



Season 5, Episode 7 – Women in Global Careers

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Stacie Berdan:

Welcome to the global careers podcast sponsored by GW-CIBER – THE source for inspiring stories from seasoned professionals who have embraced a global role and reaped the benefits. We offer practical advice and insider tips across a broad swath of industries and fields around the world. Whether or not you've considered moving abroad or taking on an international role, globalization will impact your career. So join us for a lively discussion as we explore what an international career really means. My name is Stacie Nevadomski Berdan and I'll be your host!

In Season 5, we focus on women in global careers: the challenges and opportunities and how things have evolved over the last few years. Join us as we hear from eight global women as they share their inspiring stories working around the world in such fields as tech, diplomacy, investing, marketing and so much more. I'm super excited about today's interview with Margarita Fernandez, Vice President and Global Operations and Management at IREX – a global development and education organization. Margarita brings more than 25 years of experience in international development, leading programs and practices around the world. She's focused on public health, economic growth, public private partnerships, governance, and education. Over the course of her extensive international career, she has been posted long term in Honduras, Bolivia, Czechoslovakia, Moldova, and Russia, while short-term assignments have taken her to more than 20 countries in Africa, Middle East, and Latin America. We first met more than 15 years ago when I published my first book, because Margarita is one of the women whose experiences are included throughout! So, welcome Margarita, it's great to have you with us today.

Margarita Fernandez:

Thank you, Stacie. It's great to speak with you again.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah! So, one of the objectives of this podcast is to provide a sense of the careers that are out there, you know, not just the linear resume... You have outstanding experience in international development around the world. Tell us, what is it that you do?

Margarita Fernandez:

Sure. So, I started my career really looking at what kind of work we could do to improve people's lives, and I decided that doing it around the world meant something to me. So, I did it on what we call the program side in international development, which is really focusing on the needs of others and understanding how we can help their lives get better. So, I did that for about 25 years, and decided to make a switch about – I don't know, seven or eight years ago – and look at the operational aspects of delivering that kind of work and advice. And we decided that it was better for me to focus on that and help my fellow practitioners understand how they could make the biggest impact and understand how I could remove the obstacles that they were facing on a day-to-day basis. So that could be anything that has to do with risk, for example, how to manage risk when you're entering a very difficult environment. Or it could have something to do with security. It could have something to do with maybe the way you're doing the work in country, and how do you move around the country. So, there's many aspects to operations, and so that is what I'm focusing on today.



Stacie Berdan:

Ok, great. So, for students or listeners interested in international development, what are some of the top skills that practitioners like yourself need?

Margarita Fernandez:

Lots of skills, obviously depending on what area you're interested in international development – it can be, as you said, about almost anything – public health, it could be education, it could be governance, could be technology. So, I will pick some skills that I think relate to all these areas. I'll focus a little bit more on how you interact with those around you. So, listening is probably the top skill I would pick – understanding people and what they need and how you can help them, and how you can learn from them is really important in this kind of work. So, listening is key, you can't learn without listening. Other skills... I think understanding other languages, obviously this is going to be very helpful. I mean, any part of the world, it doesn't matter what language, it will take you places. And I would say – writing and communicating. Writing is incredibly important because you'll find yourself writing a lot of, whether it's a report or a research piece or a profile, or you might be writing about some recommendations or some findings. And you need to be able to do that clearly and succinctly. So, people get what it is that your message is. And similarly, communicating verbally I would say is another thing. It doesn't mean that you have to deliver amazing speeches consistently, but you need to be able to articulate what you do and be able to speak to people at different levels – whether you're talking to a minister, or even a president of a country, or you may be speaking with somebody who is in a small village. And so, you need to be able to adjust the way you communicate.

Stacie Berdan:

So, what you've described in those skills... actually, a student really can actually study most anything, right? It doesn't sound as though you need to have a degree in international relations or international development? I know that's what, that's what you have. Do you think that that's necessary? Do you think the whole public policy aspect is necessary from an education standpoint to prep you?

Margarita Fernandez:

I think it helps in terms of the context that helps you see the big picture. But I have to say that some of my best colleagues are... have been very specialized – whether it's biology, some of them in sociology, or history, or even chemistry, you name it. So, I believe anybody who wants to do international work can do it and bring a set of skills that will be valuable somewhere.

Stacie Berdan:

Great. That is just great. So, I know you have had a stellar career so far working around the world, so many places, can you just share some highlights, tell us some stories, give us some examples? It's just impossible to go through everything you've done, but I want to give listeners a taste of the kind of work that you've done.

