

Specialised police teams and sexual and gender-based violence: Why context matters

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Specialised Police Teams (SPTs) have become an increasingly important tool in United Nations policing and a central component of Norway's contribution to the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Norway played a key role in developing the SPT model and has contributed personnel and expertise to several deployments. Since 2010, Norway has contributed to SPTs focusing on combatting sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Haiti, Sudan and South Sudan.

This brief examines what these experiences reveal about the possibilities and limits of police reform in fragile and conflict-affected settings. The findings show that SPTs can strengthen police skills, improve investigative practices and support institutional development. At the same time, the three cases demonstrate that the impact of these efforts depends heavily on the political, legal and institutional environments in which they operate. Context shaped what the teams were able to achieve, whether gains could be sustained and, in some cases, whether key assumptions underpinning the intervention held in the first place.

"You can come from Norway or Finland with a lot of knowledge, but it doesn't work if you don't understand the context."

SPT member, South Sudan

Key messages

- SPTs can strengthen police responses to SGBV through training, mentoring, institutional development and support to specialised units.
- The same intervention model produced different results in Haiti, Sudan and South Sudan because it operated in very different political and institutional environments.
- Police legacies, public trust, legal frameworks, resource constraints and justice-sector capacity all shaped what the teams were able to achieve.
- Future deployments should place greater emphasis on contextual analysis and realistic theories of change.



What are Specialised Police Teams (SPTs)?

Specialised Police Teams (SPTs) are small, multidisciplinary teams deployed to UN peace operations to provide targeted support in a specific policing area, such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), organised crime or community-oriented policing. Introduced by Norway in 2010, they were designed as an alternative to traditional UN police deployments based primarily on individual police officers. SPTs typically consist of experienced police officers and, increasingly, civilian specialists such as legal experts, psychologists or gender advisers. Team members are usually deployed for at least one year and work towards clearly defined objectives over several years, allowing for greater continuity than many other UN police deployments.

Rather than carrying out policing functions themselves, SPTs work alongside host-state police services through training, mentoring, co-location and institutional support.

Specialised police teams can deliver meaningful change

The three SPTs were established in response to clear needs. In Haiti, Sudan and South Sudan, SGBV was widespread, while police institutions often lacked the skills, procedures and organisational structures needed to respond effectively. The teams sought to address these gaps through a combination of training, mentoring, institutional support and coordination with other actors in the justice sector.

Across the three missions, SPTs trained police personnel, developed training curricula, supported specialised units, introduced investigative procedures and promoted more survivor-centred approaches to SGBV. In Haiti, these efforts extended to supporting specialised SGBV offices, strengthening police education and establishing a national investigative unit for sexual violence. Over time, the model also expanded beyond police institutions to include greater cooperation with prosecutors, courts, health services and survivor-support mechanisms.

These experiences demonstrate that SPTs can address important technical and organisational gaps. They provide continuity, specialised expertise and a clear thematic focus that traditional deployments often struggle to achieve.

Why context matters

One of the clearest lessons from the three missions is that technical interventions do not operate in a vacuum. The same model encountered very different conditions in Haiti, Sudan and South Sudan, leading to different opportunities and constraints.

The Haiti programme benefited from extensive consultation with national counterparts, alignment with the Haitian National Police development plan and dedicated funding. In South Sudan, the SPT built on lessons from earlier efforts but operated within a highly fragile institution marked by corruption, resource shortages and frequent personnel rotations. Sudan presented a different challenge altogether. The SPT was deployed to a newly established political mission with limited UN policing structures and less engagement with national counterparts during the planning phase. Any assessment of the Sudan experience must also recognise that implementation was interrupted by the outbreak of war in 2023.

These differences shaped not only what the teams could do but also how relevant interventions were to local needs and realities. The findings suggest that effective SPTs require more than identifying a technical capacity gap. Understanding local institutions, political dynamics and implementation constraints is equally important.

The findings also highlight the importance of understanding the role and history of the police. In Sudan and South Sudan, parts of the police and wider security sector had themselves been implicated in abuses, including sexual violence. This complicated an important assumption underlying the interventions: that survivors would view the police as legitimate actors capable of addressing SGBV. Strengthening police capacity may therefore be necessary, but it will rarely be sufficient where trust in state institutions is low.

