

Leontien BECKER – WHO – JPO Midwifery & Sexual, Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health – Nepal / Philippines-Manila



What is your educational background and nationality, what made you apply to the JPO programme and what is your motivation to work with your UN agency?

I am a Dutch national, with a Bachelor of Science in Midwifery and a Master of Science in Health Sciences, specializing in International Public Health. Working as a midwife allowed me to support women and families in what some would describe as the most meaningful moments of their lives, but my impact was limited to the individual patient in front of me. I became increasingly motivated to contribute at a broader level, by strengthening health systems and improving outcomes for entire populations. Sexual and reproductive health is an interesting field from an international perspective. How women give birth, the kind of care they receive, the risks they encounter and the choices they are able to make depends on many factors, including national health systems, geographical context, available resources, cultural norms and social values. These differences have always fascinated me and motivated me to apply for the advertised JPO position at the World Health Organization (WHO). I cannot think of a better agency to start my international career in Sexual, Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health than with the United Nations' leading agency for health, WHO.

What are the main activities and tasks you are working on and what SDGs are you helping to implement?

My work with WHO focuses on Sexual, Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health (SRMNCAH) as well as Midwifery. The activities that I work on are directly linked to SDG 3: *Ensuring healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages*, of which some of the key targets are reducing maternal mortality and preventing all preventable deaths under 5 years of age.

During the first two years of my JPO assignment, I worked with the WHO Country Office in Nepal and for the third year I moved to WHO's Western Pacific Regional Office in Manila, The Philippines. A large part of my work consists of providing technical support to countries to help them work towards their SDG targets. In my current position, I work alongside colleagues in WHO Country Offices and with Ministries of Health with the development of policies and technical guidelines to improve quality of SRMNCAH services. For example, I supported Ministries of Health to develop national action plans to reduce maternal and neonatal mortality and contributed to regional and national guidelines on the management of the most common causes of maternal and neonatal deaths. In addition to technical support, I have also worked on the programmatic side of SRMNCAH, particularly during my years in the Nepal Country Office. The programmatic work included developing and facilitating trainings for midwives and other health providers to improve their clinical skills and I have supported emergency responses and rehabilitation of health services following natural disasters.

[What is the biggest motivator for you when it comes to your work and what is the most challenging project that you have worked on/are working on?](#)

During my JPO assignment, I worked across two disaster-prone regions (Western Pacific and South-East Asia), and I have supported emergency response programmes in different crisis settings. Evidence shows that women and girls are disproportionately affected by crises and observing it first-hand fuelled my passion and motivation for working on my field in humanitarian contexts. Working in hard-to-reach areas, low-resource and/or crises settings where the need is greatest is what motivates me the most. At the same time, emergency programmes are also some of the most challenging programmes to work on, as there are many factors that may complicate effective implementation, such as security issues, disrupted supplies of medicines and equipment, etc.



[What has been the most rewarding experience to date for you at your duty station? \(work and/or non-work related\)](#)

For me, the most rewarding experiences are the field missions. Seeing the impact of the work that we do at WHO and interacting with the communities in which we implement our programmes is both rewarding and inspiring. Each mission teaches me more about the contexts that we work in

and the necessity to contextualize and adapt interventions to that specific context. For example, I went on a field mission to a remote region in Nepal, where an earthquake disrupted most health services. Visiting health facilities and talking to health providers who continue delivering care despite power cuts and disrupted referral systems due to inaccessible roads gave me more insights than that any report could offer. Sometimes programmes sound great on paper, but do not have the expected impact when being implemented in the communities. I have returned from every field mission with renewed motivation and passion to work on the gaps and challenges that I was made aware of during my field missions.

[If the case, what is your experience with relocation to another duty station?](#)

Working at the country level provided me with a deep understanding of the national health system, strengthened my government and partner engagement skills and allowed me to support implementation of SRMNCAH programmes. For the third year, I transitioned to a regional position with the WHO Western Pacific Regional Office. Moving from a landlocked country to a WHO region with 38 countries and territories, including many island countries, brought a new perspective to my work. Working at the regional level taught me how to rapidly shift between countries with different health priorities, cultural contexts, health systems, and governance mechanisms. I am grateful for the opportunity to work at both levels and in two different geographical regions, as both duty stations helped me to develop a different set of skills.

[What set of skills have you developed most throughout your assignment?](#)

Beyond the technical and programmatic skills that I developed at the country and regional level, I learned how to work on and advocate for topics that can be perceived as culturally sensitive, including family planning, abortion care and teenage pregnancy. I learned how to promote and advance women's health while navigating different political, religious, cultural and social norms and sensitivities. Another set of skills that I was able to strengthen is my cross-cultural partnerships and diplomacy skills. Being based at the country level requires close collaboration with the national government, civil societies and both international and national development partners. This was a wonderful opportunity to build cross-cultural partnerships, which helped me a lot in carrying out my role at the regional office.

[How do you feel your JPO assignment will influence your career choices/opportunities within the UN?](#)

Working for three years with WHO, the lead organization for health standards-setting and policy leadership, strengthened my passion and commitment to dedicate my career to global public health and provided me with a solid foundation for an international career. Additionally, working with a UN organization exposed me to a great community of leading professional experts in my field, which has been both inspiring and motivating for me.

[What piece of advice would you give to those who are considering applying to the JPO Programme? What are your lessons learned?](#)

I highly recommend applying, even if your profile does not 100% match the position advertised. The JPO assignment gives you the opportunity to grow and develop yourself. The years I have spent abroad as part of the JPO assignment brought me more than I could have ever imagined

when I applied for the position. Being part of an international organization and working with brilliant experts from all around the world will enrich both your professional and personal life, without a doubt.