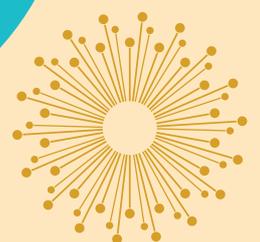


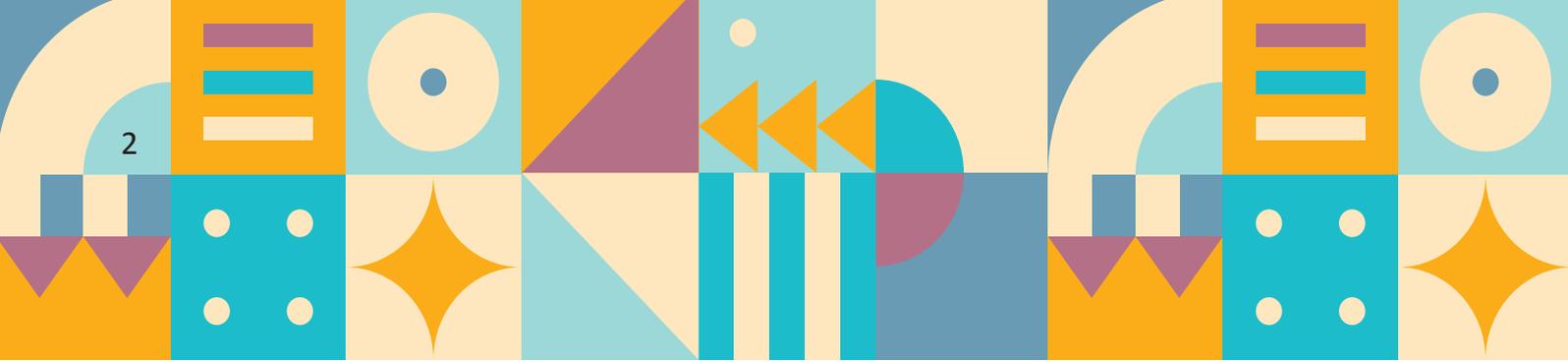
SVRI Knowledge Exchange

Building bridges:
Working towards
cross-field
collaboration
amongst VAC and
VAW stakeholders

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SVRI sexual
violence
research
initiative



INTRODUCTION

Despite a growing body of evidence^{1,2} and calls for more coordination, collaboration, and partnerships between those working to address violence against children (VAC) and those working to address violence against women (VAW), there continues to be significant tensions between these fields and very few evaluated examples of integrated or coordinated programming in practice³⁻⁷. We explore what factors may contribute to more equitable, and innovative partnerships and collaborations based on what we learned through a series of consultative processes⁸ with stakeholders working on VAC and VAW from around the world.

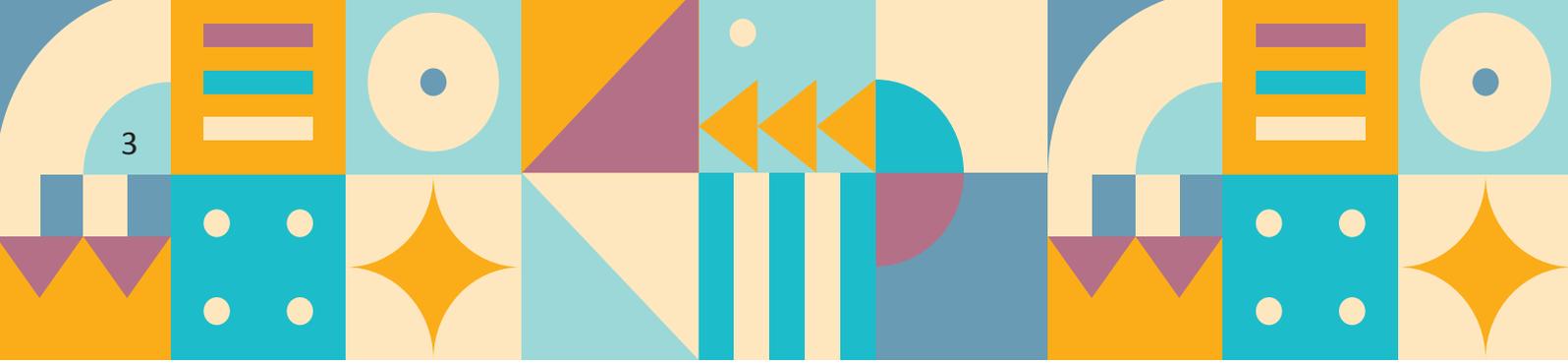
Seven virtual dialogue sessions were held via Zoom with 66 participants. Six questions were posted to an online discussion board that was open from June to September 2021. Participation was voluntary – participants provided verbal consent for the discussions to be recorded and were assured that all data would be reported anonymously. Meeting recordings were only accessible to the project team and deleted once the data were analysed. Responses were analysed thematically and this Knowledge Exchange focuses particularly on potential solutions to the divide between the VAC and VAW fields.