The police do not operate in isolation

The experiences from Haiti, Sudan and South Sudan show that police responses to SGBV depend on the wider justice system.

Investigations require functioning prosecutors, courts, health services, referral systems and survivor-support mechanisms. Across all three countries, weaknesses elsewhere in the justice chain often limited the practical impact of improvements in police capacity. Legal frameworks were incomplete, institutional coordination was uneven and case-management systems remained fragile.

Over time, the SPT model increasingly recognised this reality. While early interventions focused primarily on police capacity, later efforts placed greater emphasis on coordination across the justice chain. In South Sudan, for example, the team worked closely with prosecutors, juvenile courts, one-stop centres and mobile courts. This reflected a growing understanding that better investigations alone would not improve outcomes if cases stalled elsewhere in the system.

Resource constraints created further obstacles. One SPT member in South Sudan captured the challenge succinctly: "They don't have anywhere to sit. They don't have chairs. Where are we supposed to conduct training?" The comment points to a broader lesson. Even well-designed training programmes can struggle to achieve their intended results when police stations lack the resources needed to apply new skills in practice.

Building capacity is one thing; sustaining change is another

Another important lesson from the cases concerns sustainability. All three SPTs invested heavily in training, mentoring and institutional development. These efforts produced important results. Yet the durability of those gains depended heavily on conditions beyond the intervention itself.

Haiti provides the clearest example. The programme produced substantial outputs over nearly a decade and is often regarded as one of the strongest examples of the SPT model.

About the study

This brief is based on a comparative study of Norway's contributions to three Specialised Police Teams (SPTs) focusing on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Haiti (2010–2019), Sudan (2021–2023) and South Sudan (2019–present). The study examined how the teams were planned, implemented and what they achieved, with particular attention to the factors that shaped their relevance, effectiveness and sustainability.

For the full report, see Tøraasen, M. and Sahgal, G. (2026). *Norwegian experiences with specialised police teams in combatting sexual and gender-based violence*. CMI Report No. 3. Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute. Available at: <https://www.cmi.no/publications/9984-norwegian-experiences-with-specialised-police-teams-in-combatting-sexual-and-gender-based-violence>

It established specialised SGBV offices, supported a specialised investigative unit and integrated SGBV into police education. Yet many of these gains later became difficult to sustain as Haiti's political and security situation deteriorated. Haiti therefore illustrates both what SPTs can achieve and how difficult it can be to preserve those achievements in highly fragile environments.

The Sudan case demonstrates how rapidly changing political conditions can reshape the prospects of an intervention. Training curricula were developed, local partnerships established and implementation was beginning to scale up when conflict interrupted the mission. The case serves as a reminder that sustainability is difficult to assess when reforms are overtaken by wider political developments.

South Sudan highlights a different challenge. The SPT remains operational, but persistent institutional instability, corruption, resource shortages and frequent personnel transfers continue to affect the consolidation of new practices. Officers who receive training and mentoring are often moved to other posts before expertise becomes embedded within the institution.

Taken together, the cases suggest that sustainability depends on both programme design and context. Training-of-trainers, institutional structures and local ownership remain important, but they operate within political and institutional environments that can either reinforce or undermine reform efforts.

What this means for future deployments

The experiences from Haiti, Sudan and South Sudan suggest that future SPTs should be designed with a stronger emphasis on context.

The cases show that identifying a technical capacity gap is only the first step. Understanding the surrounding political, legal and institutional environment is equally important. Questions about public trust, police legitimacy, legal frameworks, institutional stability and available resources should be considered alongside assessments of training needs and organisational capacity.

The findings also point towards the value of broader partnerships. Police reform efforts are likely to be more effective when they are linked to other justice-sector initiatives and developed in close cooperation with civil society organisations, women's organisations and survivor-support services. These actors often possess critical knowledge of local dynamics and may enjoy levels of trust that state institutions do not.

Recommendations

- Assess police legitimacy, public trust and the historical role of security institutions before deployment.
- Conduct more systematic contextual analysis alongside technical needs assessments.
- Strengthen collaboration with prosecutors, courts, health providers and survivor-support services from the outset.
- Work more closely with women's organisations and civil society actors as implementation partners.
- Align funding, objectives and timelines with political and institutional realities.
- Adapt SPT models to local contexts rather than replicating approaches developed elsewhere.