

Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) – Case Study, February 2019 Rumbek

From WPT to Member of Parliament The Story of Mama Achol

Achol Kumthok Nyirou, popularly known as “Mama Achol”, is a resident of Rumbek Centre. For as long as she has been able, she has been a member of some form of women’s group, remarking “that when women work together, they have the ability to develop each other and the community at large.” In 2005, she joined the Rumbek Women’s Association before becoming a member of a NP Women’s Protection



Team (WPT) in 2013. After having spent five years with NP, over which she developed her knowledge and skills, she became a member of the parliament of Lake State. Her whole life, Mama Achol was a strong believer in women empowerment and the crucial influence of women in bringing peace to communities and South Sudan as a whole. When Mama Achol first became aware of NP, she was immediately captivated by their message that women can be important contributors and facilitators of peace in the community. This was contrary to the beliefs of some community members that only armed groups can ensure peace.

“I was drawn to joining the WPT because NP staff stressed again and again how women are key players of peace and stability in every community.”

Shortly after, Mama Achol decided to join the WPT in Rumbek Centre, which has around 50 members and is the biggest group NP engages with. She highlighted that after joining the WPTs, she really began to value the concept of unity and loving a person despite their clan affiliation. She is eminently proud of NP: despite different clans fighting in Rumbek, NP maintains its non-partisan stance. As a result of this bold example, NP was able to form a WPT with women from various ethnic groups. There is strength in this diversity: ever since she joined the WPT, Mama Achol has traveled all over Lakes State, bringing a message of peace and facilitating dialogue in places with people she never thought she would visit or ever engage with.

Mama Achol never aspired to be a member of parliament, but when the new assembly was formed, many members of her community encouraged her to take up that position. She credits the skills she learned as a WPT as being essential to her success of becoming a parliamentarian. Over the years, she received different trainings from NP in confidence building, leadership training, public speaking and gender equality. Mama Achol says that NP trainings on gender stereotypes in particular contributed to her understanding that gender roles are taught and can be changed, which made her more confident in speaking up and taking up an active role among her male counterparts. Now, she confidently asserts that she has “no fear” being in a leadership position because she knows that a woman can be a leader despite traditional gender stereotypes. With a laugh, she describes how this confidence means that many of her male colleagues do not discriminate, but listen and value her opinion. Tensions between male parliamentarians are common,



but Mama Achol highlights how she often employs conflict mitigation tools she picked up with NP to defuse conflicts between her colleagues in parliament.

Mama Achol tries to break gender stereotypes: As part of her work as a member of parliament, she regularly travels to different areas in Lake State to meet women and girls and encourages them to be active peacebuilders within their communities and South Sudan as a whole. During these visits Mama Achol shares stories with them of how her own confidence was built through engaging with and forming bonds with other women. Being part of a WPT made her feel empowered and more confident in her work. She shares these experiences with the women and girls across different communities, because she knows that many had traumatic experiences because of the conflict and that groups can offer strength and support in times of hardship.

Despite her new job, Mama Achol continues to be an active member of the Rumbek Centre WPT. Although her new position has earned her even more respect within the community, she remains humble and hopes that she will be able to be a WPT member for a long time. As a fierce advocate for women's education, she continues to forward the idea that more educated women will permit them to become more effective facilitators of peace for their communities and the country as a whole.