

Isabella Xu

August 27, 2025

## **Who is Left Behind When Corporations Become Social Benefactors?**

### **My Summer at One-Forty.**

Walking into One-Forty's office on the first day of my internship, I was startled by how much it resembled a private corporation. Lounge chairs, glass-walled meeting rooms, and sleek branding made the space feel closer to a startup than a nonprofit. Even the pace of meetings and the emphasis on "impact" carried the aura of a firm hustling for investors. The only difference between a Silicon Valley startup and [One-Forty](#) (a Taiwanese nonprofit for migrant worker education and cultural integration), I later half-joked to friends, is whether they pay their interns.

This resemblance was not superficial. One-Forty, like many modern NGOs, depends on corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs for survival. Over a third of its funding comes directly from corporate grants, with more arriving through long-term partnerships. There is simply not enough money available from small individual donations to sustain operations, so NGOs must chase larger corporate donors. This reliance forces nonprofits to adopt the logics, aesthetics, and metrics of the corporate world. Throughout my summer internship, I realized that large-scale NGOs must mimic corporations to survive, and in doing so they distort both who gets helped and how success is defined.

### **Who is Helped**

Scrolling through philanthropy platforms like Give2Asia or GlobalGiving, I noticed how stark this distortion becomes. The most visible titles almost always emphasize children. On GlobalGiving, the top category is "child protection," and even projects devoted to disaster response or public health tend to highlight infants or very young children (*GlobalGiving: Donate to charity projects around the world*). The visual vocabulary is just as telling: the "acceptable" victim is a child under ten, either smiling gleefully as they receive a pair of shoes or staring solemnly into the camera with an expression that silently asks, "*this is the child you, donor, could save.*"

Corporate CSR pages reinforce this imagery. Open calls on the foundation websites of American companies like Wells Fargo, Mastercard, and Dell overwhelmingly prioritize initiatives for child or female welfare. Rarely do they call for programs supporting adult men, migrants, or incarcerated people.

Lauren Berlant helps explain why. In "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics", she argues that victims must be infantilized or feminized to count as "innocent" (Berlant 128). Only then can they be seen as having had zero consent in their suffering. Thus, the "most acceptable" victims are children and women. What struck me, however, was how this dynamic has shifted since Berlant was writing in the 1990s. Whereas she critiques the way the state is pressured to enact justice through public displays of sentimentality, today the pressure has shifted onto corporations. Companies must maintain public favor to keep their customers and employees satisfied. NGOs reliant on CSR funding are therefore

pulled into this framework, forced to align their programming with the categories of victimhood that corporations—and their consumers—find most palatable.

This had a very real impact at One-Forty. For example, although Taiwan's migrant population is predominantly factory workers, most of One-Forty's programming focuses on female domestic workers. The featured beneficiaries on pitch decks for potential donors are primarily Indonesian hijabi women—a visual archetype that was forever immortalized post-War on Terror in the American imagination as the epitome of a subjugated woman. Taiwan's strong ties with the United States has ushered in this cultural iconography domestically.

Thus, despite there being nearly double the number of workers in the industrial sector compared to the domestic caregiving sector, the Taiwanese and Western public only recognize the feminized domestic migrant worker. I witnessed this live: when Taiwanese Google employees were asked in an awareness workshop what sector they thought most migrant workers worked in, the answer was universally “domestic care.”

### **Serving the Universal Subject**

Berlant also explains that governments are inherently incentivized to “buttress traditional matrices of cultural hierarchy” and to protect their “universal subject/citizens” (Berlant 129) from confronting that they, too, could be vulnerable to oppression. The same can be said for corporations, who draw their employee and customer base from the universal subject.

This resulted in migrants being framed in relation to the benefit they could bring to Taiwan's universal subject. In practice, this meant that pitches to government or corporate funders rarely emphasized migrants' dignity or rights on their own terms. Instead, presentations focused on how well-educated and happy migrant workers would improve medical care for Taiwan's elderly, or how companies would see greater productivity if their migrant factory workers were supported. Even “empowerment” was articulated as a service to someone else.

### **Metrics and Abstraction**

Corporatization also dictates how success is measured. To appeal to CSR sensibilities, NGOs must adopt the language of business: return on investment, key performance indicators, and growth trajectories. Impact becomes a numbers game. How many workers trained? How many classes taught? How many percentage points of income gained? The bigger and bolder the numbers, the better.

But the emphasis on metrics does not just change how NGOs present their work—it reshapes how they operate. Programs are designed around producing quantifiable results, even when those numbers are only abstractions of the actual goal. For example, “migrant empowerment” becomes measured by higher wages or increased productivity, even though those outcomes cannot capture whether someone is actually living a dignified life. Just because a migrant earns more money does not necessarily mean she is less socially isolated, more respected, or genuinely free.

The metrics system is also structurally necessitated by the way CSR operates. Representatives from corporate donor programs rarely visit NGO sites in person; the closest they come is an occasional

“employee volunteer day” staged for optics. Most of the time, their only exposure to an NGO’s work is through Canva infographics, glossy reports, or tightly scripted Zoom presentations. Because impact is mediated entirely through slides and spreadsheets, only the numbers—big, clean, quantifiable—can communicate effectively.

As I helped prepare presentations at One-Forty, I became acutely aware of how much was lost in translation. The stories of individual migrants, the small community ties formed in the office classrooms, or the quiet pride of someone who wrote her first essay in Mandarin—these could not be reduced to neat bullet points or graphs. Yet in order to secure funding, the human details were consistently backgrounded in favor of “scale.”

This system produces perverse incentives. NGOs begin tailoring their activities not toward the actual needs of their constituents, but toward the outcomes that will generate favorable statistics. Once “number of graduates” or “increase in wages” becomes the benchmark, organizations are pushed to chase those metrics, even if doing so does not align perfectly with their mission. The abstraction takes precedence over the reality it was meant to measure.

The cruel irony is that the alternative—qualitative evaluation—has its own traps. Moving away from numbers often means returning to the sentimental logic Berlant critiqued: producing stories of suffering that infantilize or feminize the victim in order to elicit sympathy. This creates a double-bind. NGOs must either embrace metrics that flatten human dignity into data points, or lean on sentimentality that reinscribes hierarchies of who counts as a “worthy” victim. In both cases, the humanity of those being served is subordinated to the demands of donors.

## Works Cited

Berlant, Lauren. "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics." *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, edited by Wendy Brown and Janet Halley, Duke University Press, 2002, pp. 105–33. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hpn4c.7>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2025.

"GlobalGiving: Donate to Charity Projects around the World." *GlobalGiving*, [www.globalgiving.org/](http://www.globalgiving.org/). Accessed 27 Aug. 2025.