

Voices of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers Speaking Out Against the Discriminatory Abortion Ban

Mary Kate Shannon, RPCV Peru, 2011-2013

I have had my fair share of firsts: I was the first female volunteer with a disability to serve in Peru, and coping with this challenge was daunting on its own due to stigma and discrimination against persons with different abilities around the globe. I knew serving had its risks and I knew they would be high for me and so did Peace Corps but it was a most necessary first. I had felt called to do this, and facing this stigma showed me that my presence in Peru was essential to the promotion of persons with disabilities but especially that of females. The reality was daunting, oppressive, and saddening. So despite how incredibly challenging serving in the Peace Corps was for me I considered it a critical sacrifice.

But soon I would find out just how much sacrifice I would have to make. Four months into my service I was raped. It was 2pm and all I wanted to do was to finish up my lesson planning and go home for lunch. Little did I know that I had gotten into a taxi with a serial rapist who had been released from prison just a few months prior...and I would be taken to that same location, in the middle of a barren and lonely desert where he reached inside my soul and stole something that I did not know existed. My service just got harder and it would get harder from there on out. It went from dealing with new language, food, and people to I don't want to die in a desert, how anyone would find my body, to just get somewhere where someone will find your body.

I escaped and Peace Corps came to my aid as soon as they could. They were incredibly supportive and I owe many things to host country staff in Peru. They stepped up and had been amazing. I owe my recovery to their kindness and compassion of my PCMOs, CD, and SSC, and the love I received from my Peruvian host. I would return to service because of this support and because I still hold love in my heart for Peru despite the things violence that was committed upon me. I owe much of this also to Kate Puzey, her family, and the amazing RPCVs who made sure that I would not be forgotten or have to go at this alone.

I returned to service, a new city, and on April 20, 2012, my attacker was sentenced to 28 years in prison. Still it had not provided the closure that I needed. Disability protection laws were used to extend the time he would serve but it would come at a great cost to my own dignity...when asked to walk in front of judges to demonstrate that I am in fact disabled. In turn this caused the defense to begin to question my presence and ability to serve in a foreign country if I had been so venerable. I was baffled and confused. My attacker had done this, he plead guilty. Justice would come to me despite the humiliation and pain it brought.

The challenges I faced in country would not end. Five months prior to the end of my original COS date. I would be raped again. I had to leave my country in January of this year and was devastated that my service had ended the way it began.

Back in DC, I was in recovery still ill from PEP [post-exposure prophylaxis] meds and the realities that I was dealing with. I had disclosed to my counselor that I was more than 3 weeks late. I did not know what to do. I am pro-choice but I had always wanted children, a family. If I were pregnant how could I love and give this child the life it deserved, when his future would be tied to the actions of his father? When Peace Corps informed me of my options I thought my life was over. I was severely depressed and I could not fight anymore. I needed someone to ease my burden, the

burden of so many Peace Corps Volunteers and fight for me, for a future that I could not see or imagine. But I felt alone.

I had returned to the US traumatized, with no money, no job, and at times it felt impossible to function. Peace Corps staff informed me that due to federal regulations that they could not pay for an abortion. My ability to choose had been taken from me, and this just added to the list of betrayals and things that would be stolen from me. A few weeks later, I discovered it was only a scare and that it would be a choice that I would not have to make.

Still I was dismayed; I was outraged that this service was not available to women who had paid the ultimate sacrifice with their bodies and futures. I was hurt; Peace Corps had said that I would have to pay for the abortion myself out of my readjustment allowance, but I had already been using that to seek stability and housing while recovering, job searching, and reconnecting with the world I left behind, and grieving all that had been done and taken from me.

The US government has a responsibility to come to our aid in our greatest time of need and not let women who are putting their lives at risk to better the lives and to even promote the empowerment of the women in our communities. In circumstances of rape and sexual assault or when a woman's life is at risk, like any other woman serving in the military or in a diplomatic role a Peace Corps volunteer should be given choices because as you all of become aware there are too many opportunities for men to take and make choices that may take a life time to recover from.

I accomplished a great deal during my service and it made me stronger and it only made me love the men, the women, and children of Peru I had served all the more. Hardship after hardship I remained ever more committed to the Peace Corps mission of Peace and friendship. It is now that I call upon congress and ask you to further your own commitment to the survivors, and fighters of Peace Corps and give us the love and support that we gave to our communities even when it was hardest for us to give. Give us the power to choose, the power to take back our bodies, and rebuild our lives

Thank you very much for your commitment to Peace Corps and to the rights of women all over the world.

