

### **Laidlaw Leadership In Action Reflection:**

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Title of LIA Project:	Gender Equality for Girls Internship with GVI Ghana

#### **My LIA Project:**

My project began as the Gender Equality for Girls Internship with GVI Ghana in Kokrobite, Greater Accra. This project aimed to break cultural and societal constraints by educating and empowering girls to break generational cycles of poverty. This project is important because despite rapid transformation to girls' access to education in recent decades, with Ghana placing 7th for all Sub-Saharan Africa on gender parity in education in 2019, this remained at 61%. This importance is further entrenched by how this average conceals the large national discrepancies negatively affecting girls in poor rural coastal communities such as Kokrobite.

The stakeholders for my project concerned the organisation I was working with and the community benefiting from the organisation's presence. My internship was with GVI, an NGO founded on working towards the UN's sustainable development goals. Split into country-based branches, I worked within GVI Ghana, a people-focused NGO aiming to prosper sustainable community development within Kokrobite. When picking an organisation, I was very intentional about sustainable impact over the often neo-colonialist or counter-productive projects occurring within many people-based volunteer programmes.

I felt GVI aligned with my values upon learning about the organization's priority of 'impact above all else' and its ultimate goal of achieving community self-sufficiency, thereby making GVI's presence in the community unnecessary.

Facing the impacts of climate change and industrialisation, Kokrobite was affected by both the rising sea levels alongside over-fishing, diminishing local industries. Consequently, as industrialisation was taking off in the cities, this community was being left behind, rendering GVI's presence vital for supporting the community and improving opportunities.

Despite my project originally having a gender-based focus, as my internship progressed, it expanded to also encompass the Justice, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) Internship. This is because whilst my gender-based focus surrounded being the lead on the Menstrual Health Project and Girl Guides, I also got the opportunity to create my project called 'Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms' focused on more JEDI topics. In doing so, this project progression allowed me to tailor my internship to include both my legal and gender equality passions.



*(this was GVI Base)*

### The Societal Impact:

GVI Ghana is dedicated to boosting local capabilities in education, social welfare, public health, gender equality and environmental care. Through its particular focus on children, it aims to break the cycles of poverty and create sustainable solutions. As an intern, I acted as a facilitator on behalf of GVI by working in numerous partner schools and having direct contact with the children. The projects I conducted were both impactful and important in various ways.

Concerning the more programmes falling under the Gender Equality for Girls umbrella, both the Girl Guides and Menstrual Health classes were vital to empowering the girls. In Girl Guides, we were able to cultivate a feeling of sisterhood between the girls and create an atmosphere of empowerment, whereby all the girls were taught that gender should never be a limiting factor in their goals. During my 6 weeks, I worked with the same classes across the schools and was able to witness the girls' confidence increase, traits I am confident are continuing to grow as GVI continues facilitating these classes. As for Menstrual Health, this felt like a particularly important syllabus to cover. Menstruation can be so scary for young girls, worsened by the cultural norm of silence concerning puberty and the common lack of sanitary products. Therefore, being able to educate girls about the changes occurring in their body, it helped de-stigmatise the changes and reduce the fear. During the programme it was beautiful to see their fear decrease and comfortability grow, empowered by the support systems between the girls.

As for the programme I created, this had an impact by educating children on their rights and how the legal system works. For small rural poverty-stricken communities, I think children can easily feel disempowered and like these systems are inaccessible to them. Rather I aimed to change this narrative, providing them with an understanding of these mechanisms and how they affect them as individuals. This was impactful because as the project progressed, the children started to have greater engagement with the material, as demonstrated by their increase in questions and keen interest to learn more. This was important because in aiming to

break cycles of poverty, it was vital that the children grasp simple legal concepts, both so they know what rights they have and feel they can advocate for change.

These classes accurately showcase the subjectivity of impact, particularly on human-centred programmes, whereby it cannot be determined by numerical figures but rather through positive interactions and changes in attitudes.



