Successive, protracted armed conflict deeply transforms affected communities' interpersonal relationships and coping mechanisms. In the South Mosul area in northern Iraq, decades of multilayered conflict, followed by mass atrocities committed during IS (Daesh) occupation (2014-2017), have fundamentally impacted civilians' understanding of community and conflict prevention and resolution. Violence has been normalized, meaning that the communities' threshold for naming violent incidents is high.

According to one of NP's senior national protection officers, who is from the area himself:

"Communities would generally respond more violently to situations of conflict, particularly through physical violence and the widespread use of weapons; at the same time, people will tell you that there is no violence within the community. In many communities, if you are not responding with a weapon, the community would not call it violence."

Since early 2021, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) has offered Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) trainings to women and youth, as well as key community leaders and duty bearers, to shift the narrative and promote nonviolent conflict resolution and prevention of violence against civilians. UCP offers an alternative way of solving conflict, promoting the power of relationships for protection, as opposed to the use of violence. It puts civilians, particularly those most affected by violence, such as women and youth, at the center of the conversation about their own protection, transforming them into active agents of peace.

As part of NP's core methodology, international and national staff work together to implement UCP in South Mosul, Iraq. Drawing on the strengths of both nationals and internationals, one of NP's objectives in South Mosul is to address, prevent and respond to gender-based violence and provide communities with tools to address their protection concerns through reflective exercises, NP starts by providing knowledge, changing attitudes and, eventually, behaviors.

National staff, including guards, drivers and caretakers, who are active voices in the community, are included in the UCP trainings provided when possible, encouraging them to set an example for nonviolence in their communities.

The story of Hassan, a guard at one of NP's offices, is one example of many people who were able to use the tools of UCP to change the reality within their conflict-stricken communities. In May 2023, Hassan intervened to prevent the escalation of armed violence between two men in the community. The conflict ignited when Mohammad*, another community member, found out his sister Nour* was being beaten by her husband, Naji*. When Mohammad learned of the abuse, he went to the couple's house at night while Naji was sleeping and violently beat him. After the attack, Naji wanted to take revenge against Mohammad with a pistol.

"Mohammed was infuriated when he heard about his sister being mistreated, partly because he was concerned about her health and a woman from his family had been disrespected. It is very common for men in this community to fight each other in such cases of domestic violence." [Hassan, Support Staff, NP]1

Hasan, support staff for NP since February 2022, (June 2023)

---

[1] *The names of the conflicting parties have been modified to protect their privacy.*

"Because of community pressure, men are considered cowards if they do not enforce their rights by force and violence due to the question of male honor. Within the community, it is culturally appraised to settle scores and solve conflicts through violent means." [Hassan, Support Staff, NP]

Domestic violence is one of the main examples of the normalization of violence, particularly in communities where women's socio-cultural position is strongly pre-determined by patriarchal customs and traditions. As Hassan's analysis highlights, in these communities, women embody male and family honor, and the community expects this honor to be defended through violent means.

"The resource to violence between spouses in Qayyarah is pervasive. In most cases, women are the victims." [Hassan, Support Staff, NP]

After hearing this family's story, Hassan resorted to the UCP knowledge and practices he had been exposed to throughout his work and training with NP to diffuse tension and support the parties in finding a nonviolent resolution to the conflict.

"What I learned from NP about protective presence is to assess the situation before intervening, and then choose the most appropriate steps to stop violence in peaceful ways, through dialogue, empathy, and advice to calm a violent person." [Hassan, Support Staff, NP]

When Hassan realized Naji intended to murder Mohammad, he rushed to Naji's house and convinced him to give Hassan his weapon. Hassan leveraged his relationship with the individuals involved and employed shuttle diplomacy strategies, whilst staying present with the family to come to a nonviolent solution.

Hassan spoke with Naji and Mohammad separately, emphasizing that violence creates more violence and can lead to cyclical conflict. Through proactive engagement, Hassan started a reconciliation process between the parties. He facilitated a safe space for dialogue in his home, where Mohammed apologized for his behaviour. Two days later, Hassan invited the two men for dinner to strengthen their relationship and ensure there was no more tension between them.

The core of NP's dissemination of UCP as an effective method to prevent and respond to situations of violence rests upon its community-based approach. Communities are not only the primary owner of their own socio-cultural, religious and tribal norms but are also the key actors of change.

"NP had a significant impact on my own behaviors; through its UCP training, I learned how to deal with and manage conflict situations within my community. I understood that violence cannot be resolved by violence."

"I now try to spread the knowledge and awareness I acquired with NP through informal awareness-raising discussions whenever I am with my friends, family and other relatives. When I witness a fight, I try to convince and advise parties not to use violence." [Hassan, Support Staff, NP]

NP's community-based approach has a powerful trickling-down effect. NP not only supports community members to take a stance against violence but also incarnates this paradigm shift through its staff, who belong to the community they serve. NP empowers Community Peace Teams to proactively amplify values of nonviolence and peaceful coexistence within their communities. Their families, friends and relatives are now denormalizing violence and choosing to act. Any sustainable shift should be rooted not only in inner self-coherence - by embodying the nonviolence that one promotes – but also in the primacy of local actors. A change by the community, for the community.