

Life After Senegal

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Mary reeked of garbage. She was tired, discouraged, and did not want to talk to anyone. As Mary reached her host family's compound, she was glad to see no one around. She had spent the day sorting and weighing samples of the town's garbage with two very reluctant helpers, who had been ordered to assist her. Town officials had told Mary, a new Peace Corps volunteer (PCV) in Senegal, that they wanted to start a composting and garbage collection program like the one started by a PCV in another town. At that moment, however, Mary was not sure they really cared.

The project seemed to start smoothly enough. Mary knew the first step was to sample the town's garbage to ensure that the garbage contained sufficient compostable material. The mayor and his staff said they wanted to proceed and promised to find volunteers to help with sampling. But when Mary arrived on the morning of the count, there were no volunteers. The mayor had not followed through, so he told two handy men to help Mary sort the garbage after she collected it. The men were revolted by the task and difficult to work with. It was a long and frustrating day.

The more she thought about it, Mary worried that there was no future to the project. She had data and it proved that most of the garbage indeed could be composted, but the mayor had not put any effort or resources into starting the program. And what role had she played in the failure? Had she spent enough time getting buy-in on the project? Had she established the right relationships with people? As she ruminated about the day with all its misunderstandings, she began to recall many other small failures she had experienced since arriving in Senegal. As they came back to her, she began to question her ability accomplish anything. Was this failure something she could overcome? Was it possible to find her place and role in this culture that seemed so radically different than anything she had known?

Mary roused herself from contemplation. She was home again with her family and friends. They seemed the same, yet she had changed. Two years in Senegal had left its mark, but she still had not fully unpacked its meaning. And, perhaps most crucially, were there lessons she could carry from this intercultural experience that might enable her to successfully navigate future critical incidents in her professional life?

Senegal and the Peace Corps

Mary White was a PCV in Senegal, a West African country the size of South Dakota. She and the 53 other volunteers in her training group had spent two days in Washington, D.C., for an introduction to life as a PCV before traveling to Senegal to start training in one of the Peace Corps' areas of focus—agriculture, health, environment, or business—and in language and Senegalese culture.

The program in Senegal was one of the Peace Corps' longest continuously-operating ventures. It had started in 1962, shortly after the country gained independence. One of the most important aspects of the Peace Corps—its differentiation from many other non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—was its focus on understanding the people and their culture, and on working from within the community, through collaborative leadership rather than leading from a position of authority. Because volunteers were given great freedom in choosing and executing projects, most PVC leadership training was focused on how to understand and work with the community.

Senegal was a French colony until 1960, when it was granted independence. The country has been a republic since independence, and has become one of the most politically stable and democratic countries in West Africa. Despite this, over half of its people lived below the poverty line, and many people still relied on subsistence farming. While access to clean drinking water was high in urban areas, less than half of the rural population had improved water sources (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2014). The average person had the equivalent of a middle school education (UNESCO, 2012), and only half of the population was literate (CIA, 2014).

Three ethnic groups accounted for over 80% of Senegal's population; of these, the Wolof group was the most populous (CIA, 2014). The Pulaars tended to concentrate in the northern and south-eastern regions of the country, while the Seerars clustered in the south-central delta region. Because of their dominance in population and control of the central and major urban areas, the Wolof people were the primary ethnic group in government and business. There were many similarities among the three groups. They all shared a high degree of collectivity that emphasized group mores over individual desires; a fatalistic attitude that placed responsibility on divine will rather than on individuals who exert free will; and a strong respect for tradition, viewing most change with suspicion. These attitudes were also influenced by the almost universal practice of Islam—about 94% of Senegalese were Islamic, mostly Sufi (CIA, 2014).

Training in the Peace Corps

Each Peace Corps program was given broad guidelines to follow in training volunteers, but they were largely free to train in a manner that would best meet the needs of each country. The training program that Mary and the other trainees in her group undertook once they arrived in Senegal was designed for the unique needs of the Peace Corps Senegal program and service within Senegalese culture. The Senegal training program combined homestay and large group training.

