Dozens of children were left behind by UN personnel in Haiti. Their mothers want justice

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<https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/15/americas/haiti-un-peacekeepers-trust-fund-sexual-abuse-as-equals-intl-cmd/index.html>

When Pauline Philippe found out she was pregnant with twins, she felt a flash of happiness. Then she burst into tears in front of the ultrasound technician.

‘Why are you crying?’ she remembers him asking. Trying to cheer her up, he added: ‘You're having twins, Preval and Aristide!’ -- referring to two former Haitian presidents.

Haiti at the time was still badly shaken by a deadly earthquake that struck the capital Port-au-Prince two years prior in 2010, killing [hundreds of thousands of people](https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/12/world/haiti-earthquake-ten-years-anniversary-intl/index.html). The disaster spurred a massive influx of relief workers and aid groups, including a contingent of United Nations peacekeepers who brought a deadly cholera epidemic with them to the small Caribbean nation, resulting in another nearly 10,000 deaths.

The man who fathered Philippe's twins was part of the international assistance effort, a UN policeman on temporary assignment in Port-au-Prince. Married with a family back home in Niger, she says, he did not stick around.

‘I thought about everything that could happen,’ Phillippe told CNN. ‘I called the father and told him I was pregnant with twins. He said, 'How can that be? From me? I'm going to leave the country, you'll have bastards. You can't raise kids without a father.’

But in November 2012, the then-26-year-old gave birth to a girl and boy. Their father left the country two months later.

**'Inherently unequal power dynamics'**

Philippe is one of untold numbers of women and girls around the world raising children fathered by UN peacekeepers and staffers. From 2010 to February of this year, the UN has recorded [463 paternity claims](https://conduct.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/report_of_the_secretary-general_on_special_measures_for_protection_from_sexual_exploitation_and_abuse_a77748.pdf) against its personnel, of which 55 have been verified. In 298 cases, action remains ‘pending.’ Those are only the people who have come forward.

Largely abandoned by the fathers, these mothers are trying to raise children in some of the most difficult conditions in the world -- in the wake of natural disasters, violent and ethnic conflict, or in refugee camps -- and often face harsh social stigma.

But while the societies in which the women live may judge them, the UN itself is clear about who's at fault for what it calls ‘sexual exploitation and abuse.’

In 2003, then-UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan issued [a bulletin](https://www.unhcr.org/media/secretary-generals-bulletin-special-measures-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-sexual-abuse) discouraging sex between UN workers and the people they are sent to help, with the bulletin explaining that such relations ‘are based on inherently unequal power dynamics,’ and ‘undermine the credibility and integrity of the work of the United Nations.’ Peacekeepers and military police -- like the father of Philippe's children -- are banned from any ‘fraternization’ with the civilian population.

Current Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has vowed to get the UN's ‘own house in order.’ In 2017, he unveiled a four-pronged strategy focused not only on ending impunity, but also on prioritizing victims' rights and dignity. He appointed the UN's first [Victims' Rights Advocate](https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/profiles/jane-connors#:~:text=United%20Nations%20Secretary%2DGeneral%20Ant%C3%B3nio,Advocate%20for%20the%20United%20Nations.) and created a ‘trust fund’ to support victims.

But Philippe and six other Haitian mothers interviewed by CNN say support has been meager and conditional. And their demands for justice -- child support from the fathers, to which they might be entitled by Haitian law, and even compensation as victims -- have come to almost nothing.

‘They treat us as less than human,’ one woman said, describing their interactions with the UN.

In Haiti, where warring gangs have [driven thousands from their homes](https://edition.cnn.com/2023/08/01/americas/haiti-violence-explained-intl/index.html) in Port-au-Prince, causing food and energy prices to skyrocket across the country, the women described a desperate struggle to survive and care for their children. Some have been forced to flee the country.

Meanwhile, sex scandals involving UN personnel have continued. In June this year, [60 Tanzanian peacekeepers](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/09/world/united-nations-tanzania-sex-crimes-intl/index.html) were sent home from the Central African Republic over allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse involving four victims, two of them children.

CNN spoke to Philippe at her small apartment in Dajabón, a dusty trading town in the Dominican Republic, where she and her twins fled in 2021, attempting to leave behind the chaos of blocked roads and shuttered schools in Haiti. In the single room the family shares, the kids sleep on a small bed, and Philippe sleeps on the tiled floor. Her son experiences severe pain from a condition Philippe says would be remedied with a simple surgery, but she can't afford it.

She says she met her children's father while she was working as a cleaner at the UN headquarters in Port-au-Prince in 2009. First, he asked her to run errands for him: buying plantains and groceries at the local market. Eventually, she says, he asked her to come to his house.

