



**General Food Distribution Program
(GFD), Baliet and Akoka Counties, Upper
Nile State**

Safety Audit Report, July 2025



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Executive Summary

Coalition for Humanity (CH), in partnership with Plan International and with funding from the World Food Programme (WFP), conducted a Safety Audit in Akoka and Baliet Counties, Upper Nile State, under the General Food Distribution (GFD) program. Conducted in March 2025, the audit assessed safety and protection conditions, focusing on risks faced by women, girls, and vulnerable groups. Data was gathered from 37 participants through Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews.

The audit revealed widespread protection risks driven by poverty, weak infrastructure, and harmful social norms. Gender-Based Violence (GBV) – including sexual assault, domestic violence, and exploitation – was identified as a major threat, particularly for women and girls traveling long distances to collect food, water, or firewood. Child marriage and teenage pregnancy remain prevalent due to economic hardship and cultural traditions. Reporting of GBV incidents is minimal owing to fear, stigma, and the absence of effective referral systems.

Living conditions are poor across both counties. Most families reside in temporary, overcrowded shelters lacking privacy and security. The absence of latrines has led to open defecation and recurrent disease outbreaks, including cholera. Women and girls face heightened risks when accessing distant or isolated water points, while menstrual hygiene remains a challenge, causing school absenteeism.

Health services are extremely limited, with few staff, medicines, or facilities that ensure privacy. Education access has improved slightly, but schools remain unsafe and under-equipped, with inadequate sanitation and lighting. The food distribution system, while lifesaving, exposes women and girls to harassment and assault due to long travel distances and poor crowd management.

Despite these challenges, the audit highlights strong community resilience and willingness among leaders and youth to address protection issues.

Recommendations:

Urgent actions include:

- Establishing Women and Girls Friendly Spaces (WGFS) and GBV referral pathways.
- Expanding and securing food distribution points.
- Improving shelter, WASH, and health facilities to ensure safety and dignity.
- Enhancing school safety and menstrual hygiene support.
- Strengthening community protection committees and awareness on rights and GBV prevention.

Sustainable safety in Akoka and Baliet depends on coordinated, gender-sensitive interventions that empower communities and integrate protection across all humanitarian sectors.

1. Introduction

Coalition for Humanity (CH), in partnership with Plan International, conducted a comprehensive Safety Audit across Akoka and Baliet Counties in Upper Nile State in March 2025. The exercise was funded by the World Food Programme (WFP) under the General Food Distribution (GFD) program. The audit aimed to assess the safety and protection environment within the two counties, with a particular focus on the risks faced by women, girls, and other vulnerable community members.

The safety audit was carried out as part of CH's broader commitment to ensure that humanitarian interventions are designed and implemented in ways that uphold safety, dignity, and access to essential services for all. By identifying existing protection concerns and barriers to safety, the audit sought to inform ongoing and future programming to better respond to the needs of affected populations.

A total of 37 participants took part in the assessment. These included 24 community members (12 men, 12 women, 12 boys, and 12 girls) from both Akoka and Baliet counties, as well as 13 key informants (7 from Baliet and 6 from Akoka). Participants were engaged through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), which provided space for open and inclusive dialogue. The approach allowed community members to share their lived experiences and perceptions of safety, while also highlighting the specific protection risks that affect different groups.

The findings of this audit represent the collective voice of the communities in Akoka and Baliet. They provide a nuanced understanding of the security situation, physical safety environment, and protection risks, especially those linked to gender-based violence (GBV), limited access to basic services, and infrastructural challenges. The assessment also captures how these risks are influenced by environmental, social, and economic factors, such as seasonal flooding, displacement, and poverty.

While the context in Akoka and Baliet remains dynamic – affected by intermittent conflict, displacement, and changing weather conditions – the audit provides a snapshot of the current situation. It emphasizes the urgent need for continued monitoring, context-adaptive interventions, and community-led protection strategies that strengthen resilience and ensure the safety of all, particularly women, girls, and other at-risk groups.

2. Methodology

The safety audit employed a participatory, mixed-method approach to ensure that the perspectives of diverse community members were adequately captured and analyzed. The process was guided by a standardized safety audit tool, which incorporated observational checklists, structured discussions, and interviews. This approach enabled the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data, providing a well-rounded understanding of the protection landscape in the two counties.

2.1 Data Collection Methods

The data collection process relied on three key methods:

- **Physical Observation:** Observations were conducted in community settings, food distribution points, health facilities, WASH sites, and other public spaces. These observations helped assess environmental safety, infrastructure conditions, lighting, sanitation, and accessibility. Observations were carried out at different times of the day to account for changes in activity patterns and security dynamics, especially between daytime and nighttime hours.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Separate FGDs were held with women, men, adolescent girls, and boys in each of the two counties. These discussions were designed to provide safe spaces for participants to express their experiences and concerns openly. Facilitators guided conversations around themes such as security and violence, mobility, access to services, child protection, and gender-based violence. This method helped to uncover patterns of risk and identify coping strategies used by community members.
- **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** In-depth interviews were conducted with 13 key informants, including local authorities, traditional leaders, teachers, youth representatives, religious figures, and police officers. The KIIs were instrumental in validating community perspectives and providing insights into the broader institutional and cultural factors influencing safety and protection.

2.2 Coverage and Participants

The audit covered Akoka and Baliut Counties, both of which host communities affected by displacement, limited access to services, and recurring insecurity. The 37 participants were selected from CH's existing project locations, ensuring a balance of gender, age, and social status. Special attention was given to the inclusion of women, adolescent girls, and persons with disabilities, whose experiences often reflect unique vulnerabilities.