*(the left image showcases me teaching my project at one of the partner schools called Presby Primary School and the right image showcases how Sunbeam Partner School looked like, which was where we led Girl Guides Sessions)*

### The Personal Impact:

Personally, I feel the LIA project has massively affected my perception of life. Even though I think I have always been grateful and tried to focus on the positives, living in Kokrobite opened my eyes to how happiness cannot be bought but rather is a mentality. Seeing children, many of whom lived in unimaginable conditions to the average UK resident, where food, heat and water were not promised, smile every day and truly demonstrate more happiness and gratitude than most people at home, really changed my outlook. I realised that long-term happiness is a choice and that without an appreciation for all the ways we are blessed, no amount of money, wealth or time will change that mental switch. Despite many in the community facing personal challenges, there seemed to be a commitment to positivity and not letting emotionally difficult experiences define them, a lesson I hope to embody. Therefore, a personal impact of the LIA is my changed perception of myself and how I want to experience life. Whilst it can be easy to let difficult moments consume us, I hope to continue expressing gratitude and remember that it is my actions that define me rather than the experiences I have endured.

Concerning my smart goals, my first one was to gain a thorough understanding of gender equality and feminism in a global context and Ghana specifically and feel confident discussing this issue. I achieved this goal through my interactions with Ebi – the programme lead – and the local Ghanaians. I spent the first two weeks listening both in the training and the classes to learn how the girls reacted to different gender equality concepts, particularly those aged 12-15. A pronounced realisation I had was their attitudes towards beauty standards and race. This became pronounced on my third day in Ghana where I was shadowing other volunteers and

got into a conversation with one class of girls. Through complimenting my skin, they expressed that they wished they had my hair type and skin colour, a trend that would continue throughout my stay. This interaction sharply introduced me to the post-colonial impact on beauty standards which remain today with the prominent use of skin bleaching. Whilst this is a difficult issue to navigate, it helped provide the foundations for understanding gender equality in the context of Ghana which was deeply rooted in understanding the interconnection between historical and cultural influences.

My second goal was to root any project created in cultural integration and community impact by collaborating and engaging with local stakeholders to align the activities with the girl's needs. Combined with the prior goal, this would ensure the project was founded in a commitment to sustainable change and adapted to the needs of the community. Since my project was focused on human rights and fundamental freedoms, I pivoted away from this gender-based focus. Nonetheless, this still required collaboration and engagement, which I achieved when considering the cultural context. I had numerous meetings with Ghanaian staff members including Ebi and Belinda – who was a younger staff member - to understand how the topic of human rights was navigated in this community. In doing so, I learnt the importance of respecting varied religious and cultural beliefs, particularly around the strong cultural emphasis on respect for authority and traditional values. Consequently, this allowed me to create a programme that would uplift and educate students without offending their parents, thus achieving the goal.

Finally, my third goal surrounded the broad all-encompassing goal of all actions concerning the root longer-term cause of the issue rather than supporting surface-level impacts. Since sustainable development was the goal, I needed to prioritise asking questions and communicating with the staff members regarding how GVI worked and aimed to create this long-term change. In these conversations, I learnt more in detail about how GVI Ghana puts its 'impact above all' focus into action, primarily surrounding how community outreach is highly prioritised and the lack of hierarchy between the organisation and the community. Learning about how GVI worked on an organisational level enabled me to gain insight into how I should plan out my project to achieve sustainable long-term change. This included educating the girls in some of the girl-guiding lessons about ways to support climate change long term, particularly with factors affecting their community such as rising sea levels and water pollution.

Moreover, my LIA had a profound personal impact enabling me to achieve all my smart goals.

#### Leadership Development:

Through enabling me to put the lessons on leadership into practice, the LIA has been instrumental in continuing the development of my leadership skills.

