

The Feminine Face of United Nations CIVPOL in Haiti

Introduction

The United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) began deployment in June 2004. In order for it to successfully carry out its mandate in accordance with Resolution 1542 (2004), the mission is composed of military, Civilian Police (CIVPOL) and international and local civilian staff.

Among its other tasks, CivPol is mandated to assist the Transitional Government in the restructuring and reform of the Haitian National Police and in the implementation of a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration program “for all armed groups, including women and children associated with such groups”¹

As of 1 August 2004, the CivPol contingent in Haiti comprises 206 police officers, four of whom are women (around two percent of the contingent’s total size). Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which was adopted by the Security Council on 31 October 2000, “*Urges* the Secretary-General to seek to expand the role and contribution of women in United Nations field-based operations, and **especially among** military observers, **civilian police**, human rights and humanitarian personnel.”

With women only making up two percent of the entire CIVPOL contingent in Haiti, MINUSTAH has yet to meet the requirements of Resolution 1325.

¹ S/RES/1542 (2004) April 30 2004.

The figures are not much better in other peacekeeping missions. As the UN Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations, Mr. Jean-Marie Guéhenno, pointed out in a speech to the Security Council in October 2003, women constitute a mere four percent of the total number of civilian police in UN peacekeeping missions worldwide.²

Why are there so few women in the civilian police contingents of UN peacekeeping operations? What are the obstacles they face? How can these obstacles be removed? This is what we tried to find out by talking to the four women who were selected by their respective countries to serve in MINUSTAH.

Portrait

Four women, four separate destinies who have one thing in common: until now, none of them have ever been part of a United Nations peacekeeping operation.

Commissioner Kere Noelie, maiden name Compaore, is in her forties and comes from Burkina Faso. She is married with three children and works at the Central Police Headquarters in Ouagadougou. She has been posted to the Personnel Section of MINUSTAH’s CivPol division.

² Statement of Mr. Jean-Marie Guéhenno, UN Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations; Open Meeting of the Security Council on Women, Peace and Security, Wednesday, 29 October 2003.



Kere Noelle

Gendarme Fabiola Molina-Lopez comes from France. She is also in her forties and has two children. She is part of the Research Brigade where she works as a criminal identification technician specialized in investigating criminal behavior. In MINUSTAH, she works in CivPol’s Special Programmes Cell and focuses on combating violence against women and the protection of children.



Fabiola Molina-Lopez

Gendarme Christine Briand, from Quebec, Canada, is 31 years old and is still single. Currently based in British Columbia, she is an investigator, detective and carries out patrols and stakeouts. Within MINUSTAH, she manages CivPol’s relations with the media.



Christine Briand

Finally, Commissioner Maimounatou Abdoulaye, 55 years-old, is from Cameroun. Married with four children, she works at the General Delegation of her country’s National Security Service (Sureté Nationale). In MINUSTAH she is about to be deployed to the town of Hinche, in Haiti’s central province, where she will be providing administrative support to CivPol.



Maimounatou Abdoulaye

What motivated them to join the police/gendarmerie?

Maimounatou Abdoulaye was the first woman of her region of origin to join the police force in her country in 1973,

taking full advantage of a new opportunity that was first given to women in 1970. She insists that her husband supported her when she announced that she wanted to take the entrance exam for the police force. She points out that “to this very day, he has supported me throughout my career which spans nearly thirty years. He even encouraged me to take the test to be selected for this mission”

Fabiola Martina-Lopez remembers her father’s influence, his strength, his character and his authority. She decided to join the gendarmerie in 1990 in order to, as she puts it, “fill a post and prove that women can work as well as men, without necessarily wanting to compete with them.” She explains that in France, women have been able to join the gendarmerie since 1983. An annual recruitment drive has given more and more women the opportunity to join the profession.

Kere Noelie echoes Fabiola’s words, explaining that she wanted to break a cultural taboo in her country by joining a profession traditionally reserved for men. Supported by a father who was himself a gendarme, she passed the entrance exam in 1977, only one year after the first graduating ever to include women was admitted to the force.