Margarita Fernandez:

So, well, that's a hard question, Stacie. But I will pick a few things here and there that were particularly interesting to me, and from which perhaps I learned the most. You know, I had this image, as I started my career, that I had important things to say, and that people would hear what I had to say, right. But that's not always the case. And you'll learn as you go. One of my more interesting situations was when I was in a country in Latin America, and we were making some recommendations around some of the organizations that were owned by the government – the government was thinking of, you know, ceding that ownership to different groups, and in some cases, selling those corporations. And we had the hard task of making recommendations around whether they should do that or not, and how, right, what process they should follow. Well, one day, I was in probably, like, the fourth floor of a building with my team, I was probably one of eight or ten people, we're all working hard on some financial models, and looking at what our recommendations really should be, and debating within ourselves and consulting with others,



etc. And all of a sudden, we hear this really loud noise outside, and somebody went over to a window to take a look. And there were some big crowds out there. And there were people actually worried about what our recommendations were going to be in. One of the things that I learned from that is that you need to be able to listen to what they have to say and not think of them as a threat to you. So, some of us went downstairs and talked to them, and listened – going back to that skill – and actually learned a lot from them. And were able to take in some of the feedback and build it into our recommendations. So, it's really amazing – sometimes you find yourself in situations that are really scary, but you need to move on and make sure that you and your team are safe, and then really be open-minded about things. I've had the incredible fortune of working in beautiful places. When the wall came down and the former Soviet Union and the Eastern Europe and Central Europe really opened up to the world, I had the opportunity to live in Prague, which is one of the more beautiful cities in the world. And our offices were in... behind the museum, in front of the Wenceslas Square, and I had to cross over the Charles Bridge every day to get to my apartment, and I walked every day saying “pinch me, pinch me”, because it was just one of the most beautiful sites, it's one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. At the time, it was a country that was undergoing an opening that required advice, and I happened to be in the right place at the right time. Nowadays, it's a country that's doing very well, they don't need much help in terms of international development. So, I feel I was very lucky to be there and kind of take this on and be able to learn about a country that I otherwise probably wouldn't have had a chance to visit. But it's not always beautiful, right, it's not always super nice. And I'm...I was always ready to go to the last mile in some of the poor countries around the world. I've had the great fortune of working in South Sudan. And it is a new country, not just a country that faces a lot of challenges – civil war and a lot of refugees, etc. – it's a country that brings a lot of riches to anybody's life, because you can... you don't get to spend the time admiring your environment as much as you do admiring the resilience of the people. And again, that is not something that you see every day.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, that's the beautiful part of working internationally. Thank you for sharing that. Because it's not just the glamour and the glitz of... yeah, living in a beautiful place like Prague, but it is actually getting to know the people and really helping them and watch them. Maybe not even helping them and having them inspired to actually take their country and their economics and their economy forward. That must be amazing. It's just thrilling inside.

Margarita Fernandez:

Yes, it's absolutely... There's so much to learn from people. I cannot tell you how many times I learned what some countries and some people have tried in their environments. And some things work and some things don't, but you can learn a lot from what works, and take it somewhere else and say: hey, you know, they've tried this in this country, you want to try this here as well? The solutions don't always come from us. Sometimes the solutions come from neighboring countries and oftentimes they come from themselves.

Stacie Berdan:

The best solutions actually, right, the best solutions that were... Yeah, that's terrific. That's terrific. So, can you share some of the biggest challenges – this is a question that students regularly ask – some of the biggest challenges you faced in your career and how you had to deal with it?

Margarita Fernandez:

As you go about the world, you're not going to run into people that see things the way you do, or people that might not share the same values that you do. And it's very difficult to give them the space and the voice that they deserve and be neutral or be receptive to what they have to say. It's hard sometimes to erase your own slate, if you will, and keep it blank, so that you really are listening to what their pain points are. So, putting yourself in other people's shoes, sounds sometimes like a cliché, but it is really, really challenging, especially if you don't personally agree with somebody on their methods, perhaps, or their values, right. Probably one of the hardest things for me has been



across the world to make sure that I keep my own personal feelings and perspectives at bay so that I can really, really be there for them and meet them where they are.

Stacie Berdan:

That must be particularly difficult, especially because as an evolution, and around the world as a woman, right? Because sometimes we see things culturally that we don't necessarily agree with, but it's part of a culture. Have you experienced things like that?