2.3 Areas of Focus

The audit explored multiple interrelated sectors that directly impact safety and protection, including:

- **Protection:** Security risks, gender-based violence (GBV), abuse, and exploitation.

- Shelter Conditions: Safety, privacy, durability, and suitability for vulnerable households.
- Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH): Access to clean water, functional latrines, and hygiene practices.
- Health Services: Availability, accessibility, and quality of healthcare, especially for women and children.
- Public Infrastructure: Roads, markets, and schools, and their role in community mobility and safety.
- Food Access and Distribution: Distance to food distribution points, security concerns, and associated risks.

2.4 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Given the sensitivity of topics such as GBV and protection violations, the audit prioritized ethical data collection practices to safeguard participants. All discussions were conducted in private and confidential settings, and participants provided informed consent before engagement. Facilitators were trained in survivor-centered approaches, ensuring that no participant was exposed to further harm or distress during the process.

Security concerns in certain locations occasionally restricted the timing or depth of field activities. In some cases, assessments were conducted retrospectively to protect enumerators and participants from potential threats. Despite these limitations, the collected data provides an accurate reflection of the prevailing safety and protection environment in both counties.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data gathered from FGDs, KIIs, and observations were systematically compiled, categorized, and analyzed. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns, emerging themes, and localized differences between Akoka and Baliet. Findings were interpreted through a gender and protection lens, ensuring that the experiences of women, girls, and other vulnerable groups were central to the overall understanding of safety conditions.

3. Objectives of the Safety Audit

The primary purpose of the safety audit was to **identify, analyze, and understand protection and safety risks** faced by communities in **Akoka and Baliet Counties** under the General Food Distribution (GFD) program. The assessment focused particularly on the experiences of **women, girls, and other vulnerable groups**, with the goal of strengthening protection programming and improving community safety and dignity.

The specific objectives of the safety audit were as follows:

3.1 To Identify and Analyze Protection Risks and Vulnerabilities

The audit sought to document and analyze the **specific safety threats** and **protection risks** affecting residents in Akoka and Baliet. This included examining the prevalence of **gender-**

based violence (GBV), child marriage, sexual exploitation and abuse, and domestic violence, as well as understanding how factors such as poverty, limited access to services, and weak community structures contribute to these risks.

Through this analysis, the safety audit aimed to highlight the **root causes** of protection issues, including cultural practices, lack of awareness, and systemic gaps in service provision. This understanding serves as a foundation for developing effective interventions that address both immediate safety concerns and the underlying factors driving vulnerability.

3.2 To Evaluate the Physical and Environmental Safety Conditions

A core component of the audit was to assess the **physical safety environment** within the two counties. This included examining the condition and accessibility of **shelters, water and sanitation facilities (WASH), health centers, schools, and food distribution points**. The assessment also looked at **mobility and security** – especially for women and girls who often travel long distances to collect water, firewood, or food – evaluating the risks they face during these activities.

By identifying unsafe areas, poor infrastructure, and environmental hazards, the audit provides a basis for designing **context-specific interventions** that promote safer access to essential services and public spaces.

3.3 To Assess Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Risks and Gaps in Response Systems

Given the heightened risk of GBV in humanitarian settings, the audit aimed to establish a clear picture of **GBV risks and existing response mechanisms** in Akoka and Baliet. The process examined how incidents of GBV are reported and addressed, the role of **local protection structures** such as the **Special Protection Unit (SPU)** and **community leaders**, and the availability of **referral pathways and survivor support services**.

The audit also explored community attitudes toward GBV and the extent to which survivors can safely seek help. Identifying gaps in awareness, capacity, and service delivery was key to recommending improvements in prevention, response, and survivor-centered care.

3.4 To Inform Humanitarian Programming and Strengthen Protection Interventions

Another major objective was to generate **evidence-based insights** to inform the planning and implementation of humanitarian programs by Coalition for Humanity, Plan International, and other partners. The findings are intended to guide the **design of targeted, context-appropriate interventions** that enhance safety, reduce vulnerability, and promote community resilience.

These insights also aim to support coordination with the **Protection and GBV Clusters**, ensuring that gaps in service delivery and community support systems are addressed collaboratively and effectively.

3.5 To Provide Actionable Recommendations for Risk Mitigation and Safety Enhancement

Finally, the audit sought to produce **practical, actionable recommendations** that local authorities, humanitarian actors, and community structures can use to strengthen protection systems. These recommendations focus on **GBV risk mitigation, improvement of infrastructure and public safety, community awareness, and empowerment of women and girls.**

The recommendations are meant to promote collective responsibility for safety – emphasizing the role of communities, government institutions, and humanitarian partners in building a secure and inclusive environment for all residents of Akoka and Baliet.

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1 Protection Risks

The safety audit findings from Akoka and Baliet Counties revealed deep-rooted and multifaceted protection challenges that continue to threaten the safety, dignity, and well-being of community members – especially women, girls, and other vulnerable populations. These risks are tied to several factors, including poverty, cultural norms, weak protection structures, and limited access to basic services.

The discussions held during focus group sessions and key informant interviews highlighted **gender-based violence (GBV), child marriage, teenage pregnancy, and restricted mobility** as some of the most pressing protection concerns. In both counties, women and girls described living in an environment where their safety is constantly compromised, whether at home, in public spaces, or while carrying out essential household responsibilities.

a. Gender-Based Violence and Exploitation

Across both Akoka and Baliet, incidents of **rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, and sexual exploitation** were reported as major protection risks. These acts often occur in contexts where women and girls have little control over their movement or decision-making, and where community mechanisms for protection are weak or absent.

