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Field Notes of an RPCV: Reflecting on Development and Adolescence

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Reflecting on Development & Adolescence

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Abstract

They say the Peace Corps is the *toughest job you'll ever love*. In July of 2017, I began my service as a Peace Corps Youth Development Volunteer in Costa Rica. Nearly six years later, as I prepare to graduate with my master's degree in International Development at Clark University, I reflect upon those Peace Corps years of service and the many lessons learned while living in community, implementing youth projects, and, specifically, working with adolescent girls. My interest in studying international development and, particularly, deepening my knowledge of gender and development is directly connected to the Peace Corps. Therefore, it only seems appropriate to incorporate my Peace Corps service into this cumulative thought project- a MA Practitioner Paper- which seeks to analyze development paradigms and strategies concerning youth and adolescent girls. My analysis references primary materials distributed during my Peace Corps service, Costa Rican documents from the Ministry of Education, and my own firsthand experiences as a Peace Corps Volunteer. I also draw from my academic training at Clark University and a review of academic literature to further explore how development, its assumptions and programmatic interventions shape the narratives of adolescent girls and young women in the Global South. I conclude by incorporating autonomy and consent as two important themes which affect girls.

KEYWORDS: *Gender, adolescence, girlhood, youth, Peace Corps, RPCV, development*

Glossary

Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social (CCSS)	The Costa Rican Social Security Fund is responsible for most of the public health sector.
Instituto Costarricense del Deporte y la Recreación (ICODER)	The Costa Rican Institute of Sports and Recreation promotes healthy, active lifestyles.
Ministerio de Educación Pública (MEP)	The Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education.
Patronato Nacional de la Infancia (PANI)	The Costa Rican National Children's Trust, responsible for the welfare and protection of children.
Peace Corps Trainee (PCT)	An individual who is in training to become a Peace Corps Volunteer.
Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV)	An American citizen that has been trained and deployed by the Peace Corps to provide international development assistance.
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer (RPCV)	A Peace Corps Volunteer who has successfully completed their service and "returned" home.
United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)	The sexual and reproductive health agency of the United Nations.
Volunteer Reporting Form (VRF)	The quarterly report a PCV must submit to Peace Corps detailing their work.

Introduction

I begin this paper by echoing hundreds of Peace Corps Volunteers before me; the community I lived and worked in for over two years taught me far more than *I*, a "Youth Development Volunteer," could have ever possibly taught *it*. I am forever grateful for life lessons in humility, empathy, and community, which have left an indelible mark on my personal and professional trajectories. I also acknowledge the enormous privilege I hold, particularly as a highly educated, English-speaking American citizen, to professionally engage in the field of "international development." I hope to use this privilege to work toward a more equitable world for all and to amplify the voices of historically marginalized and vulnerable communities. I am also indebted to Clark University and, particularly, to those professors who fomented my understanding of the world and my own positionality in it. This paper is an opportunity to critically reflect on the impact of my Peace Corps service. In writing it, I hope to contribute to the scholarship on development and gender in three ways: first, I discuss Peace Corps as a development organization and the training materials and support it provided to me as a PCV; second, I evaluate my own implementation of "development" during my Peace Corps service; and third, I draw upon the girlhood studies scholarship to analyze how certain development paradigms and strategies portray youth and, more specifically, adolescent girls.

A Brief History of the Peace Corps

The Peace Corps is an independent agency of the government of the United States of America. Founded by executive order in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy, the Peace Corps' stated mission is to promote world peace and friendship through three goals: "To help the countries interested in meeting their need for trained people; To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served, and; To help promote a better

understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans" (Peace Corps, n.d., *About*). Celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2021, the Peace Corps has sent more than 240,000 PCVs to 143 countries around the world (Peace Corps, n.d., *Fast Facts*). Today, PCVs implement projects based in six sectors: agriculture, community economic development, education, environment, health and youth and development. Traditionally, PCVs commit to 27 months of service. Since 1996, *Peace Corps Response* also sends experienced professionals and RPCVs to complete short, high-impact assignments of 3-12 months.

Celebrated & Critiqued: Peace Corps as a Development Organization

For many, the Peace Corps embodies what is best about America. Peace Corps supporters say that PCVs are altruistic individuals who participate in capacity-building at the community level, ultimately promoting "sustainable development" over time. There are ample measurements of a 'successful' PCV or a 'successful' service. Referring back to the three goals, success can look like establishing a friendship with a community partner, facilitating a training program for teachers, or even sharing stories from the host country after returning to the United States. The Peace Corps has been politically popular with both sides of the aisle, and it is usually spoken of favorably in popular culture. Former Congressman Sam Farr once called Peace Corps "the American tax payer's best bang for its buck" (Hill, 2022). This sentiment, however, is certainly not shared by all.