The first facet facilitating this development occurred when creating the lesson plans, particularly my individually designed programme. I am typically someone who likes to do thorough research before putting pen to paper and committing to ideas, a personality type which initially caused me problems. This is because rather than

being able to create a near-perfect prototype that I submitted to the staff member to print the night before the lesson, I quickly learnt that this was not suitable for classes in an environment where technology access is scarce. Rather it was better to work in advance and submit a rougher draft a couple of days prior which you could then get approval of by the staff member and would be able to print in time. Adapting to the situation of low technology access helped ingrain the importance of reacting to the environment and adjusting behaviours. Through completing this initial independent work, I was able to improve my time management and organisation. Additionally, I learnt how useful a range of opinions is, and through engaging with Ebi and Belinda was able to capitalise on the power of diversity, both in ideas and learning from their lived experiences as Ghanaians.

Additionally, leading the classes also allowed me to develop my leadership skills. In doing so, I exercised a dual function of leading confidently and being a facilitator. Since I was more familiar with the subject of my programme compared to the volunteers assisting, I took on the leadership role whereby I would introduce topics and outline the plan for the class. By doing this, I was able to take a step back and allow the less experienced volunteers to exercise control and lead. This had the benefit of both allowing others to practice their leadership skills and allowing me to support the struggling kids 1-2-1. Further, it also enabled me to convey purpose and build coalitions between the volunteers/interns.

Stepping back from actively practising leadership, a key part of my growth was discovering the leadership style that suits me best. By honestly assessing my leadership preference, I realised that I enjoyed practising a soft leadership style. In doing so, I depend upon my emotional intelligence and capacity for empathy, having a humanity-focused direction for my team. I realised this preference during the sessions where I would talk my team through the lesson plan for Girl Guides and answer any of their questions. This act forced me to focus on how the most important aspect of being a good leader is being the voice of the team, encompassing all that the team stands for. Through listening to the teams' ideas and perspectives, I was able to improve my lesson plans. Further, I realised a large aspect of my leadership style centred around my enjoyment in building networks and connections, further emphasising this human-centred focus. In developing this understanding, I realised that despite gravitating towards softer leadership traits, leadership preference isn't a choice between being assertive and strong-natured or soft and diplomatic; rather good leaders strike a balance of maintaining a team-focused approach while also leading when necessary.



*(the above image showcases me introducing the topic we were covering in the class which was the project I had created before passing over control to one of the new volunteers)*

### Dissemination:

Having only gotten home from my LIA a month ago, I have not yet had the opportunity to disseminate my project. However, I have applied to do a presentation at the annual Laidlaw Conference which is being hosted at my university this October. I am hopeful that this will allow me to share the amazing experience I had and the lifelong leadership lessons I learnt.

### Cultural Experiences:

Spending 5 weeks in Ghana allowed me to truly immerse myself in the culture and create life-long memories. Whilst I anticipated a certain level of culture shock, having not travelled to West Africa before (or Africa more regionally), this was larger than I expected. However, by travelling throughout Ghana and engaging with the community in Kokrobite, I quickly acclimated and felt more comfortable.

Travelling to a country founded on its exploitation by the British, it felt vital to learn about Ghana's rich culture and historical sites. Therefore, during my travels, I visited both Cape Coast and Elmina Slave Castles alongside the Black Star of Independence and the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Museum. The one unifying factor was peoples' pride in their country, a universal trait I had not before experienced by a collective group. Their enthusiasm for teaching others about their culture fed my hunger to learn and I found myself soaking up all the information I learnt on the various tours. Two moments that stood out to me were my interactions at the Black Star of Independence and Elmina Castle.

As the only visitors at the Star of Independence, the staff member invited us up to stand at the top of the arch. Looking out over the city and absorbing the guide's passion for his country, I felt overwhelmed by emotion, both about how grateful I was

for the experience and how excited I was to learn more about the unique country I was growing to love.

