

Gender Issues in the UN Peacekeeping Operation in Haiti

An Interview with Nadine Puechguirbal, Senior Gender Advisor, UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH)

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Nadine Puechguirbal is the Senior Gender Advisor in the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH). Deployed at the onset of the mission, Ms. Puechguirbal has been working in Haiti since June 2004. In addition to Ms. Puechguirbal, there are nine other gender advisors serving in UN peacekeeping operations¹, out of a total of 17 peacekeeping operations.

While there has been substantial discussion about the role and position of peacekeeping gender advisors at the policy level, there have been few opportunities to understand how these gender advisors operationalize their mandates in their day-to-day work on gender issues within the UN's peacekeeping operations.

In order to raise awareness about the critical role of gender advisors in UN peacekeeping operations, the WILPF UN Office PeaceWomen Project conducted the following interview with Ms. Puechguirbal.

1. PeaceWomen: According to the UN Secretary-General, “the role of gender advisors in gender units is to promote, facilitate, support and monitor the incorporation of gender perspectives in peacekeeping operations” (Secretary-General’s Study on Women, Peace and Security, 2002). Using this policy language as the basis, how did you envision your role and work as MINUSTAH’s Senior Gender Advisor before arriving in Haiti?

Nadine Puechguirbal: I participated as a Gender Advisor in a needs assessment mission in March 2004 that was deployed to prepare the new peacekeeping mission in Haiti. During the assessment mission, I established contacts with the main women’s organizations on the ground and other key partners (mainly UN and national authorities) to get an idea of the situation in the fields of human rights, police, justice, violence, etc. from a gender perspective. In addition, I used to live and work in Haiti for the UN Observation Mission of Human Rights (MICIVIH) in 1995 and from 1998 to 2000, so I already had a fairly good idea of the main challenges in the country. I also think that my experience as a Gender Affairs Officer for the UN Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) in 2003 had prepared me to take over this new position. What I had in mind before taking up my duties at the beginning of June 2004 was to adopt a twofold strategy: i) working closely with each component of the mission to ensure that gender mainstreaming would be taken seriously and effectively implemented and ii) getting involved with women’s organizations to build up confidence and a constructive partnership. Most importantly, I wanted to work with both the men and the women of the mission and of the country and try to go beyond the traditional activities of a Gender Unit. The challenge was to bring creative and innovative ideas to the field of gender and peacekeeping that would make my work appealing to others (what I call a “gender-friendly approach”).

2. PeaceWomen: How does the Secretary-General’s policy language translate into the concrete day-to-date work of the MINUSTAH Gender Unit?

The MINUSTAH Gender Unit currently consists of 2 staff: a Senior Gender Advisor and a national Program Officer. Recruitment for additional staff is going on, mainly for a national administrative assistant who will be stationed in Port-Au-Prince and two more national Program Officers who will be posted in the regions. A Gender Affairs Officer (P3) should be recruited in the near future.

Nadine Puechguirbal: First of all, I had to get settled and assert my authority as Head of the Gender Unit. Since no plan had been made for the allocation of space for the Gender Unit, I had to fight to secure a desk, a computer, and a vehicle for the Unit. I also had to spend time to explain to my UN colleagues the role and function of the Gender Unit in a peacekeeping mission. The UN staff’s understanding of gender issues slowly improved, especially after the first two induction courses that I gave to international civilian staff. A few allies were found in the political, civil affairs and Civilian Police (CivPol) divisions as well as among senior administrative officers and the Officer in Charge, Acting SRSG. While disseminating information on gender issues within the mission, I also began initiating and consolidating contacts with key national and international partners, UN agencies and members of Haitian civil society, including women’s organizations. I initially planned for having ten national Program Officers and two United Nations Volunteers in the Gender Unit, however a severe cut in the budget left the Unit with only three national Program Officers. I was therefore compelled to reduce my expectations and revise my plan for staff deployment in the regions as well as readjust my workload. I think that a Gender Unit should be more substantially staffed to be able to achieve its goals and implement its mandate. Maybe after we have succeeded in showing that gender makes a difference in peacekeeping missions, we will be given the means of action we need in the near future.

