

When I think of “home,” I feel fortunate to think of more than one place – the two most prominent that come to mind are my home in Charlotte, North Carolina and the home I have in Quito, Ecuador. There is, however, a stark contrast between these homes, most notably in the roles that each family member plays to make things run smoothly. I was brought up in an environment that in many ways challenges traditional gender responsibilities – my parents work together in the kitchen, both of them work hard at their jobs, and they view their marriage as an equal partnership. The home in which I lived for four months in Quito functioned smoothly because my host mom took care of all household chores and my host dad worked as an engineer outside of the home.

Through conversations with my host dad about his marriage to my host mom, I learned that he saw women’s value more in their efficiency in running the household than in anything else. This realization challenged the framework in which I had grown up, and I suddenly became hyper aware of my gender both inside the home and out. I became very sensitive to “cat calling,” comments about what I was/was not capable of because of my gender, and looks of surprise when I described the way my own home functions in the U.S. Gender was, for the first time, becoming a factor in how I interacted with people.

As my mindset expanded and I learned that not all homes function the way my Charlotte home does, I grew to appreciate the freedoms I have in the States that I struggled to find in Ecuador. As I continued to have conversations with my host dad about gender roles, I learned that his views are rooted in what his father thought, which were rooted in what his grandfather thought, which helped me understand that we are all incredibly shaped by the convictions of our cultures and the people around us.

My advice to other females studying abroad would be to listen and ask questions before creating judgments. Prepare yourself by talking to others who have studied abroad in similar settings, but know that nothing can completely prepare you for the difference in mindsets you will likely experience. Be ready to learn and be ready to embrace that our backgrounds make us different from each other, and that we can *start* to understand these differences by simply sitting down at the dinner table and making ourselves available to listen.