Margarita Fernandez:

Oh, absolutely. And when it's part of the culture, you have to respect it. And then you'll find yourself spending a lot of time making sure you understand it first of all, and find ways for them to see the positive aspects of doing things perhaps a little bit differently. Not because you want to change the way they do things, because you think yours is better, but because it might actually make a difference in other people's lives, to uplift them and give them a voice that may not have had. Right? So oftentimes, you might find yourself working with certain leaders that may or may not be giving the space and the voice to those who need it. And how do you convince that person that that's important, whether it's about children or about women or about some other vulnerable group? Right? So, you're absolutely right, that is definitely a challenge. And, and there's no boilerplate solution, right. So, you just have to really understand that person and make inroads slowly and develop a relationship with them.

Stacie Berdan:

That's really good advice, because I think some people actually just get kind of indignant and want to change things immediately. But you've just described that you really, you just can't do that. You just can't come in and make it your own, right, you've got to actually work with them, make the inroads, help them understand why other things would be better for a variety of reasons, not just because you think so.

Margarita Fernandez:

That's right. And that's especially important when you're dealing with leaders, because what they do and what they say can really change other people's lives for the better or not. Right?

Stacie Berdan:

Mm, hmm... Yeah, that's great. So, you know, in reading your profile, evidence-based impact rises to the top of your skills, very topical for our listeners, but can you talk about it? What is it, why it's important? Why it's important to you?

Margarita Fernandez:

Absolutely. So, evidence-based impact is really informed impact. Impact that is designed around learnings that we've had from previous experiences. And that's where the evidence comes in. And having a good system and approach to collect that evidence and present it, and analyze it, understand it, so that you can then use it to design something that might actually be better, right. Ideally, it will be better for the partners that you're working with. And so, that's why it's important. It's really about learning. And if you do it based on things that are not factual, you know, recorded and documented, then it's more anecdotal. And it's not something that might be as valuable and as broad reaching as some of the evidence-based impact that we can have.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great. That's wonderful. I know, it's so important now. And there's a lot of impact-based investing, and with ESG, DEI – all coming into play, I think it really matters to a lot of our students to know that actually there's a role for this in so many different, so many different spaces, particularly in international development, I assume.



Margarita Fernandez:

Absolutely. You're absolutely right. And if we don't learn, we don't evolve. So, I think organizations that are interested in funding the kind of work that we do, whether it's a donor or foundation or a government, they need to see the evidence that what you're proposing to do will actually have the highest chances of working. You cannot guarantee that it will work because every contract is a little different. But there are some approaches out there that life has shown us that they do actually work, and when you demonstrate that to somebody who's willing to invest in that, you have higher chances of being able to go out and do the work.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great. So, you've had lots of different roles. Sometimes you've lived long-term in country, sometimes short term, sometimes working from the U.S. from a global role... Can you actually describe for our listeners, kind of, what the differences are between being in country, on the ground, long term versus short term versus, again, being in the U.S. and actually working around the world with colleagues on projects, but being based in the United States... Some of the pros and cons?

Margarita Fernandez:

Of course, of course. Well, the beauty of being posted, as we say, which really means that you're spending about a year or more somewhere, is really the you start to get to know a country and its people. And so, when you're imparted with implementing a program that, say, maybe a five-, four-, or three-, even three-year program, you need to take the time to get to know your contexts, understand your partners. And really, that's how you make a difference, develop the relationships to go out there and, and do the work that you believe is going to be beneficial. And so, is that something that you can do when you're out and as you sit on the ground, in country, and the longer you're there, the more likely you are to understand the context and the people and more likely that you'll be able to make a difference. You know, this has a cumulative effect. When... That's what we call long-term assignments, Short-term assignments tend to be, you know, anywhere between a month or three or four months. Those are because you oftentimes have something to offer that is very unique and is needed somewhere for a few months but maybe you don't... you're not needed there for years at a time. So those are very interesting, and it gives you a chance to look at how one country is addressing a challenge, a development challenge. And it allows you to learn from that and take it to your next country and share that with people, right. And so, there's... it really enables a much wider perspective. And you can take stock of all the different things that people are doing to address one challenge that may be common or universal. When we're in, oftentimes, in the U.S. organizations that do this kind of work – have a headquarters or main office in a city or town in the U.S. – so, when you're there, you're supporting from the U.S. a group that may be implementing the work overseas, right, in country. Many of the organizations are like IREX – set up offices in different countries, it's like, almost like opening up a small business. You start by registering, you hire people, you make sure that you have the work for them. And you try to deliver on that. And so, that requires some support from a headquarters organization in terms of standards and compliance that may be a requirement by, say, your donor or your funder, or your client if you're a for profit. So, these are all different roles that one would be taking. There are of course, as you grow in your career, and over time, you may build a specific expertise that is very needed. And so, you might find yourself shuttling back and forth to a lot of different countries, even doing work for other organizations you might not have thought of, and you become, you know, somebody who's very looked for and can influence a lot of work. So, that is also... that might take a little bit more time, but it is definitely a rewarding part of our careers. I also... I firmly believe in professional development and working with teams around the world to build skills. So, sometimes when you're in headquarters, you're able to bring these people together – sometimes in their location, sometimes somewhere else in a third country – to share experiences, to learn from each other, and, very importantly, to build connections and bonds. And so, that is a little bit more easily facilitated from the headquarters, but oftentimes implemented hand in hand with country teams. So, there are lots of ways to collaborate across, depending on where you're sitting.



