Post-MCGI Society Research Team
Working Paper

Beyond “Free Will”: Debunking the Volunteerism Defense in MCGI’s Labor System

By

Rosa Rosal

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Abstract

For years, Members Church of God International (MCGI) has answered allegations of labor abuse with one word: voluntary. Labor is framed as tungkulin—spiritual duty—so refusal becomes framed as spiritual failure rather than an ordinary decision. This working paper argues that “volunteerism” functions less as free choice and more as a structured compliance system. Drawing on the Post-MCGI Society Research Archive and our recent working papers, we analyze the volunteerism defense on four fronts: (1) consent under “menace of penalty,” (2) the deployment of minors in labor roles and the constraints of child-protection and child-labor standards, (3) economic extraction through captive consumption and debt pressure, and (4) surplus labor as a mechanism that produces visible hierarchy and legitimacy breakdown. The purpose is not rhetorical. It is to clarify why a volunteer label does not settle the question of coercion, exploitation, or legality when the surrounding structure manufactures compliance and restricts exit.

1. Introduction: why “voluntary” is not the end of the argument

In ordinary life, “volunteer” means you can say no without consequence. In high-control settings, the word often does different work: it operates as a moral shield. When questioned about why members work long hours without pay—sometimes including minors—the reflex reply is: voluntary naman. The category is treated as self-justifying, as if religious framing automatically dissolves labor standards.

But social science does not evaluate consent by asking what a system calls itself. It evaluates consent by asking what the person can realistically refuse, what penalties follow refusal, and whether exit is genuinely open. Our working papers on MCGI’s labor economy treat “volunteerism” as a claim that must be tested against structure, incentives, and documented practice.[1][2][3]

2. Conceptual framework: consent, coercion, and engineered compliance

A useful baseline comes from the International Labour Organization's forced-labor definition: forced labor is work extracted under the "menace of any penalty" and not offered voluntarily.[4][5] "Penalty" is not limited to physical harm; it includes pressures that constrain real choice. In a corporate workplace, the penalty might be firing. In a high-control religious organization, the penalty can be spiritual terror, shame, surveillance, ostracism, or being labeled iba ang diwa—sanctions that operate socially but land psychologically.

This is where Gramsci and Foucault help. Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony explains how domination is maintained not only through force but through moral language that turns compliance into "common sense," internalized duty, and self-administered discipline.[9] Foucault's account of discipline and normalization explains how surveillance—formal or informal—produces self-policing subjects who regulate their own behavior to avoid correction, stigma, or exclusion.[10] Our "Beyond Free Will" journal uses this lens to describe why voluntarism in MCGI is often engineered: elders or church workers "invite," mass indoctrination supplies the moral framing, and social embedding makes refusal psychologically costly.[3][11]

We also draw on threshold and exit models: when credible exit narratives spread, they reduce stigma and lower the perceived cost of leaving, producing cascades.[6] That matters because "volunteerism" relies on stigma and fear staying intact. Once fear decays, the volunteer label loses power.

3. Evidence base and method

This paper synthesizes materials documented in the Post-MCGI Society Research Archive—screenshots of labor solicitation, internal instructions, audio recordings of fundraising pressure, and interviews with exiters—as already described in our working papers on (a) MCGI's modern-day slavery economy and (b) child labor risks in religious contexts.[1][2] Where we use legal frameworks, we do so as standards for analysis of risk and exposure, not as final adjudications of guilt. The claim is about how the system functions, and what that function resembles when measured against internationally recognized definitions and Philippine statutory constraints.

4. Findings: four reasons the volunteerism defense fails

4.1 The myth of consent: “menace of penalty” in spiritual form

The strongest rebuttal to “voluntary” is that consent collapses under duress. Under the ILO framework, voluntariness requires free and informed choice, including the practical freedom to refuse or leave.[4][5] In MCGI’s labor system, refusal is rarely treated as a neutral decision. It is treated as a moral event. The penalty is not “you lose a job”; it is “you lose standing,” “you lose community,” “you are rebellious,” “you are not of the right spirit,” and—most powerful—“you endanger your salvation.”