Participants explained that **bushy roads, riversides, and food distribution sites** are high-risk areas where women and girls have been harassed or assaulted. Many of them travel alone or in small groups to fetch water, bathe, or fish along riverbanks, which exposes them to sexual violence. One woman in Akoka described the situation as *“something every girl fears – because when you go for water or firewood, you are never sure you will return safely.”*

In Akoka County, where there is only one food distribution point serving the entire county, women and girls are forced to walk long distances – sometimes **over four hours each way** – to collect food. The journeys expose them to sexual harassment, robbery, and verbal abuse. Many participants expressed frustration that the very activities essential for family survival – such as collecting food, water, and firewood – place them at risk of violence.

In Baliet County, while the presence of a few GBV actors such as HDC was acknowledged, women still reported feeling unsafe when moving through certain areas. The absence of **safe spaces** for women and girls and the **lack of proper GBV referral systems** were identified as key barriers to reporting and responding to cases. Youth leaders and key informants echoed these concerns, admitting that some cases of **sexual exploitation** and **domestic violence** go unreported due to fear, shame, or lack of trust in existing systems.

Community leaders also acknowledged that **some perpetrators of sexual exploitation and abuse** were individuals in positions of power, including traders and local authority figures. This has created an environment where impunity and silence perpetuate abuse. The absence of trained GBV responders and weak law enforcement structures further limit the protection available to survivors.

b. Domestic Violence and Household-Level Risks

Domestic and intimate partner violence emerged as a **common and normalized form of abuse** in both counties. Women shared experiences of being beaten or verbally abused by their husbands, often triggered by disputes over food, money, or alcohol consumption. In households where economic hardship is severe, tensions often escalate into physical violence.

The audit found that domestic violence is **rarely reported** to authorities, as women fear reprisal, social stigma, or lack of response from law enforcement. Several men who participated in the discussions admitted that **alcohol abuse** and **economic stress** contribute significantly to domestic disputes. They also acknowledged the need for greater awareness and community education to challenge the social acceptance of wife-beating as a “normal” or “cultural” disciplinary measure.

The absence of **safe shelters** and **confidential reporting mechanisms** further discourages survivors from seeking help. In both Akoka and Baliet, there are no dedicated GBV desks at police stations or health facilities. Women in these areas often rely on relatives or informal community elders for mediation, which sometimes leads to further victimization rather than justice or protection.

c. Protection Risks for Men and Boys

While women and girls remain the most vulnerable, the audit also found that **men and boys face distinct safety threats**. Young men expressed fears of **forced recruitment, abduction, and harassment by armed youth**. In both counties, male participants cited a rise in insecurity during evening hours, with some areas becoming no-go zones after dark.

Boys also reported witnessing or experiencing violence at home and in schools. Many admitted feeling powerless to challenge these situations due to traditional hierarchies that limit their influence in family and community matters. Despite these challenges, many young men expressed willingness to be part of **community-based awareness campaigns and protection initiatives**, recognizing their role in promoting safety and respect for women and girls.

d. Security and Mobility

The issue of security and mobility cuts across all aspects of protection in Akoka and Baliet. During the day, both men and women are able to move relatively freely, but **nighttime mobility is highly restricted**, particularly for women and girls. The lack of street lighting and the presence of armed men in certain areas create a climate of fear after dark.

Women shared that they avoid going out at night, even for emergencies, due to the **risk of harassment or assault**. In contrast, men dominate public spaces after sunset, which limits women's participation in community activities and social life. The lack of adequate lighting around markets, water points, and schools not only increases insecurity but also contributes to **accidents and exposure to environmental hazards**.

In both counties, **poor road conditions** and **flood-prone routes** further restrict safe movement, especially during the rainy season. The combination of insecurity, limited infrastructure, and lack of transportation options forces many community members to walk long distances through unsafe terrain. Women and girls who travel alone are especially vulnerable to sexual assault, while men risk attack or robbery on isolated roads.

The audit emphasized that **mobility restrictions are not only a safety issue but also a barrier to accessing essential services** – including healthcare, markets, and education. In Akoka, for example, many women reported missing food distribution days due to fear of traveling alone or because they could not leave their children unattended. Such challenges highlight the urgent need for measures that enhance safe movement, such as installing lights in public areas, improving roads, and strengthening community patrols.

e. Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy

One of the most alarming protection concerns identified during the audit was the **rise in child marriage and teenage pregnancy** in both Akoka and Baliet. Participants consistently attributed these trends to **poverty, lack of education, and deeply rooted cultural norms** that value girls primarily for their marriageability rather than their potential.

Women and men alike acknowledged that **many families marry off their daughters at a young age** – sometimes as young as 13 or 14 – to reduce financial burdens or to receive dowry. Fathers, uncles, and older brothers are typically the main decision-makers in these arrangements, leaving mothers with little or no influence over the outcome.

Some girls described being forced into marriage as a way to escape mistreatment at home or because they saw no viable alternative for survival. Orphaned girls, in particular, face heightened vulnerability as they often lack family protection or support networks. A youth leader in Baliet noted that *“many of these young girls marry not because they want to, but because it is the only way to be cared for or survive.”*

The effects of child marriage are far-reaching. Many girls drop out of school permanently once married, cutting off their chances for education and economic independence. Teenage

mothers face severe health risks during childbirth and lack the maturity or resources to care for their children adequately.

Despite widespread acknowledgment of the problem, some traditional leaders defended early marriage as a **culturally accepted practice**. This tension between cultural beliefs and human rights norms underscores the need for sustained community dialogue and legal enforcement to protect girls from exploitation and early marriage.

f. Summary of Protection Gaps

Across both Akoka and Baliet, the safety audit identified several critical protection gaps:

- Absence of **safe spaces** and **referral systems** for GBV survivors.
- Weak enforcement of laws against **child marriage, sexual abuse, and domestic violence**.
- Limited awareness on **GBV prevention and survivor-centered care** among local authorities and community leaders.
- Inadequate **lighting and security infrastructure**, restricting women's movement and increasing night-time risks.
- Persistent **cultural norms** that tolerate or justify harmful practices such as early marriage and gender-based violence.