There are many critiques of the Peace Corps, and cost is at the top of the list. The average PCV costs approximately $56,500 per year, and the total cost of Peace Corps operations is around $410 million annually (Hill, 2022). That being said, "the Peace Corps budget is about 1 percent of the foreign operations budget" (Peace Corps, n.d., *Leadership*). Therefore, the total cost of annual Peace Corps expenditures is a comparatively miniscule slice of the fiscal pie.

A second critique of Peace Corps is that its use of the word "Volunteer" is misleading, as it implies that Peace Corps workers are unpaid. PCVs are in fact paid a monthly stipend that meets the minimum requirements to live in the host country. Additionally, PCVs receive full medical benefits, they earn two vacation days per month (48 vacation days total), their international travel expenses are fully covered, and upon exiting Peace Corps, they receive a "readjustment allowance" of several thousand dollars. The nonmonetary benefits are also substantial. After successfully completing their service, RPCVs receive 12 months of noncompetitive eligibility for federal employment. RPCVs are also eligible for the Paul D. Coverdell Fellows program, which includes financial assistance for graduate studies. Thanks to the Fellows program and the Peace Corps, I received free tuition at Clark University to pursue my master's degree.

A third critique of the Peace Corps is summed up by Meghan E. Kallman in her book, *The Death of Idealism: Development and Anti-Politics in the Peace Corps*. She writes, "The Peace Corps is part of the American diplomatic regime and has been criticized as a colonial project virtually since its inception, as has the practice of international development generally… Should we really be giving voice to an organization with such a troubled history that so regularly conveys such troubled messages and enacts such troubled ideologies?" (2020, p. 14). Kallman (2020) further criticizes not only the organization, but also its PCVs. The archetypal PCV, she argues, is no longer viewed as altruistic. Instead, "The idealism driving many volunteers' desire to 'help out' is itself (or at least could be understood as) variously an expression of colonialism, imperialism, gendered heroism, naiveté, white supremacy, or some combination of them" (Kallman, 2020, p. 15). While it is certainly a harsh analysis, as a RPCV, I find that Kallman's observations hold some truth. Certainly, the awareness of historical injustices, systems of

oppression, and other pertinent topics varied greatly from volunteer to volunteer. During pre-service training, very little time was dedicated to thinking about these extremely important issues. In reviewing my training materials, I could not find any relevant activities that we completed as a group to address them.

I believe that the Peace Corps can do a better job of contextualizing present injustices and inequalities by incorporating lessons into pre-service training that critically analyze major historical events and Global North interventions, especially those orchestrated by the United States. While the US record in Costa Rica is not nearly as bad as in neighboring Nicaragua, for example, the US support of multinational companies such as the United Fruit Company led to the spread of global capitalism in Costa Rica and devastation for many families and communities. One activity that could be easily-implemented in Costa Rica or in any other host country is to assign a book related to the history of the country, that PCTs must read before arriving in-country. Establishing a base knowledge among all PCTs through a common reading assignment would foster difficult but necessary conversations about privilege, systems of oppression, and development work as a PCV.

Peace Corps & Development

In *Roles of the Volunteer in Development: Toolkits for Building Capacity* (Peace Corps, 2002, p. 7), the Peace Corps defines its approach to development in the following statement:

"The Peace Corps uses the term 'development' in human, people-to-people terms: ***helping people develop the capacity to improve their own lives.*** *By working within a human capacity building framework, the focus of the work is on the development of people, not things… The capacity building approach focuses on helping people learn to identify what they would like to see changed, use their own strengths, and learn new skills to achieve what they believe is most important."*

This broad approach to development is multi-level and includes project participants, professionals and service providers, organizations, and communities. The approach has merit because it emphasizes individuals and communities identifying what they believe is most important, and supporting them to build the skills that will enable them to achieve their stated goals. It does not support the idea that external actors know best, nor does it allow for external actors to make decisions on behalf of individuals or communities. It is driven from the bottom-up, versus from the top-down.

On a large scale, Peace Corps practices capacity-building by forming alliances first with national governments, and then with regional and later local partners. Before Peace Corps operations can begin in any given country, the host country must first solicit the assistance of Peace Corps. There is a lengthy initial process in which the host country identifies the capacities it wishes to build. Next, Peace Corps agrees to bring one or more of its sectors to the country, recruits and trains local professionals to facilitate programs and to run most day-to-day operations, and trains PCVs to begin or support projects in local communities identified by regional leadership. As long as Peace Corps remains in a given host country, it is practicing capacity-building at community, regional, and national levels. While PCVs do capacity-building 'in the field,' Peace Corps program staff do capacity-building through supporting mostly governmental efforts to implement new policies and to develop new curriculums or work plans that will be implemented nationwide.

