

Personal Safety

(adapted by SPANA from the Guidelines for US Peace Corps Workers in Morocco)

In an entirely different culture, on top of regular rules-of-thumb there are some other important cultural/social aspects of life that should be considered in order to maintain someone's personal safety within maximum range. Developing strong interpersonal skills and maintaining a safe-profile behaviour will help you to enjoy this unique experience.

Following these basic guidelines should help avoid problems and provide for a good, safe quality of life for any foreigner in Morocco (much is common sense and/or knowing about your environment):

Be careful:

- being out after dark, especially for females being alone
- being alone in bars/restaurants, especially after dark
- allowing unknown people inside your home, at any time of day and especially at night
- consumption of alcohol-containing drinks when alone in public places
- patronizing bars/restaurants/public or private places known to be frequented by potential criminal elements and/or alcohol/drugs users
- personal relation of any kind (not work-related) with potential criminal elements and alcohol abusers
- personal relation of any kind (not work-related) with homeless people/street kids
- inappropriate dress (i.e. shorts, short skirts, tank-tops, tight clothing)
- travelling alone in unknown areas or in areas considered unsafe, inappropriate or not recommended by the local people
- involvement in any way in local ethical/political/social/religious debates or conflicts
- involvement in any illegal activities
- involvement in street conversation with unknown people
- accepting car rides from unknown persons

Also, some other steps are to be considered as being part of a strong support system:

- identifying the neighbours and the proper way to communicate with them in order to receive prompt assistance at any time
- building a strong relationship based on sincerity and mutual respect with counterparts and work mates
- open and immediate discussions with any staff member about any concern or safety-related issues
- maintenance of safe and secure housing conditions
- only give your telephone number to people you know well; if you receive unsolicited or harassing telephone calls do not engage in conversation with the caller

- identifying the unsafe environments in town as soon as possible and avoidance of them at all times
- building effective communication channels with the local community and with colleagues.

‘The most effective way of being safe is to avoid putting oneself in unsafe situations.’

Balancing cultural sensitivity with managing personal safety

‘You do NOT have to be nice to everyone or to anyone at all for that matter. This is a job, not a popularity contest.’

A great deal of emphasis is placed on being "culturally sensitive." When it comes to personal safety issues, you may find yourself in a variety of difficult situations. You're torn between doing what you want or need to do and what you think is "culturally appropriate." This is especially true during your first few weeks when you're still trying to make sense of which people are, what they want, and whether they can be trusted. The temptation is to always be polite or respectful of other people, which is good advice for everyday interactions, but not for situations where your safety is at risk.

‘There is no contest between cultural sensitivity and safety; safety must ALWAYS come first. Just be smart-put yourself first.’

What feels threatening to one person may not be a problem for someone else. However, within the framework of Moroccan culture, there are some behaviours that are definitely inappropriate and should be a cause for heightened awareness.

Warning signs

- Anyone who comes to your house/hostel after dark
- An evening invitation where you're the only guest
- Persistent questions about your personal life
- Suggestive comments
- Any touching from a stranger on any body parts you consider to be private. Between friends of the same sex, handholding is common.
- In Morocco being touched at all by a person of the opposite sex is a violation of Moroccan cultural norms.

‘Being culturally sensitive never demands that you behave inappropriately.’

Some Points

- Don't worry about offending people or being rude especially if the situation makes you feel endangered.
- Your security/safety may be at risk especially when you aren't with people you trust.

- Being safe means knowing your environment. When you first arrive in Morocco, you don't know anything about your environment, so you are not really safe and you will not feel secure. Like anywhere else, in Morocco, after you know your surroundings, know where you are going, know whom to trust, know what is normal and what isn't in respect to cultural differences and situations, then your judgement will be better and you will feel safer.
- Men do not get as much harassment sexually on the street, but they may still get harassment!
- Culturally, women do not go out after dark, so a woman alone at night is an odd sight and may draw attention.
- Don't act helpless; try to be self-assured with maybe just in need of a little assistance
- Some actions that are potentially risky:
 - Going to unknown places alone at night
 - Going to the police station
 - Going places with people you do not trust
 - Being in (sketchy) parts of town like the train and bus stations

An important part of working cross-culturally is being able to understand and accept different values, customs, and behaviours. However, you're under NO obligation to tolerate comments, attitudes, or actions that you feel are a threat to your personal safety. Cultural sensitivity NEVER means being polite or respectful at the cost of your security.

