

# GHANA: A GREAT PLACE TO BE

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*The following narrative describes the experiences of an African American woman who studied abroad in Ghana, West Africa, during her sophomore year in 2005. She explains how she overcame challenges as a single mother and as a nontraditional, minority student to realize this dream. She also highlights the importance for social work students, researchers, and professionals to become more active in serving the global community.*

In 2005, I stood in the middle of an elementary school in a squatter community of Ghana, overcome with disbelief. My stinging tears reflected the mixed emotions of admiration and sadness I discovered during my first trip to Africa, the Motherland. This school barely had walls, and was built on a foundation of determination and hope rather than concrete. There was no electricity, and no running water. The half-finished roof allowed the sky to provide natural light, but made the teacher and students vulnerable to the rains. There was a long, square-shaped basin hidden by a makeshift partition to serve as the lavatory. The school's teacher had committed his life to serving his community as an educator, and despite dire conditions—including a lack of school supplies and equipment—the children were hungrier for knowledge than for food to feed their malnourished bellies. This field visit was one of the most remarkable experiences I had in those seven weeks. Ghana taught me the priceless value of obtaining indigenous knowledge and skills to make the greatest contribution to humankind.

This cross-cultural experience changed not only my view of the world from a social work perspective, but my *choice* of the role I would play in it. In Ghana, I learned that the horizons of this profession are much broader than many people's limited perspective of social work—including social work students and practitioners themselves. While I was the only non-traditional African American social work major in a group of 13 students from universities across the United States, I realized that I too

could be instrumental in sustainable, human rights-based, social development for the poor and suppressed internationally. I finally got a taste of what it is like to be a member of the majority—in comparison to my status as a minority—in the United States. As a result, I have chosen to advocate for and serve as a living example of social work practitioners fulfilling their responsibilities by protecting the social welfare of the most vulnerable in our global community particularly in Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa is among the least-selected regions for studying abroad, and among the most expensive in terms of expenses and risks. My experience there taught me that social workers, specifically those from North America, are under-represented in cross-cultural education, research, and professional opportunities.

I had to jump over hurdles and push through obstacles to realize this dream. It was as if I had all the hope of a naïve, new gambler, but a deck of cards—aka circumstances—were stacked against me. First was my challenge of being a single mother of two children and dependent on welfare. I had to find adequate childcare for my daughter, who was 12 years old, and my son, who was only 18 months. I had no support from family members, the majority of whom resided outside of Washington, D.C. With the limited income of a small government grant that barely covered my monthly expenses, I had no extra money to cover costs not included in the study-abroad program to include some meals. Second, the Catholic University of America (CUA), where I was pursuing my

undergraduate degree in social work only offered study abroad programs to Europe. The stringent foreign language prerequisites automatically disqualified my participation. Third, I was a nontraditional student who had returned to school after almost ten years. I knew that I had head-of-household responsibilities and had reached a maturity level far beyond that of the other participants, but the very idea of letting this opportunity slip through my fingers forced me to come out of my "she shell", let go of my survival attitude of being "Miss Independent," and get over my predicted annoyance of being surrounded by 19-to-22-year-olds for an extended period of time.

I pieced together a team of supporters in the United States and abroad. I asked my youngest maternal auntie, the closest member of my family, to care for my children in New York. She agreed. I found out that Federal financial aid can legally be used for studying abroad. I advocated for myself and finally got CUA officials to accept transfer credits from the accredited Universities Studies Abroad Consortium (USAC), by way of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). If I had to, I decided that I would fast for those meals that were not covered in the program, and would test the concept of bartering. Then, I packed some used clothes and other belongings to exchange for Ghanaian goods.

"Akwaaba," the Twi word for "welcome," is the best word to describe my visit to Ghana. I never imagined meeting so many kindred spirits in a foreign territory. Upon arrival at the Kotoka International Airport in Accra, we were comfortingly embraced by the sound of applause from a crowd of Ghanaians waiting on their loved ones. I felt the love as if my family was there, too. Everywhere we went, the Ghanaians were so kind and generous. I was accepted as their "sister." They shared their personal hardships, dearest ambitions, and extraordinary triumphs. Since I was often mistaken for being Ghanaian, I had no problems adapting to the *tro-tros* (the cheap but congested, local transportation), or being the taxi-ride negotiator for my group.