In Costa Rica, the Peace Corps partners with numerous organizations including MEP, PANI, the CCSS, ICODER and others. Many partners, though not all, are governmental organizations, as there is already an established agreement between the host country's government and Peace Corps. As a PCV, this trickles down to the local level. The local schools,

PANI office, and health clinic are all examples of important partnerships. Local partners also typically include the *junta de vecinos* or the neighborhood committee, and other community-based groups. Families and individuals are also indispensable allies. The PCV often forms close relationships with the host family and its neighbors, as they are required to live with the host family for some or all of their service. The most successful PCVs are those who, over time, weave themselves into the very fabric that makes up the community.

However, there are potential drawbacks to the capacity-building framework as a development strategy. On the community level, one important assumption that this approach makes is that I, the Peace Corps Volunteer, have the skills and tools to support capacity-building. Though all PCVs receive extensive pre-service training (12 weeks) and additional trainings throughout the two years of service, it is difficult to know whether all PCVs will be successful "capacity-builders" once they are in their host communities. Peace Corps does attempt to measure 'successful' capacity-building skills by requiring all PCVs to submit a quarterly report called the Volunteer Reporting Form or VRF that documents their work in detail. But, as RPCV and placement officer Justin Tabor writes, "Peace Corps Service is about much more than numbers. Volunteers engage in cross-cultural exchange as part of their service and throughout their lives. These interactions are the bulk of the day-to-day that Volunteers live through in communities around the world" (Tabor, 2020). In other words, being a successful capacity-builder is not necessarily required or even expected in order to be a successful PCV.

Another challenge to the capacity-building framework involves relationships of power and the local political hierarchy of the community. Who speaks on behalf of the community and identifies its needs, its strengths, and its weaknesses is highly political. When Peace Corps Volunteers first arrive to their communities, they spend the first three months getting to know the

community and performing various activities to be included in a community diagnostic assessment. However, the ability of a Volunteer to accurately understand the dynamics of a community and its stated needs in three months is questionable at best. Additionally, language barriers and cultural differences can contribute to misunderstandings. Certain groups may be excluded from the conversation due to patriarchal norms or other relationships of power that may or may not be visible to the Volunteer.

Analyzing power is an important aspect of understanding how a community functions, and by extension 'building capacity.' A helpful resource for critical power analysis is political scientist John Gaventa's power cube (2006). He argues that power is made up of spaces, forms, and levels, which are "themselves separate but interrelated dimensions" (Gaventa, 2006, p. 25). To understand the cube, I will provide a brief example of power analysis from my service. As we live in a patriarchal world, women often hold less power than men at all- local, national, and global- levels. As a female PCV, I felt that my power increased during my service, not because of my gender, but because of my status simply existing as a white, educated American in Costa Rica. My power was visible, for example, when local Costa Ricans took me more seriously as a "Real American," while my colleague, a Latina PCV, was taken less seriously because of her racial/ethnic identity. However, my power was not the same in all spaces during my service. For example, I felt more power working at the school with children, while I felt my power was taken away from me when I found myself walking alone, and the lewd comments of a group of men made me feel very unsafe and vulnerable. This understanding of power can be helpful in breaking down the political hierarchy of the community. While I did not then know about the power cube, I think it would have been an extremely useful tool during the community diagnostic assessment process and beyond.

A final critique of the capacity building framework is that it tends to ignore systemic problems and offers isolated "solutions." Whether it be an individual participant or a singular community, the idea that one person or one community can simply build the capacity to overcome all obstacles is out of touch with real systems of power and oppression. The Peace Corps aims to be apolitical, and yet, challenging power and making demands is very much a political act. Many host communities where PCVs are placed have been historically marginalized and oppressed by their own government or by existing institutions. Building capacity is not necessarily enough to create meaningful change, though it can certainly contribute to consciousness raising and political activism.

Peace Corps Costa Rica Logistics

The Peace Corps has operated in Costa Rica since 1963, just two years after the agency's 1961 inauguration. PCVs primarily work in one of six sectors: agriculture, community economic development, education, environment, health and youth and development. Costa Rica currently has three operational sectors; community economic development, English (education), and youth development. In the next section, I will discuss the youth development framework.

The first stage of Peace Corps service, the pre-service training, is an extremely important part of Peace Corps service. All Peace Corps Trainees (PCTs) must complete training and meet the evaluation standards set by the project team's leadership in order to become a PCV. The pre-service training includes technical training, language training, health and wellness training, safety and security training, and intercultural competence, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (ICDEIA) training.

The pre-service training takes place during the first three months in-country. In Costa Rica, our cohort was located just outside of the capital city of San José. Each PCT was placed

with a host family, and the host families' homes were clustered in groups of three to five. PCTs were placed according to language level. For example, in my cluster, we were four PCTs. On days where we met for language training, we stayed in our local clusters. On days where we met for all other trainings, we met as a large group at a nearby community center.

