

“When you heal the women, you heal the household”

An Assessment of Safety and Protection of Women and Girls in North Minneapolis

In North Minneapolis, the intersection of socioeconomic stress, marginalization, and systemic inequalities have left women facing heightened vulnerabilities and unique safety challenges. Women in North Minneapolis continue to face distinct and urgent protection needs, from domestic violence and harassment, to lack of safe public spaces and sex trafficking. In recognizing these challenges, Nonviolent Peaceforce seeks to establish a community centered response that empowers women, fosters resilience, and creates sustainable and dignified safety measures.

Through this needs assessment, NP aims to illuminate the specific protection needs of women in North Minneapolis, and identify actionable strategies to enhance immediate safety for women and contribute to long term peace and stability.

Key Objectives

The primary objective of this needs assessment was to understand and address the specific safety and protection needs of women in North Minneapolis who are affected by systemic inequalities, cycles of substance abuse, family disconnection, and sex trafficking.



Methodology

- **Interviews with community leaders:** NP engaged different community leaders, including faith leaders, educators, nonprofit directors and activists in one-on-one interviews. They provided insights with broader understanding of the challenges faced by women in North Minneapolis and the existing community dynamics. Community leaders also offered guidance on effective intervention strategies and collaboration opportunities.
- **Focus Groups:** To ensure that our interventions are rooted in community identified priorities, we had direct inputs from women through a focus group discussion about their experiences, safety concerns, and referral partway too resources.
- **Presence in the community:** During the course of six months we evaluated women's protection needs during regular program activities – engaging with women at bus stops, providing coffee in the morning once a week, and providing regular presence at local parks and high-traffic areas.

This needs assessment focuses specifically on the experiences of African American women in North Minneapolis, particularly those who are navigating cycles of substance abuse and sex trafficking. The perspectives in this report do not include those from other demographic groups, such as, Latina, Asian, indigenous or African immigrant populations, which means the findings are centered within the cultural and historical context of African American women.



Identified Needs and Vulnerabilities

Systemic and cultural challenges

- Participants consistently emphasized the legacy of historical trauma, including slavery, systemic racism, and economic disparities, which is deep-rooted and continues to manifest in generational cycles of poverty, substance abuse, and family disintegration.
- Drug use, particularly fentanyl abuse, was described as a critical issue in areas like 36th St and Penn Ave, where overdose and violence are rampant. Most of the participants noted that substance abuse is often a trauma response, a means of escaping harsh realities.
- Sex trafficking: concerns were raised about Minneapolis being a major hub for teenage sex trafficking, making it a critical area for intervention, prevention and survivor support. This issue disproportionately affects vulnerable young women, compounding the need for targeted safety programs.

Lack of safe spaces

- Bus stops, poorly lit areas and streets were identified as hotspots for harassment, assault, and violence. Women expressed feeling unsafe walking alone during early mornings or late nights. Public infrastructure improvements, such as better lighting and community presence at bus stops were suggested to enhance safety.
- Limited safe gathering spaces for women: Many women pointed out the need for trauma healing spaces and safe environments where they could share experiences, learn skills and build strong, resilient and safe relationships.

Disjointed and unknown existing community resources

- The need to recognize, collaborate and strengthen existing efforts was key in all the conversation we had during one-on-one conversation with community leaders and the focus group. It was highlighted that there are different local organizations within the community already doing critical work in women's safety and protection. A key gap is ensuring these efforts are connected to one another and well known in the community.



Opportunities for Unarmed Civilian Protection in North Minneapolis

From the needs and concerns gathered from the community, the following entry points highlight where Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) principles and strategies can be effectively applied to address the safety and protection needs of women and girls in North Minneapolis:

Safety in High-Risk Public Spaces: bus stops, poorly lit areas and public spaces are significant concerns, with women frequently facing harassment and violence.

- Deploy trained civilian protectors to provide protective presence in these locations during high-risk hours (early mornings and evenings)
- Facilitate partnership with local authorities to improve physical safety measures such as better lighting, cameras and visible community patrols
- Engage the community to develop nonviolent, collective monitoring systems to deter violence and harassment in public spaces. (EWER)

Addressing Substance Abuse and Exploitation: Drug abuse, particularly fentanyl, and sex trafficking are widespread challenges, often rooted in trauma and economic hardship.

- Create safe spaces for women to escape cycles of addiction and exploitation, focusing on trust-building and trauma-informed care.
- Conduct nonviolent engagement in affected areas to de-escalate tensions, protect women at risk, and offer pathways to support them.

Supporting Women's Leadership and Empowerment: Women are central to creating safe households and communities but face significant burden due to systemic inequalities and broken family structures