As for extracurricular activities, Ghana is the place to be. Some of my most memorable

party nights took place in the Ghanaian clubs and restaurants. My classmates and I even celebrated a major soccer victory with our new Ghanaian friends. I also met social work professors from the United States and Ghana who were paving the way for international practice and research. I met change agents from other backgrounds, too, including those who were informally educated and working within local, national, and international organizations.

If I had chosen to study somewhere other than Ghana, I would have been deprived of some critical cross-cultural lessons and would never have met the international social workers who became my role models. USAC provided the mentors and resources for us students to have a rewarding and safe summer in Ghana. Through USAC we received a useful and informative orientation, which I highly recommend for any new cross-cultural exchange. We took residence in the International Hostel at the University of Ghana, Legon, in Accra, where we had our classes. We also toured special sites such as the slave castles, the Kumasi Kingdom, Kente cloth factories, and the thriving business district OSU, populated by many retired Americans who have moved to Ghana. Our courses included Twi Language; Society, Government and Politics in Ghana; African Music and Dance; African Literature; and, my personal favorite, Social Issues in Ghana. This class was taught by Dr. Brenda McGadney-Douglass (who would later become my mentor), then a visiting professor from the University of Toledo.

Dr. M-G, as I like to call her, exposed us to the good, the bad, the ugly, and the beautiful of social problems and social welfare in Ghana. Her course included field visits to orphanages, hospitals, slums, schools, non-profit organizations, and even a bakery run by disabled persons. I felt simultaneously sad about the poor quality of life and inspired by the empowerment approaches taken by community leaders. We learned about Ghanaian responses to child labor and neglect, malnutrition, sexually transmitted diseases, and the domination of an informal economy, as well

as detrimental traditional practices, such as child marriages and slavery.

In Ghana, Dr. M-G taught me important lessons that contributed to my future endeavors. For instance, she warned me to ask permission before taking someone's picture, and how to offer a small donation without attracting unwanted attention. She invited me to assist her in research on the effects of the 1994 multi-ethnic conflict in Northern Ghana, known as the "Guinea Fowl War." Interviews were conducted in a group setting of internally displaced women—most of them widows—who'd been resettled in Accra. Hearing the profound testimonies of these women made me realize that women are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and other violent threats during forced migration. This research included interviews with conflict-displaced Liberians in the Budumburam Refugee Camp located in Gomoa, Ghana, provided me with insight about the different challenges, policies, and responses between refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). I also gained an appreciation for gender-specific interventions to meet the specific needs of women and children.

Furthermore, this exposure in Ghana revealed my own privileges and affirmed my true, self-identity. Prior to this trip, I defined myself as a minority with several financial and social disadvantages in terms of access to quality education, employment, etc. But while in Ghana (the first African nation to gain its independence), where even the chefs in Chinese restaurants were black, and where there were no welfare benefits in the form of cash or food stamps to offer those in need, I finally realized my own powerful status. For example, I understood that I was fortunate to be a student and be able to secure financial aid to pursue my bachelor's degree. I also understood that I had a vantage point as an English speaker, fluent in the language of technology, and as a home renter, with an apartment that had unlimited clean running water and bathroom facilities. I then recognized my power as an American citizen with a passport and access to visas to nearly anyplace in the world. With this new awareness of my power, it broke my heart to

decline each of the few marriage proposals I received, because I knew for some Ghanaians a marriage of convenience is believed to be their only chance to enter the U.S.A., considered the "the land of milk and honey." Shamefully still today, cross-cultural exchanges are not mutually beneficial and usually result in a "North-South" (Caragata & Sanchez, 2002) exchange in which those from the North get to explore and sometimes exploit the countries, communities, and cultures of those from the South. I believe that with increased participation of social work students and practitioners in international opportunities, these exchanges can become more reciprocal.

