to raise awareness among peers and communities.
- Establish school- and community-based spaces where children can learn about their rights, reflect on gender norms related to work and marriage, learn about psychoeducation and trauma healing approaches and participate in safeguarding initiatives.

Strengthen parenting support

- Establish caregiver support groups within existing community platforms such as savings groups to promote positive parenting practices, conflict resolution, gender-equitable norms and alternatives to child labour and child marriage as coping strategies.

Strengthen the child protection system's ability to prevent and respond to child marriage and child labour in Karamoja, including improved coordination with civil society and community-based protection actors to ensure timely, survivor-centred responses

Invest in frontline capacity

- Provide continuous training and operational resources for community-level responders (such as youth champions and PSWs) and statutory actors (such as LC1s, PSWOs, CFPU and justice actors) to prevent and respond to child marriage and child labour using trauma-informed and survivor-centred approaches.
- Ensure that children entering the protection system through police and probation services receive timely, protective and non-punitive responses.

Improve coordination between statutory and customary protection actors

- Ensure that multi-sectoral platforms such as child welfare committees and district child protection task forces are functional and link government agencies, NGOs, FBOs, cultural leaders and private sector actors at the district and sub-county levels to promote timely referrals, joint case planning and efficient use of limited resources.

Expand response services for exploited children

- Establish and adequately resource safe shelters, psychosocial support services and reintegration programs, including access to education and vocational training for children who have experienced child marriage or child labour.

Expand accessible, safe reporting mechanisms

- Provide training to local council leaders (LC1s and parish-level local councillors [LC2s]) as first responders, establish child protection helpdesks in trading centres, ensure helplines are functioning well and allocate funds for emergency transport.

Strengthen monitoring and cross-border coordination

- Strengthen the role of women's groups and youth organisations in community sensitisation and the identification, referral and monitoring of "at risk" children.
- Strengthen coordination between sub-counties, districts and neighbouring Kenya to prevent cross-border trafficking and support safe return.
- Increase resourcing for prevention and response.
- Expand national, district and sub-county budget allocations for child protection services. Encourage donor investment in long-term, community-driven programming that builds local capacity and ownership through accompanying technical assistance and joint programming.
- Strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems and engage the private sector as allies to take responsibility for preventing child labour and promoting child-safe employment pathways.

Tailor interventions to local livelihoods systems

- In Moroto, regularise informal mining, protect children against exploitation in markets and address economic drivers of child labour.
- In Napak, reduce household reliance on children's agricultural and pastoral labour, enhance school attendance during peak labour seasons and support caregivers with practical livelihood alternatives.



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ANNEX A: HOUSEHOLD SURVEY FURTHER INFORMATION

Table 18: Household survey – further information

	Overall (n=266)	Moroto (n=137)	Napak (n=129)
Household has a steady source of income			
Yes, seasonal	163 (61.3%)	74 (54.0%)	89 (69.0%)
No, irregular or none	86 (32.3%)	50 (36.5%)	36 (27.9%)
Yes, year-round	12 (4.5%)	9 (6.6%)	3 (2.3%)
Unknown	5 (1.9%)	4 (2.9%)	1 (0.8%)
Wealth compared to other families nearby			
A lot more	8 (3.0%)	5 (3.7%)	3 (2.3%)
Somewhat more	26 (9.8%)	11 (8.0%)	15 (11.6%)
About the same	95 (35.7%)	60 (43.8%)	35 (27.1%)
Somewhat less	105 (39.5%)	47 (34.3%)	58 (45.0%)
A lot less	32 (12.0%)	14 (10.2%)	18 (14.0%)
Household receives support (food, cash or services)			
No	172 (64.7%)	103 (75.2%)	69 (53.5%)
Yes	94 (35.3%)	34 (24.8%)	60 (46.5%)
Drought or irregular rain affected household negatively			
Yes	207 (77.8%)	102 (74.4%)	105 (81.4%)
No	59 (22.2%)	35 (25.6%)	24 (18.6%)
Issue most affecting household's ability to care for child			
Food shortage	182 (68.4%)	97 (70.8%)	85 (65.9%)
Climate events	60 (22.6%)	23 (16.8%)	37 (28.7%)
Conflict	15 (5.6%)	13 (9.5%)	2 (1.6%)
Debt	4 (1.5%)	3 (2.2%)	1 (0.8%)
Other/ Don't know	5 (1.9%)	1 (0.7%)	4 (3.1%)
Daily number of meals the household members typically have together			
Two	139 (52.3%)	70 (51.1%)	69 (53.5%)
One	106 (39.9%)	61 (44.5%)	45 (34.9%)
Varies	12 (4.5%)	5 (3.7%)	7 (5.4%)
Three or more	8 (3.0%)	1 (0.7%)	7 (5.4%)
Unknown	1 (0.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.8%)

ANNEX B: LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROTECTING CHILDREN, INCLUDING AGAINST CHILD LABOUR AND CHILD MARRIAGE

Selection of key child protection laws
• The Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (1995) guarantees children's rights to protection, care and basic services. • The Children (Amendment) Act (2016) outlines the key duty bearers in ensuring the protection and welfare of children. • The Penal Code Act (1950) criminalises sexual offenses against children. • The Domestic Violence Act (2010) provides legal protection for children within households. • The National Child Policy (2020) provides strategic direction for child protection programming and coordination. • The National Action Plan on Violence Against Children (VAC) guides multi-sectoral prevention and response efforts. • Prevention of FGM Act (2010) prohibits FGM and includes provisions for prosecuting and punishing offenders and protection for survivors or those under threat of FGM.
Laws specifically governing child labour
• The Employment Act (2006) sets out conditions in which children may work and the type of work they are allowed to undertake (most notably light work for 12 to 14 years of age and no hazardous work before 18 years). The Children (Amendment) Act (2016) strengthens protections for child labourers, setting the minimum age for employment as 16 years and provides greater clarity over what constitutes harmful or hazardous work, including debt bondage, slavery and trafficking in persons.
Laws specifically governing child marriage
• The Children (Amendment) Act (2016) sets the minimum legal age of marriage at 18 years, defining child marriage as "any union whether formal or informal involving any person below the age of 18 years for the purpose of living as husband and wife." This is supported by Article 31 of the (amended) Ugandan Constitution. • Other legal instruments set different ages, including the Marriage Act 1904 (21 or 18 years with parental consent), The Customary Marriage (Registration) Act (16 years for girls, 18 for boys), The Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act (1961) (16 years for girls, with consent, and 18 for boys) and The Marriage and Divorce Mohammedans Act (1906) (no minimum age).

Adapted from Girls not Brides, n/d.

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