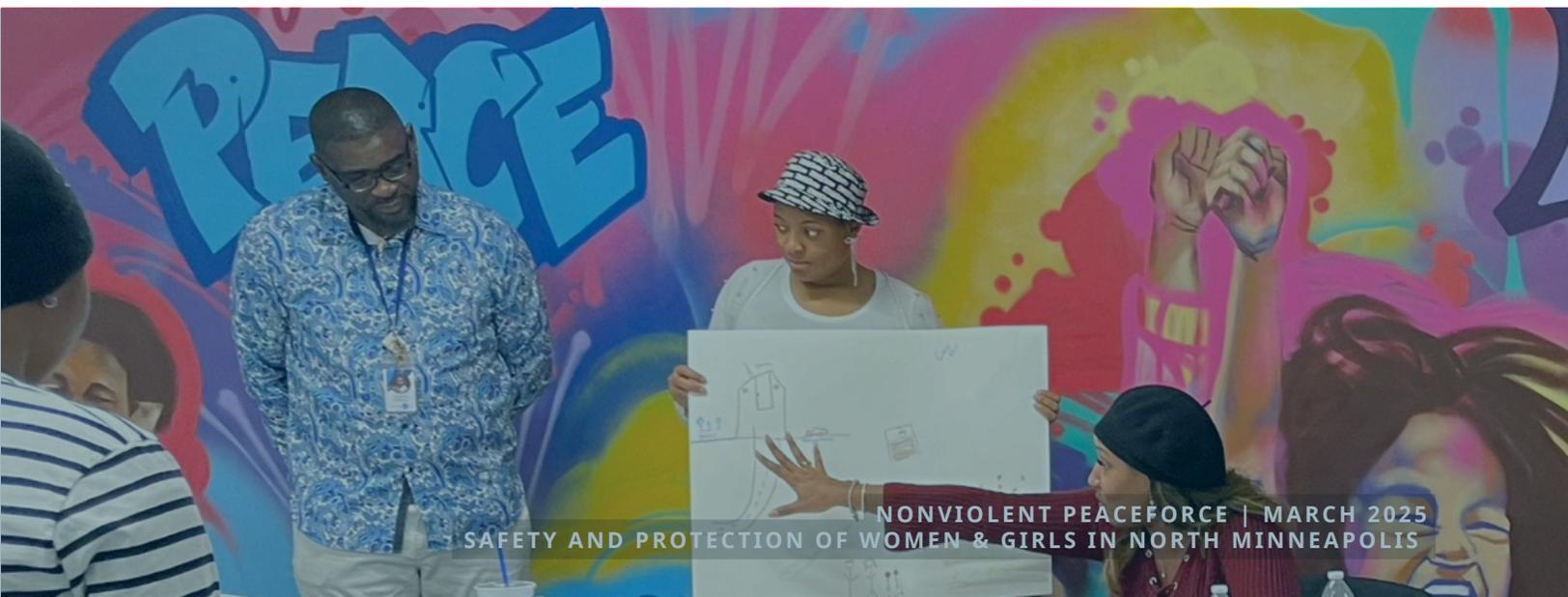
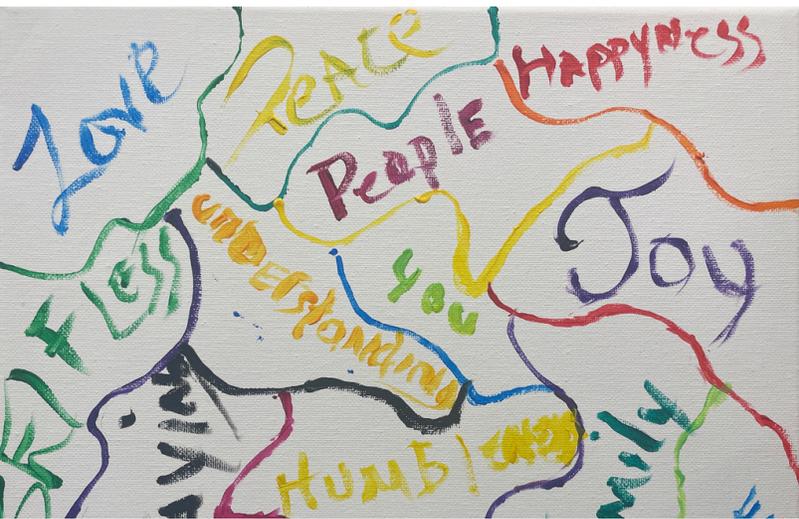
- Train women as UCP practitioners to lead community-based safety initiatives, fostering leadership and empowerment.
- Establish platforms for women and men to collaborate on safety strategies, advocate for their needs and build networks of mutual support.

Combating Sex Trafficking: Minnesota is a major hub for teenage sex trafficking, putting young girls at heightened risk which poses safety concerns for the community.

- Provide protective accompaniment to survivors as they navigate legal and recovery processes, ensuring their safety and dignity
- Partner with schools, shelters, and local organizations to raise awareness about trafficking, prevention strategies and survivor's support.

The importance of engaging men in women’s protection: A key theme emerging from the focus group discussion is the long-term impact of the welfare policies of the 1980s and 1990s, which often removed men from families due to restrictions on welfare eligibility for households with male presence. These policies contributed to the erosion of traditional family structures, leaving women to shoulder the burden of care giving, survival, and safety. This systemic disruption has had intergenerational consequences, including cycles of poverty, trauma, and disconnection from male members who might otherwise play stabilizing roles in the household.

The women in the focus groups repeatedly emphasized the need for protection work to engage men as active participants as well. While there are protection need and opportunities for UCP to address those needs specific to women, safety and resilience must be built collectively by engaging men as protectors, allies, and community leaders. It was highly recommended that engaging men in safety initiatives would address root causes of violence and disconnection, and will strengthen communities and build strong social cohesion. This perspective aligns with the intersectional nature of NP’s work, which acknowledges the interdependence of men’s and women’s roles in fostering a safer and more cohesive community.



As NP continues the Community Peacebuilding program, NP seeks opportunities to partner with community members, local organizations, and funders to advance the safety of women and girls in North Minneapolis.

For further information or partnership ideas contact Tamiko Edwards at tedwards@nonviolentpeaceforce.org

About Nonviolent Peaceforce

Since establishing a presence in North Minneapolis, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), together with the community, has worked tirelessly to cultivate a foundation of safety and peace, by building meaningful relationships with neighbors and implementing Unarmed Civilian Protection. NP has become a trusted resource in fostering nonviolent approaches to safety, community peacebuilding, and conflict transformation following a consistent presence in North Minneapolis and other parts of the world.

Special thanks to our Program Intern, Nanyeni Glory Diotoh, for leading on this assessment. Nanyeni is a graduate student at Notre Dame where she is studying for her Masters of Global Affairs, with a focus on International Peace Studies.

