

TESTIMONY OF JESSICA SMOCKEK, STUDENT AND FORMER PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER

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“PEACE CORPS AT 50. PROBLEMS OF SAFETY AND SECURITY: VICTIMS SPEAK OUT.”

BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Madam Chairperson, Ranking Member Berman, Congressman Poe, Committee Members, my name is Jessica Smockek. I am a former Peace Corps volunteer and a rape survivor. Thank you for the opportunity to share my story with you and for the hope that you've given to me and to so many others, by giving survivors a voice and by demonstrating a genuine interest in making the Peace Corps safer for future Volunteers.

I. Entering the Peace Corps: The Failure to Prepare

I joined the Peace Corps in 2004, when I was 23 years old. Growing up, my grandparents always emphasized the importance of compassion and giving. When I was eleven, I visited my aunt, who was a social worker in Jamaica. I saw how children lived when they were given fewer advantages than those enjoyed by most children in the United States. After that, I never forgot how lucky I was to be an American. When I was in high school, I volunteered as a candy striper. And once, after my hometown experienced massive flooding, I helped to organize a free drop-in day care center to help parents who needed time to rebuild their homes and lives.

My college placed a strong value on volunteerism and international development. While I was there, I volunteered for Habitat for Humanity and taught English as a second language to kindergarten students. Through grants and scholarship programs, I was given the opportunity to study abroad. I studied in Japan, Germany, Poland, and Thailand.

Two of my favorite college professors were former Peace Corps volunteers and, knowing that I loved to travel and wanted to dedicate my life to helping others, thought the Peace Corps and I were a great match. I did, too. Having studied abroad in Japan and Thailand and travelled throughout the continent, I decided I wanted to serve in Asia. I was assigned to Bangladesh, somewhere I had never been and didn't know a lot about. Peace Corps didn't prepare me for what I experienced.

Before we were sent to Bangladesh, the new volunteers met for a day and a half in Seattle. We got information packets and played ice breakers. We were told a little bit about Bangladeshi culture. The women, for example, were told we would need to wear local clothing. But there was no substantive discussion of country conditions, sexual harassment, or safety. Instead we were told we'd get our training in-country. Unfortunately, meaningful training never came.

Our landing in Bangladesh was a hard one. Everywhere around us in Bangladesh, we could see signs of extreme poverty. Most families had no running water. Many children were too poor to afford the uniforms required to attend school and so spent their days in the street. The lack of a sanitation system meant that piles of trash lined the roads and the fields.

We were sent to Savar for ten weeks of training. It was August of 2004. Political riots swirled around us after an assassination attempt was made against the female prime minister. Because it was considered too dangerous, the Peace Corps staff was forbidden to take public transportation. Peace Corps Volunteers, however, were still required to use it. This public transportation policy was, in part, what caused the Peace Corps' to lose a volunteer for three days shortly after our arrival, while the volunteer was attempting a site visit. For these reasons, and others, we were issued cell phones and were required to keep them with us at all times—something we were told the Peace Corps didn't do for volunteers in any other country. Looking back I realize that the cell phone policy demonstrated the Peace Corps' awareness that our situation was precarious.

Nevertheless, our in-country safety training was anemic. At no time during our ten-week training were we taught how to protect ourselves. We were told we might experience harassment, but that it was cultural, it could be laughed off, and we'd get used to it. The only mention of rape was in a video that showed three rape victims who spoke apologetically about having consumed alcohol prior to their rapes. Since Bangladesh was a dry country, the video didn't seem to apply to us at all. We were led to believe that we wouldn't be in any true danger if we just wore local clothing and stayed in at night. Armed with this simplistic belief, we were sent to our villages. Two other women and I were placed in a village called Kishoreganj. It would soon earn a reputation as the most dangerous volunteer site in the country.