BUILDING CROSS FIELD COLLABORATION: IDEAS FROM THE FIELD

It was strikingly clear that almost all stakeholders we spoke with – whether researchers, practitioners, or funders – supported cross field collaboration, but didn't know how such collaborations might work: *“There is a desire in the field for there to be more connectedness between the work that is being done whether in research institutions or people working more in practice and programming. I think the desire is there, but the big question is do we need to push it? Expand it? Do we need to let it evolve?”* (Participant Dialogue 2a). While we need to acknowledge the multiple tensions and barriers to working together – including divergent frameworks, language, approaches, values, principles, and limits of funding mechanisms – the support for, along with ideas for collaboration is encouraging.

A lack of trust and differing world views hinder cross field collaboration. Participants suggested that having access to **ongoing, safe spaces** for reflection, sometimes uncomfortable conversations, and processing disagreements, distrust, assumptions, and misunderstandings as well as for building trust and sharing new ideas, possibilities, and synergies was important. These spaces and regular conversations could contribute to developing new norms and shared values and principles and will support building connections between the fields.

An important theme around the **need for evidence building** emerged from the dialogues particularly for more priority driven research⁹. Some of the gaps identified by participants included evidence on effective joint programming and elements for success especially evaluations of both specialised and joint programming or projects on prevention of and



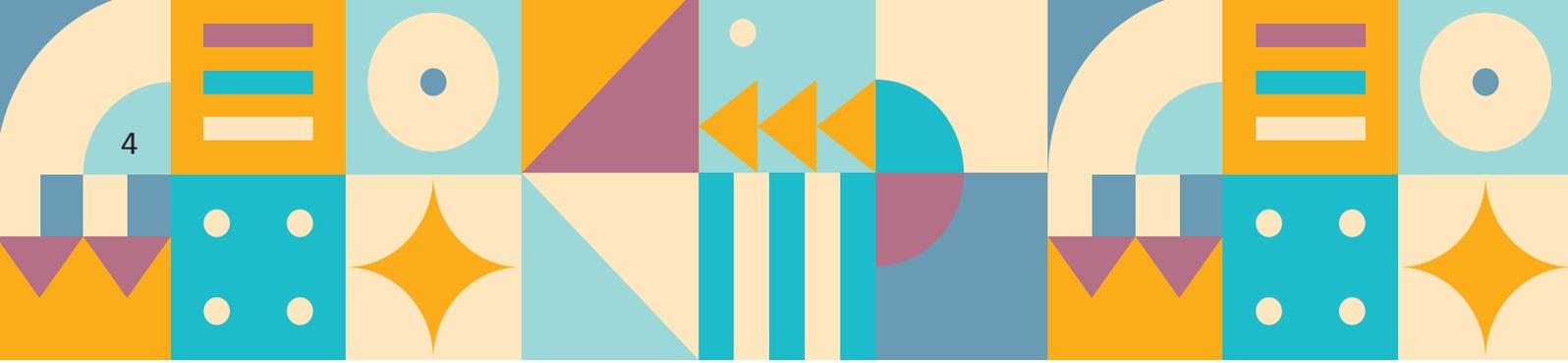
responses to violence and the impacts on women, adolescents, and children. Several stakeholders wanted more research on the intersections between violence against women and violence against children, and particularly research that was locally and regionally contextualised so that it was clearer what the policy and practice implications were for their own work. Research stakeholders in particular noted the importance of evidence building efforts being ethical and using rigorous methods and tools or measures that could be accepted and used in both fields. Finally, stakeholders were deeply committed to ongoing sharing and learning across the VAC and VAW fields, recognising the power of cross-field learning for innovation and driving change. As such, there was a strong call for research and learnings to be shared widely and thoughtfully with diverse stakeholders in accessible ways.

