Nonviolent Peaceforce

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Creating Safe Access to Response Services for Gender-Based Violence Survivors in Leer HQ

Since the outbreak of conflict in 2013, Leer County has been one of the most severely affected counties in South Sudan. The majority of Leer residents have been displaced from their original homes, leaving them vulnerable to protection threats. Despite the signing of the Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in September 2018, Leer HQ (the town of Leer), remains heavily militarized with soldiers occupying former homes and imposing an intimidating environment for civilians. While some residents are gradually returning to areas surrounding Leer HQ, many remain stranded in informal IDP settlements.

As is typical across many areas of South Sudan, the conflict has had a disproportionate effect on the women and girls of Leer. Aside from the increased threat of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), the unstable context has exacerbated traditional harmful practices related to gender. Girls are vulnerable to forced marriages (often as children), their future determined by the ability of the prospective husband to pay a "bride price" in the form of cattle. This "bride price" provides one of the incentives for cattle-raiding, a long-standing practice in South Sudan exacerbated by the relatively recent proliferation of small arms amongst the population. Deaths resulting from these cattle-raids lead to revenge killings, perpetuating a cycle of violence. Once married, girls are also highly vulnerable to domestic violence at the hands of their new husband. The 2020 South Sudan Humanitarian Needs Overview highlights that physical assault perpetrated by an intimate partner accounted for 37 per cent of GBV incidences reported in 2019. The belief that violence is an effective and normal response to conflict within the family is prevalent amongst the community. Gender-based violence is considered a private matter, and public discussion of the phenomenon remains taboo. As a result, survivors of domestic and sexual violence are less likely to seek protection, justice, or post-incident health care.

Within this context, the Southern Unity Mobile Team of NP (better known simply as the SU team) travels at least once a month to Unity State to conduct missions lasting between 7 and 14 days at a time. The primary focus of the team is on the prevention of violence, with a particular focus on women and girls.

Through workshops and awareness-raising, the team challenges the harmful practices which perpetuate violence against women. Aside from prevention of violence, the SU team is also concerned with response.

The team works closely with humanitarian partners based in Leer HQ to ensure that survivors of SGBV can safely access post-incident health care (including psycho-social support) and, if desired, access to justice. To achieve this, the SU team are required to engage with local national NGOs (NNGOs) over a significant length of time; one-off workshops are insufficient. The SU team began the process by mapping all the services available to SGBV survivors in Leer. The team identified a lack of awareness among the community regarding the services available; women simply did not know where to go. The team also identified a lack of coordination between the various organizations providing services. For example, the NNGO running the primary health care centre, and providing PEP post-exposure preventive (PEP) kits, were not aware of another NNGO providing psychosocial support. Some health care centre staff did not know what psychosocial support was, as a concept.

In June 2019, the SU team held an introductory training for NGO staff working in Leer on SGBV response. The training was attended by medical staff, counsellors, and caseworkers from various organizations. This activity served as an opportunity for the SU team to establish relationships with (and among) the organizations who would be receiving SGBV survivors upon successful establishment of referral pathways. During the two-day training, participants sat together to discuss and identify the main threats to women and girls in Leer County. NP trained the participants in how to responsibly share information among organizations while guaranteeing the confidentiality, safety and dignity of the survivor. Once NP was confident that the attending organizations understood how to coordinate effectively and responsibly, it was agreed that a referral pathway for SGBV survivors in Leer would be established.

In November 2019, the referral pathway was formally established in Leer HQ. As a result, coordination amongst partners improved, and the full range of services available to SGBV survivors was shared with the community. For example, partners engaging in SGBV prevention now inform community members (in coordination with staff at the primary health care centre) of the importance of seeking medical support within 72 hours of a sexual assault. This messaging is mirrored in the awareness raising workshops conducted independently by the SU team.

Despite the successful establishment of the referral pathway, the SU team identified a remaining gap in the provision of care for survivors, specifically regarding access to justice. A lack of SGBV awareness and sensitivity among local authorities, particularly police and judges, impedes access to justice for SGBV survivors in Leer County.

This deficit exacerbates poor standards of law enforcement in the area in general. As a result, the vast majority of domestic violence and sexual assault cases in Leer County are not reported, creating a culture of impunity for perpetrators and perpetuating further incidences. In response, the SU team conducted a two-day workshop for police officials in January 2020. The participants, representing both administrative and investigative branches of the local police, were invited to discuss their duties and responsibilities as responders to SBGV cases. This workshop was designed to enhance the newly established referral pathway, improving coordination between NNGOs and police officials.

The workshop was opened by the State Governor, whose participation was a valuable statement of support and ownership from position of influence. The Governor emphasized in his speech the need for a change in South Sudan regarding the culture of violence against women and girls. The SU team began the workshop by challenging the underlying practices concerning gender which ultimately contribute to SGBV. The team differentiated the concept of sex from gender; sex being defined as the biological difference between male and female, gender being defined by prevailing cultural and social norms. This particular session was an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their perceptions of masculinity and femininity, and how these perceptions may change over time. At the end of the session, participants were invited to reflect on how their perception of gender may lead to discrimination.

During the following session, the SU team defined the various types of SGBV (physical, sexual, economic, verbal and emotional), with a particular emphasis on traditional practices harmful to women and girls such forced and child marriages. After these two opening sessions, the participants expressed an understanding of what SGBV constitutes. It is noteworthy that most participants, at the beginning of the day, stated that SGBV was an unknown concept to them. This reflects the broader societal understanding of domestic violence and forced marriage as acceptable or normal. The SU team then facilitated a plenary discussion regarding SGBV cases within Leer County. The participants cited the low reporting rates for SGBV in the area as evidence that the incidence rate was correspondingly low. This view directly contradicts the understanding of community members and humanitarian partners operating within Leer County, who describe a high level of unreported SGBV cases.

The SU team invited the participants to discuss the obstacles faced by SGBV survivors when reporting their case to the police. After discussing these obstacles (poor law enforcement, lack of SGBV awareness and sensitivity, victim blaming, and a lack of empowerment amongst women and girls), the participants acknowledged the need for greater awareness, sensitivity, and capacity for SGBV response amongst police officers in Leer County.

The following day, the SU team trained the police officers on SGBV concepts (for example; survivor as opposed to victim), confidentiality protocols, and, at great length, the key concept of informed consent. To ensure ownership of the issue, and to place a universal issue within a national context, the team outlined the relevant South Sudan legal framework under which police must prosecute SBGV (the Transitional Constitution of 2011, the Penal Act of 2008, the Police Act of 2009, and the Child Act 2008).

Despite the natural constraints of operating as a mobile team (operating without a fixed base in Leer), the SU team successfully, over a series of visits, established and strengthened a referral pathway for SGBV survivors in Leer County. It should be noted that being a mobile team offered an advantage as the SU team was considered a neutral party amongst the Leer-based actors and organizations who constituted the referral pathway. Having no permanent presence in the area, members of the SU team were strictly facilitators of the process, and could not be accused of working towards any self-serving objective. Despite the successful establishment and strengthening of the referral pathway, the process of supporting access to post-incident services for SGBV survivors in Leer is still in its infancy. The SU team will continue to return to Leer County, building on this initial success. In particular, the SU team will facilitate improved coordination between partners and local authorities.