Risk-reduction strategies

ON THE STREET

- walk confidently
- avoid eye contact (in some place) and make eye contact (in some places)
- wear sunglasses if you need to walk with your head high
- carry money in front pocket and another secure place
- avoid high-crime areas
- dress appropriately at all times

WHILE TRAVELING

- travel with others
- for women identify other women travellers
- carry only necessary possessions
- be familiar with your route
- travel by train whenever possible
- always let someone know where you are going and when you will be back

TAXIS

- separate your money, small change for the ticket fare and hide the rest
- evaluate the fitness of taxis and their drivers and make a mental note of the number on the door
- sit in the back

- ask for the meter to be put on and that it starts!
- It can be reassuring to ask him to wait while you unlock and enter your lodging late at night

AT NIGHT

- avoid high-crime areas
- walk in well-lit areas
- travel as a group
- ask for / accept a walk home

IN CROWDS

- be mindful of possessions
- be aware of the people around you
- avoid being distracted
- have an “out”

Being aware of your surroundings

Being aware of your surroundings is perhaps the most important element in avoiding trouble. Be alert to potentially dangerous situations, and avoid places and people that might lead to trouble.

- Become familiar with the paths to and from your house; know alternative ones you can use in case you should need them.
- Avoid always taking the same path at the same time of day. Vary your itinerary to discourage anyone who might be watching your routine so as to bother you.
- Know where there are alleyways and doorways where someone might hide and attack you or pull you out of sight.
- Be aware of areas which are habitually unlighted, and avoid them if possible.
- Notice whether there are individuals or groups of people who seem to be in particular places much of the time; if they seem hostile, avoid those places.
- Cross the street or change paths if you find yourself walking in a large group of men, or past a cafe or in deserted street, where there might be no one to assist you in case of difficulty.
- If you think you are being followed, turn around and look. Don't leave yourself in suspense or worry about embarrassment if there is no one there. Looking into their eyes can be misread as a forward gesture so be careful.
- Choose busy streets as opposed to empty or dark ones

Dealing with harassment from acquaintances

Harassment comes not only from men in the streets, but also from colleagues and acquaintances. Because men make assumptions about male/female relationships, and stereotypes regarding foreign women, be cautious in accepting invitations from men.

- Do not let yourself be put in a situation over which you have no control, or to which you have no alternative but to give in to circumstances set up to trap you.
- Always carry money with you for a taxi, a bus, or even a hotel, if needed.
- Try to know what transportation and/or hotels are available near where you are going.
- Know whether you have a friend or acquaintance nearby who could be of help if needed.
- Do not worry about insulting a person who has put you in a difficult position. Don't be afraid to question him or point out to him that he is out of line. Do not let yourself be made to feel that you are somehow to blame -- that because of your actions or naiveté you invited trouble. Refuse to allow another person to throw the blame back on you.

Your appearance (clothing) may attract or discourage harassment.

- Walk with confidence; show assertiveness.
- Appear to have a destination. A wandering look may attract someone eager to assist in pointing the way or in steering you wrong. A wandering look may also make you appear timid, weak or vulnerable.
- Don't burden yourself with packages and bundles that tie up both hands and make movement difficult. If necessary, be ready to use any packages you are carrying against an aggressor.
- Both men and women should avoid going out alone at night, especially in areas known for trouble. Women accompanied by a man are far less likely to be harassed, so don't be afraid to ask someone to accompany you.
- When you are walking with another person, lock arms. Two people who are obviously together are less likely to draw comment or harassment, and the locking of arms will force people to walk around you rather than cutting between you.

Reacting to harassment or attack

Your reactions to harassment or attack will, of course, differ depending upon the situation and upon yourself. This is another good reason for being very much aware of your surroundings. Should a situation arise which calls for reaction, you want to choose one which is safe. Often it is best simply to ignore what is happening. If, however, that is not successful, or if you wish to respond, bear the following in mind:

- If you are alone, you may not want to incite further aggression by striking out or verbally attacking your aggressor.
- If you are in a crowd, you may want to draw attention to an aggressor by yelling, letting know people around you what is happening. The embarrassment may make him stop.
- Ask for help. Step into a shop or a public place, especially where there are groups of people, or women (who tend to be sympathetic and helpful). Or just wait out your harasser in a public place in the presence of other people.
- Make noise or show aggressiveness. This is often sufficient to stop a man who is expecting passivity from a woman.

Preventing assault

- If you are a woman, do not let men into your house or room, at least not without another female present.
- Do not tell strangers where you live, and ask your neighbours to do the same.
- When travelling alone on a bus, try to sit next to a woman. If there are only men present, consider waiting for the next bus.
- If you are a woman, do not attract unfavourable attention by drinking beer or alcohol in public. If you are a man, adopt a conservative attitude until you have determined the prevailing attitudes of the community.
- Choose reputable hotels, check your room carefully, and hotel entrances, fire escapes and windows which could provide access to an attacker. If you are in doubt about the safety of your surroundings, request to be transferred to another room.
- Remember that people you think you know well may act quite differently when they have been drinking.
- Be sensitive to what is considered appropriate dress and appropriate behaviour for the people you are with and the situations you are in.