As for Christine Briand, she says she was attracted by the prospect of having an active and intellectually stimulating job. She passed a training course in which men and women had to face the same physical and psychological tests. Women have been accepted in the Royal Canadian Gendarmerie since 1974. Today, they are in positions of authority

at the very highest levels within the institution.

What difficulties have they encountered along their path?

Maimounatou Abdoulaye explains that her parents never knew what she did for a living. She was forced to hide the truth from them because if her Father had known that she had joined the police force, he would have forbidden her to continue, obliging her to resign out of respect for his authority. She remembers how she was criticized for wearing a uniform. The skirt was considered too short for a Muslim, whose body should always be covered.³ She admits that “reconciling her role as a wife and mother with that of a police officer was no mean feat. It was not an easy road, but you had to impose yourself and make men accept you and respect you.”

Fabiola acknowledges that women police officers are often given little margin for error and must prove themselves in order to avoid being marginalized. Women who are allowed to enter a profession that has always been considered the exclusive preserve of men must prove that they are just as good in order to be respected. She points out, however, that “the complementarity is very enriching and contributes to getting the job done.”

Kere Noelie explains that, for a long time, it was difficult for women in Burkina Faso who chose policing as their profession to be accepted by a society that felt a woman’s place was in

³Although Cameroon is a secular state, it has a significantly large Muslim community

the home. She points out that recognition from her spouse was extremely important. She cites the case of one of her colleagues whose husband never accepted her decision to join the police force as an example. The woman would come to work in plain clothes and then change into her uniform. In the evening, before going home, she was forced to change out of her uniform and back into her “women’s” clothes.

Although the constraints Christine faced were minimal, she recognizes that the greatest obstacle was the lack of understanding within her immediate circle, which did not consider policing to be a suitable profession for women.



Interview with the Senior Gender Advisor/MINUSTAH

How do they explain the absence of women in the CivPol division of UN peacekeeping operations?

Christine Briand points out that the selection process for MINUSTAH included a strenuous physical test and was only open to officers who had a minimum of eight years’ experience. However, most of the women with that kind of experience are already married. She emphasizes how difficult it is for a

woman to leave her family and children behind. Although she did not have to go through this herself, she can attest to the dilemma faced by certain female colleagues who would have liked to join a peacekeeping mission but decided to not go through with it for family reasons.

Married women and female heads of household feel guiltier than men do about going abroad for six months and leaving their children with their spouse or a member of the family. Of course men who leave their families behind are not criticized by society since they are not “naturally” or traditionally expected to remain in the home the way women are.

Society continues to thrust the burden of guilt upon women who are, above all, judged on the basis of their ability to be good mothers or wives. Women who leave on mission are seen as “abandoning” their children and their home. One need only remember the deployment of American female soldiers during the first Gulf War in 1991 and the public debate this sparked. The media showed crying mothers at the airport kissing their son or daughter for the last time before heading off to complete their mission. Such scenes provoked negative comments about the women who had decided to place their duty as soldiers before their duty as mothers. Ten years later, women have entered the United States army on a massive scale and, after being on the ground during the war in Iraq in 2003, no longer attract as much tension as they used to.

Fabiola acknowledges that it was not easy for her to leave her husband and her two children for the first time. Nevertheless, she took the decision

jointly with her husband, who is himself a police officer. She points out that certain members of her professional circle asked themselves why she had suddenly requested to be deployed overseas. Few women volunteer to go on peacekeeping missions because they do not want to leave their families.

For their part, Maimounatou Abdoulaye and Kere Noelie underline the fact that women have to pass the same test as men in order to be selected for a mission. However, they have noticed that the rate of failure is higher among women and explain this in terms of lack of preparation due to time constraints (multiples household chores). Women have a double schedule which does not allow them to dedicate as much time to their studies as they would like. Moreover, in Burkina Faso, only officers with the rank of commissioner are eligible for selection, regardless of whether they are men or women. There are few high-ranking women.