The pre-service training includes a number of important moments. During "tech week," Youth Development PCTs are divided into small groups and go to visit a PCV in his or her community. It is the first opportunity for a PCT to "feel" what service will be like, and there are a number of technical tasks that the PCT must perform, such as facilitating an activity with children at the local school. It is also a great opportunity for mentorship and peer-learning. Another important moment is the counterpart workshop. After PCTs learn their community assignment, each designated community counterpart arrives to San José, meets their newly inducted PCV, and together, PCV and community counterpart participate in trust-building activities and create a plan for the PCV's first months in-site. At the end of the workshop, the PCVs and their respective counterparts depart to their communities. Assigned PCV communities are geographically situated in regional clusters, meaning that PCVs are placed in communities normally within one to two hours of each other, which facilitates a network of support for both PCVs and their counterparts.

Throughout the two years of service, PCVs will participate in a number of additional trainings, returning to the city of San José alone or with counterparts. Importantly for Youth Development PCVs, they will participate in a week-long integral sexual health training alongside a local counterpart, such as the high school biology teacher or school counselor. As I will discuss in the following section, sexual health is an important aspect of the Youth Development model in Peace Corps Costa Rica.

The Youth Development Framework

Guided by three Costa Rican professionals, the Youth Development leadership team was well-organized and dynamic. In week one of pre-service training, we learned the mission of Peace Corps Youth Development: "Youth will be empowered to make informed decisions about their education, health and lifestyles." We also immediately went to work learning about the Peace Corps Youth Development's development model, which is broken down into two goals and five main objectives. "The first goal is "Healthy Foundations." It includes; life skills and leadership, sexual and reproductive health and gender equity, and arts, sports, and recreation. The second goal is "Youth Support." This goal includes; parent support for youth, and service provider support for youth. The Development Model guides the design and implementation of projects. Over the course of my nearly three-year service, I collaborated on projects incorporating all five objectives. Some of these included; facilitating multiple girls' empowerment groups, supporting the first-grade physical education class, leading life skills workshops at a kids' camp, running a parent club, and designing and implementing professional development workshops for the Ministry of Education. Later in this paper, I will highlight two projects- *Chicas Poderosas* (Powerful Girls) and *Madres Adolescentes* (Adolescent Mothers)- to evaluate my own role implementing these projects and to further explore how development shapes the narratives of adolescent girls and young women in the Global South.

Three principles guide the Peace Corps approach to Youth Development. The first principle is practicing positive youth development, which means focusing on positive outcomes instead of problems, including all youth instead of targeting specific youth, understanding youth as active participants versus recipients of services, and viewing youth as an asset, not a problem. The second principle is striving to enhance youth participation. This includes youth who are out

of school, migrant youth and other vulnerable and marginalized groups. Finally, the third principle is implementing asset-based community development, or ABCD. According to an article by Forrester et al., "the tenets of ABCD are based on the premise that every community, no matter how troubled or disadvantaged, possesses unique (gifted and skilled) individuals, associations, organisations and institutions that need to be recognized and could be mobilized from within for development and community-building purposes" (2020, p. 444). During my first month in community, I partnered with students at the local elementary school and high school to create community maps, identifying areas that they liked to go, areas that they did not like to go, areas where they felt safe, etc. This is a concrete example of implementing ABCD, the creation of a community mapping assessment utilizing youth participation of distinct age groups.

My Peace Corps Service

It is difficult to measure the full impact of my Peace Corps Service. We were often told by the leadership team that working with youth is liking planting seeds. Sometimes, you do not see the fruit for many years to come. However, there are many moments I think fondly of, such as sharing *cafecito* and telling stories with local families, playing pick-up soccer with students after school, watching a young girl develop self-confidence, and supporting an LGBTQ youth as they quit self-harming and began to dream about a better future. These moments I think of as "wins." Of the many projects I created or co-facilitated as a PCV, there are two which I am most proud of: *Chicas Poderosas* (Powerful Girls) and the PANI group for adolescent mothers.

The *Chicas Poderosas* group was a girls' empowerment project, which I implemented in 2018 and 2019 with sixth grade girls, and again in 2019 with high school girls aged 13-17. After three months of collecting qualitative data such as formal and informal interviews, surveys and observations, and after also completing a comprehensive community diagnostic, I decided to

prioritize working with adolescent girls and the institutions that serve them for the duration of my Peace Corps service. I was especially interested in working with adolescent girls because of the compounded vulnerabilities that I observed in their lives. For example, there were few activities in the community for youth, and especially for the girls. Outside of playing soccer, going to the river, and attending church, youth didn't really have much to do. Girls were not frequently included in playing soccer, and swimming in the river was an activity that girls were almost never permitted to do without adult supervision.

