

JJCF Personal Statement
Kate Bollinger · Summer 2010

My work this summer, enabled through a grant from the Jennifer Jessica Cohen Foundation, was very impactful on academic, professional, and personal levels. As an Advocacy Project peace fellow, I worked with the Women's Reproductive Rights Program (WRRP) in Nepal. While I have spent time in South Asia before in study and research capacities, I have never had the opportunity in this geographic area to become integrated into an organization and to understand the work environment, build relationships with coworkers, and make tangible contributions. This experience was a very important step towards my ultimate goal of doing development work in Nepal.

One significant lesson I took away from this summer – and which I am now doing a directed study on at school based on my summer work – is the value of local empowerment. WRRP's organization was such that they worked to empower women in villages to change their circumstances, lobby their government for change, and strengthen their local networks to make this possible. Except for me, everyone at WRRP was Nepali and spent time both in villages, in addition to the central Kathmandu office. Making village-level work a priority proved to be a very effective strategy to work to end uterine prolapse. As I continue on in the development field, having seen the effectiveness of their organization, I would like to continue working at a grassroots level which emphasizes cultural awareness in decision making. While I found my time in the villages this summer not always comfortable, it was definitely the part of my experience which impacted me the most.

The main reason why this time impacted me so substantially were my interactions with the women I met who were uterine prolapse sufferers. I worked with these women in several capacities – for interviews and during the quilt painting project that I worked on this summer. It felt very important for me to have visited these villages multiple times to spend time with these women on separate occasions. I felt that they really warmed up to me, they were so kind to me, and many invited me to their homes. The women were amazingly open during interviews in which I (through a translator) asked them some very personal questions regarding their difficulties as women in their village and their difficulties with uterine prolapse. One of them started crying as she described to me not having enough money to even educate her children who had so much promise.

Spending time with these women, in their villages, seeing the conditions in which they lived, and hearing about their difficulties, gave me a very tangible sense of how very privileged I am and the great importance of helping people, such as these women, who are in desperate circumstances. I am now back at school and having many discussions in classes and outside of class about international aid, women's rights, and sustainable development. I find these types of conversations take on an entirely new meaning now that I have seen these things in action in one of the poorest countries in the world.

Additionally, my coworkers in the main office at WRRP were amazingly hardworking and dedicated to the cause of uterine prolapse. I worked very closely with them, developed some wonderful friendships, and learned a lot from them. I'm sure I will keep in touch with them for many years to come.

I am so appreciative of the Jennifer Jessica Cohen Foundation for providing me a grant which helped to fund this very impactful summer.