

Portrait of Warrant officer Colette Legba, BENBATT Garage Chief



“Attaining gender equality” is quite possible should women’s promotion be everyone’s business. Recruitment of female staff in peacekeeping operations is a reality. Conscious of their contribution to peace and security, the UN urges member countries to enhance their participation in the various stages of the peace process. Likewise, troop-contributing countries should include more and more women into the military contingents assigned to peace keeping operations.

The Beninese contingent of peacekeepers (BENBATT-9) deployed in Tanganyika province

does comply with that principle. The management and maintenance of the Contingent’s rolling stock, commonly referred to as « Combat Train N° 2 », has been entrusted to one of the 12 women out of the 450 peace-keepers comprising the battalion. The senior non-commissioned warrant officer Colette Legba, is the garage chief for the BENBATT, a position usually held by men. So, in a nutshell, here is one staff member who puts the rest of us to shame all of us who *“dressed up smartly”* work in air-conditioned offices.

Incorporated into Benin Armed Forces in 1985, Colette received training in mechanical engineering in 1996. After going through several internships, she earned certificates qualifying her for mechanical engineering work. Several years later, she received refresher courses in Belgium on M113 and PANDUR armored vehicles which she can handle perfectly. These training courses provided her with the ability not only to drive these vehicles but, more important, to above all, to ensure their day to day maintenance. She is using her twenty-five years mechanical and electrical experience serving the Benin Army.

What does her job within the Contingent consist of? Here is what her supervisor told our colleague Marcelline Comlan of Public Information/Kalemie about it: *“Her presence within the Battalion is of great importance. She is in charge of keeping the vehicles used for military operations in good running conditions. One day, a MAN truck belonging to the Moba detachment broke down at a time when technical inspection was in the offing. All efforts to repair it were in vain. Without hesitating, Warrant Officer Legba travelled to Moba. She spent a whole week there to make the vehicle operational, and a few weeks later the vehicle successfully passed the inspection.”* Regularly, the

PROTEGER

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battalion carries out routine military training drills. As a preparation for these mechanized patrols, the garage chief is responsible for performing the necessary checks on the operational condition of the vehicles. To insure the smooth conduct of the protection missions.

Besides maintenance, the garage chief is responsible for fixing technical breakdowns and repairing the damage to the battalion's rolling stock which occurs frequently as a result of poor rural road condition. Conscious of her important role, she spares no effort to make sure this critical equipment is available to the Contingent. The "UNIMOG" vehicle, which she maintains on a regular basis, is generally used for multiple purposes such as transport of troops or equipment.

Warrant Officer Colette Legba also dedicates her time to other minor mechanical and electrical tasks. She repairs equipment such as power generators and tests small electrical equipment for defects and repairs or replaces defective parts. She also refurbishes small tools. Given her technical know-how in welding, cracked exhaust pipes are readjusted and reduced to silence. She supervises 32 male military staff members. With such role models, female peacekeepers provide proof that they can play the same roles, meet the same standards and work in the same difficult conditions as their male colleagues do.

Collette Legba received her elementary schooling in Parakou, a city in Northern Benin. After obtaining her elementary school Certificate in 1980, she pursued her secondary education in several towns in Benin: Bohicon, and Bembereke. After the third grade, she opted for technical studies. When Colette started working as a mechanic, she was surprised to see people stop and watch her as she worked, wondering among themselves if she could really repair a vehicle or a machine, and these were "**mostly women**", she said. She realized that few women would accept to work in arduous and unhygienic that require dealing with men.

Unlike them, she never spent a second asking herself such questions. Her job is her passion. Furthermore, she thinks that today women can work anywhere "**even on the Moon**" she said, breaking into a big laugh. Warrant Officer, I'm sorry but I like to have both feet on the ground, you never know. This Just to tell you that it's frightening to fly on a plane let alone on a rocket ship. The Moon! Do you mean it or are you kidding? What am I going to do there? I have neither family nor friend there.

As for the status of women, it remains critical, Colette said, despite the progress in their advancement. **"Women are generally portrayed as weak human beings and as inferior to men. This stereotype is unfortunately still deeply ingrained in the mindset of both men and women alike. This should not be the case. In fact, women need to muster up the courage to overcome these weaknesses,"** she argued. As for Congolese women, **"their situation is very delicate. Given the situation the country has witnessed, and considering the vulnerable conditions in post-conflict areas, I find that the fate of many women still depends heavily on men."**



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After work, Warrant Officer Colette Legba says she gladly takes off her blue work clothes to maintain her feminine side. ***"This is important she says, because I am a woman above all."*** She likes to wear colored boubous as well as pagnes. As a wife and mother, she says she makes no distinction in the education of boys and girls. Sporty, she specially enjoys walking. She walks about twenty kilometers once a week, between the contingent's base and MONUSCO headquarters.

Colette loves cooking. She is the one who goes to the market and cooks Beninese meals which she shares with the contingent's members. Eating well is sacred. I am telling you! Madam Warrant Officer is very serious...she loves music and a good ambiance because she has a cheerful nature; but can be strict when necessary. Her military status quickly prevails, as one of her colleagues pointed out: ***"her dear principle, people should take their jobs seriously"***.

Well, why are you sitting idle? Forward, march, one two, one two....!!!



By Marcelline Comlan and Aïssatou laba Touré