Stacie Berdan:

Mm hmm. That's great. Wonderful. So, so you're lucky to have done all of those roles, and hopefully everyone does as well... Because it sounds like a nice complement to be able to do the roles you really do understand, in country out of country, from the U.S., global teams... Yeah, that's great.

Margarita Fernandez:

Absolutely. I think the more roles you have, the more you understand that the entire sector and what you can do.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah. So, clearly, you're a global thinker, you work for an organization that promotes international education, not everybody understands or appreciates it still. You know, what would you tell listeners who are like: well, you know, globalization, global careers, that's not really for me... You know, what would you tell them that globalization does affect our careers? Or does it?

Margarita Fernandez:

Oh, my goodness. I mean, I can't illustrate that better than the example of what's going on in Ukraine right now. It's a situation that's very difficult for Ukrainian people, but it has spilled over to many other countries today who might import grain from Ukraine and are not able to import it and feed their people because they don't produce enough grain. You know, it has had an impact as well on the price of oil, and it impacts many an economy. So now, there's a domino effect to something that might happen in a country that feels very, very far away. But within months, and sometimes even earlier than that, it can impact us in our daily lives in many, many ways. I had teams in Sri Lanka, who because of the situation in Ukraine, were actually not able to go into the office because they couldn't get gas. It's really amazing how global we've become, and we can't ignore that.

Stacie Berdan:

Most certainly, most certainly. Yeah. And not only the oil for sure. But I mean, what's happening in Sri Lanka politically as well, I imagine – that's another aspect, right, political turmoil, things happen around the world that affect people. Wow...

Margarita Fernandez:

Exactly. Around the world. We're so interconnected now.

Stacie Berdan:

So interconnected. Yes, yes. And I think a lot of us learned that through supply chain as well, pandemic issues with the supply chain. Yeah. So, what aspects of being a woman have helped you in your international career and the obstacles... Or has gender not mattered?

Margarita Fernandez:

I think I would not be honest if I didn't say it does matter. And it matters more in some locations than at others. The more conservative societies might not look at you openly from the beginning, you need to work a little bit harder to earn their trust. And some of them, because of cultural norms, may never be comfortable dealing with you the way they might deal with a man. But I have seen it work in other directions, too in environments where you're dealing with vulnerable populations and sometimes there might be more women than men. And so, they may be more open to a conversation with a female member of the team. So, it can go both ways.



Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, great. And you know, I know you're married, you have a partner, you've got kids, twins. How did you manage this global career while actually raising a family as well? How do you, I mean, balance – I don't think really is appropriate as a word to use – but how did you manage it?

Margarita Fernandez:

Well, you know that balance, perhaps, is something that changes all the time, it's constantly requiring a look and adjustments to it. So, some years, when your kids are small, you might find yourself really reliant on others of your family, relying on family to help you out, because situations will emerge that you can't always plan. And so, you need to look to others for help. So, I think, for those who are in international development, sometimes you find yourself in scenarios or in countries where you don't have family, so having a network of friends that become your family, I think it's really key. Sometimes it's more about self-care, making sure that you're taking care of yourself, and, you know, exercising and sleeping and doing all the things that recharge you so that you can face the day with the right level of energy and the ability to work with others productively. So sometimes you have to look outside, sometimes you have to look inside, and understanding which one is the one that you need in the moment is another skill you need, right. So definitely not a boilerplate solution, something that will evolve as your own life does... My kids are now 24 years old and are out of the house. So, the logistical part of being a parent is very small. But there are other needs that they have. So, it is something that you continuously have to evaluate and understand what your options are, and talk to other women, especially your parents, or men who may have faced the same situation, they might have some great ideas for you.