These gaps point to the urgent need for **comprehensive and coordinated protection interventions**, combining immediate risk mitigation with long-term behavioral and structural change.

5.2 Shelter Conditions

The safety audit revealed that the majority of households in both Akoka and Baliet live in **temporary and poorly constructed shelters**, primarily made from locally available materials such as grass, poles, mud, papyrus reeds, and plastic sheets. These structures offer minimal protection from environmental elements and pose significant safety, health, and privacy concerns for residents, particularly women and children.

In many cases, families share a **single small hut or "tukul"** that serves multiple purposes—living, sleeping, and cooking. Adults and children of both sexes often sleep in the same confined space, which compromises privacy and exposes family members, especially adolescent girls, to increased risk of **sexual abuse** and psychological distress. The lack of partitioning or designated spaces for sleeping and domestic activities was frequently cited as a source of discomfort and shame among women and girls.

During discussions, community members expressed deep concern about the **poor durability** of these shelters, which are easily damaged by heavy rainfall, flooding, or strong winds. In the rainy season, leaks are common, forcing families to sleep in damp conditions that

contribute to **respiratory and skin infections**. The absence of proper flooring or roofing materials leaves many households vulnerable to pests and environmental hazards.

Few households have **fenced compounds**, and most doors are made of makeshift materials such as plastic sheeting or weak metal scraps. This lack of basic security features exposes residents to **theft, intrusion, and violence**, particularly at night. Women noted that because their homes are not lockable, they live in constant fear of strangers entering their shelters while they sleep.

The findings point to a critical need for **shelter improvement programs** that prioritize privacy, safety, and resilience. Interventions should promote the use of more durable materials, provide technical guidance on safer construction methods, and encourage community-driven initiatives to build **separate sleeping spaces** for adults and children. Such improvements would not only enhance physical protection but also restore a sense of dignity and security for households.

5.3 Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH)

The WASH situation in Akoka and Baliet is extremely poor and poses both **health and protection risks** for the communities. The audit established that **neither county has functional community latrines, and open defecation is widespread**. This has created a public health hazard, contributing to the spread of diarrheal diseases such as **cholera, typhoid, and dysentery**. At the time of the safety audit, Akoka County was experiencing an active **cholera outbreak**, which was being managed by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The absence of sanitation facilities means that women, men, and children often relieve themselves in nearby bushes or open fields, typically after dark to maintain some privacy. Women and girls reported that they feel **unsafe using open areas at night**, fearing assault or harassment. This fear leads many to limit food and water intake during the day, causing dehydration and other health complications.

Access to **clean and safe drinking water** is equally limited. Both counties rely heavily on the **river as their primary water source**, with each county having only **one functional water point**—a hand pump or purification plant—located in the trading center. For households living in outlying areas, this means long walks to fetch water, often through **bushy or isolated routes** that increase exposure to GBV risks.

Women and girls bear the primary responsibility for water collection, and many described being harassed or attacked on their way to or from the river. The lack of alternative water points forces them to make multiple trips daily, further exposing them to insecurity.

The audit also identified a serious **gap in menstrual hygiene management (MHM)**. Many girls, particularly students, lack access to **sanitary pads or other menstrual products**, forcing them to use old cloth or leaves. This leads to poor menstrual hygiene, discomfort, and absenteeism from school. The absence of **MHM education and support** further perpetuates stigma and vulnerability for adolescent girls.

The findings underline the urgent need for **integrated WASH interventions** that include:

- Construction of community and household latrines.
- Provision of dignity kits for women and girls.
- Hygiene promotion campaigns focused on sanitation, handwashing, and menstrual hygiene management.
- Expansion of clean water access points to reduce travel distances and related GBV risks.

Improving WASH services is essential not only for public health but also for enhancing the **safety, dignity, and well-being** of women and girls.

5.4 Health Services

The audit revealed severe gaps in the availability and accessibility of **healthcare services** in both Akoka and Baliet. While communities reported that common illnesses include **malaria, diarrheal diseases, tuberculosis, and skin infections**, health facilities in both counties lack adequate staff, medicines, and equipment. Accessing treatment often requires walking long distances, which becomes nearly impossible during the rainy season when roads and paths are flooded and impassable.

There are **no reproductive health or menstrual hygiene services** available in Akoka, and both counties lack sufficient support for **GBV survivors**, such as psychosocial counseling or medical treatment for sexual assault. This gap leaves many women and girls to suffer in silence after experiencing abuse.

Community members also raised concerns about **privacy and confidentiality** within existing health facilities. Consultation spaces are often overcrowded, and the absence of private examination rooms discourages individuals – particularly women – from seeking care for sensitive issues. Health workers confirmed that there are **no designated protection or GBV desks** in either county's health centers, which limits the ability to provide survivor-centered care or confidential case management.

The lack of essential medicines was another significant concern. Residents frequently cited shortages of basic drugs such as antimalarials and antibiotics, forcing patients to purchase them from local traders at unaffordable prices. Elderly and disabled persons are especially disadvantaged, as they cannot travel long distances or pay for medication.

Improving access to health services requires a **multi-pronged approach**, including:

- Deployment of **mobile health clinics** to reach remote communities.
- Training of health workers on **GBV case handling, trauma-informed care, and confidentiality**.
- Provision of essential medicines and reproductive health services.

- Establishment of private consultation spaces to encourage health-seeking behavior.

Strengthening the health system is critical to reducing preventable diseases and ensuring that all individuals—particularly women, girls, and persons with disabilities—can access care safely and with dignity.

