

Reconsidering How We See Voluntary Work

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Voluntary work has always been a popular medium for the youth to engage with social issues and it's been particularly refreshing to witness youth-led organisations spearheading impactful projects.

As young people learn to recognise that exposure isn't a valid form of payment for unpaid internships, a similar line of thought comes to mind regarding voluntary work. Where do we draw the line between working out of one's passion and being exploited?

Exploitation looks like demanding long hours and maximum effort for a job that pays nothing, except for some level of social and self-fulfilment, by taking advantage of people's emotional involvement. It genuinely freaks me out when I see recruitment posts asking for graphic designers and writers who must be ready to give several hours of their day. And this recruitment is largely targeted towards middle and high schoolers who can have a difficult time setting boundaries when offering their skillset.

It's important not to undermine the work they've put in. A single Instagram infographic requires intensive research and stressful deadlines. Plus, it can be incredibly emotionally taxing and triggering to constantly be exposed to violence, abuse, and mental health -- issues which are often the subjects of work in volunteer organisations.

It's important we ask ourselves if the



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work we put in is meaningful or useful the way we consider it to be. While I've assumed that people volunteer because they feel strongly about a cause, many do it to enhance their résumé. We know this trope: doing the bare minimum for a day, disrupting communities instead of thinking about sustainable forms of development, and feeding into their own saviour complex.

Not only do the admissions officers see through it many times (in the con-

text of using this volunteer work to boost applications when applying for university abroad), you might end up causing more harm than good. For example, feeding people living in poverty and taking 1,000 photographs of yourself doing so instead of contributing to mechanisms that teach them to stand on their own feet, promotes a saviourity complex. Even if there's some net benefit to providing them with food one day, you need to reconsider the

framework of your organisation.

Having said all of that, this discussion does have several moral dilemmas. The fact that we're having this conversation screams privilege because we can decide to not partake in voluntary work, but the people we work for can't wake up one day and deny their reality. Many organisations may not have the funding to pay their workers, and that doesn't mean work can stop. But you must be mindful of how much you ask from volunteers, and look into foreign donors or fellowships for potential monetary support as well.

Social activism and justice must not be a choice as long as systemic inequality exists. There are ways alternative to volunteerism like donations, amplifying underrepresented voices, making existing resources accessible, and giving up space. For the youth age demographic, this time is for you to grow creatively. Find a balance so that the trade-off doesn't become your mental health. Perhaps working on your skills will lead to opportunities to help your communities better. If voluntary work is something you enjoy, then definitely stick with it, but know that everyone has a different way to contribute.

Aahir Mrittika likes to believe she's a Mohammadpur local, but she's actually a nerd. Catch her studying at mrittikaahir@gmail.com

Foreigners Can't (or Won't) Pronounce My Name Right

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I started university last year in the midst of the pandemic, although not in the way I had imagined. Instead of trying to adapt in another country, I now wake up at odd hours to stare at a screen that's mostly black boxes, unless the instructor is sharing their slides, and cringe inwardly whenever my name is mentioned. If Covid-19 didn't happen, these things would've been a figment of my imagination, except the inward cringing because nobody there would get my name right.

Don't get me wrong, my university is great. My professors and classmates are nice. The student body is diverse, international students making up a significant portion of it. Despite all this and the additional comfort of doing classes right from home, the anxiety of having to introduce myself creeps in.

As an introvert, I like to keep the introduction period as brief as possible. However, I knew that this time it would take a little longer. My name can be difficult on foreign tongues, in this case native English speakers. This language simply does not accommodate one of the phonetic sounds in my first name. I'm not new to this since I've had to explain the pronunciation of my name to non-Bangladeshi teachers at school. This would be the



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

same -- or so I thought.

Despite the mental preparation, I wasn't ready for the onslaught of cringe in the first few weeks of the semester, and for my anxiety spiking up whenever the introduction period spiralled into a linguistics lecture. Since they won't get it right anyway, I soon stopped correcting them. In fact, hardly any

of them asked for the correct pronunciation, which I thought was a relief.

Over time, I've grown accustomed to this name-butchered. I now respond to something that isn't my name without batting an eye. I thought I'd become numb to it, but when I was sharing this anecdote with friends, I couldn't bring myself to

imitate the ways my name can apparently be pronounced. I felt embarrassed, which made me question the numbness I claimed to have felt. Was it just a flimsy coping mechanism?

In an interview with Ellen DeGeneres, comedian Hasan Minhaj shared anecdotes about his own name-related mishaps. When he was advised to change his name at the beginning of his career, Minhaj replied, "If you can pronounce Ansel Elgort, you can pronounce Hasan Minhaj."

I wish to have Minhaj's confidence and patience someday, yet it makes me wonder why foreigners who speak in English as their first language are unwilling to ask about names that don't roll off their tongues easily. My university likes to promote their liberal ethos of multicultural inclusivity. While such policies are welcome and reassuring for international students like myself, sometimes the simple act of wanting to know the correct way to say an interesting name can mean a lot.

If you are one such student having to respond to a distorted version of your name every day, I feel you. Hang in there until they get your (and my own!) name right.

Adhora Ahmed tries to make her two cats befriend each other, but in vain. Tell her to give up at adhora.ahmed@gmail.com