When discussing factors that hamper cross field collaboration, several participants shared the importance of developing and committing to **a nuanced understanding and approach** which “allows for absolutes to be questioned such as exploring the view that children have agency and evolving capacities whilst still acknowledging that they are vulnerable in a way that women are not.”¹⁰ They noted that certain world views and stereotypical binaries polarise and therefore act as barriers to finding ways of collaborating.

“I want to highlight that in the children’s field, yes there is a strong emphasis around protection often but there are also really strong voices on the agency and participation of children...- I think it’s important that that we don’t reinscribe the binary of children’s organisations are all protection-focused and women’s are all feminist- and agency-focused.” (Participant, Dialogue 2a).

This quote reminds us that the VAW and VAC fields are not monolithic and a diversity of collaborations and partnerships can be created to best suit the context, goals and partners involved.

The establishment of a uniting framework was seen as a potentially powerful lever for more coordination and collaboration. The most popular suggestion from participants was to anchor such a framework around a life course approach, but this is not without its challenges. As one discussion board entry noted, *“there are logistical challenges to building a life course approach to violence into prevention interventions– how do you put these things together? The services available are also quite siloed in a way that makes it difficult to refer people to the correct services at the same time.”* Another popular suggestion was to unite stakeholders through an intersectional analysis of systems of power and oppression that contribute to VAC and VAW, and framing around arenas of abuse and arenas of empowerment and agency for women, adolescents, and children – in all of their diversity: *“Power needs to be really central to the work that we are doing and different manifestations of power – it’s not about bringing everyone together, it’s about grounding ourselves in the theory and understanding*



how different individuals and groups are impacted simultaneously by different systems of oppression and forms of discrimination-overlapping power relations” (Dialogue 2a). This approach is modelled in groundbreaking research undertaken in Uganda¹¹.

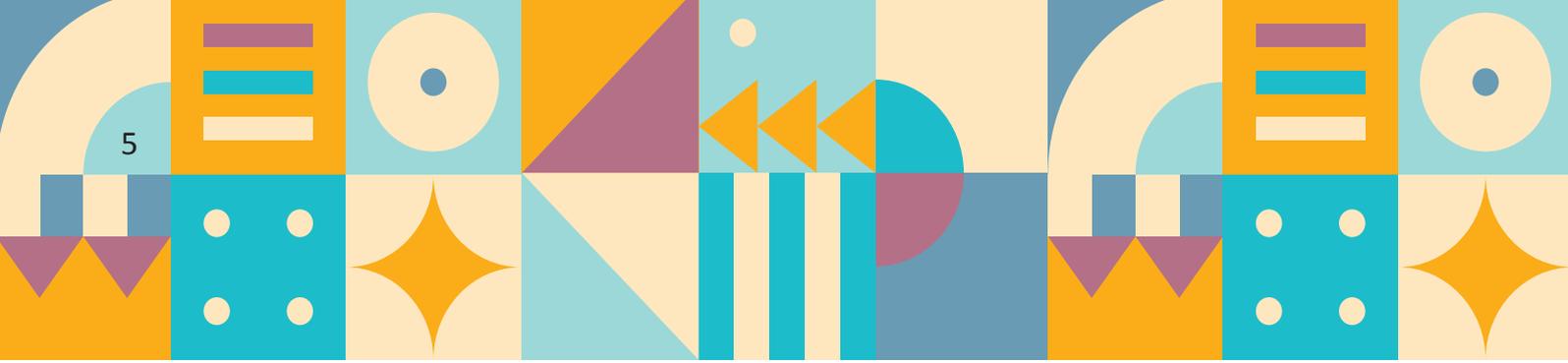
The employment of a feminist analysis contributes to a gendered understanding of both VAW and VAC and many participants identified this as potentially useful. Other suggestions for a uniting framework included focusing on participatory approaches that work well for both women and children or centring a rights-based approach.

