

Blogs

Story

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On a peacekeeping mission, you become part of history

My decision to enroll in the UN Volunteer roster was emboldened after seeing two female medical doctors reject their assignment offers in Liberia due to social pressures from their families—an unfortunate but common occurrence in Pakistan. I admit, the situation in Liberia at that moment was not very encouraging, but I felt bad seeing two qualified women from my country not able to follow their aspirations. That was the moment when I decided that I was going to enroll, and become a UN Volunteer.



Iram Batool at the UN logistics base in Port-au-Prince, Haiti (United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti) during a Fire-prevention and safety training conducted for the Haitian volunteers working with local NGOs and CSOs. (UNV, 2011)

I first became a UN Volunteer in 2004 when I accepted an assignment with the [United Nations Operation in Burundi](#) (ONUB) as a Support Officer. I was excited about the opportunity. I still remember practically jumping from joy in my office when I received the offer. My enthusiasm was quickly dampened by the words of caution from colleagues and friends—some of them calling me crazy for being happy to land a role in a warzone. Shortly thereafter, my recruitment focal point at UNV called to brief me on the “complicated” security situation and mentioned that I was replacing a Support Officer who had lost his life in Burundi only one month before. To be honest, I was silent for few minutes. I did not know what to say.

Before becoming a UN Volunteer, I worked as an HR Assistant for UNDP in Pakistan, assisting in the recruitment of Pakistani nationals to serve as international UN Volunteers in peacekeeping operations and UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes. These UN Volunteers used to visit our office and share inspiring stories of their experiences in the field. I was always fascinated to hear what they were doing. At that time, we did not have many Pakistani women willing to volunteer abroad due to social and family pressures revolving around the concept of a “female working alone abroad.”

I really appreciated the honesty and concern of my recruitment focal point. She wanted to make sure that I made a well-informed decision before accepting this assignment. I asked her to give me some time to discuss the offer with my family.

Internally, I was shaking and thinking that my mother would never let me go. I was very surprised when she said, “if this is what you want to do and you are comfortable with it, then you have my full support.” The decision had been made. Next thing I remember, I was packing my bags for my first UN Volunteer assignment in Burundi.

The UNV Programme Manager became my mentor and coach even before I arrived at the duty station. She made

sure that I did not become overly stressed due to “fears of the unknown” ensuring that I was fully aware of what was expected from me with respect to my assignment and what I should expect in terms of support mechanisms available to me in Bujumbura, Burundi. It is important to understand that UNV has pre-departure briefing kits for every country that contain all the information needed to embark on an assignment.

Despite the security risks, I volunteered for almost four years in Burundi before moving on to a staff position because I simply loved what I was doing. In addition to my professional assignment, I enjoyed meeting different people, learning from their experiences, and the opportunities that presented themselves to volunteer in local communities beyond our immediate duties. Above all, it was the sense of becoming a part of the history of Burundi and leaving a positive legacy behind that kept me in the assignment. I felt that my service was a direct contribution to peace in this country.

There are souvenirs which I hold from Burundi that continue to motivate me to make a difference in the world. This is perhaps the most valuable feeling of self-satisfaction anyone can ever hope for. Taking that first step, and then becoming a UN Volunteer, changed the course of my life.

Ms. Iram Batool (Pakistan) completed a Master’s degree in Business Administration before starting to work for UNDP Pakistan in 2001. She accepted a UN Volunteer assignment in Burundi (2004-2008) and then worked as the UNV Program Manager in the United Nations Mission in Central African Republic and Chad (MINURCAT) and in the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH). She was Portfolio Manager for the UNV Peace Programming Section in Bonn, where she managed the UNV programme in the Missions of Mali, Liberia, Cote d’Ivoire, Haiti and Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT).

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