II. Placed in Jeopardy: The Failure to Protect

Not long after our arrival, female volunteers throughout Bangladesh, would be routinely confronted by the most aggressive sexual harassment we had ever experienced. Walking down the street, in markets, and on busses, we were constantly approached. Strangers would put their arms around us and say things like "you want to sex me now." Men would follow us everywhere we went and, if we tried to walk away, would grab our arms---or any other part of us they liked---and tell us they were not done speaking to us and had not given us permission to leave. In none of our other travels had any of us ever been so constantly barraged by unwanted verbal and physical harassment. That we wore local clothing and stayed home after dark made no difference.

After multiple female volunteers reported numerous incidents of harassment, a male volunteer offered to train the female volunteers in self defense. The Peace Corps, however, refused his offer. Instead, Peace Corps suggested that any women

experiencing stalking, threats, unwanted touching, or aggressive behavior call the peer helpline to learn how other female volunteers had learned to “deal with it.”

III. Danger Escalates: The Failure to Respond

I tried to adjust and to ignore the danger, as the Peace Corps seemed to suggest we should. I began teaching English at a girl’s school. But in early November 2004, soon after I was placed in my village, I was confronted by the group of men who would begin a campaign of harassment and threats that, despite my begging for protection from the Peace Corps, ultimately ended in gang rape and torture.

I was returning to my village after a medical check up in the capital city. I had taken a rickshaw for the last leg of the trip. The driver had let me out and was attempting to overcharge me for the ride. A group of six Bangladeshi men in their early twenties or late teens saw the argument and seemed to come to my aid. I paid the driver, thanked them for their help, and began to walk the rest of the way home. But, the men followed me. At first, they tried making conversation and asking me questions. But gradually they surrounded me. Instead of questioning me, they began touching me. They tried to kiss me. Soon they grabbed me and, when I tried to get away, they knocked me to the ground, touching me and kissing me more. I was terrified and helpless. Eventually, they simply left.

When I got up, I realized my host uncle had watched the whole thing and had done nothing. That night, my host father told me that it was no big deal; the boys were simply curious about Americans, and I should brush it off. I then reported the incident to the Peace Corps Medical Officer (PCMO) and to the Peace Corps country safety officer. But they told me that those types of things just happened in Bangladesh and recommended I call the peer helpline. The Country Director merely emailed me, saying he had heard what happened and hoped it got better.

As time went on, harassment and threats continued, for me and for the other women stationed in my village. We were stalked and groped. A man tried to break into one of my site-mate’s homes when her host family was away. We reported these incidents to the in-country staff, who were responsible for alerting Peace Corps Headquarters in Washington, D.C., but for a long time, our reports went unanswered. We asked for pepper spray or mace, but these requests were denied. We begged to move to a safer site, but again Peace Corps refused.

The Peace Corps safety officer eventually visited my site and talked to the local police. She told me a policeman would be stationed on the main road between my house and the school where I worked. This provided some temporary relief, but eventually the police protection waned, and finally disappeared.

With no long-term protections in place, our reports to the Peace Corps were dangerous. The local men learned that I had reported them, and this made them furious. They began telling me and my site mates that they were going to hurt me if I

didn't keep quiet. At first, we reported these threats to the Peace Corps, but with every report, the men became angrier. With virtually no security measures in place to protect me, I was at their mercy. And so, eventually, we stopped reporting the threats.

We were harassed every single day. We were scared to go anywhere. The three of us stationed in my village tried to stay together as much as we could. Eventually we decided we would try to find an apartment to share so that we would never have to be without each other. We were too late.

IV. December 6th: Worst Fears Realized

There was no school on December 6, 2004, so Kelly, one of my site mates came to my house early that morning to go apartment hunting. Just as we were about to leave, the Peace Corps security officer texted me that she was coming to our site to meet with us and talk to the police. She didn't say which, if any, of our many reports inspired her decision.

When she arrived, she asked us for an update on the threats and harassment. Kelly told her what had been going on, and the security officer said she would talk to the police later that day. We never found out whether or about what she spoke to the police. In fact, I never spoke to her again despite what happened to me later that day.

When the security officer left, Kelly and I went looking for apartments. When we had finished it was late afternoon. I walked Kelly to a safe place where she could find a rickshaw and then began walking home. I was walking down the main road, the one the policeman was supposed to patrol but never did. It was around 5:00 PM, near dusk, and the road was silent and empty.

