

# THE INDEPENDENCE AND RESILIENCE OF BENTIU'S WOMEN PROTECTION TEAM IN THE MIDST OF FLOODING CHALLENGES

*Bentiu Response, Unity State*



*Community meeting with WPTs in Tong boma, Pakor payam, rubkona county, 26th June 2022*

In 2019, Nonviolent Peaceforce's (NP), Beyond Bentiu Response (BBR), team formed a Women's Protection Team (WPT), in Tong Boma, situated at the west of Bentiu Town. Tong, at the time, was experiencing a rise in conflict resulting in cases of Child Protection (CP,) and Gender-Based Violence (GBV). The WPT took part in capacity building training by NP and were subsequently engaged in advocacy efforts to address, challenge and respond to CP and GBV issues within their communities. The women additionally supported volunteers with running the Child Safe Space (CSS), by mobilizing children and supporting in the organizing of playful activities. They did this by offering protective accompaniment and raising awareness about the existence of Care International's mobile health clinics in their community. They also coordinated with the local health service provider to ensure that people had access to relevant care and medication as they faced a lot of water-borne diseases and malaria. The team, led by their chairwoman, were able to identify cases of GBV, CP and security related concerns and refer them to NP through the regular visits and communication. However, the visits from the NP team reduced drastically due to the heavy flooding in mid-2021 which resulted in limited transportation to Tong boma. This however, changed in the month of June 2022, a year since their the last visit, the BBR team had the opportunity to return to Tong and reconnect with the WPT. After a nearly 2-hour journey on a canoe, the team reached Tong, on 22 June 2022, and were welcomed by the WPT who awaited their return.

The team was elated to learn that despite the increase in challenges due to flooding and the absence of NP, the WPT had independently made efforts to continue their activities on topics such as GBV awareness and prevention, and CP awareness, and that they continually held regular meetings to seek information on the challenges faced including but not limited to cases of children drowning, occurrence of GBV when women collect firewood amongst others, faced by their community and work together in resolving them.

The importance of these CP awareness sessions was essential given the increase of floods in Tong boma and the risk of children drowning and water-borne diseases in areas previously crowded by children for leisure and playful activities. As a result of the previous CP training that was provided by NP prior to the flooding in mid-2021, the WPT were instrumental in conducting CP awareness sessions with the community to ensure that children are supervised at all times and that they are aware of the risks they face when playing in flooded areas. Additionally, because of the frequency of the floods, community members were forcefully displaced and had to relocate to higher grounds within Tong as well the areas of Bentiu and Rubkona. This displacement of families from the community meant that there have been many cases of Sexual Gender Based Violence (SGBV), reported in the community, as women were susceptible to SGBV given that they had to travel long distances to collect firewood, access waterlilies thus exposing them to sexual assault, harassment and physical injuries. The WPT has continued to engage with their community to not only raise awareness on SGBV, but to also ensure the community are aware of the referral pathways in place in Rubkona and Bentiu. As a result of the WPT's interventions, women now travel in groups to collect firewood or waterlilies which in result helps them feel safer and better supported when faced with challenges on route. Indeed, a WPT member is quoted as saying *"since the formation of the WPT in our place (Tong), we the members become closer to each other and started working together in doing awareness on protection and dissemination of peace messages in our community. Our commitment was further strengthened when we participated in the WPT conference. This gave us the chance to share stories with our fellow WPT s from different areas"*.

The WPT in Tong have demonstrated that the women in their community have the power, capacity and knowledge to support their community despite the aforementioned challenges they encountered. The WPT, through NP will continue to undertake trainings in their communities and engage men, in addressing the prevalence of GBV. Moving forward, the women requested for more regular meetings with NP given that the team is now able to visit and travel by using canoes. They hope to strengthen their skills and continue their efforts. Thanks to the work that NP does within this community many more women are able to take part in the development of the community, peacebuilding process and take part in strengthening the capacity of other women within their communities.