
Women-led self-protection in Sudan

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In parts of Sudan, local NGOs and women's groups have taken the lead in their own protection, and their considerable achievements have helped change the status of women in their communities.

Since the outbreak of civil war in 2011 in Sudan's South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, the civilian population has experienced intense aerial bombardment and ground attacks. At least 4,082 bombs and missiles have hit predominantly civilian targets including villages, schools and hospitals.¹ Some 450,000 women, men, boys and girls are internally displaced while another approximately 250,000 people have fled to South Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. Since the war broke out, the Sudanese government has banned international humanitarian actors, media representatives and local traders from accessing opposition-controlled areas.

In the absence of any effective international assistance and protection,

local NGOs and a women's association have supported up to 400,000 individuals by providing basic survival and self-protection guidance and by building awareness. In this article, Nagwa Musa Konda, former Executive Director of Nuba Relief, Rehabilitation and Development Organisation, and Leila Karim Tima Kodi, head of the Nuba Mountains Women's Association,² speak about their experience of locally led protection efforts in Sudan.³

Nagwa: *The situation is very tense. We have bombings, or planes flying over, nearly every single day. Most victims of the aerial bombardment are children but also many women. When the bombing happens, the women will run after their children*

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to try to save them and because they run in the open, they are very exposed to the shrapnel from the bombing. That is why having foxholes everywhere [shallow depressions that afford protection to people lying in them] and training people to jump into the holes rather than run away have been so important for people's protection. As soon as you lie down rather than stand up, your exposure to flying shrapnel is so much lower.

As war broke out in June 2011, research into local survival and protection experience from the previous war in the area (1985-2002) was just about to be concluded. Local and international researchers associated with the Local to Global Protection (L2GP) initiative, together with the local NGOs which had taken part in the research, rapidly turned the research into a self-protection training package. The research pointed to some key experiences from the previous war which seemed relevant for civilians in the new war. The research pointed in particular to three important sets of threats and challenges:

- reducing risk of injury or death from aerial bombardment and long-range shelling by seeking shelter and providing first aid training and kits to communities
- reducing life-threatening risks from lack of food, clean water, income, basic services and shelter by mobilising traditional knowledge of wild foods and herbal medicine and introducing household rationing to stretch sparse resources
- overcoming fear, a sense of isolation and hopelessness, and erosion of dignity through basic community-based psychosocial activities including continuing education and other activities for children.

"Protection is very important. If it were not for the awareness on protection, many people would not be alive now. Since the war continues, we will continue with the message on protection." Leila Karim, Nuba Mountains Women's Association

Nagwa: *As we found out that most of the victims of the fighting and the aerial bombardment were women and children, we sat together with the Nuba Mountains Women's Association. We realised that*

many of the younger women, men and of course the children had not lived in the war zone during the previous conflict and they had no idea of what to do when war and aerial bombardment began again.

The standard training that was developed lasts for four days and the volunteers who take part have to commit to bringing all they have learned back to their communities. Women who attend a particular mosque or church will go back and train those constituencies. Teachers will teach the children in their schools as well as other teachers. In this way, basic protection training has reached more than 400,000 people since the war started.⁴ The number of casualties has greatly lessened and people are somehow able to cope better with both the bombings and the fear of the bombings.

Dig foxholes everywhere!

Leila: *In the Women's Association we inform the women about current events and advise them on how to deal with war and how to protect themselves, cooperate with each other and keep safe. From the beginning, we took the threat from aerial bombardment very seriously and encouraged people to dig bunkers and foxholes in safe areas. Right away, we began teaching our children that as soon as they hear the sound of the airplanes, they have to immediately jump into the bunker and lie down for safety. Whether their mothers are with them or not, the children have to hide themselves.*

Nagwa: *The protection volunteers went on to suggest that communities and local authorities move schools, mosques and churches to safer locations, whether close to caves in the hills or into the forest. Teachers were encouraged to take a small blackboard and conduct their classes under trees close to the caves in case aerial bombardment suddenly happens.*

We also bought basic whistles to alert children if they are playing and do not notice the aeroplane coming. In other places, we have people on watch with a large bell – once you hear the bell, you immediately get into the foxholes. The planes do not give you time to run, so it is important to be very close to a safe shelter if bombing suddenly happens. That is why the key messages in the beginning was the importance of digging foxholes everywhere – at home, at the water pump, in the market, at schools, mosques and churches – everywhere!

Daily challenges

As the war continued, more issues and messages were included in the training – such as economising, reducing meals, storing food, gathering wild foods and how to prepare them – and pre-positioning food in different places in case a family's house is bombed and burned down.

