

A life-changing experience

Nicola Gibson is currently working in rural Bangladesh as a team leader for a group of volunteers from the UK and Bangladesh, focusing on sexual and reproductive health, vocational training and youth participation in local government. Here she talks about the experience and links to the profession

Volunteering in a developing country is something I have always wanted to do, and although I am not here as an occupational therapist, I have noticed how much being an occupational therapist has shaped how I analyse and approach situations and how many similarities there are between development work and occupational therapy.

As occupational therapists, we are acutely aware of the impact that engaging in meaningful occupations has and the link this has to self-actualisation, general health and wellbeing. We therefore understand the massive implications of a person or group of people being discouraged and at times denied access to meaningful occupations, such as school or work.

In fact we even have our own term for it – occupational injustice. This is when a person's occupational rights are violated, for example when people are excluded from participating in meaningful occupations or when occupations are imposed upon them (Whiteford 2000).

Specifically, what I noticed in rural Bangladesh was occupational marginalisation, where the decision-making process to engage in meaningful occupations is taken away and there is a dictating force about where, when and what occupations a person may engage in (Townsend and Wilcock 2004).

This is seen, generally speaking, with women and girls in Bangladesh. For example, particularly in rural areas, girls are married young; 52 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18, and 18 per cent are married before 15 (UNICEF 2016).

The girls are then generally pulled out of school. Many girls have aspirations to finish school and start a career, but for a variety of different reasons this is not possible. Women are also discouraged from working and even if they are encouraged there are several barriers in place to accessing and maintaining work.

Usually, women in our target communities would like to work and the benefits of this would be huge, not just to the women, but to the wider community and the overall development of the country.

Our team, as part of the wider VSO organisation, worked on reducing these barriers to occupational performance in a number of different ways. One way was by organising community events to challenge these gender stereotypes.

One event we organised had keynote speeches from local women working in jobs they were passionate about, who spoke about the challenges they faced, but how important it is that girls and women are allowed the opportunity to stay in school and pursue employment.

Another way was by organising free handicraft, tailoring and business training for women who expressed an interest and a drive to turn this interest into a career. We also work with the local community to strengthen links with the local government to access training and support services for women.

Women and girls are often prescribed their occupations once they are married; to cook, clean and look after their family, without any consideration about what they may like to do or even knowing what options are out there.

That is why we have placed a big focus on empowering women and girls, as well as educating local communities about different ways that women can contribute to society. During our handicraft training it was amazing to see the benefits of engaging in something meaningful and productive, something that they decided they wanted to do.

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'Give a (wo)man a fish and you feed her for a day; teach a (wo)man to fish and you feed her for a lifetime'; this proverb about the importance of enabling people to support themselves is just as relevant to volunteering in the development sector as it is when working as an occupational therapist.

My training has ensured that all the work I do focuses on enablement and empowerment, supporting people to learn skills and provide them with information that will enable them to support themselves.

As I have a very clear understanding of this, this is something I have been able to push with my own team and ensure that all the work we do follows this ethos.

An example of this is by supporting and training local community members to provide training and information to the wider community on important issues such as maternal health and access to local government support services, and ensuring our volunteers take a step back during this process.

Just as your role as a therapist is to support your client to no longer need you, it is the same for sustainable development; the aim is for the community to continue to develop without support for external agencies.

This has also had an impact on the way I approach being a team leader, specifically by setting up an environment that enables volunteers to develop skills and confidence and supporting them to make their own decisions.

There are many things that this experience has taught me – improved flexibility for example, as well as a more global view of the world and a better understanding of cross cultural working – but one thing I have noticed that I did not expect is a developed understanding of how a person's environment, particularly their culture and the way they have been brought up, has an effect on so many aspects of their life.

Of course this is something we speak about often, however it was not until being out of Bangladesh for a month I noticed how living in this environment has impacted my behaviour and the way I view the world, in both positive and negative ways.

From the way I think about dress, to the way I act and also view the world as a woman. For example, I have always been a very independent person who likes their own company, however after spending four months constantly with other people, I found I no longer felt comfortable being on my own.

I have found this particularly interesting and it has helped me develop a better understanding about the people I work with here, and when I return to work I feel it will give me a better understanding about my patients.

I feel the skills I have as an occupational therapist have enabled me to become an effective team leader in development work, and in turn, this experience will also improve my skills as a therapist.

It is a cliché, but this has been a life-changing experience and I certainly encourage those who are interested and able to, to engage in overseas development work.

References

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Nicola Gibson is currently on a career break from the NHS and is volunteering in Bangladesh as a team leader for ICS (International Citizens Service) and VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas)

