

Background

Globally, approximately 70 million people rely on informal trash collection as a source of income. Brazil's National Solid Waste Policy, passed in July 2010 after 20 years of debate, acknowledges waste picker cooperatives as service providers and institutes mechanisms to support cooperatives and municipalities that integrate informal workers into solid waste systems. However, informal waste pickers (*catadores*) still lack access to social security services. Female pickers (*catadoras*) who comprise about 56% of the informal collector population in Brazil, face even greater vulnerability due to the challenge of gender dynamics and the sexual division of waste picking activities. Some of these obstacles include: the limited representation of women in authority positions in waste picker collectives; the challenge of balancing picking activity with family responsibilities, which limits access to the fair earnings that male waste pickers obtain; and, the reality that only 20% of women in the field have access to regular waste picking employment. These barriers demonstrate the urgency of a gendered approach in the assessment of informal waste collection to increase job security and empowerment of all *catadores*.

Project

With the support of the "Meg" Walsh Leadership Award, I propose to study the Gender & Waste Project (GWP), an ongoing effort dedicated to empowering female waste pickers in Minas Gerais, Brazil. The Walsh Award will enable my independent study of the initiatives of the GWP and its goals of providing women with tools for equality in the workplace and their personal lives, increasing leadership in waste picker organizations, and gaining economic opportunities. In addition to my independent study, I will create a video documentary and a multimedia-portrait series as a final outcome to document the efforts of the GWP. My documentary and portrait series aims to share the unique stories of local *catadoras* in Minas Gerais, while evaluating GWP as a potential measure of providing gender empowerment in informal waste collection in other regions in Latin America. The two main questions I will answer in my study and present in my documentary are: How does the Gender & Waste Project empower *catadoras* in Minas Gerais? How can the Gender & Waste Project's first pilot project in Minas Gerais be used to shape the direction of gender empowerment efforts for *catadoras* in other Latin American countries?

Purpose

The Gender & Waste Project was born in 2013 from demands by Brazilian and Latin American waste picker leaders and WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment Global and Organizing) to confront discrimination against *catadoras*. The GWP is based in the Center for Study and Research on Women (NEPEM) of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil. This initiative grew as a result of an existing relationship between the Latin American Network of Waste Pickers (RedLacre), WIEGO, and NEPEM, as well as an interest in piloting the program in Minas Gerais to explore themes for a future gender empowerment program for Brazil and Latin America. The GWP encourages gender equality in the informal economy by giving women tools to fight subordination, such as leadership development in waste picking and union organization among female waste pickers.

The GWP also aims to legitimize a gender-conscious approach to teaching and assessing sanitation within academia, NGOs, and governmental dialogue. Solid waste management has been abundantly researched, but gender dynamics, the sexual division of labor, and leadership empowerment of women in informal waste picking have not been adequately addressed or

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documented. An assessment of “invisible” issues like gender relations, violence, prejudice, and women’s autonomy enables the development of a gender-sensitive system that strengthens democratic processes in informal waste collection on all levels of engagement.

Intent

Through detailing the stories of *catadoras* in my documentary and portrait series, I hope to disseminate information about gender empowerment efforts in the informal waste picking profession to improve women’s opportunities in sanitation in other global contexts. To complement the video documentary, I will use recycled material collected during my field visits to design portraits of different *catadoras* and develop an art exhibit entitled “Portraits of Women in Sanitation in Minas Gerais.” I will contact art galleries, schools, and other cultural/educational venues in Belo Horizonte and the US in order to widely disseminate the stories of the *catadoras*, and will also publish my documentary online and seek positions in documentary festivals to raise awareness of gender issues in sanitation.

The Gender & Waste Project has yet to be documented in academic literature or media. I aim to add to the knowledge base on gender empowerment efforts in sanitation in Latin America through my portrait series and documentary. My studies and international public health experiences in Uganda and Bangladesh made me passionate about sanitation, while preparing me to compile interviews and conduct independent research, assets that will contribute to my successful completion of independent study and my final project during my Walsh period.

Timeline

At the start of my award period, I will begin my research, and my work with my affiliate Dr. Sonia Dias, a garbologist, WIEGO waste picker specialist at NEPEM, and GWP partner. In the first three months of my grant period, I will observe GWP meetings and workshops, as well as interact informally with *catadoras* to gain a stronger understanding of the initiative within Minas Gerais and its potential for other regions in Brazil and Latin America. Spending time with local female workers on their daily collection routes will help me understand their lives as I prepare to document their stories.