All of a sudden, I was lifted off the ground and felt a knife against my face and a hand over my mouth. I was dragged onto a side street into an abandoned concrete courtyard, and my nightmare began. Some of the men who had warned for months that they were going to hurt me, from who I had begged to be protected, were about to put me through a night of unimaginable horror, subjecting me to acts that I should not have been able to survive, that I did not want to survive, that I nearly didn't survive.

First, they slammed me against a wall. One man kept me pinned there while another kept his hand on my mouth and a third flashed a knife in front of me. They were screaming at me, accusing me of going to the police. They had warned me not to talk, they yelled. They asked me who I thought I was and told me I needed to learn a woman's place. One said that I thought I could get away with anything because I was American, but they wouldn't let me get away with what I had done. They would show me what it was like to be a woman in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, they said, women don't tell. Because I had told, I had left them no choice: they had to kill me.

That's when I knew I was going to die. Hours later, I wished I had been right about that.

They ripped my clothes, and they pulled down my pants. I was raped. Strange objects were forced inside of my body. I couldn't breathe. There were hands over my mouth and face. They kept flashing the knife at me and threatening to kill me. I tried to keep my eyes closed. I tried to breathe. I tried to survive.

It didn't end, even after they finished raping me. Instead, they continued their physical assault, and I began to think it would never end. With no hope of rescue, I begged them to kill me. But they just laughed.

When the men finally finished with me and left, I couldn't move. For a while, I thought I would just stay there and die. I wanted to die.

V. Aftermath of the Attack: The Wrong Response

Eventually, I found the courage to begin the walk back to my house. My host family wasn't home. I went to the bathroom and tried to wash myself. After I had used up everything in my medical kit, I went back to my room, locked the door, and turned out the light. When my host family came home, they banged on my door, but I couldn't answer. I texted one of my site mates that we had to go to the capital in the morning, and then I tried to sleep. Despite my exhaustion, I laid awake all night, afraid my attackers would break through my wooden shutters.

The next morning, without talking to my host family, I left the house and met one of my site mates at the bus stand. I couldn't tell her anything, but she could see that something was wrong. Predictably, our bus was delayed. So, by the time we got to the capital, the hotel where Volunteers normally stayed was full. It was getting dark, and we had nowhere to go. I was terrified, but the owner of the hotel ended up inviting us to stay at his house. I was scared, but thankful for the room.

The next day I went to the Peace Corps' office and saw the PCMO, Jen. Still in shock, I was unable to tell the PCMO what had happened. She sent me to a counselor, but I still couldn't bring myself to tell anyone what the men had done. I could only say that I didn't feel safe at my site. Later, in another attempt to get me to reveal what had happened, the PCMO gave me valium, and told me to write down what I refused to say. I didn't want to write about it. I didn't want to remember it. It was too painful to admit, even to myself. Moreover, I was exhausted and, with the valium, writing got harder and harder. But the PCMO insisted. Because she wouldn't let me stop writing until she was satisfied she had a complete story, I wrote down an abbreviated version of the details I could stand to reveal.

After I finished writing, the PCMO gave me prophylactic medicines to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. She also allowed me to call my parents and a professor to whom I was very close. In addition, she contacted the Country Director, who was away on a site visit, but he chose not to come back or to contact me.

The PCMO did not, however, physically examine me or provide me with a rape kit. In fact, no one collected any evidence of what had happened. The PCMO soon after took away my cell phone—the one they had issued us and told us to keep on our person at all times. Jen said my cell phone was unnecessary and a distraction. This, unfortunately, prevented me from warning any of the other volunteers about what had happened. Jen told me that if I did happen to talk to any other volunteers, I should tell them I was leaving to have my wisdom teeth pulled out.

I stayed in the city for a few nights and then was sent back to my village alone to gather my belongings. A driver dropped me off at my host family's house and I was forced to spend the night there one last time. One of my site mates came over to help me pack and to stay with me. On her way over, she was attacked and pushed to the ground. I heard her screaming and ran outside to help. It was too dark to see the attacker, who then ran away.

