

Civilians Protecting Civilians: Women's Protection Teams (WPTs) in Bentiu Protection of Civilian's S

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***Please note that WPT member names used are pseudonyms, for the privacy of those women interviewed.**

Edited By: Nisha Rajoo

Trigger Warning: This article discusses issues relating to sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls in conflict settings. Reader discretion is advised.

Every morning, a steady stream of women leave the Bentiu Protection of Civilian's site (POC) on foot, moving outside the boundary of the site to collect firewood, elephant grass, soil and other provisions. These movements are a necessity, as these resources allow women to cook and care for their children and families.

These movements also come with enormous risk. At the start of the conflict in 2014, "a great number of women and girls were raped by military groups outside the POC," explained Nyamal, a POC resident and Women's Protection Team (WPT) member. In one particularly notorious period in December 2018, local clinics treated [approximately 150 women and girls](#) for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) injuries over the course of just 10 days.

Since this time, violence against women and girls has not abated. **Domestic violence and rape are endemic in and around the Bentiu POC site, with cases reported daily. The impact of these experiences, amidst ongoing violent conflict, has been substantial.** "Most of us were traumatised, we've seen too much death," explains Sarah, also a member of a WPT.

The WPTs are run by civilians, for civilians. They are a nonviolent, unarmed and civilian-led response to the violence of the conflict broadly, but also specifically to issues of sexual and gender-based violence in the POC site. In the Bentiu POC site, there are a total of 6 teams, some

e with over 100 individual members, who mobilise themselves into protection teams, training and working alongside each other to prevent and respond to SGBV and other threats. “The reason we formed ourselves as Women’s Protection Teams is because we have seen the protection gap in our community when we arrived at the POC in early 2014. So we formed community based protection teams which are community driven initiatives, for the sake of sustainable peace in the POC,” shared Mary, another WPT member.

There are 66 WPT teams working across South Sudan. Though they work alongside international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) like Nonviolent Peaceforce, a protection organisation active across South Sudan, the vast majority of WPT work is undertaken independently. Those involved are embedded in their communities, have strong networks of relationships, and use these networks to prevent and intervene in violence. **The work of the WPTs is diverse. Each week, a number of days are dedicated to protective patrols and presence at markets, key transit pathways to outer villages, water points and pools - areas with particular risk of violent incidents. Members move together in groups, marked by their bright pink t-shirts, their presence acting as a form of prevention, and response, where necessary.** “If children fight at the water point, we suppress them,” explains Sarah.



Image Courtesy of Nonviolent Peaceforce

In the photo above, members of a Bentiu WPT are patrolling alongside Nonviolent Peace force protection officers outside the Western gate of the POC site after there was unrest in the area due to armed violence. Their capacity to create a safer space through their presence and actions is dependent on their understanding of the context, and their ability to influence and encourage other community members. This is critically linked to their position in the community, their existing family and friendship networks, their understanding of the space in which they operate and how that shapes safety outcomes for themselves and their neighbours.

The teams particularly focus on advocacy with women and girls moving to and from the POC site who are at risk of SGBV. They share important security information and strategies, and provide care to and accompany survivors. Nyaluak, another WPT member in Bentiu POC site, explains how their training and actions have changed how they respond to sexual violence: “Anything that happens to us in the bush, things we used to be ashamed of before, now we know how to speak out. If something happens to one of us, we take that person secretly to receive care.” Knowledge of preventive measures, referral pathways for medical and psychosocial care, justice mechanisms, and an ability and willingness to stand alongside their sisters in the face of sexual violence situates the WPTs as key protection actors in their communities.

This concept of civilian protection stands in stark contrast to how it is generally perceived. Often, when we think about how to protect women and girls from SGBV, our minds jump to the blue helmets of the United Nations, military interventions, and armed forms of defence. To most of our imaginations, to protect a civilian requires some guns or fences or bombs – physical and potentially harmful threats to enforce deterrence. These assumptions about protection bypass the many ways that women themselves are working to protect against violent threats, including SGBV. **WPTs are agents of their own protection, and agents for transforming attitudes towards gender-based violence more broadly. Through their actions, they demonstrate what is possible when working in a community, for the community.**

In 2021, as the POC site transitions to an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp as part of the peace process in South Sudan, the WPTs have been clear about the need for new strategies and coordination outside the site itself. Nyabol, a WPT member, explains their strategy moving forward: **“As women, we need to strengthen our networking. For example, we need to conduct WPT coordination meetings and conferences with the rest of WPTs working in Bentiu town, in order to discuss women’s roles in leadership, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding in our community.”** Their work not only provides protection, but the opportunity for the creation of sustainable peace in a place marked by deep community division.