During the remaining months, I will start interviewing female workers and GWP participants to document their personal histories and experiences within informal waste collection. These months will also be used to: generate and edit interview content; organize my documentary in consultation with the GWP’s leaders; include English subtitles for increased accessibility of my documentary for non-Portuguese speakers; develop portraits for my portrait series; and, arrange my art exhibit with a local art gallery. During the end of my stay, I plan to contact art galleries and schools in my hometown in the US to begin preparing for my delivery of presentations to students and members of my community.

Preparation & Goals

I am linguistically prepared to conduct in-depth research in Brazil. Last year, I pursued coursework in Brazilian Portuguese at Johns Hopkins University, an experience that led to a two-week trip to Brazil in January. Nine months later, I am back in Brazil, as a student in the SIT Public Health, Race, and Human Rights Program in Salvador. My work this year involves independent research on homelessness and the organizations that address it, in Salvador.

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During my Walsh project, I plan to live with a host family during my first month of research; continue my practice of Capoeira, a Brazilian martial art; and, volunteer with “Arte Pela Paz,” a local arts organization. I have already been in communication with the director of the center and he has expressed interest in my involvement.

My completion of my independent study and documentary and portrait series as 2015 Florence “Meg” Long Walsh Leadership Award recipient will provide a timely-contribution to the dialogue on gender empowerment in informal waste collection, as the Gender & Waste Project is assessed as a measure of increasing *catadoras*’ social inclusion in employment in Latin America.

I was recently asked, “What’s the difference in breathing air and being full of life?” I believe life becomes a rich experience through relationships. I have been privileged to use my journey at Johns Hopkins as a time to explore leadership through establishing connections through my engagement in the Office of Multicultural Affairs, and service as a Tutor and Resident Advisor.

Once the thrill faded from the first week at university, I found myself thrust into anxiety and felt inferior to my talented peers, some of who were already taking Organic Chemistry as I struggled to understand the first unit of General Chemistry. My first semester at Hopkins was a time in which I developed and began to believe my favorite college mantra: “It’s different for everyone.” This statement acknowledges that no two students are the same: we all come to the table with different skillsets, backgrounds, and interests. The most important task is to embrace our unique identities as guiding forces to finding our perfect “fit.” As I grappled with the newness of my college experience, I discovered the power of the community as not only a source of refuge, but also a reminder of my unique essence.

I joined the Tutorial Project, my school’s oldest service program, after learning about the matching of a Hopkins student and elementary school student from Baltimore City Public Schools for one-on-one tutoring, two times a week. During the spring of 2012, I was matched with Jamel, a 7 year-old second grader with high-energy and high-attitude. Each session was challenging: we would start with math problems, that he greatly enjoyed, but once we moved to a reading activity, Jamel would shut down and run away. One day, after observing a successful tutor-tutee pair, I realized I needed to find a way to relate to his interests. Due to my love of art, I began drawing him pictures before our sessions, which he became excited to receive, improving his behavior. I never gave up on Jamel, as I knew he would not give up on me, regardless of how often he acted out. I remained committed to demonstrating my complete attention, optimistic attitude, and creativity, persevering regardless of how difficult our sessions became.

During a second semester of tutoring, I was paired with a loud, active, and intelligent third grader named Matthew, who related to me through music, but shut down when things didn’t go his way. My mother wisely suggested that rather than focusing on negative behaviors, I should cheer on his positive actions. We soon started achieving more together with my change in perspective and finished the semester strongly. My involvement in the Tutorial Project demonstrated the immense value in approaching goals with persistence and asking for help amidst challenges. The Tutorial Project reminds me how the community has influenced the person I have become, providing me with a lesson on maintaining a strong commitment and courage amidst challenges that will arise in my life.

The Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) offered me support as I jumped the many hurdles on my track during my first year at JHU. Ranging from the Student Success Series (now known as JUMP) Pre-Orientation Program, where I spent 3 days learning how to be a successful student at Hopkins and developing connections with other first-year students and campus leaders, to the advising I received from the incredible professional staff and mentors in the Mentoring Assistance Peer Program (MAPP), I realized that I wasn’t alone at Hopkins. I was encouraged to seek academic support services by my upperclassman mentor in MAPP, who gave me tips on the right courses to take while helping me explore Baltimore. Due to the amazing guidance I was given from this program, I decided I wanted to give back to younger students and served as a MAPP mentor during my sophomore and junior years at JHU.

