



WOMEN AND ARMED CONFLICT

Liberia: Female Peacekeepers Smash Stereotypes

By Bonnie Allan



U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton greets a U.N. peacekeeper in Monrovia. Clinton has strongly supported Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in promoting democracy and development. In 2010 USAID invested more than \$11 million in programs for women's empowerment. © AP Images

Since its groundbreaking deployment in 2007, India has sent four all-female police units to Liberia, each serving a one-year rotation. Their success in the post-war country has inspired other nations to defy tradition and deploy more female troops in U.N. peacekeeping roles.

Five days after an elaborate marriage ceremony in southern India, 28-year old Rewti Arjunan traded her red silk sari for a blue camouflage police uniform and flew to the West African country of Liberia.

The young bride is serving in one of the world's few all-female police units deployed to a United Nations peacekeeping mission.

"In India, we are quite traditional with these things. My husband, he was against it," admits

Arjunan, who had never before traveled outside India. The trained police officer gave her future husband an ultimatum.

"I told him, 'If you permit me to go on this mission, I will marry you.'"

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Now, Arjunan's life is anything but traditional. She is helping to change the face of international policing in a post-conflict country.

Since its groundbreaking deployment in 2007, India has sent four Female Formed Police Units (FFPU) to Liberia, each serving a one-year rotation. More than one hundred female police officers trained in crowd control and conflict resolution make up the FFPU at any one time. They are supported by about two dozen men who serve as drivers, cooks and logistical coordinators.

The FFPU is primed for rapid response to any violence that might erupt in this country of 3.8 million, which still lacks a strong army or armed police force.

Two bloody civil wars, between 1989-1996, and again from 1999-2006, killed about 250,000 Liberians, displaced hundreds of thousands more, traumatized women with rampant sexual violence, destroyed infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals and roads, and corrupted the justice system.

Eight years after the war ended, almost 9,500 U.N. peacekeepers help maintain the fragile peace.

"The greatest deed is to protect humanity. I got this chance, and I thought, I want to live this," says Arjunan.

The Female Formed Police Unit is a symbol of progress for U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which stipulates that peacekeeping missions support women's participation in post-conflict peace building.

The United Nation's ultimate goal is gender parity in the civilian, military and police sectors, but, globally, women make up just 8.2 percent of roughly 13,000 U.N. police and only two percent of military police.

India has scored high marks for pioneering an all-female police unit, serving alongside other female officers from Nigeria and elsewhere, in a country that boasts Africa's first female head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

By day, the Indian police officers stand in the hot sun guarding the president's office, and, by night, they patrol crime-ridden areas of the capital, Monrovia.

As the rain trickles down on the dark streets of Monrovia's Congo Town, Arjunan sits in the back seat of a U.N. police vehicle with her hair tucked inside a blue beret and a pistol strapped to her waist. Beside her, 25-year-old Pratiksha Parab holds an AK-47 rifle and peers out the window.

Their job is to protect Liberia National Police (LNP) officers, who are not armed, as they patrol to deter armed robberies and rape.

"Most of the violent crimes are at night, and the criminals use weapons," says LNP Commander Gus Hallie. "So, with our FFPU counterparts on our side, with arms, we feel we can battle with criminals."

As they patrol, the U.N. Police observer and LNP officer joke that "Indian women are tough."

Arjunan smiles, pleased, but she explains why she is a good peacekeeper.

"Women are not aggressive. We come in a polite way. This presence can maintain the peace. We are loving by nature."

There are many stereotypes attached to female peacekeepers: more nurturing, more communicative, less intimidating.

The label that makes the Contingent Commander Usher Kiran cringe, though, is "soft."

"I don't think there is a difference between female and male," says Kiran, a 22-year police veteran, as she sits under a poster of Mahatma Gandhi.

"If you are putting on the same uniform, you are doing the same duty, you are having the same authority as the males."

"Where we found a difference [between male and female peacekeepers] is in their perceptions of their role," explains the U.N.'s Gender Advisor in Liberia, Carole Doucet. "The women see themselves as more broadly involved in the community."

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A member of the United Nations first all-female peacekeeping force stands guard with fellow officers after arriving at the Monrovia, Liberia, airport. © AFP/Getty

Doucet says the U.N.'s female police, known as "blue helmettes," have inspired Liberian women to join the national police force.

In 2007, only six percent of Liberia's police were women. Today, it has risen to 15 percent with roughly 600 female officers.

The Indian women also sponsor an orphanage, teach self-defense and computer classes to local women, and — despite limited English — reach out to survivors of sexual abuse.

"I can be scared to talk to a man," whispers a 16-year old rape victim, who cannot be identified, at a safe home for girls in Monrovia. "A woman is better. She is like an auntie or mother."

India's all-female unit has inspired Bangladesh and Nigeria to create their own, while countries such as Rwanda and Ghana also are ramping up their female troop contributions to U.N. missions.

Back at the Indian headquarters in Monrovia, Arjunan talks to her new husband over the Internet,

using a webcam, for at least an hour every day.

Although she's a little homesick, Arjunan says she is proud to follow in the footsteps of other courageous women in India's history.

"Many freedom fighters were ladies...Fighting for justice. Fighting for good things."

Bonnie Allen is a freelance journalist working in Liberia, West Africa. She worked as a journalist in Canada for more than a decade, and holds a Masters' Degree in International Human Rights Law from the University of Oxford.