**Adrian Brown, Fire Aid Director**

**Fire Safety Audit Team Leader**

**Protection of Civilian Site: Bentiu**

Having visited South Sudan previously and met both women and men’s focus groups, I was keen to ensure that when we returned there were a number of female firefighters in the party rather than just the 2 males for the original visit.  This was for a number of reasons, firstly when we met with the women’s focus group, whilst they were happy to talk to us and the culture allowed them to do so, I felt they would be more likely to open up in greater detail to a female that they could relate to more.  Secondly the community safety group would be primarily made up of females and again I felt that the training for this group would come over better from female where possible.  For the community response I didn't think it would matter if male or female instructors.

Having now returned from the second trip I have to say I do not believe it would have been as successful as it was without the female members of the team.  The fact that we had considered this showed us in a very professional light.  For example, on one occasion we had already agreed that the women’s focus group meeting would be better without me as a male being present, we were then asked by camp management to think about not having me as a male present and when we said that we had already agreed this, they were impressed that we had already taken this into account.

For technical input there is no difference between male and female staff, where having females on the team made a fundamental difference is with meeting with representative groups, from an aid agency point of view, I would say the majority of the senior staff were female and they appreciated having female firefighters to talk to.  With regard to camp residents the senior male leaders were used to dealing with high powered women and so this made no difference, but the female camp residents were so over joyed with having female firefighters present, on one occasion when my colleague introduced herself all the women present broke out into spontaneous applause.  Nobody clapped when I as a male introduced myself!

When trying to understand the fire related issues that are occurring in the camps, given the history of Gender Based Violence both during the war and still taking place today in the camps then having a female to speak to and explain allowed us to get a far better understanding and so will enable us to help reduce the risk of fires in these camps.  Just after we left the large camp, media reports came through of over 150 women of all ages being subject to serious sexual assaults in the area, these are exactly the reasons why most people have fled to the safety of the UN camps and the protection of the peacekeepers and why they are not likely to return home anytime soon.  Who do you think they are most likely to speak to and receive training from a male or a female firefighter?  Given the choice of taking a team out there again I would pick an all-female team.