Having the opportunity to study in Ghana for seven weeks changed me personally, academically, and professionally, and continues to produce positive results in my life. I now have a working knowledge of French language skills and living, working, and have also had studied in ten other countries within Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the Caribbean. In 2006, I became the first CUA student to be awarded the Institute for International Public Policy (IIPP) Fellowship, funded by the U.S. Department of State and the Department of Education to increase minority representation in careers dealing with international affairs. It was the opportunity I created to study in Ghana that strengthened my application, which is only accepted during the sophomore year. In my junior year at CUA, I created another study-abroad opportunity through the School for International Training (SIT). Again the minority in a group of 39 students, this time we spent an entire semester in Morocco, where I resided with a host family, stayed in a village for a week, rode a camel, and received scholarship support. I also published an article on this experience as a minority and nontraditional student (see below, Cowan, 2007). I was nominated by CUA for a Fulbright Fellowship. Though my proposal was not funded, I became the first Research and Office Assistant for CUA's new Center for Global Education, where I created the International Scholar of the Month Competition. I brought the knowledge, skills, and values gained from interacting with Ghanaian locals into the classroom by writing my thesis *Indigenous*

*Women: A Secret Ingredient to Sub-Saharan Africa's Sustainable Social Development.* In 2008, I became the first in my family to earn a college education. After graduation, I completed a ten-month internship in Senegal with "Africare," the first African American-owned development organization, which serves more than 20 African countries.

In December 2010, with a 4.0 GPA, I earned my MSW in macro practice with a concentration in Displaced Populations from Howard University School of Social Work (HUSSW). One of the highlights of my three semesters of advanced-standing curriculum at HUSSW for me was that I was selected as one of 21 diverse participants to go to South Africa for an alternative spring break (ASB). In South Africa, influenced by my experience in Ghana, I requested a field visit to an agency serving displaced populations in addition to our planned visits to traditional social work settings, such as orphanages and child welfare agencies. Thus, we visited "Bonne Esperance" (Good Hope), a shelter for refugee women and children funded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). As with my first exposure in Ghana to the plight of displaced persons, the women's sharing of their stories and coping strategies turned out to be a life-transforming and eye-opening experience for many of my peers. During a university-wide presentation on the South Africa ASB, I presented my research on the xenophobic violence faced by displaced persons in South Africa's urban areas. I also discussed some of the peace-building methodologies for integration implemented in South Africa, such as multicultural gardens.

Another impact of studying in Ghana was that I sought to be the first HU student to conduct my field placement at the humanitarian organization Church World Service (CWS). I was the Refugee Protection Advocacy Intern at CWS for two consecutive semesters, and learned a lot about advocacy and policies related to refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), U.S. foreign aid, coalition building, and working with inter-disciplinary teams. I applied my social work skills to write the first draft of a refugee resolution which advocates are pushing for the U.S. Congress

to pass in commemoration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. One of my first tasks at CWS was to co-edit an article published in *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine*, which I titled "Exploring the role of community partnerships and empowerment approaches in protection" (Eby et al., 2010). I helped advocate for people-centered policies and reconstruction efforts that focused on local capacity building and accountability.

In the mix of globalization, increased natural disasters, and declining economies, people from all disciplines and qualification levels are competing today for the same jobs. Consequently, due to the lack of social work representation in international organizations, people who lack community-based and people-centered perspectives are the ones making decisions which determine the quality of life for the most impoverished and vulnerable. Meanwhile, social workers have the responsibility, tools, and "Code of Ethics" provided by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2008) to efficiently and effectively serve these populations.

Johnson (2004) postulated that "despite these global changes, social work curriculum remains narrowly focused on a domestic perspective" (p. 47). In this regard, those social work schools that deliberately incorporate global perspectives and make overseas opportunities available will undoubtedly become more sought after by students wanting to pursue a career in social work. According to Healy's continuum, the internationalization of the social work curriculum could include the student being able to learn a second language, study or intern abroad, and gain hands-on experience with an international organization (Johnson, 2004).

To make my dream of going to Africa a reality, I had to be persistent and totally unreasonable with myself, family, and faculty. In Ghana, after witnessing first-hand the extreme levels of poverty juxtaposed with astronomical levels of hope and self-determination, I took an oath to do everything in my power to help bridge the gap between people from different cultures and internationalize the social work profession and

curriculum. Although I was the minority in my group, I defined what my role would be in the social development of the international community, and am still reaping the benefits of this experience. Social workers are necessary to achieve holistic, people-centered, sustainable solutions. An overseas experience may not seem possible with the demands of the social work curricula at the undergraduate or graduate levels, but I am here to testify it is doable and every bit worth any extra effort or agony it may cause you. I encourage students and professionals to create such rich and rewarding experiences sooner rather than later. And as I hope to have demonstrated, Ghana would be a great place to start!

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