VI. Return to the United States: The Wrong Reception

Only after the Peace Corps had promised to pull my site mates from the village, did I agree to leave Bangladesh. I insisted that the Peace Corps change my original flight plan, because it had called for a long layover somewhere in the Qatar, which the Peace Corps suggested might offer me an opportunity to do some sight seeing, which was the last thing I could do in my state. On December 13th, while I was still reeling from the trauma, I was put on a plane, all alone, back to Washington, DC. I was not offered anyone to fly with, nor was I offered the opportunity to fly to Pennsylvania to see my family. I was told I had to come straight to Washington, DC, where I would stay for 45 days.

When I arrived at the airport in DC, there was no one to meet me. I had to find my way through this large, unfamiliar city by myself. I had been given directions to the Peace Corps office, but no other information about the area.

On my first night in DC, the rooms in the hotel the Peace Corps sent me to were full, so I slept on a couch in the suite of some other returned Volunteers. The next morning, I got up early and found my way to the Peace Corps' office building and began the rigorous rounds of mandatory appointments that would continue for the next month and a half.

One of the first appointments to which Peace Corps sent me was with a male gynecologist. He was insensitive, and it was an awful experience. I was also sent to a doctor who examined me for parasites and disease and eventually diagnosed me with Bangladeshi ringworm. The doctor provided me with prophylactics that made me sick and with malaria medicine to which I turned out to be allergic. Because I learned of the allergy after leaving Washington, DC, I had to personally find and pay for a specialist who could help me get the medicine I needed.

Another mandatory appointment was with two men from the Inspector General's (IG's) Office. I didn't want to go alone to tell two strange men about what had happened to me. While in-country I was told that I would be given an option as to whether to have the meeting. But, when I arrived in DC, I was told that the meeting was mandatory.

Peace Corps also required that I meet with a counselor, Robin. Far from helping me heal, meeting with Robin re-traumatized me. She gave me a piece of Santa Claus paper that said "ho, ho, ho," and made me write down everything I had done wrong and would do differently when I went back to Bangladesh. As examples to "help" me get started, she suggested I write down: that I had gone out alone after 5:00 PM, that I didn't scream or fight back, and that I had failed to integrate into the community. Rather than feeling safe and supported, I felt belittled and blamed.

Once a week, I was also sent to a psychiatrist, Deborah, who worked an hour outside of the city in a remote area. I didn't feel safe travelling to her office, and I didn't like or trust Deborah, but I wasn't given any choice about my treatment provider. Deborah pressured and provoked me into talking about my experience. Once I did tell her what had happened, she diagnosed me with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which she attributed to the rape. She recommended that I receive treatment and be evaluated for my potential to return to Bangladesh at a later date.

No one from the Peace Corps ever asked me what they could have done to help prevent what happened, what needed to be improved, or how they could protect the others who remained near my site.

VII. Separation from the Peace Corps: A Rough Transition

After my 45 days in DC, I was medically separated from the Peace Corps. Without any explanation of the system, I was shunted onto the Department of Labor's workers compensation program, where I have been left to plead for the benefits I've needed to recover. I am required to repeatedly describe my "injury" on forms and to strangers. Stunned by the question, I often don't know what to say. The process is not designed to be navigated by victims of sexual trauma.

With case examiners constantly changing and forms disappearing between Affiliated Computer Services and the Office of Workers Compensation Programs, many of my claims have taken months—some, years—to process. I am still awaiting reimbursements for claims I submitted in October of 2009.

VIII. Impact in the Field: Continued Danger

I wish I could say that what happened to me made a difference for the other women in Bangladesh, that the Peace Corps realized the danger and protected them better after I left. I even wrote a letter to the Peace Corps explaining the danger and telling them my site was no place for volunteers. But my letter went unheeded, and the

women in my site were no safer than before. Just as I had not been made safer after the warnings sent to the Peace Corps by the women placed in Kishoreganj before me.

The harassment and threats continued. In fact, in June of 2005, some of the Bangladesh volunteers did a safety survey showing the dangers the volunteers were facing and sent the survey to Peace Corps headquarters in Washington. The Country Director threatened them with administrative separation, the Peace Corps' version of a dishonorable discharge.

