

NO MORE

By adopting best practices in the handling of sexual assault cases, Peace Corps can be a leader

by Casey Frazee

The “Safety of the Volunteer 2007” report released by the Peace Corps Office of Safety and Security states that there were 253 incidents of rape, some form of physical or sexual assault, death threats or intimidation against Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) in 2007. That is roughly 3 percent of PCVs who served that year. When the statistics are compiled for 2009, I will, unfortunately, be among those numbers.

Earlier this year, while serving in Southern Africa, I was sexually assaulted by a man in my community. The Peace Corps website states, “The agency recognizes that Volunteers’ daily safety is, for the most part, best assured when they are well integrated into the local community, valued and protected as extended family members.” Unfortunately, this system has a major flaw—when the attacker is also a well-integrated community member. My attacker was the brother of my host mother and the boyfriend of a co-worker at the NGO where I worked. Furthermore, he was a high-ranking official in the provincial branch of the country’s reigning political party. Going to the local authorities in the aftermath of the assault did not seem a safe option, as I feared retribution from my attacker.

After I reported this assault to Peace Corps, I was evacuated to the capital. My initial meeting with Peace Corps, subsequent to the attack, focused mostly on whether or not to report the assault to local authorities and on developing a new site; I was not offered any medical attention or counseling. Having prior experience working with issues of domestic violence, sexual assault and rape, I tried to rely on my own strength to

work through this situation, but a week after this meeting, I fell apart. The country director sent me out of the capital to visit PCVs and be “productive” during this transition period. I was visiting a fellow Volunteer in her rural village, her house surrounded by the all-too-common penetrable fence. I was afraid. I was scared of the shadows and I scowled at the people in the community, wondering why they had to stare at me. I feared that someone else would attack me.

I called the Peace Corps Medical Officer and requested to see a counselor. The PCMO told me that there was no budget for me to see a counselor and that while he would fight for me, I shouldn’t get my hopes up. Having trust in the organization that brought me halfway around the world, I choked out an “okay,” hung up the phone and cried. Since I was quickly unraveling without support from Peace Corps in-country, I decided to call the Office of Special Services in Washington, D.C. I was connected to people who told me that

there is always budget available for PCV health and safety and that the PCMO had spoken in error.

I began asking myself and fellow PCVs, what rights do I have as a Volunteer? How many times can I see a counselor? Can someone else speak on my behalf if I am too intimidated by Peace Corps? There is nothing in the Volunteer Handbook that addresses this and no one I asked—in Washington or in-country—could find any policy that references the rights of PCVs who experience sexual violence. I am not alone as a PCV who has been assaulted. I have heard from women in multiple countries who were not taken seriously, pushed out of their country of service or who were not offered counseling.

In the aforementioned report on volunteer safety released in 2007, the report states, “Trend analysis indicates that other sexual assault incidence rates have been increasing an average of 7 percent each year over the 10-year period.” While the report provides copious data, it is short on follow-up. Counseling, medical separation, interrupted service, treatment of PCVs in-country by staff, state-side support; these items are presumably left to another report.

Now back in the United States I have contacted Peace Corps to discuss implementing policies to protect PCVs in these situations. As of late October, as this article is being written, I am awaiting next steps from Peace Corps. I have also started a blog on this issue to mobilize support from members of the Peace Corps community.

While I am deeply disappointed at how my situation was handled and that my time in Peace Corps did not end the way I had ever envisioned, my situation is over. My hope is