At the beginning of August 2004, I hired a male Haitian Program Officer, Ernst Luceus. Mr. Luceus’ role is to help build up confidence on gender issues within the male-dominated MINUSTAH Mission, and with outside partners. Mr. Luceus is now in charge of delivering all gender-related training to MINUSTAH military, CivPol and the Haitian National Police (HNP). As a matter of interest, a CivPol officer congratulated him at the end of an induction course, remarking that he was glad to hear a “real man” deliver such a course instead of a woman; according to the officer, it gave the course more credibility. Mr. Luceus is also in charge of following up on a new project the Unit is starting, in partnership with the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), to develop a peer education system with men addressing issues of masculinity within the Haitian context. He will bring to this project his experience as a member of a small organization of Haitian men working to fight sexism.

3. PeaceWomen: In all missions previous to MINUSTAH, gender advisors were not deployed until

after the mission had been established and the peacekeepers had begun working. In MONUC, for example, the Gender Unit was not established until one year after the mission had been set-up. Unlike previous gender advisors, you were deployed at the onset of the mission in Haiti. Do you think your presence at the onset of the mission has made a difference?

Nadine Puechguirbal: Definitely. Although it was a real challenge at the beginning to get accepted and respected as the Senior Gender Advisor, I am convinced that my early arrival in the mission will make a difference in the long run. It took me two months of repeated efforts to start seeing things change; my strategy was to spend a lot of informal time with my UN colleagues to explain in a non-confrontational manner why gender matters in a peacekeeping mission. I further explained the role of the Gender Unit and acknowledged the work of women's organizations under dire circumstances during a press conference with national media that was well-received within the Haitian society and opened a few doors, mostly with some women's organizations that were testing my own commitment to gender issues. I am convinced that building a strong partnership with women's organizations on different issues of joint interest at the very beginning of a mission has a positive impact on our work because it encourages the local population to look favorably on the mission.

It is getting clear that a Senior Gender Advisor must be sent at the very onset of a new mission: it is indeed easier to integrate a gender perspective at the beginning when everybody gets to know each other and is still receptive to "new" ideas and topics, than at a later stage in the middle of the implementation of programs and activities when people are not willing to change the course of their work to pay attention to gender.

4. PeaceWomen: One of the tasks of the Gender Unit is to provide gender-sensitivity training for incoming peacekeeping personnel (military, civilian police and civilian personnel). The scope of, and time given for, gender-sensitivity training, as a component of the general induction training, is dependent on the political will of the leadership in each peacekeeping mission. Can you describe the gender-sensitivity training currently provided by your Unit?

Nadine Puechguirbal: I started to provide gender awareness training at the very onset of the MINUSTAH mission and it was helpful in raising an interest in gender-related issues among UN staff. I was approached by a few staff who confessed that they had no idea "what gender meant" beyond the usual stereotypes of "I thought it meant women's issues only", or "I thought it was about sexual harassment", etc. I had the feeling that I was able to break through the resistance mechanisms of a few individuals.

Today, all new UN staff receive gender training when they arrive in Port-au-Prince, including international staff, military staff officers and CivPol. At the onset of the Mission, I requested two hours for a gender-awareness training for military staff officers and CivPol. Now I have to integrate a session on the prohibition of sexual exploitation and abuse into the two-hour course (see my answer to question #9). I handed over the overall responsibility of training to, Mr. Luceus, the national Program Officer. I still deliver a one-hour induction course on gender issues and a one-hour course on the prohibition of sexual exploitation and abuse to international civilian staff.

