

Guided by one of NP's pillars, the primacy of local actors, NP started to engage and build trust with women in South Mosul to better understand their protection concerns, facilitate their safe access to duty bearers, and to increase their participation in local decision-making processes. While all groups face unique protection concerns and threats according to their gender, age, class, and social groupings, NP chose to focus on women after programmatic upscaling due to the high rates of GBV in the area and NP's observation that some local government authorities, security duty bearers, and community leadership actively increase the protection risks facing survivors of GBV and reproduce the patriarchal cultural norms that underpin such violence.

Engaging the community

To reach adult women, NP conducted informal home gathering activities where one woman would invite her female neighbors and relatives over in a group of 20-30 women who would join NP staff for a conversation about their protection concerns, including sexual harassment in public spaces and domestic violence as well concerns regarding basic needs and strategize together to address them.

By living in the local community, NP was able to build deep trust in the area through constant engagement, visibility in public at all hours, and relationship building with both leadership and everyday citizens to create these gatherings.

Simultaneously, NP designed a six-part youth participatory training series that focuses on key protection issues affecting the region and mobilized groups of young men and women to attend through its network in South Mosul, including from youth councils, schools, informal local leadership, and previously active local volunteer initiatives.

While many young people are keen to affect positive changes in their communities, young women are completely excluded from local decision-making and young men allowed only a small role. NP decided to focus on youth as well as adult women due the ways in which they are

traditionally marginalized and excluded in the local community as well as their appetite to engage their own communities on the issues affecting them.

Providing a safe space

From these conversations and trainings, a group of approximately 25 adult and young women decided to raise their voices and concerns and joined NP's Community Security Forums (CSF) to talk with duty bearers, security actors, and government agencies directly. Based upon the women's concerns, NP invited officials from the local municipality, police, community police, National Security, education directorate, agricultural office, and hospital to the CSFs.

The women attendees used the space of the CSF to voice out and raise their concerns regarding the police's abdication of their responsibility to protect women and failure to prevent GBV in the region as well as strongly advocate on their other priority issues such as garbage collection, stray dogs, costs of schoolbooks, school cleanliness, and lack of teachers.

While some issues the women raised such as a lack of teachers are outside the control of local government bodies due to budgeting constraints, the barriers between women and duty bearers are continually being broken down during these forums. For example, during the June CSF, the women attendees identified hotspots where sexual harassment occurs and the Director of the Community Police agreed to coordinate with the local police to increase police presence in those areas.

After the CSF, the NP team witnessed the Community Police patrolling and providing presence near schools on more than three occasions and received positive feedback from female students that the CP were present near their schools. The head of Qayyarah Education Directorate noted to the attendees that they could file formal complaints with him regarding issues of school cleanliness, which the attendees had never known was possible before.

From forum to forum, specific actions points are developed and followed up on by the women attendees. The duty bearers and government officials themselves have noted how useful these forums have been for them. Such meetings also present as a great opportunity for mutual trust building between the community and its duty bearers, where authorities recognize the women as proactive and engaged community members, and the women, among other community members, see an increasing responsiveness and good governance on the duty bearer's part. General perception was quite positive, having, among others, the director of the municipality praising s efforts to hold these forums.

"This is my first meeting with women to learn about their issues related to the municipality because most of the people who visit my office are men" – Municipality Director

The forums also continue to be a safe space for the women attendees to advocate on deeply embedded and challenging protection risks such as GBV. Among community members in Qayyarah, GBV is considered shameful and taboo to discuss, especially by women, but now a group of women are openly speaking about it in a public forum. After the third forum on 5 July, the head of National Security thanked NP for creating a space to talk to women directly and one of the women attendees noted

"I am telling you now. Before NP started doing all this work, I never imagined that I could come to any public institutions and report on issues." – Women from Qayyarah during Community Security Forum, 5 July 2022, South Mosul

What's next?

These efforts will not stop at the CSFs. NP will continue to work with this group of engaged young and adult women, as well as with the young men NP has trained and coached, to facilitate the creation of community protection teams (CPTs) to continue to address their protection needs and priorities they have identified.

NP is now working with the youth to setup the structure of the CPTs and to provide further trainings, in order for the groups to carry out projects and initiatives they are interested in, such as public campaigns for violence prevention, trainings and awareness raising sessions in schools, and advocacy campaigns. However, as men are the primary perpetrators of GBV, NP's efforts will specifically target man to man engagement on GBV, through the CPTs. NP is also engaging a group of community leaders who will speak out against the prevalence of domestic violence and the cultural norm that it is shameful to discuss it, report it, or even admit that it exists. These efforts will all work together hand-in-hand to build a society free from violence.