In addition to limited recreational activities, girls faced other vulnerabilities. The *machista* attitudes of many community members, especially men, created a culture of violence that put girls in physical danger. Fear of violence from boys and men caused families to monitor their daughters much more strictly than their sons. Next, I noticed that many girls were dropping out of high school, usually after the ninth grade. Likely connected to the former, I also observed how many girls were in legally-defined "inappropriate relationships" with much older men, and finally, how the rate of teenage pregnancy in the community was significant.

To implement *Chicas Poderosas*, I first approached the sixth-grade teacher at the local elementary school, and asked for her support to begin a group for girls that would focus primarily on life skills, but also incorporate basic gender and sexual health information. That teacher enthusiastically agreed. Although she was unable to co-facilitate for many of the sessions, she was constantly supportive, and provided feedback having observed new, positive behaviors exhibited by the girls over the course of the program. The first group of sixth grade *Chicas Poderosas* in 2018 took place once every week for five months, and was interrupted by a major national strike, which shut schools down for the remainder of the year. I was also in the process of beginning a boys' group, but was unable to begin due to the strike.

In 2019, I implemented *Chicas Poderosas* with a new group of sixth grade girls and a new sixth-grade teacher as my counterpart. At the same time, I began a boys' group, *Somos Valientes* (We Are Brave), with the male physical education teacher as my counterpart. Both groups met separately once a week for three months. However, the sixth-grade teacher later decided she wanted to bring the two groups together, so we adjusted and continued teaching life skills programming to the combined sixth grade class that year. We also worked closely with a social worker from the local clinic to strengthen the application of the sexual and reproductive health curriculum.

At the high school level, I worked with the guidance counselor as my counterpart to implement the *Chicas Poderosas* curriculum in 2019 with nearly 20 adolescent girls. First, my counterpart and I worked together to customize eight sessions that we would cover in the following weeks, including the topics of leadership, communication, machismo, relationships, and others. Then, my counterpart chose the girls based on her experiences with them at school and her working knowledge of their lives and backgrounds. Finally, we met with the girls once a week for two months, to complete a total of eight *Chicas Poderosas* sessions. I would also go on to participate in other life skills and cultural activities at the school with the guidance counselor, the English teacher, and counterparts.

Now that I have described the implementation of *Chicas Poderosas,* I turn to my work with the PANI group for adolescent mothers. In this project, I worked closely with PANI and a representative of UNFPA, who was working in the region at that time. After meeting many adolescent mothers in my community, I learned that they were nearly all part of a group organized by PANI that provided economic support to enrolled girls and also facilitated educational workshops. In 2018, I began to attend the workshops and to develop relationships

with the participants. I observed that the attendance was often inconsistent, and that there were many barriers that prevented the girls from attending the workshops, such as unsafe transportation and lack of childcare. When in early 2019 I was asked to support the redesign of the workshops, I was eager to participate.

Together with PANI and UNFPA, we developed a series of five workshops incorporating themes identified as important to the girls such as: my body, gender violence, personal finance, parenting, and self-esteem. The workshops reached over 75 adolescent mothers aged 13-18. One critical decision we made when redesigning the workshops was to move them away from the town where PANI was located, and into three key local communities where the majority of the participants lived. This was important because it resolved complicated and often unsafe transportation situations for the girls. It also eased the burden of finding childcare for extended periods of time. After concluding the workshop series, we observed: an increased attendance rate, demonstrable feelings of sorority among participants, and utilization of new life skills. We also noticed how different PANI staff members expressed greater empathy for the participants and their lives. For most PANI staff, it was the first time they had visited the local communities and observed firsthand where the girls lived with their families. Finally, we were also able to provide better, more localized support and advocacy for the participants.

Challenges During Peace Corps Service

Three major challenges presented themselves during the course of my Peace Corps service: the early 2018 election of President Carlos Alvarado, the three-month national strike of 2018, and the Covid-19 Pandemic.

As a youth development PCV committed to issues of gender and equity, sexual and reproductive health was an important topic to me, and a key element of the youth development

framework. However, during the 2018 presidential election, when the more progressive candidate, President Carlos Alvarado, was elected over the much more conservative opposing candidate, Fabricio Alvarado (an evangelical pastor), a culture war between the camps of "traditional values" and "inclusion" broke loose. This 'war' was further exacerbated by a ruling from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to allow same-sex marriage in Costa Rica that same year. This created a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ youth, and also made it difficult to implement "sexual and reproductive health and gender equity" in a meaningful way at school. President Alvarado stepped into his role in May of 2018, and just one month later, the Peace Corps youth development program held a week-long sexual and reproductive health training with PCVs and their counterparts. There were multiple moments throughout the week that were tense, as many counterparts who held conservative views were uninterested in engaging with the training. Certain topics, such as rights of LGBTQ+ students, were hotly contested. Many counterparts simply refused to teach certain aspects of the MEP curriculum.