5.5 Public Infrastructure and Education

Public infrastructure in Akoka and Baliet remains underdeveloped, further limiting safety, access to services, and community resilience. Roads and bridges are in poor condition, and some areas become **completely inaccessible during the rainy season**, isolating residents and disrupting essential services such as food distribution and healthcare.

Despite these challenges, there are encouraging signs of progress within the **education sector**. Schools in both counties are operational and promote inclusive learning, with **girls aged 5–18 actively participating** in classes and extracurricular activities. Teachers noted an increase in girls' enrollment, attributed partly to ongoing awareness campaigns on the importance of education for both genders.

However, serious barriers persist. Some schools are located in **remote or insecure areas**, making it unsafe for students—especially girls—to travel long distances alone. Parents often keep their daughters at home due to fear of abduction or sexual harassment on the way to school. In addition, the **lack of sanitation facilities**, particularly separate latrines for boys and girls, leads to absenteeism among menstruating students.

Another major gap identified was the **absence of Women and Girls Friendly Spaces (WGFS)** in both counties. Such spaces would offer safe environments where women and girls can receive psychosocial support, learn vocational skills, and participate in empowerment activities. The lack of these facilities deprives women and girls of vital opportunities for healing, education, and social interaction.

Investing in improved public infrastructure and education facilities—including **fencing of schools, installation of lighting, and provision of latrines and menstrual hygiene support**—would significantly enhance safety and promote long-term development. Education remains a powerful tool for breaking cycles of vulnerability and empowering young girls to make informed life choices.

5.6 Food and Non-Food Items Distribution

The audit observed that **food distribution**, implemented monthly by Coalition for Humanity and Plan International, remains a vital source of sustenance for vulnerable households in both Akoka and Baliet. However, the current distribution arrangements pose significant safety and accessibility challenges—especially for women and girls.

In Akoka, there is only **one food distribution point serving the entire county**, forcing many beneficiaries to travel for more than **four hours each way** to reach it. These long and isolated journeys expose them to risks of **sexual harassment, robbery, and physical assault**. Upon receiving food, some women reported being attacked or robbed on their way home. The

overcrowded conditions at the distribution site also create discomfort and safety concerns, particularly for pregnant women and children.

In Baliet, while the situation is slightly better due to shorter travel distances, women and girls still bear the primary responsibility for collecting food and transporting it home. The absence of organized security during distribution further increases exposure to harassment.

Participants suggested that **opening additional distribution sites** and **organizing food delivery closer to villages** would help reduce travel risks. They also emphasized the need for **awareness sessions on GBV and protection during distribution days**, which could promote respectful conduct and community vigilance.

The findings demonstrate that food assistance, though lifesaving, must be coupled with **safety planning and risk mitigation measures** to prevent it from inadvertently exposing beneficiaries to harm. This includes proper crowd management, clear distribution schedules, and the presence of security personnel or protection monitors at sites.

5.9 Daily Life Observations

Physical observations conducted during the audit provided valuable insight into **the rhythm of community life** and the resilience of the people in Akoka and Baliet. Daily activities revolve around survival and household management, with **women and girls bearing the bulk of domestic responsibilities** such as fetching water, collecting firewood, cooking, washing, and caring for children.

Most women perform these tasks in groups, which not only makes the workload more manageable but also offers a degree of safety and emotional support. This collective approach fosters **social cohesion**, helping community members cope with difficult conditions. Despite facing multiple challenges, women were observed chatting, laughing, and encouraging one another as they worked – an expression of strength and solidarity in the face of hardship.

Children are actively involved in household tasks, often accompanying their mothers to water points or markets. However, **child supervision remains informal**, with older siblings typically caring for younger ones. The absence of recreational spaces means that most children spend their time helping with chores or playing near the homesteads.

Observations also confirmed the total lack of **latrines**, as reported during interviews. Key informants, including chiefs, police officers, and community representatives, admitted that even they do not have toilets in their homes. This reality reflects a widespread sanitation gap that affects everyone, regardless of status.

The environment across both counties is generally peaceful during the day, with vibrant community interactions. However, **women and girls avoid movement after dark**, reinforcing earlier findings about insecurity and poor lighting.

Despite the adversity, community members display remarkable resilience. Their cooperation, humor, and willingness to support one another are testaments to their determination to

survive and rebuild. These social bonds are among the strongest protective assets within Akoka and Baliet and should be harnessed in future programming aimed at improving safety and community well-being.

6. General Findings and Discussion

The safety audit conducted in Akoka and Baliet Counties revealed a complex web of **interconnected protection, social, and infrastructural challenges** that shape the daily experiences of community members—especially women, girls, and other vulnerable populations. The findings highlight how **poverty, insecurity, weak infrastructure, and harmful cultural practices** collectively undermine personal safety, access to services, and community well-being.

Overall, the audit paints a picture of communities that are **resilient but underserved**, with people forced to adapt to difficult living conditions in the absence of adequate protection systems and essential services. The following key themes emerged from the analysis:

6.1 Protection and Gender-Based Violence

The most urgent and pervasive concern in both counties is the **high prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV)** in various forms, including rape, sexual harassment, domestic abuse, and early or forced marriage. Women and girls are particularly exposed to these risks when performing essential daily activities such as collecting water, firewood, or food. Many participants shared personal stories of fear and trauma, reinforcing the reality that **routine survival tasks often carry life-threatening risks**.

The normalization of **domestic violence** and the persistence of **harmful social norms**—such as the belief that men have disciplinary rights over women or that girls should marry young—further compound these challenges. The absence of **safe spaces, GBV referral mechanisms, and legal protection structures** has left survivors with little recourse to justice or psychosocial support. In both Akoka and Baliet, most GBV cases remain unreported due to stigma, cultural taboos, or the perception that justice mechanisms are inaccessible or biased.