Today, Philippe struggles to define their relationship, which continued for several more years. ‘I couldn't say we loved each other,’ she said. But a year after he left, Philippe decided that the UN should know what had happened.

From her hometown of Cap-Haitien, a port city on Haiti's north coast, in 2014 she boarded a moto-taxi with her twin infants -- one in each arm -- and began the hours-long journey back south. They stopped only once en route: at the country's main airport, where, with no money to buy the babies milk or diapers, she says she knocked on car windows asking strangers for help. ‘It's shameful for me to admit,’ Philippe recalls, ‘but I did what I had to do.’

The next morning, Philippe presented her kids at the UN mission headquarters. She says officials took photographs and questioned her and later asked her to submit the children to a DNA test. In 2015, she says she received a call from a UN representative who told her the test results were positive. In 2018, small amounts of money for her children began to arrive from a parade of organizations. Documents accompanying the funds, seen by CNN, described her as a ‘victim of sexual exploitation and abuse’ or said she had been referred to them by UN's Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate.

Over the past six years, Philippe has received small payments authorized by the UN, each one coming, she says, at unpredictable times, but the sums have been enough to cover school fees for the year, which are about $500 per child. She and others say they have received nothing for this school year, which has already started.

As a condition of receiving the money, Philippe and several other women told CNN they were asked to provide receipts from the schools, and in some cases to sign a document promising to use any remaining funds for the children's health, food and shelter needs, as well as attend unspecified NGO-run events in the area. Some told CNN that these conditions are demeaning.

Jokencie Jean Baptiste, a mother from the southern Haitian town of Les Cayes, began crying as she described struggling to feed her son, whom she says was fathered by a Senegalese peacekeeper. ‘Imagine taking the money to pay for school, then coming back to the house, you see your kid so hungry. What are you supposed to do?’ she asked, before adding: ‘They treat us like prostitutes. Like we're supposed to be poor.’

Nearby, in the seaside town of Port Salut, home to a now-shuttered UN base, Rosemina Joseph -- who says she became pregnant with a Uruguayan peacekeeper's child when she was a teenager -- told CNN she asked the UN for help rebuilding her house after it was destroyed in a 2021 earthquake.

But she received only enough money to construct a foundation, she said. She and her son live in a lean-to made of sticks at the construction site.

The UN's Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse holds over $4.8 million dollars, according to its [2022 annual report](https://www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/sites/www.un.org.preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/files/230719-untf_annualreport_2022_final.pdf), and is supposed to fill ‘gaps’ in assistance to victims globally.

But since its creation seven years ago, the fund has only reported spending a total of $249,738 in Haiti, for a two-year program that began in 2021.

If that money had been divided equally between the 30 families the trust fund says it benefited, each person would have received over $8,000. But multiple women showed CNN receipts suggesting that they received less than a quarter of that sum. The rest was spent on ad hoc expenses and activities organized by on-the-ground aid group AVSI, according to the organization.

Development experts consider direct cash transfers the most effective form of help, and the UN gives cash transfers to other kinds of aid recipients in its programs. But not to victims.

‘According to the UN policy, there is no direct payment to the victims,’ the fund's program officer Yasna Uberoi told CNN. ‘And the Trust Fund project is the same. It's support in terms of training and providing opportunities for livelihoods, so that they can rebuild their lives and become independent.’

So beyond small exceptions for education and some immediate basic needs -- for which the UN requests receipts -- it's intermediary organizations that decide how to spend the fund's money to benefit victims.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Liberia, for example, the trust fund's annual report shows that local organizations have used this money to offer victims what it considers ‘income-generating’ training in sewing, pastry-making and mushroom farming. Not all beneficiaries of such programs are victims, a spokesperson confirmed to CNN, who later clarified that beneficiaries include about 60 percent of known victims, noting that identifying projects as only for known victims would risk stigmatization.

The way funds like these are managed undermines ‘basic human dignity,’ says Beatrice Lindstrom, a Harvard Law School lecturer and former legal director of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, who has worked on a variety of victims' claims.

‘When victims have no say in what happens to them, or in the kind of support they receive, it's really re-victimizing them by stripping them of the ability to have agency and to have their rights recognized,’ Lindstrom told CNN.

Trust funds created for other kinds of victims of alleged wrongdoing by the UN or its staff have similar restrictions. In 2020, the UN's own human rights experts criticized a fund created to support victims of the cholera epidemic in Haiti, for failing to offer direct compensation.

‘Compensation is ordinarily a central component of the right to an effective remedy, and development projects are simply not a replacement for reparations,’ they wrote in a [press release](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/04/un-inaction-denies-justice-haiti-cholera-victims-say-un-experts).