A second challenge that occurred during my service was the 2018 national strike. On September 10, 2018, Costa Rica came to a virtual stand-still. Facing large amounts of national debt, newly-elected President Alvarado pushed through a fiscal plan that taxed certain goods and services up to 13%. For three months, striking led by numerous union groups, including teachers' unions, blockaded key roads and caused significant economic and social interruption. The strikers were demonized by the newspaper *La Nación,* publishing 220 notices about the striking between September 10th and October 5th (Mora Solano, 2022, p. 63). Protests did not end until December 10th that year, effectively shutting down schools for the remainder of the year. For reference, the Costa Rican school year typically runs from mid-February to mid-December, with a week-long break for Holy Week (usually in April) and a two-week break in July.

The national strike sabotaged the remainder of the 2018 school year. Youth development projects were nearly impossible to implement; counterparts were unavailable, school facilities were under lock and key, and the community had limited resources to work with outside of the schools. In many communities, for example, there is a *salón comunal* or community hall, where the community can come together for events and celebrations. My community's *salón comunal* was an ancient, dilapidated structure that was neither safe nor practical for use. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the soccer field and the river were both recreational spaces, but they were dominated by adolescent boys and men. In most families, when youth are not at school, they are expected to be at home with their families. The family is usually intergenerational, and it is not uncommon for youth to spend a significant amount of time with their grandparents and other elders. To summarize, it was very difficult to interact with youth during the 2018 strike, especially the adolescent girls and younger children.

The final major challenge that occurred during my Peace Corps service was the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. After days of rumors and growing concern, in March 2020 the Peace Corps made the decision to execute a global evacuation of PCVs in all posts around the world, totaling nearly 7,000 PCVS in 60 countries. At the time, I had completed my original 27-month Peace Corps commitment and was in the middle of my third year of service focusing on more regional projects, particularly with MEP leadership and PANI. I was also collaborating with my counterparts to design and implement a girls' empowerment camp for adolescent girls, which would have taken place during July of that same year. The abrupt end to service and evacuation from Costa Rica was extremely difficult for me and for many other PCVs. I felt a sense of powerlessness being swept away from the work I had left unfinished and, more importantly, from the community I had become a part of and the place I called home. Back

in the United States, I was at once confronted with reverse culture shock and feelings of fear, isolation, and uncertainty as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded.

Exploring Development Paradigms at Clark University

Like so many others, COVID-19 completely disrupted my personal and professional life. The answer to the question of "What comes next?" wasn't immediately obvious. During Peace Corps, the professional experiences that had been most rewarding to me personally were those spent facilitating girls' programming. This greatly shaped my decision to pursue "development work" more broadly, and to study how gender and development interact more specifically. Nearly two years after being evacuated from the Peace Corps, I arrived at Clark University to begin my master's degree in International Development in January of 2022. The very first class I took that semester, titled "Sex and Development," immediately confirmed for me that I had made the right decision. In writing this MA Practitioner Paper, I have tried to analytically reflect on my experiences as a PCV in Costa Rica. I will now turn to a discussion of three development paradigms that frequently appear in girls' programming, drawing heavily on my academic training and, particularly, lessons learned from the class "Adolescent Girls and International Development," which I took during the Fall 2022 semester. I will also connect these paradigms to my own experience doing girls' programming as a PCV using the examples of *Chicas Poderosas* and the PANI group for adolescent mothers.

The first common development paradigm that appears in girls' programming is the "Victim/Heroine" dichotomy. Girls- especially girls from the Global South- are depicted as both victims and heroines, simultaneously needing rescue and holding the key to achieving international development objectives. As victims, girls are portrayed as having no agency to determine the outcomes of their own lives. Injustices of the patriarchy are done unto them, and

they need saving from international NGOs. As heroines, however, they are the saviors of the world, because despite their victimization, girls will somehow also lift their families and entire communities out of poverty through a tremendous, untapped potential that they have stored somewhere inside of them. This has also been called the "Girl Effect" (Chant, 2016, p. 20).

Though I was unfamiliar with the Girl Effect during Peace Corps, I reflect on how girls were often targeted in our youth programming efforts. "Doing gender" was one of the "cool" things to do as a PCV, and this was reflected in the number of girl empowerment groups that volunteers participated in. I believe that increased interest in girls in the Peace Corps was influenced by President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama's 2015 *Let Girls Learn* initiative, which partnered with the Peace Corps in numerous countries. According to an official White House press release, the Peace Corps trained over 2,800 volunteers and initiated over 330 community-identified projects through Let Girls Learn to "create the conditions necessary for girls to succeed" (The White House, 2016).