My first group of 4 “mentees” was a varied bunch in their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, personalities, responsiveness, interests, and comfort with the transition to college. I

felt proud to be paired with this group to help them avoid common first-year challenges, while also encouraging them to take risks and find their fit. I remember hosting late-night breakfasts during finals, organizing local restaurant trips, and creating end-of-semester goodie bags, but more importantly, the consistency I needed to gain their trust. I learned the importance of acknowledging different “personal languages” in my communication with my mentees, creating activities that appealed to their wide variety of interests. Persistence became a strong tenant of my engagement in my sophomore year, as I realized how easy it was for my mentees to cancel last-minute when there was no precedent for responsiveness and participation. This engagement helped me develop personal strength, while also supporting the successful integration of underrepresented students into the JHU community. I decided to extend my encouragement of the success of first year students even further by acknowledging a part of my first year that I wish was stronger: my residential life experience.

My freshman RA was a kind, active student, who provided a forum for my hall community to bond. Although she was friendly, I didn’t feel comfortable speaking with her about my personal challenges. There were times where I felt alone, although I had a strong group of friends and was engaged on campus. I realized at the end of my freshman year that, when the opportunity arose, I wanted to offer a safe space to other students by being an RA. I happily received this opportunity as a junior and became the RA to 114 students in AMR III Building A. My residents came from a variety of individual, ethnic, cultural, racial, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds, each possessing a unique story and personal identity. I learned how to mediate conflicts, acknowledge my limits as a student leader and refer students to the appropriate campus resources, set boundaries, develop exciting activities that would bring students closer together, and connect on a personal level with 114 different people. I encouraged them to design their perfect journey at JHU, admitting that they may struggle at the beginning, as I did, they will find their place. My residents’ responses from the residential community’s first semester survey revealed just how many of them felt that I cared and made them feel confident in their ability to succeed at Hopkins. Service has shown me the vast potential for establishing enriching relationships and the benefits that result from committing to help someone else.

My leadership experiences at Hopkins have all been about supporting the success of others. I am proud to know that the time I have shared with other students giving advice, support, and, simply, an open ear has helped increase others’ sense of belonging at Hopkins and confidence to succeed. When we use our privileges, opportunities, and lessons as platforms upon which to promote the growth and success of others, there are no limits to our potential to achieve. I am hopeful to continue on this journey of lending a hand to the empowerment of others as a 2015 “Meg” Walsh Leadership Award Recipient.

2015 Meg Walsh Award Budget Template

Brittany Ayana Thomas
Portraits of Sanitation: gender empowerment and art in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil

	Description	Expected Costs	Notes
Travel	Round trip ticket from Washington DC to Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil	\$1,100	
In-Country Transportation	Local bus transportation in Belo Horizonte (City of Belo Horizonte: BHTRANS Company) MOVEBRT	\$70/month (\$840)	The local bus is ~\$1.20 per ride (I estimate two rides per day each month for 12 months).
	Regional bus Transportation to visit other sites engaged in the project (Infrequent)	\$400	
Food	\$400/month	\$4,800	
Shelter	First month: Living with a host family Subsequent months: Shared apartment	~\$800 \$400/month (\$4400)	Estimate based on previous experience negotiating housing with a host family.
Equipment	Camera/tripod to film documentary Audio recording equipment Carrying case Art supplies for portraits	\$550 \$375 \$100 \$200	
Miscellaneous	Art supplies for volunteer art class at "Arte Pela Paz" Supplies for and membership in Capoeira group	\$40/month (\$480) \$60/month (\$720)	Including: paint, paper, art utensils, etc. The costs for membership include: a uniform, class three-times per week, and registration for monthly group competitions ("batizados").
	TOTAL	\$14,765	

To supplement the cost of the art supplies for my art class at "Arte Pela Paz," I will pursue donations from local art stores in the United States and Belo Horizonte. I will also look for used or discounted materials that can be purchased at a lower price by visiting teacher stores and discount retailers.