

Sam Jezak
Dominican Republic, ETW
Summer 2015

My time this summer in the Dominican Republic had both atmospheric highs and some of the lowest lows that I can remember. The trip was the first time I have really been outside of the comfortable bubble of the U.S., so it should not be surprising that I experienced a sharp learning curve and at the same time had the time of my life. All of the cliché things that are supposed to happen when traveling alone, found on the likes of BuzzFeed and Facebook, did indeed happen, but thankfully the Dominican Republic offered many unique experiences that made my time even more enjoyable. Of the multitude of challenges I experienced in the Dominican, the difference in gender roles, the general poverty and crime that comes from it, and the vast language gap were the most impactful.

A big topic that was frequently brought up when talking to people to prepare for the trip was the difference in gender roles in greater Latin America. What I observed was one of the more interesting parts of the experience. Women in the *marianismo* tradition are expected to be humble, subservient, and dependent on men for their livelihoods as well as in their personal lives. However, I have found that many women in the Dominican show much more agency and initiative than the men I have seen. The owner of the hotel I am now in, who is originally from Romania, but still is a woman small business owner in a Latino country and must grapple with the expectations nonetheless, practically runs the place on nothing more than her own sheer will. The wonderful woman who owns the four table restaurant that provided me with undoubtedly the best meals of my time there, as well as lots of advice and conversation, also runs her own business, and even once told off a fish merchant who was trying to cheat her, quite independently. Additionally, the unfortunate reality of single mother homes is just as relevant in

the DR as it is in the States, and creates situations that ride in the face of tradition. These women have no choice but to provide income as well as rear their children by themselves. Many become small business owners, like the women previously mentioned, and are deserving of respect and admiration.

However, not everything is as positive. One of the more frequent manners in which gender roles are expressed is the harassment of women walking down the street by many men, especially drivers of the motoconchos, or motorcycle taxis. Whistles, more than obvious lingering stares, and cries of “Ay mami!” greet the majority of women whenever they pass by the groups of drivers, huddled at most intersection corners like hungry packs of wolves. At first, I rolled my eyes, acknowledged to myself that it was wrong under my breath, and chalked it up to a cultural difference. But I have also seen multiple instances of this very thing happening in big cities in the US. What does that say? I have yet to fully figure that out. Is it a product of Latino immigrants coming to the US and bringing their backwards and misogynist habits with them? That seems like a lazy analysis. While the act is seemingly accepted and reinforced here in the DR, implicitly if not explicitly, are the residents around the woman walking in New York any different? Disappointingly, no one steps up and speaks out, similarly allowing the behavior to continue unchecked. Maybe the Latino world is not so far behind the US in gender relations, not because they have advanced beyond traditional roles and actions, but because many in the US haven’t either.

I was welcomed rather rudely to the Dominican by thieves at the airport stealing a rather large amount of money from my luggage as I was clearing customs. While I suspected that the perpetrator of the crime was a member of customs enforcement itself, I was powerless to challenge anyone. Welcome to the world outside of the comfortable first world and Notre Dame

bubble. Looking back at it, not having everything strapped to me walking to and through the airport was the first mistake, but also not realizing that I looked like a walking ATM to some in the country was another. Approximately 41% of the country lives at or under the poverty line, so any extra money laying around would go a long way in their lives. As someone with quite light skin, which the Dominican sun loved to burn, I easily stood out as an outsider from the locals. I did my best to shed the Ugly American Tourist vibe, doing what I could to follow the local customs, but regardless, I was constantly playing with a different set of rules. While there were only a couple of instances that I was directly asked for money, it was commonplace that I was hilariously overcharged, which I could usually talk down. The hardest thing to adjust to were the constant propositions from the prostitutes in the country, which is legal but still a jarring difference from the U.S. Walking down the street I was greeted with whistles from the working women, and only once was there any real resistance when I politely declined. Despite living in the country for over a month, I did not adjust to seeing men in my hotel come home with different women every night, and pay them over breakfast at the bar the next morning. At the same time, who am I to judge people trying to combat the endemic poverty that grips the island?