Shortly after I left, the Country Director (who never attempted to contact me after I was raped), called a meeting of several women in my former volunteer group and told them, without my permission, what had happened to me. Then, he told them that rape was a woman's fault and that I had caused what happened to me by being out alone after 5:00 PM. As for the other women in the group who had been very vocal about being constantly stalked and afraid, he threatened them with administrative separation.

Years later, I learned that several other women in my volunteer group were sexually assaulted after me and, partly because the Country Director had made such an example of me, chose not to report it. One terminated her service early. Two simply kept quiet, didn't seek help, and finished their terms.

IX. Hope for the Future: Policy Recommendations

Much could be done to ensure future volunteers don't have to live through what too many of us have already experienced.

First, every Peace Corps employee should be trained in sexual assault prevention and response. To ensure the training is meaningful, the training must be designed and vetted by experts as well as victims, before being implemented. Current materials that are woefully outdated or worse – materials that cause affirmative harm – should be discontinued now.

Second, those who are sexually assaulted or raped while serving in the Peace Corps need in-person advocates to provide support at every step of the process. While in-country, every survivor must have an in-person advocate to assist her in:

- Securing safe accommodations after an attack;
- Obtaining immediate medical attention, including a rape kit, appropriate prophylaxis, and a morning-after pill to be used at the survivor's discretion;
- Reporting the incident to the Peace Corps' Headquarters;
- Understanding her options for pursuing legal action, such as how the prosecutorial process works in the country of service, how victims are involved in those prosecutions, how long she has to press charges under the country's statutes of

limitations, what protection will be provided to her should she remain in country to prosecute, and what emotional and financial assistance the Peace Corps will provide during the ordeal; and

- Gaining access to intermediate medical and counseling resources in the country or region of service, should she choose to remain or return.

Peace Corps should allow returned victims to go home to their families to heal, instead of forcing them to live for long periods in a city that is unfamiliar and far from home. It should provide victims with a list of resources available in their home states, such as rape crisis and suicide prevention centers, and trauma-specific therapists and psychiatrists who take worker's compensation insurance. But, should victims choose to come to Washington, DC upon their return to the United States, they must be treated with care. They must be met at the airport, provided with a list of practical and available medical and counseling resources, and supported as they get the help they need.

Finally, once separated from the Peace Corps, victims need a liaison to the Department of Labor to help them navigate the bureaucratic impediments to the benefits and resources that are theoretically available but practically sparse. They also need someone to hold the Department of Labor accountable for timely and thoroughly honoring victims' claims, and thus, an advocate should regularly monitor claims and advocate for their prompt payment on the victims' behalf. This type of permanent liaison position is critical to eliminating the unnecessary delay and harm represented by the current system. Peace Corps was given an opportunity to make these reforms voluntarily in the 1990s. That effort clearly did not produce effective reform. Now Congress must act.

Even working tirelessly, a single victims' advocate would be unable to provide the in-depth and comprehensive support needed for the legion of rape and sexual assault survivors, whose ranks grow by twenty-to-forty new volunteers each year. Therefore, the Peace Corps must, at a minimum, have a properly-tasked victim support *network* in Washington, D.C., as well as a Sexual Assault Response Coordinator in all Regional Hubs.

First Response Action's Survivors' Bill of Rights creates a victim-centered framework for approaching the prevention and response of sexual assault. What it asks is practical and necessary. And, I believe implementing the Survivors' Bill of Rights is an important step toward improving Peace Corps Volunteers' safety and security, and toward ensuring that victims of sexual assault are given the help and dignity they deserve.

I believe in the Peace Corps. I believe that the Peace Corps wants to do the right thing, and is trying. But I am thankful that Congress is interested in ensuring that, through accountability, changes are implemented that are meaningful and long lasting. I am also thankful that Congress has given my thoughts and my story a voice. Maya

Angelou once said, "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again." I am hopeful that, because of your concern, the Peace Corps can continue in all its promise, stronger than before, and my nightmare need not be lived again.