Due to a lack of human resources, time and logistics, we are not able to deliver gender training to the military contingents that are deployed throughout the country, outside of Port-au-Prince. I did manage to hold a joint information session with the HIV/AIDS Advisor on HIV/AIDS prevention and gender issues to more than 200 military troops from Brazil at the end of June. Time permitting, I plan to resume training of contingents in the near future when the Gender Unit is fully staffed and national Program Officers are deployed in the North and in the South of the country. The ideal solution would be to "train the military trainers" on gender issues, however I have not identified anyone who would be comfortable enough with the subject to conduct his/her own session (not to mention the problem of language within the mission, where the majority of military personnel speak little French or English). Although gender training is not the key that solves all problems of misunderstanding on gender issues, I strongly believe that it helps break the ice around a sensitive subject and paves the way for further exchanges and initiatives.

5. PeaceWomen: How does the Gender Unit engage with Haitian women in the civilian population?

Nadine Puechguirbal: The Gender Unit is involved in a few projects with women's organizations. The main problem these days is the increase in the level of violence that prevents us from implementing our activities in the field (not to mention the fear, the lack of confidence of local men and women in the future of their country, and the impact that the current volatile security situation has on their spirits). I have been working closely with the Ministry for the Status of Women and some women's organizations in assessing the impact of the recent deadly storm on women and girls in the city of Gonaïves. We carried out a joint visit to Gonaïves and talked to women at distribution points, health centers and so-called shelters. A system had been put in place to ensure women were the direct beneficiaries of the assistance, thus avoiding mismanagement of food items by local men belonging to the main gangs (this measure had been implemented only after watching young men taking control of the food during the very first distributions).

A lack of coordination between the main partners involved in the humanitarian operation resulted in delays in food distribution with women and girls waiting for hours under the scorching sun. Women who lost everything in the storm and are now in charge of cleaning, rebuilding and feeding their communities should not have to go through this ordeal. In addition, a few women were reportedly attacked on their way home after they had left the distribution spots secured by the Argentinian peacekeepers. During that visit, women's organizations wanted to collect more information about those cases with the aim of preparing a proposal for improvement of the security of women on the ground if it turned out that these facts were true.

The visit to Gonaïves was very interesting insofar as it highlighted the lack of gender sensitivity within the humanitarian community at large. Even if women were put in charge of receiving food items, no measures had been established to facilitate their tasks and ensure a safe environment for them beyond the distribution points. The problem is that they were not involved in the identification of the distribution points that were selected by a local committee composed exclusively of men. The same situation prevails in the so-called shelters where a majority of destitute women and girls try to survive. In this respect, women and girls are mainly treated as victims and beneficiaries rather than actors and this approach tends to undermine their capacities. One platform of women's organizations working for the promotion of women's rights, is about to issue a press release to highlight the plight of women, and stress that they are not only victims but are also responsible individuals within their own community, and should be more involved in the reconstruction of Gonaïves.

6. PeaceWomen: In a recent article, written in collaboration with MINUSTAH's CivPol and Public Information (August 2004), you examined the experiences of the only 4 women Civilian Police in the MINUSTAH Mission.² Since the article was released, 11 more women have joined the CivPol Division, bringing the total number of women Civilian Police personnel to 15, out of a total of 409 at the beginning of October (around 3.6%). Are these low levels found in the other sections of the MINUSTAH Mission— among military personnel, civilian international and national personnel?

Nadine Puechguirbal: Well, I must admit that there is a real problem of gender-imbalance within the mission. As of 1 October 2004, the composition of MINUSTAH staff was as follows:

- a) 3,092 military troops, including 34 women only (around 1 %); female military belong to contingents from Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. Brazil has the biggest contingent, i.e. 1,197 elements without a single woman;
- b) 409 CivPol³, including 15 women police officers only (around 3.6 %): 3 from Canada; 3 from Chile; 3 from Zambia; 2 from Spain; one from Bosnia-Herzegovina; one from France; one from Burkina Faso and one from Cameroon;
- c) 281 international staff, including 62 women (around 22 %); a woman (D2) has just arrived as Head of the Political Division (in addition, there are only four women working as Heads of Unit/Sections, i.e. Personnel, Gender, HIV/AIDS and the medical officer)
- d) 386 local staff, including 43 women (around 11%); national women mainly occupy positions such as translator, personnel or administrative assistant, cleaner, clerk. All national drivers are male.