The language used to talk about Let Girls Learn reflects the "Heroine" narrative that is currently popular in international development circles. The Obama Administration described Let Girls Learn as an "initiative that employs a whole-of-government approach to helping adolescent girls around the world get a quality education that empowers them to *reach their full potential* [emphasis added]. As we look towards the future, it is clear that *educating girls is among the most strategic and effective investments we can make* [emphasis added] to achieve our foreign policy and sustainable development goals" (The White House, 2016). In my work with the *Chicas Poderosas* groups, I used a manual that was first produced by the Peace Corps Costa Rica WID/GAD Committee in 2011 and later updated by PCVs over the years. While it is impossible to pinpoint how Let Girls Learn may have shaped the popularity of girls' programming within

the Peace Corps, I do believe the initiative reflects a larger international development narrative that unwittingly influenced my work as a PCV.

A second, related development paradigm I observed in the Peace Corps is that girls' participation in formal schooling is equivalent to girls' empowerment. Since at least the 1990s, global interest in education as empowerment has dominated narratives about girls in international development circles (Cobbett, 2014, p. 312). Though this idea may seem positive on the surface, a deeper analysis reveals many issues with this understanding of girls' empowerment. Firstly, formal schooling and education are not synonymous terms. There are many ways to receive an education outside of the four walls of a classroom. I would also argue that there are many forms of education or knowledge that go beyond reading textbooks. In many cultures, knowledge is transmitted to children through their parents and elders, oftentimes through example. Secondly, restricting girls' empowerment to classroom attendance neither ensures a quality education in the classroom, nor does it examine the many ways in which girls can and do experience empowerment. In Cobbett's piece, *Beyond 'victims' and 'heroines',* she argues that the "conflation of schooling with empowerment has prevented awareness that some girls (or boys) might not choose school, which is ironic given that empowerment, a fuzzy concept though it is, is at its core about the ability to make choices" (2014, p. 314).

Understanding empowerment as the ability to make choices- including choices about going to school and getting a formal education- does not necessarily align with international development narratives. The Let Girls Learn initiative believes "ensuring that a nation's girls are *educated* unlocks human potential on a transformative scale, advancing progress in every area…When women and girls are *educated*, they have the tools to better participate in the formal economy and earn an income- and are poised to make a tremendous difference in all areas of

their lives…when women and girls are *educated*, they are a powerful force for positive change" (The White House, 2016; emphasis added). Peace Corps also believes that an educated girl is an empowered girl. There is a not-so-implicit understanding that formal schooling is the *correct* choice for youth, and especially girls. As a PCV, I constantly encouraged youth to go to school and to stay in school. I expressed disappointment when students left school. I now recognize that that disappointment was a reflection of this development paradigm, and ultimately not good for girls (or boys).

Although education was often equated with empowerment during my service, the mission of Peace Corps Youth Development also promoted empowerment through youth participation and capacity-building. My experience working with the PANI group for adolescent mothers put a strong emphasis on capacity-building. As I described earlier, we involved the girls in the decision-making process about what they wanted to prioritize in the workshops. One topic I found to be key to girl empowerment was "understanding my body." In conversations with many adolescent mothers, it was shocking to me to learn that most of the girls did not have a good understanding of their reproductive systems, menstruation, or pregnancy. After giving birth to their children, many of the girls had been pressured into using the birth control implant, a tiny rod inserted into the upper arm. They knew that they could not get pregnant again with the implant, but they were uninformed about the side effects. They were also unaware of the many sexually transmitted infections that could come from unprotected sex, as their primary concern was preventing a second unintended pregnancy.

The "understanding my body" workshop played a small part in empowering girls to understand how their own bodies work, how to protect themselves against STIs, and how to advocate for themselves in sexual relationships and in making their own health care decisions.

However, it is important to remember that the PANI group for adolescent mothers had conditionalities. In order to receive the economic support that PANI provided, the girls were required to attend the educational workshops and to maintain consistent attendance at school. The conditionality of attending school to receive cash assistance is a concrete example of how formal education is utilized as a development strategy for girls' empowerment.

The third development paradigm I observed during Peace Corps identifies adolescent girls' sexuality as something to be controlled. When adolescent girls express their sexuality, they are behaving "badly." Meanwhile, when adolescent boys express their sexuality, they are applauded for "acting like a man". An interesting study examining the construction of adolescent girls' sexuality in social media determined that girls' sexuality- and by extension, girls' bodies- are categorized by the media as dangerous. The authors of the study explain, "These stories [on social media] serve to warn adults that adolescent sexuality is dangerous for girls, while blaming girls themselves and absolving boys of responsibility" (Chmielewski et al., 2017, p. 12).