I thought I knew Spanish going into the Dominican. It turns out that what I knew was American classroom Spanish, not everyday Dominican Spanish. The local dialect was nearly incoherent to me for at least the first week, and it took me until the fourth week to truly be able to having long conversations without constantly asking for clarification. Most Dominicans do not use “Ss” except for the first syllable, often times cut off the last syllable of their words all together, and have quite the slang vocabulary that comes from a mix of Spanish, Taino- the local native language that was wiped out, and African languages from slaves brought over to work on

the sugar plantations. At one point, a waiter had to sit down with me and explain to me all the common slang expressions, laughing at my misunderstanding of what was being said.

The month in the Dominican had the purpose of examining the education system in the baseball academies in the country. It provided invaluable firsthand experience and access to the people on the ground, working in the academies. This material will eventually be my senior thesis, and here is a summarized version of the results.

Unlike American, Canadian, and Puerto Rican born players, Dominicans and other Latino players aren't eligible to be drafted, but can be signed as free agents once they reach 16. In the olden days, the cream of the Dominican crop would be signed by roving scouts from a few American teams. This didn't fully tap the talent of the baseball-crazed island though, and in the '80s the Dodgers opened an academy to sign and train players on site to prepare and develop them for their minor league system, and eventually if they were good enough, the major league team. Other organizations caught on and eventually every single organization had an academy on this island of just 11 million people.

Dominicans now make up between 35-45% of all professional players in the majors and minors, a crazy stat given the island's population. There are many reasons behind this, but maybe none more than the island's dual rates of 14% unemployment and 41% of kids that don't finish primary school (6th grade in the DR). Baseball is a way to hit, throw, and run away from poverty into a better life for a young boy and his family. However, in the past 15 years this system has come under intense scrutiny from the American media, who paint a picture of an exploitive system of new age indentured servants, a neo-colonialism where the players, only in their teens, are used to expand the bank accounts of wealthy American owners for pennies on the dollar (Dominicans usually sign for a fraction of what drafted players do). Ouch. Not good for business.

The owners and MLB responded, expanding the education programs for kids at the academies and promising to interact and give back more to the communities where they set up shop.

This response has been incredibly varied in its implementation and execution, largely due to the fact that the organizations are free to design their programs however they want, without a centralized directive from the league office. Some teams go all out, some teams do the very minimum. Even among the best teams, which were basically all I went to since the bad teams weren't all too keen on showing me around, they don't run their programs the same. The distinction can be broken into two factions-those that focus on baseball related readiness, and those that look to educate the whole person, not just the ballplayer.

The organizations that focus more on the baseball side spend their time teaching English and cultural lessons revolving around baseball. Vocabulary covered is overwhelmingly baseball terms, listening exercises are videos of coaches instructing in English, and oral exams are typical baseball situations and language. While they do other activities as well, including exercises on financial planning, social media training, and critical thinking (often in the form of board and card games or logic puzzles), it is all framed by and leading to the goal of helping the players be better suited to life on the baseball field in the US, not a moral need to provide education.

Contrast this with the other group of organizations, who hold the formation and education of their players as people a very high priority. These teams stress education for life and for the benefit of the player in their future endeavors, in addition to advantages it will give when playing in the US. Just as importantly, they put their money where their mouth is, literally, devoting many hours and resources to education that other teams simply don't. They possess rigorous standards, in-depth curricula, and have the vast majority of their players speaking very proficient English with a high school degree in their hand by the time they walk out the door, whether that

is to the US to play, or, if they are released, back home. It's no coincidence that the teams in this group have the highest rate of Latino ballplayers reach the majors. Their ownership groups have recognized the payoff and have invested both in resources and will, and are reaping results on the field while also responsibly providing their players with a Plan B if their baseball careers don't go as planned.