For the first three days in Senegal, all of the new trainees stayed at the Peace Corps training center and learned the basics needed to avoid offending people. Then they were split into groups

of three or four based on the languages they had been selected to study. Because Mary was in the business development program and did not speak French, she and three other trainees were assigned to learn French in Mboro, one of the regional capitals. Mboro was a small town an hour's drive north of the training center.

During her first two-and-half months in Senegal, Mary split her time between the Peace Corps training center and a Senegalese family in Mboro. The pattern was that Mary lived with her host family for five or six days, traveled to the training center with the other volunteers for two or three days, and then returned to Mboro. At the training center, Mary attended training sessions on Peace Corps volunteer health policies led by American staff, and discussions on ways to assist with business development in the communities led by current volunteers. With her Senegalese family in Mboro, Mary immersed herself in the local language and culture.

Homestay was a hallmark of the Peace Corps Senegal program and hospitality is a defining aspect of Senegalese culture. The Peace Corps paid stipends to host families to provide meals and a room to each PCV. Families were briefed on what to expect from trainees and how to help them acclimate to Senegal. Most families agreed to host trainees because they supported the Peace Corps and they enjoyed having Americans stay with them. However, occasionally a family was more interested in receiving money than in working toward mutually beneficial ends with the Peace Corps. For example, one trainee in Mary's group had to move to a new family after the first week because her hosts were not meeting the Peace Corps standards in living arrangements or in assisting with her training.

Language training was the third pillar of Mary's Peace Corps Senegal initiation. In addition to language immersion through living with families, volunteers met as a group with a language teacher who held classes each day. These teachers were Senegalese nationals who had been hired by the Peace Corps, and many of them had worked with the Peace Corps for many years. They spoke English fluently, understood American culture, and had experience handling issues of the sort Mary and her fellow volunteers were likely to encounter. Because of this, the language teachers were able to provide insightful answers to the volunteers' cultural questions and help steer them away from misunderstandings.

Women and Gender in Senegal

Although Senegalese women legally had the same rights and opportunities as men, this was usually not the case in practice. Senegalese culture took very conservative and traditional approaches to gender roles. Men were typically heads of households and identified as breadwinners. Women were responsible for all household chores and raising children. This narrow attitude toward women's roles was more common among poor and rural families than among wealthy and urban families.

Mary noticed that Senegalese boys and girls were treated differently starting at an early age. Girls were expected to help with household chores and care for younger siblings, whereas boys had few expectations placed on them and spent time with friends and playing soccer. It was rare to see a group of girls playing out on the street, but it was common to walk through boys' soccer

games. The probability that a girl would start school was highly dependent on where she lived, her family's income, and the level of conservative religious values of her family.

Many villages that did not have schools of their own, and girls were less likely than boys to travel to more distant schools. This was for two reasons: the safety of the girls, and because household chores were viewed as more important for them. Public schools in Senegal were ostensibly free, but had fees for uniforms and materials associated with them, so families who struggled to pay the fees were also less likely to send their daughters to school. Families that were very religious and conservative often sent their sons to Koranic schools to study Islam and the Koran, while their daughters did not attend school at all. Lower school attendance by girls resulted in a female literacy rate in Senegal of 39 percent, whereas the male literacy rate was 62 percent (UNESCO, 2012).

Marriage was central to the lives of Senegalese women. Islam, as practiced in Senegal, permitted men to have as many as four wives, so women often found themselves in polygamous marriages. Most women married between the ages of 18 and 22. Although a woman's marriage was not necessarily arranged, the husband was generally chosen with the guidance and consent of the young woman's family, specifically with validation from her father.

Employment patterns for Senegalese men and women differed in substantive ways. Many women worked outside the home to earn extra money for their families, but women tended to work in informal sectors. Women often sold produce or prepared food items at home to be sold from small makeshift tables in markets. The market provided another visible example of the dichotomy between men and women. Whereas women tended to have small makeshift tables or stands selling home-made or home-grown products, men had permanent shops selling retail items or providing services. Senegalese men had better access to resources, as well as time and autonomy to dedicate to their businesses.