In addition to social media, there is a long history of religiously-imposed ideas about gender and sexuality that have influenced how adolescent girls' sexuality is viewed. Being chaste and virtuous are still highly regarded virtues in Costa Rican society, despite the reality often being quite different in most if not all communities. The term *Marianismo* describes this idealized, Catholic-based femininity that is commonly accepted throughout Latin America. Adolescent pregnancy, though frequent, is not accepted. It is a visual representation of the "danger" of adolescent sex and "sin" in the eyes of God.

Because society views adolescent girls' sexuality as dangerous, their sexuality must be controlled. Families monitored girls in ways that boys simply were not. Though many youths in the community made their sexual debut in high school, it was taboo to talk about it openly. When

a girl became pregnant, it was common to hear phrases like; “her life is over,” “it’s her fault she didn’t take care of herself,” or “she was looking for it.” Boys, on the other hand, received almost no criticism at all.

During the Peace Corps “Integral Sexual Health, Gender and Youth” training I participated in with my counterpart in June of 2018, the youth development program partnered with national MEP leaders to deliver comprehensive sexual health workshops throughout the week. The idea that adolescent sexuality, and especially adolescent girls’ sexuality, was “dangerous” repeated itself many times over the course of the training. Counterparts made comments that shamed girls for choosing to engage in sexual relationships. Ironically, those same counterparts were often the ones who obstinately declared that youth shouldn’t be taught anything pertaining to “integral sexual health” at school. Both Peace Corps and MEP promoted the idea that abstinence was best for youth. However, they both advocated (at least on paper) for integral sexual health education for all students, including LGBTQ+ students.

In the *Chicas Poderosas* groups, I approached sexuality as a normal aspect of being human. My counterparts and I utilized the Peace Corps Costa Rica WID/GAD manual for *Chicas Poderosas* and the official MEP sexual health curriculum throughout each program. In line with Peace Corps’ capacity-building approach to development, we worked on many life skills such as self-esteem, leadership, and decision-making, that would serve the girls in all areas of their lives. Though I did not condemn adolescent sexuality, I also did not promote it. Because of its controversiality in the community, I tried to maintain a respectful, neutral position by using the MEP curriculum as my guide, and I avoided disclosing how I personally felt about the topic.

Final Thoughts: Consent & Autonomy

Throughout my Peace Corps service, I spent many hours considering the concepts of consent and autonomy, particularly after interactions working with adolescent moms. I wondered, at what age or moment does a person receive autonomy? When I first arrived to Costa Rica, I learned about the new *Law of Inappropriate Relationships*, which criminalized certain sexual relationships between minors and adults in response to the high national rate of adolescent pregnancy. For example, the law stipulates that persons aged 13-15 cannot engage in a sexual relationship with an adult who is five years or more their senior. Consequently, a relationship between a 14-year-old and a 20-year-old would be considered a legally "inappropriate relationship" punishable by law. There are additional aspects of the law that criminalize the abuse of power in the case of family members and friends, teachers, coaches, and other trusted figures who engage with youth.

At first, I thought the law was a good initiative on the part of the Costa Rican government because it sought to address unequal power in sexual relationships concerning youth and adults. However, I quickly realized that new policies and laws are meaningless without conscientization and accountability. Not only did many adults accept "inappropriate relationships" as appropriate (or at least tolerable), those who did report "inappropriate relationships" to the authorities were quickly discouraged by the slow and often nonexistent legal response.

Though I have not yet settled on any one definition of consent or an age of autonomy, I find Cobbett's observations in *Beyond 'victims' and 'heroines'* to be helpful. First, she reminds us that "girls who are assertive and know what they want, might actually want sex" (Cobbett, 2014, p. 316). She also asserts that it is possible for "girls as sexual agents to experience violence within the context of relationships they have chosen to enter into" (Cobbett, 2014, p. 316). She draws on other authors, who point to the need for "relevant violence prevention and sexual health

programs" (Cobbett, 2014, p. 315). Understanding that girls are not asexual beings is important for thinking about how to best support girls as they transition from girlhood into womanhood. While sexual curiosity is perfectly normal, adolescent girls are also vulnerable to very real gendered violence in relationships with both peers and adults. Destigmatizing sex must play an important role in supporting adolescent girls and young women.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have taken the opportunity to critically reflect on the impact of my Peace Corps service in Costa Rica, incorporating the knowledge and analytical tools I have gained while studying for my master's degree in International Development at Clark University. First, I discussed the Peace Corps as a development organization and analyzed the training materials it provided to me as a PCV. Second, I evaluated my own implementation of "development" during my Peace Corps service. Third, I incorporated academic literature to analyze three development paradigms that frequently appear in girls' programming, and I connected those examples to my work with adolescent girls in the Peace Corps. I conclude this paper by extending my gratitude to the Costa Rican community that accepted me as one of their own, to the Peace Corps for both the personal and the professional opportunities it provided me with, and to the incredible professors at Clark University who challenged me academically and have prepared me to take the next step in my career in the field of international development.

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