

Becoming "La Señorita de Inglés" in the U.S. Peace Corp: My Journey From Practitioner to Ph.D.

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The Peace Corps is a governmental organization, founded in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy, with the objective of connecting United States citizens to the global community through service, community engagement, intercultural exchange, and collaboration. Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) serve in communities around the globe, promoting improved health, education, agriculture, and commerce. PCVs are assisted by local counterparts who serve as technical experts within the host community. PCVs supplement local efforts, learning from their counterparts and seeking opportunities for mutual growth and authentic intercultural exchange. Ideally, the guidance PCVs receive allows them to adapt to new settings, take ownership of their experiences, and be empowered to give back to their host communities as much as they receive in terms of professional and personal growth. While my impact on my host community was subtle, being a PCV greatly impacted my worldview, driving me to advance my knowledge and make a positive impact on society. Upon my return from the Peace Corps, I applied to study for a Ph.D. in International Conflict Management (INCM) at Kennesaw State University (KSU). In this student perspective essay, I recount the ways Peace Corps service has impacted me and informed my research.

My Peace Corps Service

I (Bharwani) was drawn to Peace Corps service for the promise of personal growth and intercultural exchange. Before service, I completed my bachelor's degrees in Spanish and Sociology, and I was intrigued by the cultural diversity of Latin America. After my bachelor's, I worked as a teacher in Mexico, Chile, Dominican Republic, and India, through various short-term exchange programs. Then, I completed master's degrees in Spanish Literature and Applied Linguistics with a concentration in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. Upon graduation, I wanted to put my training and language skills to use; having spent so much time on short-term programs, I

was longing for a deeper connection and longer-term engagement abroad. The Peace Corps was attractive because it offered me an opportunity of 27 months of intercultural exchange within a host country.

I applied to serve as a secondary education English teacher trainer with the Peace Corps in Ecuador, a position that fit my background, and I was accepted in 2017. The Peace Corps assigned me to Santo Domingo, Ecuador's fourth most populous city. Santo Domingo is the national transportation hub, located three hours from Quito, the capital, which is nestled in the Andes mountains, and four hours from Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest coastal city. Santo Domingo is considered a balance between the coastal and mountain regions, with a low altitude, mild climate, and a mixture of foods and flavors from the *sierra* and the *costa*. I was also assigned to a service site, a grade school named *Unidad Educativa Jaime Roldós Aguilera* (UEJRA). Ecuador is extremely short-staffed in qualified English teachers, and the Ministry of Education mandates that all grade school students learn English. PCVs were also invited by the Ecuadorian government, in agreement with the local schools, to help elementary teachers, many of whom had no English language training and were struggling with the English curriculum. Therefore, teachers could receive the necessary in-classroom support from PCVs, like me.

My task during my first week at UEJRA was to observe classes and learn from the local instructors. I sat in the back of classrooms and shadowed about a half dozen English teachers at the high school level. I tried to pick up the local school customs, the bell schedule, and the classroom routines. My counterparts would walk with me around campus to ensure that I did not get lost. After a week of observations, the teachers asked me to help implement class activities such as English dialogues and interactive games. From then on, I started co-teaching classes with my local counterparts. I would lead some activities while they would monitor the classroom and vice versa.

Ecuadorian public schools like mine were assigned a maximum of one PCV per year, rationing a rare resource. Most of my counterparts were young females, not unlike me. Many of the teachers were still learning to assert authority in the 40-student classrooms, which was no small task. I noticed students in the back of the classroom were more prone to distraction, with the noise of the rain or a soccer game outside, adding to the difficulty of keeping the large class focused. Many of the teachers would just try to continue teaching while students talked among themselves or yelled out answers. Eventually, I started introducing certain disciplinary practices, such as providing participation points to students for raising their hands before answering. While these classroom management changes may seem minor, the teachers accepted my suggestions with gratitude and an open mind. In exchange, the elementary school teachers taught me classroom anchors, such as songs like, “*la lechuza, la lechuza, hace shhh, todos calladitos como la lechuza que hace shh*” (“the barn owl, the barn owl, makes a shh, everyone quiet like the barn owl that makes a shh”) sung to the tune of *Frère Jacques*. I did not always need to use ways of enforcing classroom discipline that I had learned in the U.S. Ecuadorian teachers helped me realize that something as soothing as a children’s song could captivate an entire class’s attention.

