In April 2017, Oxfam in South Sudan established a representative and inclusive community protection committee (CPC) in Lokurunyang. The aim was to enhance self-protection capacities at individual, household, and community levels, and engender the participation of women to strengthen their resilience and contribute to gender equality. The CPC was composed of 20 members elected by their communities, 10 women and 10 men, from different payams.
The situation before Oxfam’s protection programme

‘Before Oxfam brought the protection programme to Lokurunyang, we knew nothing about protection and women’s rights. We took the law into our hands and fought anyone who caused us harm,’ said one of the CPC members. ‘We tolerated rape and [even] rewarded rapists as heroes who conquered fear and succeeded in a mission well planned. Unknowingly, we were so vulnerable.’

Another CPC member said that ‘there were many reported... cases of gender-based violence, including rape, domestic violence, child marriage and other forced marriage... many parents give away their young girls, and if a man takes away another man’s prospective wife, they would engage in a fight that may escalate’.

Deeply entrenched cultural and patriarchal values, norms and beliefs perpetuate the vulnerability of women and girls to risks such as child and forced marriage, lack of inheritance rights, limited freedom of movement, and denial of access to medical services.

The impact of Oxfam’s intervention

Oxfam trained CPC members on protection, the prevention of and response to gender-based violence (GBV), harmful traditional practices, women’s rights and child rights. The committee members were mentored and coached on their roles and responsibilities, and the ‘do no harm’ principle. The CPC gained acceptance and trust from the community, local authorities, and traditional chiefs. This has enabled a sustained access to the community, who was included in the identification of protection issues and development of response plans.

For instance, CPCs have been holding meetings with parents who intend to marry off their girls while they are under 18. The incidence of domestic violence and child marriage has reduced, because community members are now aware of how to report GBV, and of the importance of girls’ education. For example, five parents were convinced by CPC members of the importance of education for girls, and thus decided not to give their young daughters away for marriage. For example, the committee explained to their communities that, once a girl is educated and working, she will not forget her family. Instead she will continue to provide support, for example by buying more cows for her father – and when married, she will still have a lot of cows. CPC members also explained the consequences of child marriage, especially complications during childbirth.

Through referrals, the CPCs also ensured GBV survivors could safely access necessary services within 72 hours, while keeping information confidential, and respecting the wishes of the survivors. ‘We CPC members ensure confidentiality to avoid causing harm to survivors as well as the perpetrators,’ said one. Another adds that ‘the local authority supports the initiative and punishes offenders’. As a result, the community members seek support for GBV cases from the CPC, which makes referrals to Médecins Sans Frontières to provide immediate care and support to the survivors at their medical clinic.

Through active participation in the committee, women are empowered and have a voice on issues affecting them. Women in the CPC now solve cases at individual, household, and community levels. Whereas they were previously excluded from community decision making processes, they now participate and contribute in community meetings. Rebecca, a CPC member, stated ‘we all had nothing, therefore, we decided to join the struggle to free ourselves, and our daughters’. In addition, women handle cases of domestic violence by holding discussions with those experiencing violence, and provide basic counselling to both women and men.
Committee commitment to community transformation

The CPC held community meetings to discuss pertinent issues and how to create alliances with other actors to ensure comprehensive prevention and response in Lokurunyang. For instance, they conducted a community meeting to make the way to Lokurunyang primary school safer. This improved school attendance, as children no longer feared going to school.

The CPC members are leading by example. Two members reported that their young boys were raped at the primary school. This serious issue could have caused inter-tribal conflict. However, the skills and knowledge that community members gained from Oxfam’s trainings helped them to resolve the issue peacefully: ‘my two boys, aged seven and nine, were picked up from school and raped by older boys in the area. Had it not been for this awareness that has been going on in the community, I could have dealt with the offenders in the traditional way. But the committee advised me to take them to court and they were punished,’ said one of them.

In summary, through the CPC, there is a shift from protection for the community to protection with and by the community. The committee members are the ‘eyes’ and ‘ears’ of the community; they monitor the situation and take timely action to handle and/or refer those in need of protection assistance to the relevant services.

The activities and group may evolve but will continue to carry on with protection-related activities. As one member told us, ‘we are like students: when we graduate, we shall continue with protection work’.