We can only acknowledge that these figures do not reflect the requirement of expanding the role and contribution of women in peacekeeping operations as stipulated in Resolution 1325 (2000). It would be interesting to compare these figures with those from other peacekeeping missions and see where MINUSTAH stands in terms of gender (im)balance. As regards national staff, I am using the Gender Resource Package⁴ as a tool to draw the attention of the new Chief Civilian Personnel Officer (CCPO) to the need for ensuring that more Haitian women apply for non-traditional jobs in the next wave of recruitment (such as security guard, driver, radio technician, electrician, Information Technology assistant). I will have a working session with the CCPO to assess the current situation and try to readdress this issue. I believe that local women were not given a chance when they applied for positions and were considered less qualified than men (this cultural barrier should be overcome). In light of the current situation in the MINUSTAH Mission, it is clear that a strategy for all peacekeeping missions should be defined to improve the current lack of gender balance that may jeopardize the work of missions in the long run and have a negative impact on the perception of the missions by the local population.

7. PeaceWomen: According to UN Security Council Resolution 1542 (2004), which established the mission in Haiti, the Security Council, “decides that MINUSTAH shall have the following mandate: *...I (b) to assist the Transitional Government in monitoring, restructuring and reforming the Haitian National Police, consistent with democratic policing standards, including through the vetting and certification of its personnel, advising on its reorganization and training, **including gender training**, as well as monitoring/mentoring members of the Haitian National Police.*”⁵
How is the Gender Unit currently involved in the training of the Haitian National Police?

Nadine Puechguirbal: As I already mentioned above, Mr. Luceus, the national Program Officer, conducts regular gender training sessions for the Haitian National Police (HNP). In addition, in the framework of the mandate, I work closely with the representatives of the CivPol Division to prepare an integrated training package, in cooperation with other key partners. Weekly coordination meetings take place between the Senior Gender Advisor, the HIV/AIDS Advisor, CivPol, the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), UNFPA and two Haitian physicians, to discuss a joint project of training of the HNP. The project has four main objectives: a) Enhancing the capacity of the HNP to develop prevention of and response to STDs and HIV/AIDS within a gender perspective; b) Increasing their knowledge of the situation of HIV/AIDS in the country, as well as of reproductive health and gender issues; c) Integrating a course on HIV/AIDS and gender issues into the curriculum of the HNP; and d) Improving access to services, including counseling, on HIV/AIDS and reproductive health for the HNP. At the last recruitment session for National Police Officers, 5.6% of the candidates were tested positive, which puts this group beyond the national average. Officers who are tested positive are rejected without being told the reason why they failed the recruitment test, thus creating a risk of further contamination within the society. The new HNP direction wants to change this situation through pre-and post-counseling, including better access to medical services.

8. PeaceWomen: Are you working with other entities of the United Nations, on the ground in Haiti, on gender issues?

Nadine Puechguirbal: When I arrived in June 2004, the MINUSTAH Officer in Charge/UN Development Programme (UNDP) Resident Representative requested that I revive the UN Country Team Gender Working Group, by designating a Gender Focal Point within each agency. The first meeting of the Gender Working Group took place in July with the Gender Focal Points from UNFPA, UNDP and the World Food Programme (WFP). The Gender Working Group is organized around three main areas of responsibilities: a) ensuring the integration of a gender perspective into the work of other Working Groups, mainly Health, Education, HIV/AIDS, Disarmament and Human Rights; b) Ensuring an open dialogue with key partners on gender issues, including the Ministry for the Status of Women and civil society; and c) strengthening the strategy of gender mainstreaming within the UN Country Team (ICT) through identification of joint projects. It is so far working well. For the next meeting, we have invited a representative from the Ministry for the Status of Women with the aim of coordinating activities that are planned for the last week of November dedicated to addressing violence against women.