In December 2018, our elementary school English teacher from Ghana—an international teacher from another service program—had to return home, leaving their duties unfulfilled. Due to my teaching background, I was asked to develop an English pedagogical training for UEJRA’s 25 elementary and middle school teachers. I trained the teachers from March 2018 through February 2019, rotating through classes weekly. Even though it was challenging to remember the needs of the two dozen teachers and their students while leading two different English clubs, it became the highlight of my service. One day while walking past the school, I heard a child yell to his classmates, “*¡Es la señorita de inglés!*” That’s when I knew I left my mark on Santo Domingo as “The English Lady.”

Basura a su lugar: The World Map Project and Ecology in Ecuador

Painting the World

Talking to my students about where I came from was always complicated. While I was serving the U.S. government, I was born in India then moved to New York when I was 9 years old. As

a U.S. citizen, I proudly wave the American flag, but I was also raised singing the Indian national anthem. Even though I went to a prestigious K-12 Catholic convent school in Mumbai, where I learned to sing songs like “*He’s got the whole world in his hands*,” at home, we would celebrate Eid because I am Muslim. I wanted to share stories regarding the diversity of my ethnic origins with my students, but many of my them were unaware of the location of India. By chance, I learned about the World Map Project from other PCVs in Ecuador. PCVs in the Dominican Republic started the World Map Project in 1989, to create accurate maps in the local language that were accessible to the host community (White & Sheffield, 1995). All it takes to make the map is a few small jars of paint, an overhead projector, and a black marker. I first needed to trace a transparent template of the world map projected onto a wall, and then go over all the country’s borders with a permanent marker. The project has become a tradition, passed down from PCV to PCV. I wanted to bring the World Map Project to Santo Domingo, Ecuador. Before long, what started as a desire to share my personal geography evolved into something more important: a clean-up project that also made a bigger statement about cleaning up the environment.

I knew exactly where to paint to map. Someone had painted a middle finger and male genitalia on the wall outside the eleventh grade English classroom (Figure 1), an eyesore that confronted the students every time they stepped out of English class. While I simply hoped to encourage the students to reimagine the ways that we could take ownership of our buildings by painting the world map, they taught me that we can also share a message about the importance of reducing pollution across the planet. The students not only painted the map, but added their rendition of a globe that was suffocating from contamination (Figure 2). Then, the students added another image of a beautiful globe fashioned into a trash bin and added the message “*basura a su lugar*” (“trash in its place”), as a way of reminding other students to throw their garbage in its designated location (Figure 3).

Ecology in Ecuador

My students’ focus on pollution is understandable given the ecology of Santo Domingo. The city is the transit capital of Ecuador, filled with car, bus, and motorcycle pollution that would make me feel oxygen deprived. My nose would collect black soot daily. Still, I took



Figure 1. The wall in front of the eleventh-grade classroom before the World Map Project



Figure 2. Students repainting the wall as a part of the World Map Project



Figure 3. The World Map Project (center) surrounded by the students' own environmental messages
Note. The mural reads "Basura en su lugar. Trash in its place."

advantage of my location to connect with other PCVs in Ecuador. Every month, I would plan a weekend getaway with other PCVs, and we would use that as an excuse to get some fresh air and explore the country. Ecuador is not only home to large cities filled with contamination, but it is also a gateway to the Amazonian rainforest. From climbing down waterfalls and rocking on the *casa del arbol* (“treehouse”) swing at the “End of the World” in Baños, to eating fish wrapped in banana leaves and guarding my purse from the monkeys in the rainforest—these were just a few of my adventures in Ecuador. Even though I tried my best to experience it all, two years was not enough time. While Ecuador is about the same size as the U.S. state of Colorado, my country of service has a remarkable degree of cultural pluralism and biodiversity. By the time I completed my service, I realized that my monotheistic belief system and westernized upbringing was lackluster in comparison to the 14 distinct indigenous communities that currently coexist and continue to maintain their customs within various regions of Ecuador.