Mary and the other trainees learned most of these gender dynamics through observation and discussions with people in their host families and communities. When they had questions about why something was as it was or needed clarification, they could ask their language teachers or longer-serving volunteers. The former were able to offer the Senegalese perspective on the matter whereas the latter could understand why the question was being asked, hence could be asked more candidly.

Working with Women in Senegal

Peace Corps Senegal gave volunteers wide latitude for implementing projects, and most projects were local. In recognition of the country-wide problem of gender discrimination, a group of former volunteers started the Senegal Gender and Development (SENEGAD) program. This program helped volunteers organize gender awareness events across the country, and also ran a country-wide scholarship program for girls. The volunteers involved in this program made a number of presentations to new PCV trainees so that they could work with ongoing projects once they completed training.

When Mary finished her training, she was assigned to a small rural town about 400 miles from the capital city. For the first few weeks she was supposed to spend her time meeting people, improving her language skills and cultural knowledge, and gaining a deeper understanding of the needs of the community. This was a time to form relationships that were essential in Senegal, and to understand the people so that appropriate projects could be identified and undertaken.

Mary initially spent a lot of time at the town hall. With the exception of two clerks and one librarian, all workers, officials, and visitors were male. The two female clerks were constantly busy as people came to register births and deaths and residency, but the rest of the people there were not busy and the town hall was a place of social gathering as well as a place of business and employment. The first person Mary met at the town hall was Thiam, a male librarian. A run-down library was attached to the town hall because a charity group in France had donated a large number of books to the town. As they were talking, Thiam abruptly asked Mary if she had a husband. When she replied that she did not, he was shocked that a 24-year old woman was not married. He first asked why, and then asked Mary if she would marry him. She declined. As other people wandered over to talk, Mary found men engaged her in similar conversations and she repeatedly declined marriage proposals.

Although she was not unprepared for this reaction to her being unmarried, it was still exasperating. When she had first arrived in Senegal, the experienced volunteers had warned of constant marriage proposals that were half-serious; all the female volunteers had experienced this at some point. In general, this preoccupation with her marital status made it harder for Mary to work with men than with women. It often took longer for men to take her seriously and to stop treating her as a novelty. She soon came to appreciate the men who did not immediately propose marriage.

Over time, Mary increasingly met with local business owners and community groups. She quickly realized that it would be very different working with men than with women. Men had more education and control of their time than did women. However, women were easier to work with socially, had more attainable goals, and were generally more motivated. Although she didn't realize it at the time, these factors caused her to spend increasing amounts of time with women.

As she met more people and got to know the town and its occupants, Mary started spending less time at the town hall and more time with local women's groups. Women's groups were numerous and served varied, important purposes. There were savings groups, groups that taught girls job skills like sewing and gardening, gardening groups, and food production groups. The women were interested in learning about Mary, but they also wanted to know how they could work with her and how she could help them.

Despite easy social rapport, Mary sometimes encountered peculiar difficulties when working with women. One afternoon, Mary had scheduled a computer lesson with the president of a women's group, but the woman never arrived. After Mary had waited at the office for half-an-hour, she went to the woman's house to see why she had not come. The woman missed the appointment because her husband had brought seed peanuts home and she had to sort them before she could do anything for herself. Mary realized that all meetings and activities had to

revolve around making sure that women could prepare meals on time and complete their housework.

Another difference Mary identified was that women's groups had less ambitious, yet more practical desires for improvement. She worked with a mixed-gender group, JOKOO, which was predominantly women. JOKOO was a volunteer group that worked in ecotourism and used its profits for community projects. At the end of the tourism season, the group discussed what useful projects they would support. The men proposed to buy a tractor for the farmers to share in one of the neighborhoods. The women wanted to help a small group that had just started processing cashews to buy necessary supplies.

As Mary listened to the discussion, she knew that the tractor project was not feasible. JOKOO neither had enough money for the purchase nor was there a reliable stream of income to assist with storing and maintaining the tractor. The tractor would also not be as widely shared as the men envisioned because everyone needed to plant crops at the same time. On the other hand, Mary knew that helping the cashew group was entirely possible. It would have an immediate, albeit small, impact on the community. As Mary listened to the discussion, she reflected that women in general were more focused on the present in many aspects of their lives, perhaps because of the responsibility of ensuring there was sufficient food for everyone.