Another important initiative is the Inter-Agency National Plan on Violence Against Women, with a focus on sexual violence, that brings together UNFPA, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), UNAIDS, the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), UNDP and the representative for the High

Commissioner for Human Rights, in cooperation with women's organizations and the Ministry for the Status of Women. An important working session has already taken place between all the actors to highlight the need for standardizing tools used in the Plan, e.g. having a recognized national medical certificate after a rape, registration forms for cases of violence, a training manual for people dealing with victims of violence, etc. so that all actors involved use the same tools and do not duplicate efforts.

Coordination among all UN agencies is always a challenge but it is essential if we do not want to overlap and duplicate our efforts. I am very concerned with integrating our programs into well-coordinated efforts and with keeping an open dialogue with our national partners.

9. PeaceWomen: In addition to being MINUSTAH's Senior Gender Advisor, you are also the Missions' Focal Point on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. How do this position and the work differ from that of Senior Gender Advisor?

Nadine Puechguirbal: To be more precise, I am MINUSTAH's Focal Point on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse *ad interim* until a Code of Conduct Officer is appointed. I don't think that it's a good idea to have the Senior Gender Advisor fill the two positions. The Senior Gender Advisor has to work on confidence building with all components of the mission to be able to integrate a gender perspective into policies, programs and activities. She/he can't be seen at the same time in a role of investigation and sanctions, keeping an eye on disciplinary issues. She/he can't be "both judge and judged" if you see what I mean. I'm fully aware that I am walking on a very thin line that separates my functions as a Senior Gender Advisor and a Focal Point (FP) for Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. But I had no choice. At the time of the appointment, I was the only female staff personnel working at an appropriate level of seniority to take up the duty (I am the FP and I have an Alternate/Substitute; the rules are that either the FP or the Alternate/Substitute has to be a woman). So far, I have succeeded in separating the two functions without confusing everyone, and I do hope that I'll be able to keep the situation under control until the Code of Conduct Officer arrives in the mission (the Code of Conduct Officer will eventually replace the Focal Point; among other things, her/his main responsibility will be to receive complaints and determine whether a mission should accept and/or act on them; gather information and conduct initial fact-finding or examine any complaints in an independent and impartial manner with the assistance of the mission's military, police and civilian components as required).

Nadine Puechguirbal will be visiting UN Headquarters in New York City later in October 2004 in order to participate in a number of women, peace and security events marking the fourth anniversary of the adoption of Resolution 1325. For a complete October calendar, visit: <http://www.peacewomen.org/un/4thAnniversary/Octo4calendar.html>

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For PeaceWomen's Haiti index, visit: <http://www.peacewomen.org/WPS/Haiti.html>

For PeaceWomen's Gender and Peacekeeping Index, visit:
<http://www.peacewomen.org/un/pkwatch/pkindex.html>

For UNIFEM's Portal profile of Haiti, visit: <http://www.womenwarpeace.org/haiti/haiti.htm>

¹ For a complete listing of DPKO's Gender Advisors, visit: <http://www.peacewomen.org/un/pkwatch/facts.html#Units>

² "The Feminine Face of United Nations CIVPOL in Haiti" (August 2004):
<http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/Peacekeeping/MINUSTAHcivpolwomen04.pdf>
French version: <http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/Peacekeeping/MINUSTAHcivpolfemmes04.pdf>

³ There are also 174 FPU (Units of Police Force) from Jordan (all male); FPU are responsible for the maintenance of law and order whereas CivPol train and monitor the NHP; they are counted separately.

⁴ Gender Resource Package, Department for Peacekeeping Operations, Peacekeeping Best Practices Unit (August 2004):
<http://pbpu.unlb.org/pbpu/genderpack.aspx>

⁵ See <http://www.peacewomen.org/un/pkwatch/SCrescompilation.html#Haiti>