Back to School: Earning My Ph.D.

In August 2021, I enrolled to earn my Ph.D. in the INCM program at KSU as a Paul D. Coverdell Fellow. The Coverdell Fellows Program is a partnership between universities and the Peace Corps, funding graduate education for returned PCVs and providing opportunities for continued service and personal growth. Upon returning from service, I realized that I still had plenty of room to grow as a student and researcher. As a PCV, not only did I learn the complexity of intercultural exchange, but I also realized the ways that gender impacts international development through the assignment of socially acceptable yet limiting roles. For example, Ecuadorians constantly reminded me that I needed to get married so that I could have children before it becomes biologically impossible. After seeing many female students fall behind and quit school upon getting pregnant, I, in turn, constantly reminded the teenage girls to focus on graduation prior to having children. Upon returning from Ecuador, I wanted to share my knowledge of international development and its complexities—not only including the ways that international development can foster empathy and intercultural competency, but also the challenges that remain to create equitable societies.

I chose the INCM program for its emphasis on peacebuilding, global development, and

conflict management in international contexts, areas in which I already had firsthand experience from my Peace Corps service. As a Ph.D. student, I quickly learned that I needed to specialize in a dissertation topic. Specialization frightened me, mainly because I did not know what to focus on. Instead, I embraced the “practitioner” side of my identity by working as a graduate residence director on campus, a communications intern for the Aga Khan Agency of Habitat in Tajikistan, and finally a graduate research assistant helping design youth summer camps at KSU. The practitioner side of me is compelled to help others—that is what I ultimately want to do—and I could not imagine myself as being skilled enough as a scholar to make a similar impact through research.

My self-efficacy in research has improved, in part through my coursework, and in part through the guidance that I have received from my co-authors and professors. My topic should have been obvious from the beginning of my Ph.D. journey: I needed to give back to my country of service. During my Peace Corps service, many Ecuadorian females served as a part of my local support system and empowered me with the confidence to pursue a Ph.D. I want to utilize my new role as a researcher to share the stories of female resilience and solidarity in Ecuador.

I have come to embrace my identity as a researcher, defining myself as someone who studies climate change mitigation and environmental sustainability, primarily in Ecuador. I want to do my part to preserve the Amazonian rainforest and the way of life it provides for indigenous communities, especially the females who serve as *Chakramamas*, or the gatekeepers of nature. As the temperatures skyrocketed during the summer of 2023, I returned to Ecuador. Since my country of service is named for its location on the equatorial line, due to the impact of increasingly high temperatures along with deforestation, much of its fauna and flora is disappearing at an exponential rate. I have interviewed a dozen female climate-change interns, researchers, and urban planners while taking classes like international environmental policy as well as gender, eco-peace, and human rights at KSU. After asking many environmental technicians for their solutions to mitigate the impacts of climate change, this is the answer that I have received: *Keep persevering, the only way that we can save our planet is if we each do our part, every single day.*

As a Ph.D. student, I am now researching the ways that international trade organizations can

collaborate with local communities to promote the development of organic products. By guaranteeing fair wages, trade organizations can encourage female farmers to maintain the diversity of Ecuador's rainforest, while preserving their role as the healers and guardians of the *Pachamama*, or mother earth, within indigenous practices of sustainable agriculture. I understand the importance of climate change mitigation because many Ecuadorians helped expand my cultural perspectives throughout my Peace Corps service. I have continued to exchange knowledge and gain self-confidence through my class interactions at KSU. Lastly, by sharing my story, I hope to inspire others to pursue a path from the Peace Corps to the Ph.D. and beyond.

References

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