Despite these challenges, there are signs of **growing awareness and willingness to change** within the community. Men and youth leaders who participated in the discussions acknowledged the negative impact of violence on women and families and expressed readiness to support GBV prevention initiatives. This provides an important entry point for **community-led behavioral change programs** that challenge harmful norms while promoting respect, equality, and accountability.

6.2 Shelter and Living Conditions

Shelter remains one of the weakest areas of safety in both counties. The **majority of households live in overcrowded, poorly constructed shelters** that offer minimal protection from weather and lack privacy. These conditions have serious implications for the physical and emotional well-being of families, particularly adolescent girls who share confined spaces with adult relatives.

The lack of fencing or proper doors leaves residents exposed to **robbery, intrusion, and potential sexual assault**, especially at night. Shelter inadequacy also contributes to health risks such as respiratory infections, malaria, and skin diseases, which thrive in damp and unhygienic environments.

Addressing these conditions will require more than just distributing building materials. Sustainable shelter improvement must be **community-driven**, integrating safety, durability, and cultural appropriateness. Supporting families to design shelters that separate sleeping spaces for men, women, and children would enhance privacy, dignity, and protection from abuse.

6.3 Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH)

The audit identified a **severe WASH crisis** in both Akoka and Baliet. The total absence of latrines and the reliance on open defecation create a direct threat to public health, as seen in the ongoing **cholera outbreak in Akoka**. Communities also face acute **water shortages**, with only one operational water point in each county. This forces women and girls to walk long distances, often through unsafe routes, to fetch water from rivers or hand pumps.

These conditions not only heighten the risk of **waterborne diseases** but also expose women and girls to **gender-based violence** while traveling to collect water. The lack of menstrual hygiene products and support for schoolgirls adds another layer of vulnerability, contributing to absenteeism and poor educational outcomes.

Improving WASH services would significantly reduce both health and protection risks. This includes constructing community latrines, increasing the number of clean water access points, and providing **dignity kits** and **menstrual hygiene education** for women and girls. Integrating WASH with protection programming – by placing water points in safer locations and ensuring proper lighting – can have a powerful multiplier effect on community well-being.

6.4 Health and Access to Services

Health facilities in Akoka and Baliet are **severely under-resourced**, with minimal staffing, drug shortages, and inadequate infrastructure. The lack of privacy in treatment areas discourages people, particularly GBV survivors, from seeking medical care. The absence of **reproductive health services, psychosocial support, and GBV response mechanisms** further exacerbates the suffering of women and girls who experience violence.

Many households reported resorting to traditional remedies or simply enduring illness due to the cost or inaccessibility of healthcare. The rainy season worsens this situation, as flooding cuts off entire villages from health centers. This not only undermines physical health but also erodes community trust in formal health systems.

Deploying **mobile health clinics**, training health workers on **confidential case management**, and equipping facilities with essential medicines are critical steps toward bridging this gap.

Health interventions should also integrate **protection and mental health support**, ensuring that survivors receive holistic care in safe and dignified environments.

6.5 Education and Community Infrastructure

While the audit found encouraging progress in **girls' enrollment in schools**, significant challenges persist. Many schools lack **fencing, latrines, and clean water**, making them unsafe and unhygienic. Girls often drop out due to **menstrual stigma**, early marriage, or fear of harassment on their way to school. Teachers and local leaders expressed frustration that their efforts to promote education are undermined by cultural beliefs that undervalue girls' learning.

In both counties, the absence of **Women and Girls Friendly Spaces (WGFS)** is a glaring gap. Such spaces could play a vital role in promoting education, psychosocial healing, and skills development while serving as community hubs for awareness and empowerment.

Investing in **education infrastructure**, including lighting and safe pathways to schools, would not only improve academic access but also foster long-term protection outcomes. Education equips children – especially girls – with the knowledge, confidence, and agency needed to resist harmful practices and shape better futures for themselves and their communities.

6.6 Food Distribution and Safety

Food distribution, though essential for community survival, currently poses significant protection risks. In Akoka, the long distances to the single food distribution point expose women and girls to **sexual assault, theft, and exhaustion**. The lack of security at distribution sites and along return routes has led to cases of harassment and robbery. Overcrowding during distribution also creates discomfort and confusion, especially for elderly or disabled beneficiaries.

To make food assistance safer and more equitable, humanitarian actors must **decentralize distribution points**, strengthen coordination with **local protection committees**, and ensure **protection monitoring** during food distribution. Incorporating awareness sessions on GBV prevention and respectful conduct during distribution days would also help reduce tensions and prevent abuses.

6.7 Social Dynamics and Community Resilience

Despite facing immense hardship, the people of Akoka and Baliet demonstrated **strong social cohesion, cooperation, and resilience**. Women often work together to fetch water or cook, using laughter and conversation as a source of comfort and solidarity. This sense of community is a powerful protective mechanism that helps individuals cope with insecurity and scarcity.

However, resilience alone cannot substitute for basic rights and safety. The audit findings emphasize the need for **external support that builds on community strengths** – not merely providing aid, but empowering residents to lead change. Protection interventions should

therefore be participatory, engaging women, youth, and local leaders as key actors in promoting safety, equality, and accountability.

Ultimately, the safety audit underscores that **protection cannot be addressed in isolation**. True safety depends on an integrated response that tackles infrastructure, health, education, and livelihoods together while dismantling the social norms and power imbalances that perpetuate inequality and violence.

