

# GSPIA PERSPECTIVES

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

2018



**GSPIA60**  
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**PREPARING LEADERS  
LOCAL TO GLOBAL**

## EMPOWERING ‘STRONG GIRLS’ IN HAITI

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From June 2014 to June 2015, I worked as a volunteer coordinator at Pwoje Espwa (Espwa) residential care facility in Les Cayes, Haiti. Espwa is the largest facility of its kind in southern Haiti and the second largest employer, housing just under 400 boys and 50 girls at the time I worked there.

### Fi Ki Fò (Strong Girl)

While I was at Espwa, a friend from college reached out to me and my colleague, Kelsey. She asked if there were teen girls at the facility who would be interested in a pen pal program with young professional women from Washington, D.C. We spent the rest of our year in Haiti piloting that pen pal program for six teenage girls with letters translated back and forth, and video conferences organized for the girls to get to know their pen pals.

After nine months of letters, the U.S. pen pals traveled to Haiti and ran a week-long girls’ empowerment workshop. It was an enormous success and the girls coined the slogan *Fi Ki Fò* (meaning “strong girl”) during the very first activity. The women from D.C. asked to have a meeting with the administration at Espwa. They had raised more money than they needed for the trip and wanted to know how they could support the girls in a more lasting way. I facilitated the conversation between them, translating where necessary, in a conversation that ultimately birthed the *Fi Ki Fò* program.

Today, *Fi Ki Fò* operates throughout the school year for more than 20 teen girls at Espwa. The program includes afterschool skills-training courses for girls led by local women in the community, international mentorship through letter-writing, small business development and a week-long workshop each summer. For the girls in the program, this is the first time each has had more than \$2 of their own. As a result of the program, each girl also now has her

own savings account for the first time. Through the skills-training classes, the girls learn basic English, advanced French, sewing, embroidery, cooking and computer skills. They are mentored both by their U.S. pen pals and the Haitian women who teach their classes and run the program day-to-day. They still proudly call themselves *Fi Ki Fò*.

### Haiti to GSPIA and Back Again

Working at Espwa and collaborating on the girls’ program was a large part of what led me to the joint-degree program at GSPIA and the School of Social Work to learn more about youth development and child protection. While at GSPIA, I quickly found myself thinking of ways to leverage my learning to benefit the girls in *Fi Ki Fò*.

I took three courses in my first year at GSPIA that pointed me back toward Haiti. In the fall, I took *Development Policy and Administration* with Dr. Paul Nelson and wrote policy papers about the current state of child protection in Haiti. In the spring semester, I took *Focus Groups and Community Development* taught by Dr. Martha Terry and *Program Evaluation* taught by Dr. Chris Belasco. I contacted Write to Be (the then-newly-minted 501(c)(3) organization running the *Fi Ki Fò* program) and asked if they would be interested in a formative evaluation for the program. When they responded enthusiastically, I used my classes and feedback from professors to develop the design of a program evaluation which I carried out that summer with the financial support of the Nationality Rooms.



Rachel surrounded by the young girls of Pwoje Espwa.



It was very important to me that the evaluation center on the voices and opinions of the girls and women who experience the program daily. So, in addition to collecting quantitative data on girls' grades, self-esteem scores and demographics, I learned a great deal from the qualitative experiences of girls and women in the focus groups. I created reports of the evaluation in English and Creole, and presented them to the boards of directors of both the care facility and Write to Be.

In fall 2017, the results of the evaluation were used in Write to Be's strategic planning sessions to improve the program. As of today, Fi Ki Fò has implemented recommended changes from the evaluation, including adding targeted case management for each girl, coding letters monthly so the topics are responsive to girls' needs, and starting a Gender Committee to engage boys and men in the pursuit of a more equitable environment for girls at Espwa.

One concerning finding from the evaluation was that girls were bullied by boys on property for their participation in the program. Since one of the goals of the Fi Ki Fò program is to create a more equitable environment for women and girls at Espwa, it is now abundantly clear that we must engage men and boys to make that a reality. In the spring I took Dr. Müge Finkel's capstone course *Program Design and Evaluation* to design a project that will address the problem of girls being bullied at Espwa.

### Leadership in Evaluation

There have been many synergies between my GSPIA education and my work with the Fi Ki Fò program over the past two years, and I am coming to understand what it means to be a leader in the field of evaluation.

In a session organized by the Johnson Institute for Responsible Leadership, Penny Semeia from Pitt's Athletic Department told us that his definition of a leader is someone with the ability to influence others. Evaluators certainly fit this definition, though they are not typically thought of that way. When a program is evaluated, the evaluator decides which voices are heard and frames the findings for funders, organizations and individuals. They wield a great deal of influence over how programs evolve, find support and even come to an end. For these reasons, I see work in this field as an important leadership responsibility.

While I am thankful for my own academic and professional development in this field, at the end of the day, I am most grateful

to the GSPIA community for providing me the knowledge and ability to share what the Fi Ki Fò girls want their program to know about them.

When I asked the girls how they respond to bullies last summer, one replied, "We don't bother with them. I say 'I don't care, it is my talent I'm developing.' I have no problem with it because I know a person is not born for them to know everything. You have to practice before you know something."

This has certainly been true for me. I did not come to GSPIA knowing a quarter of what I know today and I have had many opportunities to learn and practice. Now, I try to apply what I have learned in the hope it will make me a better collaborator with communities to resolve problems like bullying, and to create spaces where participants' voices are heard and meaningfully incorporated into program improvements.