FORGING NEW WAYS FORWARD

Participants had several ideas for bringing VAW and VAC stakeholders together more often for improved coordination and new or more effective collaborations and partnerships, but ultimately resources and funding are barriers. Services, programming, and research addressing VAW and VAC are often underfunded relative to the size and complexity of the problem¹². Joint efforts should not be centred around cutting costs, but rather on expanding funding, especially to explore how to create and sustain partnerships and collaborations. We need to confront the reality that funding mechanisms and funding scarcity may be creating an environment of competition rather than collaboration.

Examples provided during the discussions of where collaboration or partnership across VAW and VAC sectors flourished, included when allies found one another and the collaboration grew without either being forced or waiting for a perfect or ideal scenario to arise. Collaborative cross-field partnerships were reported as most successful when goals aligned on a specific topic (e.g., adolescence, family-based interventions) and there was investment in equitable partnership-building¹³. This partnership-building requires investment in values and goals clarification, trust building, transparency, and a commitment to sharing and learning.

More coordination, collaboration, and partnerships are also likely to grow if stakeholders from both fields actively reach out to share learning and questions and build connections. For example, if a VAC organization is developing a new program or tool, they can reach out to VAW groups to reflect and share implications from their approaches (and vice versa).



CONCLUSION

At times it may feel like the siloes between the VAC and VAW fields are unbreakable. Our focus should not be about breaking the siloes but rather about opening up windows within the siloes and building bridges between them for an easy flow and exchange of ideas, information and knowledge. We should take time to reflect, learn and change together especially by creating safe spaces and time for all opinions, ideas and strategies to be shared. It is unlikely that a single solution, approach, or framework will pave the way for the fields to come together; rather, a spectrum of actions and ideas will contribute to positive shifts that will result in more collaboration and more partnerships to the ultimate benefit of women, adolescents, and children everywhere.

Theoretically, addressing VAW and VAC could be mutually reinforcing accelerators, not competing agendas. We need to explore the structural and systemic issues that impede collaboration and partnerships between and across these fields and dismantle them so that more people and institutions can embrace cross-field collaboration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

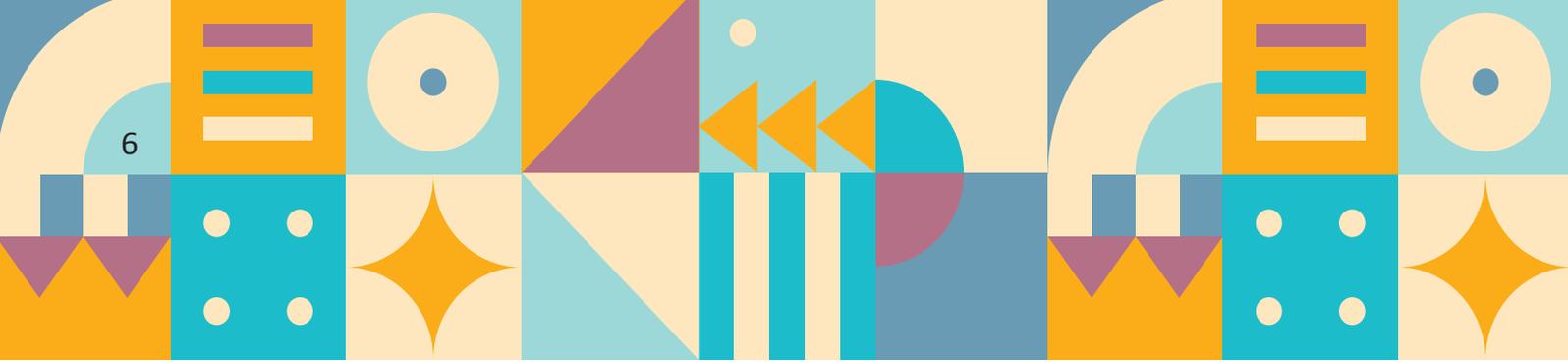
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