

## CASE STUDY

# Women and Girls Breaking the Silence and Advocating Against Sexual Harassment by Security Actors

December 2023

In Ba'aj, West Ninewa, women and girls are frequently subject to sexual harassment by men in the community, including security actors. Accordingly, they would limit their activities in public and instead remain at home due to fears of harassment. This comes within the context of social norms that restrict women's voices, which deter them from reporting any incident and equally give them no platform to speak to duty bearers directly.

To change this situation, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) has worked with the Women Peace Team (WPT) in Ba'aj. After trainings on nonviolent conflict prevention, risk analysis, and workshops on leadership, the WPT felt confident and equipped to speak to security actors to address the sexual harassment cases at the market and school. With the support of NP, the women and girls met with the Head of the Police Station in Ba'aj, responsible for addressing gender-based violence.

During the meeting, women and girls bravely spoke about and reported the harassment and verbal abuse they receive in the market and school, but also at home. One girl elaborated that the police officers stationed in front of a high school in Ba'aj were unhelpful since those officers also harassed students. In response, the Head of the Police Station reassured the women and girls that if they reported any of his police officers, he would take immediate action. He explained the hotline to report harassment cases, emphasizing the confidentiality of any complaints and reports.

*“The trainings that we received from NP provided us with knowledge and confidence and without them we would not been able to speak up about sexual harassment of security actors to Head of Police Station in Ba'aj town. - Female Community Member, Ba'aj, September 2023*

Hence, the meeting provided a safe space for women to voice their concerns, fears, and experiences. The introduction of the confidential hotline also provided the women and girls with a method to counter harassment without fear of retaliation or tribal conflict. To that end, the meeting allowed them to gain knowledge about the channel to safely report the harassment that they face.

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*Without NP, we would not have the chance to meet with security actors and have this safe space to voice out our concerns. - Female Community Member, Ba'aj, September 2023*

Inspired by the meeting, the women actively encouraged others to report incidents and shared the hotline number. Consequently, more women and girls in Ba'aj have used the hotline to report cases. In turn, the Head of the Police Station warned his police officers that such behaviors would not be tolerated and, simultaneously, increased the presence of police officers at schools and markets. To ensure officers would not go back to old habits, the Head of the Police Station is continuously monitoring their behaviors.

*My main priority is to have girls finishing their education with no fear. - Head of Police Station, Ba'aj, September 2023*

This has positively increased the level of safety as some of the female students at the school now go and inform the patrol police about the harassment that they have faced. One student mentioned: *"When we see NP or the police, we feel safe."*

As such, this demonstrates the increased responsiveness of security actors in performing their duties and highlights the success of the hotline. Accordingly, the meeting supported a positive and trusting relationship between the women and girls in the community and security actors, breaking cycles of fear towards the latter. Women and girls now feel safer in public places with the confidence, knowledge about their rights, and access to the tools to address sexual harassment.

*Due to the trainings received, I can deal with any situation I can encounter especially when I get sexually harassed. I can see the difference between us and other girls who have not taken the trainings, I can handle any situation with no fear, and I cannot be manipulated. - Girl Community Member, Ba'aj, September 2023*

This is a significant step in a conservative community such as Ba'aj - exemplifying a structural change that enables women and girls to break through gender barriers. The story highlights the power of building relationships between the community and duty bearers and providing women and girls with a platform to speak out against societal norms.