The women ultimately prevailed in the decision of how JOKOO would spend their profits. Mary was not surprised by this. She knew that even though men were considered to have power over women, the women had stronger personalities and when they took a position, they were unlikely to back down. The women were also generally more motivated and willing to work for what they wanted. Mary found this pattern somewhat contradictory, but not unique to Senegal—just because women were not treated as equals did not mean that they did not assert themselves where they were able to do so.

However, one woman defied many gender generalizations. Adjì ran a local program to support girls' education with the financial support of an American NGO started by a former Peace Corps volunteer. As a girl, Adjì had convinced her conservative family to let her continue her education. Later, she divorced her first husband when he objected to her continued work as a teacher after they were married. However, since marriage was the norm for women in Senegal, she found another husband who would support her desire to work. Adjì worked tirelessly for the girls in the program to ensure they stayed in school and that as many as possible were able to go to university. She was anxious to expand the program to support more girls. Despite her unconventional actions and attitudes, Adjì was a respected member of the community. While Adjì was still expected to run her household and did so, she was able to work in the formal economy and promote female education. Mary hoped this was an indicator that attitudes about the role of women in Senegalese society were changing.

Debriefing Process

As the two-year mark approached for Mary's group, the Peace Corps organized a close of service conference. The conference goal was to review the documents and activities volunteers were required to complete before leaving and transitioning home, but it was also a reunion for the

volunteers and a time to reflect on the past two years. Mary saw it in that order of priority—fill out forms, connect with friends, and if time remained, reflect.

Two required reports included a close of service (COS) report and a description of service (DOS) report. The COS report provided both the Peace Corps and Mary with an official record of what projects she had undertaken and what she had accomplished. The DOS report facilitated the introduction of subsequent volunteers into the communities. At times she had dreaded the prospect of both reports because she felt she had accomplished nothing. That awful day of the garbage sampling kept coming back to her along with other projects that had not succeeded at levels that met her standards. But as she wrote her reports, she realized that she had overcome not just those initial failures, but had accomplished a lot more than she first thought she had. Even the data from the garbage sample eventually had been used: the mayor presented it proudly when convincing a Belgian NGO to give the town money to buy donkey carts to haul garbage. It was not the outcome Mary had envisioned, but it was a start to making the town cleaner. Without initially recognizing it, she had found what was and what was not doable in her position in Senegalese society. She had also learned how to interact with people in a culture vastly different than her own.

After Mary returned to the United States, she recognized that some of the social norms and gender role ideas and attitudes that had seemed so incredibly foreign in Senegal were not quite as different as she had thought. It became hard not to compare everything to what she had experienced in Senegal, sometimes at the expense of Senegalese culture and sometimes at the expense of American culture. She even viewed past experiences differently: she recalled a time during junior year of college, when she and her roommates decided to have a nice “adult” Christmas party before everyone left for break. During the party, one of her roommates made the comment, “It’s so cute. It really is a grown-up party: all the guys are in the living room watching football and the girls are in the kitchen taking care of the food.” Mary didn’t think anything of it at the time, but now she saw the parallels with the women in Senegal cooking the meals while the men chatted in the shade of a tree. Work also evoked comparisons: once, the men in her office were surprised to learn she knew how to jump-start a car battery. She found a parallel in remembering that her host brothers in Senegal were impressed that she was able to change locks on a door.

By reflecting on her Peace Corps experiences over the following months and years, Mary found a key for continued growth and inspiration: by comparing her experiences in her own culture and in the foreign one she had grown to appreciate, she could understand both cultures better. She recognized that attitudes about gender in Senegal and America were remarkably similar in some ways while being radically different in others. She grasped how hard it can be to influence others when not in a position of authority. She also came to appreciate the power of reflection. How could these experiences enhance her growth as a leader and as a professional working in a mixed-gender work environment in the United States, or in intercultural work environments anywhere in the world?

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Other Useful Resources

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