Naima Farrell, RPCV Bénin, 2008-2010

My name is Naima Farrell, and I served as a secondary education volunteer in Bénin from 2008 to 2010. When I learned that Peace Corps does not provide coverage for abortion services for volunteers in cases of rape, incest, or life endangerment, I was appalled. As Peace Corps itself has acknowledged in the wake of such tragedies as the murder of my friend and fellow volunteer, Kate Puzey, Peace Corps volunteers run a high risk of experiencing violence, rape, or sexual assault during their service. We travel far from home – and often far from quality medical care – to help communities in developing countries, to experience other cultures, and to share American culture with the world. It is unfair, unjust, and, frankly, it makes no sense, to exclude women volunteers from the coverage that women receive under other federal healthcare programs when we, as a group, experience sexual violence at higher rates than others.

I loved my time in Peace Corps, and I have great respect for Peace Corps as an organization, in spite of its many shortcomings. I hope that Congress will enable Peace Corps to provide the support that women volunteers deserve by permitting abortion coverage in cases of rape, incest, or life endangerment.

Anonymous Returned Peace Corps Volunteer

As an American citizen, I find it appalling Peace Corps volunteers are not offered the same access to services to terminate a pregnancy due to rape, incest or life endangerment as employees in other federal agencies. As the daughter of a rape survivor, I know how such a tragedy will haunt a woman for life. As a RPCV, I can sadly attest to the need for access to abortion services. I served with many volunteers who were sexually assaulted. Please make the necessary changes to the policy with no further delay.

Janet Rich Edwards, RPCV Niger, 1984-1986

I served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Niger from 1984-1986. I lived in a small village and served as the nutritionist at the local maternal and infant clinic, where I was proud to help women have healthier pregnancies and safe deliveries. Every evening, I came home alone to my hut, in a gated compound with no lock. I trusted my village friends and neighbors, who always looked out after me. I felt entirely safe. One night, though, one of the clinic employees showed up drunk at my home. He made an aggressive pass at me, and only backed off when I shouted to my neighbors. The incident never happened again - I think word got around the town, and he was shamed - but I was frightened after that. A good friend of mine, in a larger town, was not so lucky. Rape was not something we spoke about openly back then, but it happened then and it happens now. Often, unsuspecting American volunteers are the subject of male sexual fantasies and the target of sexual crimes. It horrifies me to think of Peace Corps volunteers who give two years of their lives in service, risking their health and their safety to represent the United States, unable to get an abortion if they were raped. Other federally covered women, from federal employees to Medicaid recipients to federal inmates, receive abortion coverage in the case of rape. The thought that we would not offer the same protection to Peace Corps volunteers is shameful. Please honor the sacrifices of Peace Corps' volunteers by extending them the full benefits and protections for their health, including abortion coverage.

Eleni Bourinaris, RPCV Dominican Republic, 2009-2010

Many aspects of the Peace Corps have changed since 1979 in terms of creating an organization that promotes more than just international relations. Today Peace Corps leverages a skilled population of professionals to create true developmental change towards sustainability in the communities we serve. PC volunteers from diverse backgrounds use technology, innovative thinking and strategic planning to make a difference in the lives of people across the globe. Yet, since 1979, we've been holding volunteers to an archaic standard of reproductive choice and accessibility to abortion. By continuing to allow Congress to annually reauthorize the federal abortion restriction without exceptions for life endangerment, rape, incest or victims of other types of sexual assault, we are re-victimizing our daughters, sisters, and girlfriends in service.

As a volunteer in the Dominican Republic that faced a security issue, a prominent fear at the time was the possibility of an unwanted, unsolicited pregnancy. Peace Corps volunteers give up everything to serve their country in a mission that they believe will make a global difference. Depending on the host country, we live alone in communities. Oftentimes we are hours from our post-station and the closest volunteer. We struggle alongside our community members building camaraderie because we believe in the vision of President Kennedy and Sargent Shriver in the mission of being public servants. It's time to stop excluding

Peace Corps volunteers from the same rights and minimum standards of our compatriots in federal service.

Sarah L. Cornblath, RPCV Kenya, 2009-2010

Since its inception, Peace Corps Volunteers have served in a myriad of countries, often at great personal risk. However, despite the fact that volunteers worldwide have and continue to perform great work, we are not given the same rights as others who go abroad in the service of this country. Every other employee of the US government is entitled to life-saving medical procedures, while Peace Corps Volunteers are still being denied these rights. That is why this bill is so important. It's time to level the playing field. It's time that Peace Corps Volunteers were granted the same rights, and therefore respect, as other US service members. It's time the Government covered the cost of an abortion in the case of rape, incest, or life endangerment. It's time to end this injustice and give volunteers the rights they deserve by covering abortions in the case of rape, incest, or life endangerment.