7. Conclusion

The safety audit in Akoka and Baliet Counties brought to light the **urgent protection and safety challenges** faced by communities living under fragile and underserved conditions. Women and girls bear a disproportionate burden of these risks, as they navigate long and dangerous journeys for water, firewood, and food, endure domestic violence, and face systemic barriers to justice, healthcare, and education.

Across both counties, **basic services remain extremely limited** – shelters are unsafe, latrines are nonexistent, health facilities lack privacy and supplies, and food distribution mechanisms expose beneficiaries to harm. These factors collectively erode human dignity and perpetuate cycles of vulnerability, inequality, and fear.

Yet, amid these challenges, there is **resilience, hope, and willingness to change**. Communities expressed readiness to engage in awareness programs, advocate for women’s rights, and collaborate with humanitarian partners to improve safety. Men and youth leaders acknowledged their role in promoting respectful behavior and preventing violence. This openness provides a solid foundation for **community-driven protection interventions** that are culturally sensitive and locally owned.

Addressing the protection gaps identified through this audit requires **coordinated, multisectoral action** involving humanitarian organizations, local authorities, and community structures. Immediate priorities include:

- Establishing **safe spaces** and **referral systems** for GBV survivors.
- Improving **shelter, WASH, and health infrastructure** to ensure safety and dignity.
- Expanding **food distribution access points** to reduce risks faced by women and girls.
- Promoting **education and awareness** to challenge harmful cultural norms such as child marriage.

Long-term solutions must go beyond service delivery to tackle the **structural causes of vulnerability**, including gender inequality, poverty, and weak governance. By integrating protection across all humanitarian sectors and empowering communities to take ownership of safety initiatives, partners can foster sustainable change.

The findings of this safety audit are not merely a record of risks – they are a **call to action**. They urge all stakeholders to prioritize protection as the foundation of humanitarian response

and development. Ensuring the **safety, dignity, and rights of women, girls, and all vulnerable individuals** in Akoka and Baliet is not only a moral responsibility but also a necessary step toward achieving lasting peace and resilience in Upper Nile State.

8. Recommendations

The safety audit in Akoka and Baliet Counties revealed that protection and safety challenges are deeply intertwined with poor infrastructure, limited access to services, and harmful social norms. Addressing these issues requires **coordinated, multisectoral, and community-driven action**. The recommendations below are structured around the main sectors assessed – Protection, Health, Shelter and WASH, Education and Livelihoods, Legal/Justice, and Community Engagement.

They emphasize both **immediate interventions** to mitigate urgent risks and **long-term strategies** aimed at strengthening community resilience, promoting gender equality, and ensuring the dignity and safety of all residents.

8.1 Recommendations for Akoka County

8.1.1 Protection

- **Establish Women and Girls Friendly Spaces (WGFS):** Set up safe spaces in central and accessible locations where women and girls can receive psychosocial support, participate in awareness sessions, and access referrals for GBV services. These spaces should also provide vocational and life skills training to build resilience and empowerment.
- **Strengthen GBV Referral Pathways and Response Mechanisms:** Develop and operationalize a clear GBV referral system that connects survivors to medical care, psychosocial support, and legal aid. Partner with local health facilities, police units, and community protection committees to ensure timely and survivor-centered responses.
- **Community Awareness and Prevention Campaigns:** Conduct regular awareness sessions on GBV, child protection, and safeguarding targeting community leaders, men, boys, and youth. Use dialogues, radio programs, and school-based discussions to challenge harmful cultural practices such as wife-beating and early marriage.
- **Capacity Building for Local Authorities:** Train chiefs, youth leaders, religious figures, and police on survivor-centered care, GBV laws, and human rights principles. Empower them to handle cases with confidentiality and sensitivity, reducing stigma and discrimination against survivors.

8.1.2 Health

- **Deploy Mobile Health Clinics:** Introduce mobile clinics staffed with qualified female health workers to provide medical services in remote areas. These clinics should offer reproductive health services, GBV case management, and trauma counseling.

- **Improve Health Facility Infrastructure:** Upgrade existing health centers to include private consultation spaces and protection desks where survivors can safely report cases. Provide essential drugs and medical supplies, particularly for malaria, diarrheal diseases, and reproductive health.
- **Integrate Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS):** Train healthcare workers in psychosocial first aid and trauma-informed care. Establish community-based counseling networks to help survivors and other vulnerable individuals cope with trauma and stress.

8.1.3 Shelter and WASH

- **Promote Safer Shelter Construction:** Support households to improve their shelters through the provision of durable materials (iron sheets, timber, and reinforced poles) and guidance on building safer, better-ventilated structures with separate sleeping spaces for adults and children.
- **Increase Access to Clean Water:** Construct additional boreholes and water distribution points to reduce the long distances women and girls travel to fetch water. Water points should be strategically placed in safe, well-lit areas within communities.
- **Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion:** Implement community-led sanitation programs to encourage latrine construction and use. Provide hygiene education on handwashing, waste disposal, and safe water practices.
- **Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM):** Supply dignity kits (sanitary pads, underwear, and soap) to women and girls and train them on menstrual hygiene. Partner with schools to provide menstrual education and establish private changing areas for girls.

8.1.4 Education and Livelihoods

- **Support Girls' Education:** Provide scholarships or school materials for girls to reduce dropout rates and early marriages. Construct separate latrines for boys and girls in schools to promote attendance and menstrual hygiene.
- **Safe Access to Schools:** Work with communities to clear and maintain school routes, ensuring they are safe and accessible. Encourage parents to allow girls to attend school by conducting community dialogues emphasizing the value of education for all children.
- **Promote Livelihood and Skills Training:** Introduce vocational training programs – such as tailoring, baking, and handicrafts – to empower women and youth economically. Small grants or start-up kits should accompany training to support income generation.

