

Fighting stigma around gender-based violence (GBV): How Women Protection team help the GBV survivors to recover



Case study | November 2019



Photo: Nyajima with her youngest child in the UN Protection of Civilian (POC3) site in Juba, South Sudan/November 2019/Nonviolent Peaceforce

When her husband left, Nyajima, a mother of three at the time, became the breadwinner for her children. With no job and a family to rely upon, Nyajima's only opportunity to provide for her children was by collecting firewood. Everyday, she would go outside of the UN Protection of Civilian (POC) site to collect as much firewood as she could carry. She would give half of what she was able to collect to an old neighbor, keep a small amount for cooking, and sell what was left on the market.

Since the firewood became scarce around the POC, Nyajima had to walk farther into the bush. On one of such casual days, she left the POC, walked a long distance searching for enough firewood get through the day, when realized she did not know how to go back. With vision impairment in both eyes and disoriented by unfamiliar surroundings, Nyajima wandered for hours trying to find the road she came from when suddenly she was stopped by soldiers. The soldiers lead her to their barrack and assaulted her. They then took her back to the POC area, left her at the entrance and disappeared.

She didn't seek help at first. She needed to tell her husband before anyone else as it was culturally appropriate. Nyajima hoped her husband would decide on what to do next. He, however, was indifferent. On the third day after the incident, Nyajima overcame her fear of stigma and went to a hospital to report the case. However, it was already too late to receive emergency contraception, and nine months later she would give birth to her fourth child.

When Mary, kind and strong-willed leader of the Women Protection Team (WPT) in the area, heard about the incident that happened with Nyajima, she swiftly mobilized members of her WPT to help. Throughout the Nyajima pregnancy, the women from WPT would come to her house to help with household duties, take care of the children, and provide emotional support to Nyajima.

While in the POC, Mary herself has witnessed violence frequently, but not before the training with NP, she knew what to do. Originally from Jonglei state, Mary came to the POC with her family in December 2013. She recalls that "people [in the POC] were fighting all the time. We were like animals. We didn't have any forgiveness".

Mary says things had changed when she attended training in nonviolence, conflict resolution, gender-based violence, leadership, and more provided by NP: "I learned how to handle different problems; help others, and just welcome a new person in the community." The way Mary and her WPT was able to respond to Nyajima's case is a solid proof of how effective WPTs are in addressing gender-based violence in the community.

"I used to blame myself. And when I was not crying, I was sick," Nyajima recalls.

Being a part of the WPT and talking to WPT members helped her slowly to get back on her feet: "I feel powerful to be a part of the group. When I cannot attend WPT's meetings because I'm taking care of my children or collecting firewood, I feel that something is missing."

On those days when Nyajima feels down, and life is especially hard, she tries to stay optimistic, and emphasizes on how important it is to talk to someone about your feelings.

When Rose's husband was suddenly killed in 2016, she was devastated. Like Nyajima, she didn't have any family members who could support and protect her eight children and herself. Similarly, members of WPT helped her recover. "I learned that all the women in the WPT face different challenges, but they have forgotten about it and moved on. I wanted to do the same," she remembers.

Over time, Rose slowly recovered, regained hope, and could support others too – now as a member of the WPT.

One day, when Rose was going to town to visit her sister, she saw a woman going to the bush with a knife. Rose noticed that the woman was distressed and decided to follow her. As Rose learned later, the woman wanted to kill herself. The woman had lost her child; and her husband, who blamed her for the death of the child and had been beating her for two days. The woman had given up on life.

Being trained as a WPT member, Rose knew what to do. She provided emotional support to the woman by sharing her own experiences and helped her seek support. With other WPT members, Rose assisted the woman to address the situation in the way she wanted to – in this case to leave her abusive husband and access services she and her children needed in the POC.

Rose feels she is more exposed to GBV violence since her husband's death, but through the awareness and knowledge Rose has gained since she became a member of the WPT, she is now better equipped to prevent GBV and help survivors to access services and recover from trauma.



Photo: Rose, a mother of eight and member of Women Protection Team, in the UN Protection of Civilian (POC3) site in Juba, South Sudan/November 2019/Nonviolent Peaceforce