

27 May 2021

Shirin Abufannouneh, UN Volunteer Judicial Affairs Officer,
MINUSMA

UN Volunteer Shirin Aboufanouneh,
Judicial Affairs Officer with MINUSMA,
during a field mission in the region of
Bandiagara, Mali
© UNV, 2021

From the State of Palestine to Mali – the tale of a woman peacekeeper

What motivated a 34-year-old Palestinian woman to join a peacekeeping mission and settle in Mopti, a region of Mali prone to regular attacks from jihadists? When asked, Shirin Abufannouneh answered that this was the field experience she was looking for. Shirin serves as a UN Volunteer Judicial Affairs Officer with the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Reading her story below, one feels that she was predestined to be a UN Volunteer.

I didn't know much about Mali. But after eight years spent between legal research and advocacy in different countries, I needed to be more in the field, closer to people, to understand how to implement the law.

My journey as a UN Volunteer did not start well. First, I missed my interview with the UNV programme three times because emails kept going to my spam. Once I did the interview and was selected, I had a rough journey to

get to Mali. I lost my passport during the transit from Tunisia. I was deported to Jordan for two weeks until I got a passport to travel to Mali. I had all the signs telling me not to go to Mali, but I was still hopeful.

Even after arriving in Bamako, three weeks after I was initially due to be there, my duty station was supposed to be Gao. The mission offered that I could stay in Bamako, but I preferred to be placed in the field where I could be in direct contact with the population. I wanted to experience what it means to be in the field in a peacekeeping mission context.

When I first arrived in Mopti, I lived in a container-type of accommodation with two neighbours from both sides. After two months at the MINUSMA Super Camp of Mopti, I was moved to a single-module container that ensured me more privacy. Throughout the three years at my accommodation, I have grown my own garden where I plant trees and flowers. I also have created a gathering space to have people over including my fellow UN Volunteers.

“ I love my job because I do different things: coordinating field missions, tailoring projects based on our partners’ needs, capacity building training to reinforce the judicial system, and facilitating access to justice for victims and witnesses of all sort of offenses. No day is like the day before. There is no routine in a peacekeeping mission. That is what keeps me motivated.

I work a lot with judicial authorities, including judges, lawyers and prosecutors. Sometimes, I also collaborate with civil society organizations that work on gender-based violence cases. My mission entails reinforcing the capacities of local partners on issues related to access to justice, gender-based violence and complementarity between traditional and formal justice. I am involved in projects that aim to reconcile and bring justice to disputed communities.

In the Justice and Reconciliation Pilot Project, I contributed to reconciliation sessions between four villages in Koro Cercle, Bandiagara Region. Their

dispute erupted in 2018, which led to the burning down of one of the villages, the displacement of its people and violence between the population. Within this project, we managed to create reconciliation committees and facilitate reconciliation sessions. This allowed the villagers to address their grievances, and to find ways to move forward. Eventually, after two years of implementing this project, the displaced people returned to their village, reconstructing and cultivating their lands.

“ The population went through something hard and sad. Judicial authorities couldn't do their work because of the vicious circle of violence and the lack of financial and human resources. Moreover, they live in remote areas, surrounded sometimes by armed groups. Coordinating this kind of mission, listening to our partners, to the population, understanding their needs and trying to translate them into action, is very important to me. It makes me feel I am serving the law for real, away from the theory.

In a peacekeeping mission, the mandate is very specific and does not include humanitarian aid, strictly speaking. However, as a UN Volunteer, I still get a margin to do some volunteering and humanitarian work for the population. One of my proudest examples was in 2019, during International Volunteer Day (IVD), when we organized a fun day for 40 children at Somine Dolo Hospital/Pediatric section in Mopti. Together with other UN Volunteers there, we collected funds to buy gifts for the children and paint to decorate the Pediatric section with them.

Serving as a UN Volunteer has humbled me. My experience in MINUSMA has made me more aware of my blessings and the important work that I could do to alleviate people's suffering.

“

“ Having experienced occupation, oppression and violence myself made me more sensitive towards people suffering. But it did not drive me away from my country. On the contrary, I am proud to be the only Palestinian UN Volunteer representing my country in this challenging context. I understand the pain and what war can do to people’s livelihoods. I think that is what makes my experience unique to me, because I can relate and serve better.

 During International Volunteer Day celebrations in 2019, Shirin packs gifts for children at Somine Dolo Hospital/Pediatric section in Mopti, as part of a volunteer extra-curricular activity. ©UNV, 2019



• International Day of UN Peacekeepers • State of Palestine

Sustainable Development Goal: [SDG 5: Gender equality](#) [SDG 10: Reduced inequalities](#) [SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions](#) [SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals](#)