8.1.5 Legal and Access to Justice

- **Strengthen Legal Accountability:** Work with local authorities to enforce laws against child marriage, sexual assault, and domestic violence. Advocate for the consistent application of national GBV laws at the county level.
- **Build Police and Judiciary Capacity:** Train police officers on GBV case handling, confidentiality, and survivor-centered investigation. Support the establishment of a GBV desk at the police post to facilitate safe and confidential reporting.
- **Legal Awareness and Rights Education:** Conduct community education sessions on women's and children's rights to improve understanding of legal protections. Use culturally appropriate communication tools to reach both literate and non-literate populations.

8.1.6 Food Access and Protection

- **Expand Food Distribution Points:** Establish additional distribution sites within Akoka to reduce the long travel distances currently faced by women and girls. Distribution sites should be closer to residential clusters to minimize exposure to harassment and violence.
- **Enhance Safety During Distribution:** Coordinate with local security and protection volunteers to manage crowds, prevent exploitation, and ensure orderly and fair access to food.
- **Integrate Awareness Sessions into Distribution Activities:** Use food distribution days as opportunities to conduct awareness sessions on GBV prevention, parenting, and community safety.

8.1.7 Community Engagement and Social Mobilization

- **Strengthen Community Protection Structures:** Establish community protection committees that include women, youth, and traditional leaders. These groups can help identify and respond to protection risks while promoting local ownership of safety initiatives.
- **Promote Social Norm Change:** Facilitate community dialogues on gender equality, the value of education, and the negative effects of violence. Use storytelling, theater, and peer education to promote behavioral change and positive masculinity.
- **Enhance Coordination Among Stakeholders:** Strengthen collaboration between humanitarian actors, government offices, and community structures to harmonize protection activities and share information on GBV and child protection cases.

8.2 Recommendations for Baliet County

8.2.1 Protection

- **Establish Safe Spaces for Women and Girls:** Set up Women and Girls Friendly Spaces to provide psychosocial support, livelihood training, and awareness on GBV and rights. These centers should be accessible and inclusive of persons with disabilities.
- **Develop a GBV Referral Pathway:** Work with the existing Health Development Committee (HDC) and other partners to develop a referral pathway linking survivors to medical, legal, and psychosocial services.
- **Awareness on GBV Prevention and Response:** Increase the frequency and reach of awareness sessions addressing sexual violence, domestic abuse, and exploitation. Engage traditional leaders and youth groups as advocates for non-violence and gender equality.
- **Train Community Leaders and Police:** Build capacity among local leaders, law enforcement, and community protection groups to handle GBV cases ethically, confidentially, and without bias.

8.2.2 Health

- **Improve Health Facility Capacity:** Equip existing health centers with essential medicines, clean delivery kits, and reproductive health supplies. Ensure that female health workers are available to handle sensitive cases.
- **Train Health Staff on Survivor-Centered Care:** Build the capacity of health workers to respond appropriately to GBV survivors, emphasizing confidentiality, empathy, and respect for patient rights.
- **Expand Mobile Health Services:** Introduce mobile outreach to reach remote villages during the rainy season when access to static health facilities becomes impossible.

8.2.3 Shelter and WASH

- **Sanitation Awareness and Latrine Construction:** Conduct community sensitization campaigns on hygiene and sanitation. Encourage households to build latrines using locally available materials, supported by technical guidance and hygiene promotion activities.
- **Improve Access to Clean Water:** Drill additional boreholes and install water tanks in strategic areas to ensure communities have safe and easy access to water.
- **Menstrual Hygiene and Dignity Kits:** Provide dignity kits to women and girls, coupled with menstrual hygiene education sessions at schools and community centers.

8.2.4 Education and Livelihoods

- **Promote Education for Girls:** Advocate for equal access to education for girls through community sensitization. Provide learning materials, uniforms, and incentives to encourage school attendance.
- **Skills Development and Economic Empowerment:** Implement livelihood programs targeting women and youth, such as tailoring, basket weaving, or small-scale trading, to reduce poverty and economic dependence that often drives GBV.
- **School Safety and Infrastructure:** Support schools to build latrines, improve classroom conditions, and install lighting to create a safe and inclusive learning environment.

8.2.5 Legal and Access to Justice

- **Enforce Community By-Laws Against GBV:** Collaborate with local leaders to enforce community by-laws and hold perpetrators of sexual violence and child marriage accountable.
- **Enhance Police Capacity:** Train police officers on GBV case handling and survivor-centered investigations. Encourage the creation of GBV focal persons within police stations.
- **Support Access to Legal Aid:** Work with partners to provide legal assistance to GBV survivors and other vulnerable individuals who seek justice but cannot afford legal representation.

8.2.6 Community Engagement and Peacebuilding

- **Promote Awareness and Social Dialogue:** Conduct regular community dialogues on gender equality, child rights, and conflict resolution. Involve chiefs, elders, and youth leaders to foster collective commitment to safety and respect.
- **Strengthen Peace and Protection Committees:** Establish or reinforce existing community protection and peace committees to mediate conflicts, monitor protection risks, and report emerging threats.
- **Encourage Collaborative Action:** Promote partnerships between humanitarian agencies, community structures, and local government to coordinate protection and development interventions.

Akoka and Baliet require **comprehensive protection programming** anchored in community participation, gender sensitivity, and service accessibility. Interventions must prioritize the **safety and empowerment of women and girls**, the **accountability of local leadership**, and the **sustainability of essential services**. By addressing immediate safety risks while strengthening local systems, humanitarian actors and government partners can help these communities move toward a future of dignity, equality, and security.

Annex



1. Focus Group Discussion with Male Community Members and Local Leaders in Baliet County



2. Figure 2: Water Purification Plant in Akoka County



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