Stacie Berdan:

That's good, good tip. And also, it's about partnerships and kids, but it's also about extended family and friends. Careers take us all around the world, which is interesting and great for our careers, but oftentimes we're not there for births or deaths or weddings. And it's kind of being hard on family and relationships as well, right?

Margarita Fernandez:

Absolutely. So you have to work a little harder to maintain those, right?

Stacie Berdan:

Definitely, definitely have to work a bit harder. Yep. Is there, you're just so thoughtful, Margarita, I'm just wondering – is there a piece of advice that you would like to go back and give your younger self?

Margarita Fernandez:

Yes, it's the advice that I always give everybody who's asked me – what is my top skill. I went... I want to go back to listen – listen better, learn how to listen. Because with that you will do a better job. Again, at the risk of sounding a little bit repetitive, it's an invaluable skill. Being able to put yourself in somebody else's shoes, having that empathy and understanding where they're coming from and being flexible to meet them where they are, it's really critical. And I wish somebody had said that to me earlier. I learned it halfway and I applied it pretty consistently going forward. But I don't think I did as much listening in the early part of my career as I should have.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, I agree with you, mine too. I started my career in Washington, where nobody really listens very well, do they? So that's part of the problem, I think. But do you have any tips? I mean, tips for listening well, how to develop the skill if people aren't, or maybe not even realizing that they're not a good listener?



Margarita Fernandez:

Yeah, one of the things that I... I'm a very interactive speaker and I like to hear from the person in front of me; I don't naturally wait until they're done and I find myself sometimes making the mistake of interrupting. And that's something I continuously work on. And it is, it is really important to try to hold yourself back and just hold on to your questions until they're done, right. Because sometimes people, whether it's cultural or personal, they pause while they're thinking. And then you have to... and then you think, okay, this is my moment to jump in. But maybe it's not, right. So, listening is really critical, and understanding when you can step in and say something. And then when they... when you ask a question, don't ask them and move on, right, just ask and wait. And listen, again, because you might miss something that's really important. So, learning those stop-and-gos, I think that's a life skill. I don't think this is just for international development, but it is particularly important in this world, because you also have the language, part of it. And sometimes people will say something, translating, literally from their language into the language you're using to communicate, say English. And they're trying to say something, and it comes out differently from what they intend. And so, you need to make sure that you really understand what they're trying to say, not necessarily what's coming out of their mouth. And those are oftentimes two different things. So, moving beyond the accent, moving beyond the use of words or the jargon, and really understanding what they're saying is key.

Stacie Berdan:

That does sound like a life-developed skill. That's nothing that's going to be developed right away of course. But you're right, it's so important, no matter who we're talking with. You mentioned languages. I know you speak Spanish and English; do you speak others?

Margarita Fernandez:

I speak French. I speak a little bit of Romanian, which has come handy in two countries in the world – in Romania and Moldova. But that's really it. I can tell you that as a Romance language speaker, one can understand quite a bit of Portuguese if you speak Spanish, but I would not. I have not studied it. And I would never say that it's a language I speak.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah. Do you recommend people try to learn a language? I mean, it is known to be difficult if you don't start early enough, if you don't really like it and enjoy it. But it's worth the time and effort, right?

Margarita Fernandez:

I believe it is, because it also demonstrates to somebody else that you you're taking the time to understand their language. And there might be things that you might not capture if you don't speak it, right. So even if you have a late start... I agree with you, I did not, I was very lucky I started at home, but even if you don't, I would say always go for it. Because you can always pick up enough words to show the other person across the table that you are interested in them.

Stacie Berdan:

Everybody likes to be listened to and everybody likes to be interested in them. Yeah, that's great. Before we wrap up – this has been a great, great conversation – is there anything else you'd like to add that maybe we haven't touched upon yet.

Margarita Fernandez:

I can't think of anything. I'm just delighted to speak with you. It's always so much fun, and I can't wait to see what your next adventure is.



Stacie Berdan:

Okay, great. That's terrific. Thank you so much, Margarita. I really appreciate you taking the time out of your very busy schedule to talk with us.

Margarita Fernandez:

Absolutely. Thank you, Stacie.

Stacie Berdan:

Great. Take care.

[Music]

Stacie Berdan:

You have been listening to the GW-CIBER Global Careers podcast. Join us again next time, and in the meantime – go global!