The UN's victim's rights advocate

Ask any of the UN's multiple agencies operating in Haiti about their interactions with victims of sexual exploitation and abuse, and chances are they'll defer to Jane Connors, the Victims' Rights Advocate in New York City.

Philippe herself met Connors in 2018, but came away from the encounter feeling unsettled.

‘There was a total absence of representatives of the Haitian justice system, no Haitian journalists, no representatives of the rights of children... they hid us away in a hole, so to speak, so that the Secretary-General's envoy could hear our complaints and cry about what we undergo,’ Philippe noted at the time in writings shared with CNN.

Connors' office at the UN's New York City headquarters is far from the polished halls where high-level diplomats wander. Some of the furnishings on her floor date back to the 1960s, including ashtrays in toilet stalls, and the building has an asbestos problem, the remediation of which forced her staff to decamp temporarily.

Asked if she thought she was bringing enough publicity to the plight of victims around the world, Connors said, ‘I could have been a different kind of advocate, and write press releases and speak nicely, but I preferred to do something concrete,’ she said. In general, she does not allow media at meetings with victims, citing their own safety and privacy concerns, she also said.

In Haiti, that ‘something concrete’ was primarily to scrape together a small budget to subsidize educational costs for victims' children, she said, in a country where school fees are a barrier for many. Unknown to Philippe and the others, this was the original source of the money that began to trickle in 2018, Connors says, which over the years has passed through multiple aid organizations and UN agencies.

Connors admits that the flow of assistance to the Haitian mothers has been unpredictable , and said she can understand their frustrations. ‘I certainly can't organize my own money, but I don't want anyone to tell me how to do it,’ she said. ‘There hasn't been a seamless support structure, and that is very debilitating. If you don't have a predictable flow, you're going to feel very upset.’

Globally, her small office has taken some steps to create a UN support system for victims; Connors appointed four field officers in Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and South Sudan to serve as local advocates. She also works to personally facilitate paternity claims -- a process that could result in child support and even citizenship for the kids -- though Connors said she didn't think any child support orders had been enforced against former UN peacekeepers in the last year.

Hers is the ‘smallest, newest and poorest’ department in the UN, Connors told CNN. And though she represents victims of UN personnel, Connors said Secretary-General Antonio Guterres hasn't met with her in months. Several lower-level staff members at the UN's headquarters did not recognize her name.

Despite the challenges she faces within the behemoth that is the UN, several legal and human rights experts interviewed by CNN accuse Connors of pushing aid over justice.

‘Imagine you've been raped by someone and then a representative of that person's employer comes to talk to you, and says something like, 'Oh you know, the wheels of justice turn slowly, but would you like a sewing machine?'‘ said former UN staffer Paula Donovan, who now runs a watchdog group that campaigns for the UN to change how it handles sexual exploitation and abuse allegations.

Sienna Merope-Synge, a New York-based attorney who worked on several Haitian women's fruitless attempts to obtain child support from UN personnel, told CNN that assistance funneled to these women ‘shouldn't be seen as a substitute for legal rights.’

‘The reason the UN is unwilling to call something compensation, or to engage with it from a rights-based framework and what these women (are) actually due as a matter of law ... is because the UN doesn't want anything that looks or smells like it might be accountable legally,’ she told CNN.

According to the UN's own rules, only individual perpetrators are responsible for sexual exploitation and abuse -- not the UN. But UN rules also say peacekeepers are answerable only to the laws of their own countries in most cases, which means they cannot be investigated by local authorities and makes suing for child support an almost inconceivable transnational battle.

When CNN explained to Philippe that a 2007 UN resolution has already decided that only her children's father can be held responsible for her situation, she scoffed. ‘Then why did they open an office for victims? This is the UN's damage. The UN brought their father here. I didn't go to Africa to meet him.’

This is not the life Philippe dreamed of before having kids. Today she ekes out a living as a street vendor, selling ginger-scented donuts that she makes at home. But ends never meet. Some nights, Philippe goes hungry.

‘They say that mothers should be proud; but pride comes only if you have everything,’ she said. ‘I am not proud of being a mother, not when we live like this,’ she added, gesturing to her cramped room.

This year alone, Philippe said she's journeyed twice from Dajabón to the UN mission headquarters in Port-au-Prince, to stand before its door, in the hopes of prompting the machine to move more quickly.

‘Sometimes, I just have to confront the UN,’ Philippe said, moving her hands as if to shake someone by the shoulders. ‘For them to see that I can't take anymore, I am at capacity, I've had enough.’