

## *Lessons in Insignificance*

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I conducted a service-learning semester during the summer and fall of 2012 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. While in Kuala Lumpur, I worked for an anti-domestic violence organization called Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), which offers a shelter to domestic violence victims and their children. I spent my time at WAO working within the advocacy department and conducting research for the organization. I expected to give WAO my time and to learn more about advocacy and avenues for advocating human rights. I also expected to learn about the inner workings of a women's rights organization. When I entered into the service learning semester, I assumed that my presence, skills, and expertise would positively influence WAO and that both the organization and I would gain something from our partnership. Although I was not sure how, I believed that I would be able to help WAO in solving the problem of domestic violence and that my input would better the lives of current and future women in WAO's shelter.

During my time at WAO, I gradually came to understand that my presence was superfluous at best, and that I was barely able to understand the complex problem of domestic violence, which I had not sufficiently researched or considered before joining WAO. I came into my service learning semester certain that I would be helpful in addressing the problem of domestic violence, even though I had no previous experience with domestic violence work or women's rights and little other experience with which to validate that assumption. My time at WAO illustrated how little I truly understood about domestic violence, the difficulties of operating within the legal system in Malaysia, and the complex cultural realities of patriarchy. Realizing that I could not end domestic violence was not the victory lap I had anticipated. However, my service learning semester demonstrated my own personal insignificance in addressing the problem of domestic violence and freed me so I could truly see and understand the complex realities of domestic violence survivors' lives.

I did not know much about domestic violence prior to working with WAO, and every day at the organization, as I learned a little more about the problem, I also realized how little I *still* knew. The turning point in understanding my involvement with domestic violence crime in Malaysia was listening to the experiences of women in the shelter, and helping them seek justice for domestic violence crime. I began to be drawn into the lives and the stories of the women who stayed in WAO's emergency shelter as I spent time with them and read and recorded their histories of domestic violence. These stories were compiled into accounts with hundreds more like them, and as I began to hear more of them the individual storylines became increasingly blurred, until I felt as though I was listening to a varied but unified narrative. I realized that I had begun placing myself inside of this narrative when I was thinking about domestic violence, asking myself what I would do if I were in a domestic violence situation. As I was documenting a case of a woman who was not only a domestic violence survivor, but also an immigrant, the gravity of the situation that this woman and all of the women in the shelter were facing really impacted me. She had faced domestic violence and was now confronting even more fear and uncertainty as she tried to find a way back to her home country. As I heard this story and so many others like it I began placing myself in the women's shoes, and trying to understand their stories from their perspective gave me a different view of not only their stories, but also their futures.

As I continued working with domestic violence survivors, I became increasingly aware of the limited options available to women in domestic violence situations in Malaysia, and with the prompting of WAO, began studying the legal recourses available. None of my research would have been possible without the assistance of WAO, but working at WAO also gave me a reason to invest in the research because it had the potential to impact women in the shelter and the lives of other domestic violence survivors in Malaysia. This was my first experience serving an organization with scholarly work, and it became one of the richest experiences I have had volunteering at an organization, conducting research, or doing scholarly work because the two reinforced each other's purpose and necessity. It expanded my ideas of service and the utility of academic work, and made my work easier and more engaging because I was studying something I cared about and believed in.

While at WAO I engaged with a process of service that was abstract and yielded intangible results, which forced me to reconsider service and what serving can look like. I was forced to reevaluate how I could serve and the boundaries of "service work." Expanding my definition of service was a positive step because it allowed me to reconsider my future career goals and options and the way I think about the value of work, but ultimately I had no breakthroughs or successes with my work beyond personal ones. I came to realize partway through my service learning semester that I was not going to be able to change anything. I was one person with an incomplete understanding of the problem, with a limited understanding of the culture, and I was not in a position to make things better. I was only in a position to assist the people that are there doing the work. My ineffectuality became something that I had to reckon with, and was something that I expected as an outsider coming in for a short amount of time, but wasn't something that I expected to be emotionally taxing. I knew these women. I wanted to do something for them, but I grew to understand that I was fundamentally unable to deeply change anything.

The only quantifiable result of my research and time at WAO was the report I produced, but there was also some progress made that was harder to measure. The ultimate objective of my research was to contribute toward the creation of a new system of domestic violence response for the police. There was not enough time, expertise, or resources available to begin any of that work while I was at WAO, but toward the end of my time in Malaysia I noticed among my coworkers a renewed interest in discussing the complexity of addressing the domestic violence response of the Malaysian police. In my report I was able to document conversations that had been happening for years. While I was merely helping to repeat what had been said before by many social workers and domestic violence survivors, writing those conversations down renewed interest and, importantly, helped to legitimize it.

I also came to realize after interviewing a group of women staying in the domestic violence shelter that by approaching these women as experts I was making a statement about the importance of their stories and the importance of this problem. After one particular interview, a domestic violence survivor told me that she was interested in taking her case to the police again after a failed attempt at seeking justice against her perpetrator. When I asked her why, she told me that she felt that it was important enough to try again because she might obtain justice and she might be able to help the police understand how to properly assist domestic violence survivors. I certainly did not begin my interview with the intention of convincing the woman to go to the police. I was simply trying to give voice to the actors in the story that I felt needed to be heard the most, and by doing so had helped a woman gather the confidence to go to the police. Even though there was no grand result of my time at WAO and I was unable to change systems

of oppression and exploitation, I was able to make some people feel heard and important. This was not a job I set out to do, but became my most important work while at WAO.

I left with the knowledge that I had given WAO my time and my research, but that I had completed a project that might only be minimally helpful to my friends, the organization, and the domestic violence survivors of Malaysia. The project had truly been helpful to me, and I left with a sense of my indebtedness to WAO and the Malaysian people, and a greater understanding of the overwhelming complexity of domestic violence. My experience at WAO convinced me that my coworkers there were the perfect people to be addressing domestic violence in Malaysia because of their skill, competency, and cultural relevancy, which I lacked. I feel now that there was a place for me at WAO, but it was not instrumental and I am conscious that it ended up being more for my benefit than for theirs.

I learned the depth of my own insufficiencies in addressing the problems of the world through my semester of service learning. This was a positive step in the process of dismantling the savior complex in my own life. It allowed me to recognize the great work that my Malaysian co-workers are doing. I was able to really listen to the women in the shelter when I removed myself and my desire to make an impact, because I was no longer hearing their stories through a filter of personal motive. A healthy knowledge of my own insignificance allowed me to step outside of my perspective and attempt to understand the problem through different perspectives and really see what was happening.

If I were to go back to WAO and continue my work discussing the police force's response to domestic violence, I would spend more time listening. My strongest recommendation for the Malaysian police would be to listen. The people that need to be heard are speaking, and there are solutions to be reached, but an unwillingness to listen is keeping the system from hearing those that have been hurt by it. I would also go without a goal for personal accomplishment. Imposing my own desire to accomplish something was not helpful to my work and did not lead me to more answers, to better relationships with the survivors and my coworkers, or to a more useful report. I would attempt to participate in a way that sheds light on the great work that is already being done by people far more qualified than myself, instead of seeing everything through a lens of self-promotion. In the future, I hope to carry with me a diminished understanding of my own self-importance and a humbler understanding of service.

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