

30 STORIES OF SERVICE

JOINT JAPAN WORLD BANK Graduate Scholarship Program

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How has the JJWBGSP help you contribute to your country once you have completed your program?

I was born in El Salvador in 1976, and in 1979 a painful civil war disrupted for 12 years in my home country, El Salvador. I lived all my childhood in a country ripped apart by conflict. When peace accords were finally signed in 1992, I wanted to understand how we could collectively rebuild our nation, how we could bring prosperity and opportunities to the majority of Salvadorians, that until then, had lived under poverty and limited political representation. That is why I decided to pursue an undergraduate degree in Economics in El Salvador, and afterwards specialize in development economics by completing the Master in Public Administration in International Development at Harvard University. This academic background allowed me to come back to my country in 2005 and then work across different development issues.

What did you learn about yourself during your experience?

After finishing my graduate degree at Harvard in 2005, I returned to El Salvador and started working as an adviser to the Minister of Economy. There, I was able to apply the broad perspective that the education at Harvard gave me, to real life problems. And since 2005, I have participated, first, in the government, then in UNDP, and now in academia, in the discussion and in the process of decision making of different public policy issues affecting my country. This definitely wouldn't have been possible without the JJWBGSP, since having a graduate



degree in development from a prestigious university was key to start opening doors. Studying abroad also strengthened my self-confidence and my conviction that technical advice is key for better public policies.

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What was the most rewarding and challenging part of your study abroad experience?

The most rewarding part was to prove to myself that I was capable of attending Harvard. I was always a good student, but never considered myself a genius. I thought Harvard was only for outstanding people and that I couldn't fit it. But I did.



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Moreover, at Harvard I was a teaching fellow for two courses, and for me, this was personal proof that if you work hard, and you trust yourself, you can achieve anything.. I guess, what I'm trying to say is that the most rewarding experiences usually come from within ourselves... The most important challenge of studying abroad was probably the language. I didn't feel confident in English when I arrived at Harvard and I was pretty nervous about my ability to effectively communicate in English. And then, after a couple of weeks I realized I could improve, I said to myself, "you can do this", and I did. I know that many talented people do not apply to studying abroad just for the fear of a different language. But I can assure them from my personal experience, that the fear is largely overestimated.

Why do you think you were awarded a JJWBGSP scholarship?

To be totally honest, 13 years later, I still don't know why I was awarded a prestigious JJWBGSP. I guess sometimes you just need to be in the right place and in the right time.

I know that I was the first Salvadorian studying the graduate degree and I studied at Harvard and maybe that was a positive factor for me getting the scholarship. I would like to think that the fact that I was a young woman, genuinely interested in the development of my country, and in making a difference, was an element that was taken into account in order to get the scholarship.

Even when I don't know why I got the JJWBGSP, I am aware that I need to return what I received to society. So more young women can have the opportunities that I had.

What role did your family, friends, and/or employer play in your study abroad experience? How has this helped or hindered your journey?

My family, my close friends, my employer, and above all, my husband, were key, both in my decision of studying abroad, and in my motivation during the two years of my academic experience. Having someone that trusts you and that supports you through the process is a key ingredient. In my case, my husband. but also my parents, especially my dad, convinced me that I could do this.

As an alumnae, what advice would you offer to other women who are considering applying for the JJWBGSP?

1. Trust yourself. Even in the XXI century, we women tend to underestimate ourselves. It is normal to have doubts when you apply to such a competitive scholarship program. What is not fair, is that you believe that you cannot make it. You can, and it all starts in you. Work hard.
2. Support other women. Gender gaps are still persistent in every part of the world. One must never forget what motivated you in the first place. There is so much we, as women, can do for each other.
3. Have fun. We spend so much time thinking about the future and so little enjoying the present time. No matter what happens, be present, enjoy the process.

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