Upon arriving at Elmina Slave Castle, I was immediately hit with an intense feeling of sadness and sensitivity towards all the pain endured. The tour guide thoroughly explained the process of how slaves were moved through the castle and organised onto the ships, painting a harrowing picture of the atrocious reality millions endured. The most prominent feeling was disbelief at how individuals can treat others in such a dehumanising way. A difficult aspect to navigate regarded the anger-fueled comments made by the Americans, particularly aimed at us as white British visitors. Comparatively, after speaking to the tour guide about how history affected international perceptions, I learnt that rather than focusing on blame for the atrocities, the Ghanaian people focused on healing their national trauma through educating others.

Learning about the history of Ghana's occupation deepened my understanding of the country and culture more generally, a factor enriching my experience.



*(the left image is the Star of Independence in Accra and the right image is the courtyard at Elmina Slave Castle, the first point that the slaves would enter when being brought into the castle)*

#### Future Plans:

My LIA and Laidlaw scholarship more generally has had a profound effect on my career aspirations. Before joining the scholarship, I was completely set on becoming a commercial solicitor and even applied to a handful of first-year schemes at law firms in London. I completed two weeks of work experience in 3 different firms both in Leeds and London, and whilst I wasn't enthused with the work, I still felt it was the natural progression and goal after completing my degree. The first signs that this wasn't the career for me was completing my research last summer and finally feeling

that complete excitement about the topic which I hadn't realised I was missing during the year. After speaking to my truly inspirational research mentor, Rebecca Shaw, I realised that there were careers in law outside commercial law, but I remained unsure about working in academia. When second year began, I got swept up in the vacation scheme applications and thought I could use commercial law as a stepping stone to reach my dream career, though I remained unsure what this was.

After discovering I was incredibly passionate about women's treatment by the legal system the summer before, I decided to follow this female focus for my LIA, applying and completing the Gender Equality for Girls internship. This experience has been trajectory-altering and was the final blow to my misjudged goal of commercial law, allowing me to accept that just because it is the normal route for law students, didn't mean it had to be my route. The LIA altered this career projection by both opening my eyes to the world and providing a global perspective alongside igniting my academic passion. Having completed the international law module, the prior semester and finally feeling like I had found my academic passion, I was able to see how this module could be exercised in real life.

My whole academic career I have felt indebted somehow, starchily aware of the fortunate academic opportunities I have been bestowed and searched for a sense of purpose within law. During my LIA I was working in an organisation and with people who were so immensely driven by a desire to create change and I finally felt like I had found an environment where I could insight change. Whilst I loved the experience, I realised that rather than my skill set being predisposed to the groundwork of working within communities, I would be more suited to working from an organisational standpoint, using my legal degree for good. One of the staff members had recently completed an internship with the UN in New York and so after picking her brain, I realised that my career in the UN was not an unattainable future. Armed with the learning and confidence the Laidlaw scholarship has given me about achieving my goals and being an ethical leader, this was the final key to realising I could reach my dream career.

Therefore, I have decided against a career in commercial law and am aiming to pursue a career in international law, hopefully specialising in women's treatment. I am hoping to either complete my masters in the US focusing on International Development and Public Policy to deepen my understanding of this area to use in conjunction with my law degree, or an international law master's. After, I will be applying for internships both at the UN and other NGOs and legal bodies such as The International Criminal Court. Whilst I realise this career route is less plannable compared to commercial law, it makes me extremely excited for each step.

### Conclusion:

Finishing my reflective report, I feel it to be essential to thank those who have been instrumental throughout my leadership development and Laidlaw scholarship. I am massively grateful to the Laidlaw Scholarship for affording me this amazing opportunity over the past 2-years. Additionally, my development into a strong ethical leader would have not been possible without the unwavering support of Beccy Shaw and Matthew Penhaligon, for whom I am incredibly thankful.

**Project Leader**

Please comment on your scholar's LIA period, what you consider to be your scholar's strengths and which leadership attributes (please refer to the leadership attributes below) you feel your scholar has demonstrated and is particularly skilled in. You could also identify areas which the scholar can develop further.

Signature of Scholar

\_\_\_\_\_ Date:

Signature of Project Leader

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Date:

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