

**TESTIMONY OF:
ELIZABETH ODONGO
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**SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE'S SUBCOMMITTEE ON WESTERN
HEMISPHERE, PEACE CORPS, AND GLOBAL NARCOTICS AFFAIRS:**

“PEACE CORPS, THE NEXT 50 YEARS”

My name is Liz Odongo. I am the Training and Outreach Director at the DC Coalition Against Domestic Violence and I am proud to be a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer. I am here today hoping to make the Peace Corps better, safer and stronger for its next 50 years. Part of shaping the future requires an honest look at the past.

When I was 23 years old, I served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Guyana, where I was stalked and terrorized by the same person who had assaulted the Volunteer who served in my site before me. The Peace Corps knew, but never warned me. When it happened, I was young, scared and alone and I turned to the Peace Corps – my employer, my protector, my government. I asked the Peace Corps to listen and to help me. Instead it blamed and, later, disowned me. Unfortunately, thousands of Volunteers have had experiences like mine. And, this year, they asked Congress to listen and to help. You demonstrated your willingness to do both. So today, I am here to thank the Senate for working hard to find a solution to this longstanding and systemic problem, and for passing the Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act which, if ultimately enacted, will protect future Volunteers from the terror and isolation that I, and so many others, have experienced. I also thank Director Williams for working with Congress, diligently and enthusiastically, in this difficult process. Thank you.

In the last ten years alone, over 1000 women and men, young and old, who chose to serve their country as Peace Corps Volunteers, reported they were victims of horrific sexual assaults during their service. It's estimated that, in those same 10 years, at least another thousand were assaulted but chose not to report it. You've heard many of the stories: A woman alone, walking down a street in Bangladesh, is taken, gang raped, tortured and left for dead. A teacher, thousands of miles from home is held captive and brutally raped for hours, until she stops begging to live and starts praying to die. But the part of their stories that are too often overlooked is what happened afterwards, when they asked the Peace Corps for help.

Historically, Peace Corps Volunteers and staff were often given no training on how to protect themselves or others from dangerous situations. Volunteers who are attacked often had no idea where to go for help. Those who report their attacks to the Peace Corps' staff were often dismissed, belittled or blamed. In recent months, congressional investigation and media reports have revealed that Peace Corps' inadequate response to victims of sexual assault is systemic and long-standing. But the Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act would change that.

First, this bill, championed by Senators Boxer and Isakson, requires the Peace Corps to provide training in important and common sense techniques, like the buddy system and bystander response, and to institute best practices in safety and survivor response. No more Volunteers will be dismissed when reporting danger or assault. They will be taken to a safe place, seen by a doctor, provided appropriate mental health care and given the opportunity to prosecute their attacker.

Second, the bill creates confidentiality protocols, to ensure Volunteers are not put in harm's way for exposing danger or wrongdoing. No more Volunteers will be murdered in their sleep when their perpetrators find out what they've reported. They will be protected.

Finally, the bill creates accountability and oversight, to ensure these policies are followed. No more staff members who ignore or mistreat survivors will be re-hired or left in positions of authority. Instead, actions will be taken to ensure Volunteers can trust those they must report to.

You have asked me today to provide you with my professional assessment of this legislation, not just as a former volunteer and rape victim, but as a leading expert in the field of violence against women. I can tell you with confidence, as an expert, that I believe this bill is critical. It will save thousands more from the devastation that has already been suffered by too many.

In closing, I thank you for listening to me and commend you for your leadership and thoughtfulness in drafting and passing this bill to create a stronger, safer Peace Corps for the next 50 years. Thank you.