

“My voice was heard”: Gender, Peace, and Security and Unarmed Civilian Protection

Introduction

Just as gender intimately shapes the kinds of violence that people experience, so too does it shape the ways that people and communities experience and participate in civilian protection. Understanding this diversity of experiences is critical to ensure that protection needs are recognised, programming is inclusive, and that all people impacted by violent conflict have the opportunity to contribute to protection and building sustainable peace. Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) has an important role to play as a protection methodology that is led by civilians themselves and sensitive to the gender-specific needs of violence-affected communities.

“I want to change the situation that women are in. I want to be a voice of women and peace,” reflected Maypal, a woman who leads unarmed civilian protection activities in [Lankien, South Sudan](#). In her community, women and girls are frequently assaulted when collecting firewood and other resources, forced into child marriages, and subject to intimate partner violence in their own homes. From widespread sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) to exclusion from education, employment and leadership, women and girls continue to face [major risks and barriers to participation in social, economic and political life in South Sudan](#). This is just one example of the ways gender (intersected with other forms of identity, such as race and disability) shapes violence, political and social agency, and protection needs.

It is critical to note that the impacts of gender-based violence are not only isolated to women and girls, but all people violently targeted by virtue of their gender. Sexual violence as a weapon of war against women and girls is well documented, and this is [also violence experienced by others](#). Across various Nonviolent Peaceforce program sites - Myanmar, South Sudan, Sudan, the Philippines - and many other countries, the UN has reported that targeted forced recruitment of boys and young men by both states and non-state armed groups remains widespread practice.



Nonviolent Peaceforce Women Protection Teams on the launch of 16 Days of Activism in Bentiu Protection of Civilians Site, South Sudan November 2021
Photo: Nonviolent Peaceforce

In the [Philippines](#), [United States](#), [Myanmar](#), and many countries around the world, the often-deadly impacts of police violence fall heavily on LGBTQI+ communities. These threats are compounded for those individuals also discriminated against due other forms of oppression.


Unarmed Civilian Protection as a tool for gender-based violence prevention and response

As a field of practice, UCP has an important role to play in identifying and responding to SGBV. UCP is a methodology and set of practices for the direct physical protection of civilians by trained, unarmed civilians before, during, and after violent conflict. Prior to direct protective action, UCP begins with fine-grained context analysis, prioritising understanding of local gender norms. Practitioners are trained unarmed civilians, most often from affected communities themselves, and are uniquely positioned to understand local drivers of SGBV. This is an intentional move away from civilian protection regimes that have historically [accepted and perpetuated gender stereotypes](#), often resulting in those most vulnerable to violence being overlooked for protection. This approach also challenges patriarchal norms of domination and violent force often associated with the protection of civilians by military and police forces, situating protective power instead in the hands of those directly impacted by violence.

Those experiencing gender-based violence are agents of protection themselves and have a role to play in identifying their own needs and leading impactful responses. UCP is designed to be civilian-led, and affirm the power of civilians to shape and lead efforts to address the risks to safety and security they face.

Around the world, communities are implementing UCP methods as effective responses to SGBV—including communities at higher risk of SGBV. In South Sudan [Nonviolent Peaceforce supports 66 Women's Protection Teams \(WPTs\)](#) - representing over 2000 individual members - who use protective accompaniment, patrols, direct mediation with authorities and perpetrators, and a range of other tactics to prevent and protect against SGBV. Maypal, quoted above, is a member of a WPT and sees the direct impact of her work. Following successful advocacy to the governor regarding displacement of flooding victims, Maypal proudly noted, “My voice was heard.”

Working alongside the WPTs are teams of young people (Youth Protection Teams) and Male Gender Champions, who work across their communities in helping others to understand the



June 2021: Nonviolent Peaceforce ran a safety team of more than 100 volunteers in the United States for the Brooklyn Liberation Action to #ProtectTransYouth. Over a period of 9 hours, the team provided unarmed civilian protection for thousands, with a special focus on the Black Trans youth at the event.
Photo: Leo Xander Foo

impacts of gender-based violence, and the role that different community members can play in addressing negative impacts of gender inequality. UCP teams in Iraq are supporting many single-female headed households displaced as a result of ISIS occupation to [reclaim their homes](#).

UCP is not only effective in situations of outright war, but critical to preventing and responding to SGBV in other settings. For example, UCP strategies such as protective accompaniment and protective presence are used in situations of intimate partner violence, protest, and other gender-based violent targeting. In the United States, Nonviolent Peaceforce supports civilians working for gender equality and against violence. For example, in 2021, majority-queer UCP teams were coordinated to protect civic space at the Brooklyn Liberation Action for Black Trans Youth. The action, attended by over 5,000 people, was a direct response to the violent threats faced by Black Trans communities. Regardless of the types of violence being experienced by communities, UCP centres those most impacted, building on long-standing mutual protection work.

In the face of the continuing gender-based violence against civilians, it is essential that Unarmed Civilian Protection is more widely available and accessible. Approaches to protection that fail to account for the deep interconnections between gender and violence are likely to be ineffective – or worse, risk harming those they intend to assist.

Urgent actions:

Addressing the concerns related to gendered violence and the protection of civilians is urgent. To that end, we call for:

1. Recognition that those who are directly experiencing SGBV are best placed to advise and lead effective and appropriate protection responses;
2. Protection mechanisms led by those experiencing SGBV to be at the forefront of protection responses;
3. Recognition of the ways militarised protection responses and the gender assumptions on which they are based, pose a threat to those already at risk of SGBV;
4. UN Member States and other funders of Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) initiatives to broaden the scope of the WPS agenda to reflect more broadly how SGBV can manifest and increase funding for implementation of context sensitive and civilian-led SGBV responses by community-led organisations using UCP tools for peacebuilding and protection;
5. Greater financing of protection mechanisms, such as Unarmed Civilian Protection, that prioritise context-sensitive and civilian-led responses to the compounded threats of gender inequality and violent conflict.

*Community Security Forum for women in al-Ayadiyah, Iraq
February 2020
Photo: Nonviolent Peaceforce*