What do women bring to CivPol in UN peacekeeping operations?

All four women agree that their presence allows certain issues to be addressed from a different perspective, particularly issues related to gender-based violence in the host country. The case of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a clear example of how the presence of women in uniform can open the door to finding solutions to certain specific problems that exist in a particular country. In the DRC in fact, women have been the victims of sexual violence perpetrated by soldiers belonging to different armed groups. In this context,

it is difficult for women to talk about their experiences to men in uniform even if the uniform carries the United Nations logo. As one Congolese women puts it, “In my culture, it is not common to talk about sex with men, let alone strange men. [...] Many of the women who were raped like I was can identify their attackers, but find it difficult to report them to the police. [...] If only we had female police in MONUC¹ to whom we can report these horrible things that happened to us.”²

Moreover, the presence of women in CivPol can alter the male dynamic of the group. As Maimounatou Abdoulaye puts it, “The presence of women is a catalyst for male colleagues. They often say that if a woman succeeds they must do better, which leads to improved performance. The presence of women in many ways renders the police officer more human and less brutal enabling her to obtain more information from her interaction with other women and traumatized children.”

The presence of women in the civilian police creates space for alternative models and provides additional inspiration to women in order for them to feel less marginalized in their existential choices and, above all, continue to fight for their moral and economic independence. As Kere Noelie points out, “Whether it’s in the context of civilian police or the socio-economic sphere of every day life, women have skills, experiences and

¹ The United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC)

² The Independent Experts’ Assessment, Women War Peace, by Elizabeth Rehn & Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Progress of the World’s Women 2002, Volume 1, UNIFEM, page 70

ideas that they can bring, share and promote. There can be no durable peace without the total mobilization and full participation of women.”

What can be done to favor the participation of women?

The four CivPol officers recommend different solutions, based on their own life experiences. These can be summarized as follows:

To the Member States of the United Nations:

- a) Train more women within the ranks of the police and the gendarmerie in order for them to gain the qualifications required to take advantage of new opportunities; in many countries, peacekeeping operations are open to senior officers or individuals with extensive experience. It is often difficult to find women with the necessary qualifications, either because they have recently joined the police force or have never had a chance to acquire them.
- b) Rearrange working hours so that women can follow the same training courses as men without being penalized. Women with household responsibilities clearly have less time to study.
- c) Sensitize young girls on the need to continue their studies in order to be more independent; give them the self-confidence to conquer male bastions in professions such as policing; the State must take responsibility for

encouraging and promoting the rights of girls and women within society while breaking the stereotypes that tie women to the household and prevent them from operating outside the confines of the private sphere;

- d) Demystify the woman’s role as wife and mother within the family; tell the story of women who have joined peacekeeping missions and have managed to bear the burden of guilt after leaving their children behind.

To the United Nations:

- e) Encourage women to apply for positions within missions by giving them the opportunity to return home to their families more often; in the same vein, it may be possible to provide children and husbands with a plane ticket so that they can join their wife in the mission area for a visit or, if this is impossible for security reasons, in a third country.

There is a danger that unless measures specifically designed to encourage women to go on mission are introduced, little will change. The Civilian Police Division of the United Nations’ Department of Peacekeeping Operations has urged police contributing countries to ensure that women constitute at least 10% of their contingents. This worthy initiative, which is little more than recommendation, is non-binding since member-states still maintain complete control over who they can propose for peacekeeping

operations. There is therefore a need for innovative solutions so that a critical mass of women can swell the ranks of CivPol in peacekeeping operations around the world and make a difference.

Nadine Puechguirbal
Senior Gender Advisor

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Post-script: At the time of writing, six new women have just joined MINUSTAH's CivPol Division: a woman from Bosnia-Herzegovina, two Canadians and three Chileans. It goes without saying that we will closely follow their steps within the mission.