Many water-points have been destroyed or have stopped working and many communities are now forced to use traditional wells and in some cases surface water for drinking. Basic advice on how to boil water or use water purification tablets was therefore included in the training curriculum along with how to respond to a number of other health-related threats and issues.

Nagwa: *Staff from local health clinics warned that there are HIV/AIDS cases in the area, so we added HIV/AIDS risk education as well. Health services and medical supplies are very few in the opposition-controlled areas. There is just one small hospital caring for a population of around 1 million people, so we also included knowledge of traditional herbs and medicine. This is traditional knowledge, often known to women of the older generation but lost to young women, so the trainers now disseminate it to all generations.*

Basic first aid training is part of the workshops – including guidance on how to stop serious bleeding. With the poor roads, very few cars and a great distance to the only functioning hospital, being able to stop bleeding may prevent a patient from dying before she or he reaches the hospital.

Changing the status of women

Performing such important, life-saving roles in the community earned the women greater respect among a range of local stakeholders (mosques, community leaders, armed groups, etc). This gave the women the status and a platform from which they have been able to begin addressing more sensitive and challenging issues – such as gender-based violence – within the community. When considering the impact that the work of local organisations in the Nuba Mountains has had, international actors would do well to consider how best they can support such community-led protection



Women at market in South Kordofan, with foxhole behind them.

efforts in active conflicts – including how appropriate funding modalities could be developed to support this kind of work.

Leila: *We work a lot with issues around violence against women. We do that through conferences and workshops targeting both men and women to create awareness about violence against women. Men who batter women are punished and that makes them afraid. Although there is still violence, it is very much reduced.*

Nagwa: *The communities, and increasingly the traditional leaders and local authorities as well, respect the women for what they have done and how it has helped save lots of lives. We all realise that because of the awareness campaigns the casualty rates from bombing have decreased to very low numbers.*

Now when there is a local leadership meeting, they call for the Women's Association to participate. They also realised that they need women to be involved in training the police cadets. The local Secretariat of Health took part in the first aid

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training; the Judiciary got involved when the women raised issues of gender-based violence – including how and where to report possible cases. Eventually, that led to members of the Women's Association in some places being part of the customary courts when they decide in cases related to gender-based violence.

Dealing with trauma and despair

Nagwa: Many people – children, women, men – have seen their loved ones killed in front of their eyes. Some have seen their homes burned down with all their belongings. Many people are now deeply traumatised by what they have experienced and from the daily fear and terror they face. Still, we are a proud and resilient people; while some have fled, the majority try to stay on, because this is our homeland. This is where we grow our food and where we live. People do not want to go and suffer in a refugee camp in somebody else's country – instead we have adopted many different strategies to be able to survive and remain at home.

In such a situation, it is important to stick together and to support those who have just lost a loved

one by comforting each other and by making sure someone is not left to her or himself in times of trauma. In response to the ongoing psychological strain of living in a war zone, the women have come to realise and actively use small things like hair extensions, make-up or perfume to restore their dignity. Even if – or maybe even more so when – you are forced to live in a cave, when you do not have enough food for your children or yourself, and you live in constant fear of the next bombardment – feeling clean, smelling nice and looking good actually becomes crucial to your self-respect and your ability to survive.

When the women come together, sit, and prepare the perfumes or do each other's hair, they get a chance to talk, to explain their situation, and that gives them a chance also to comfort and encourage one another. To me personally these small things are important too. Despite all the challenges, despite all the suffering, I do not want to look messy or walk around smelling bad. I want to be a normal Nuba woman and therefore I'll protect my dignity for as long as I'm alive.

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1. Between April 2012 and June 2016 as reported by Nuba Reports, a group of independent journalists working in the area. See <http://nubareports.org>.
2. The southernmost, mountainous parts of South Kordofan are referred to as the Nuba Mountains by most of the inhabitants of the area.
3. Due to access restrictions, interviews for this article were carried out in several locations (including South Kordofan) and on multiple occasions between 2014 and 2016. Equally, interviews with key staff of Kodi, another local NGO engaged in the activities, have informed this article. Thanks also to Justin Corbett and James Thomson for their inputs. Lastly, the article draws on several papers and a short documentary film on women-led protection in Sudan to be found at www.local2global.info.
4. This was confirmed in a 2014 evaluation which showed that 80% of 640 randomly selected households knew about all the protection messages. In terms of impact on actual behaviour, digging foxholes, hiding in caves, family budgeting, food storage, health, sanitation and first aid messaging have had the greatest impact.