So a member may technically “agree,” but agreement under engineered guilt, fear of being marked, and fear of isolation is not the same thing as free consent. This is precisely why high-control groups can claim voluntariness while still producing outcomes that resemble coercion. Our recent journal frames this as hegemonic compliance: the member experiences an internal compulsion that the system itself helped manufacture.[3][9][10]

4.2 Minors and labor roles: when “service” becomes child-labor risk

The volunteerism defense becomes more fragile when minors are involved. Our research documents cases where youth—often framed as “guest coordinators” or related front-of-house roles—perform labor-intensive duties that extend beyond ordinary religious participation: logistics, reception, crowd control, ushering, travel to work sites, and extended hours that compromise rest and schoolwork.[2]

Philippine child labor standards are explicit about night-work restrictions and working hours for minors. Republic Act No. 9231 prohibits children aged 15 to below 18 from working between 10:00 PM and 6:00 AM and limits working hours to protect rest, schooling, and development.[7][8] RA 9231 and its implementing rules also define “worst forms of child labor” to include forced or compulsory labor and hazardous work—work that is harmful by nature or circumstance.[8]

This is where “voluntary” cannot be used as a universal escape hatch. Even in ordinary society, a child cannot simply “consent” their way around protective rules designed to reduce harm. And when reports include late-night duties, travel to labor sites, sleep deprivation, and missed school obligations, the system is no longer describing religious formation; it is describing labor conditions that fall into legally and morally sensitive territory.[2][7][8]

The “lock-in” allegation sharpens the issue further. If doors are guarded or locked during prolonged financial collection periods, then voluntariness becomes conceptually incoherent: you cannot meaningfully “volunteer” to remain when exit is practically constrained. We present this as an allegation requiring documentation and careful redaction, but its analytic significance is clear: restricting physical exit converts moral pressure into coercive containment.[1][2]

4.3 Captive consumption: labor that circles back as compelled purchasing

A third failure of the volunteer defense is economic structure. Our working papers describe MCGI not merely as a church, but as a labor-intensive material distribution system that converts devotion into production and then converts the same community into a captive market.[1]

The sequence is straightforward. Members provide free labor to cook, pack, clean, produce, or staff events. Then members are pressured—through moral language, targets, and social visibility—to buy the very goods and services their free labor helped produce. The result is a closed loop: free labor becomes product, product becomes internal sales, and revenue flows upward through organizational channels and affiliated operations. In such a loop, calling the labor “voluntary” misses the economic point: voluntariness does not negate extraction if the structure is designed to harvest surplus time and surplus money from the same households.

Debt pressure intensifies the picture. When members are urged to use credit, loans, or asset liquidation to meet financial targets, financial vulnerability becomes the lever that sustains compliance—an especially unstable arrangement when charismatic insulation weakens.[1]

4.4 Surplus labor and the lifestyle gap: where “sacrifice” visibly ends up

Finally, a volunteer defense collapses when the distribution of benefits becomes visible. Marx’s surplus labor concept names a simple reality: when people work beyond what is needed to sustain themselves, someone captures the surplus—either as profit, capital, or institutional power. In standard businesses, labor is a major cost. If a large organization persuades thousands to work for free “as duty,” it drives labor costs toward zero, inflating the capacity of its operations.

When that surplus is paired with a conspicuous lifestyle gap—visible comfort at the top alongside exhaustion and indebtedness below—members begin to reinterpret "duty" as subsidy. Sociology has a name for this: legitimacy breaks when the moral story no longer matches the material pattern. In our research, this legitimacy break is not abstract; interview accounts repeatedly link labor exhaustion to disillusionment, and disillusionment to exit.[1][2]

5. Implications for Charismatic Insulation and The Great Collapse

This paper plugs directly into the charismatic insulation thesis. Founder-era charisma can suspend cost recognition: members interpret sacrifice as sacred, and they tolerate demands that would otherwise feel intolerable. After succession, insulation weakens. People begin to ask ordinary questions: "Where does the money go?" "Why are we working like this?" "Why are minors doing this?" "Why can't we leave?" The volunteer label stops working, because charisma is what made the label believable.

Once volunteerism is exposed as engineered compliance—supported by stigma, fear, surveillance, and constrained exit—the system becomes vulnerable to exit cascades. That is why the volunteerism defense matters: it is not just a public relations line. It is one of the ideological technologies that once kept labor extraction stable.[9][10][11]

Conclusion

The volunteerism defense relies on a convenient assumption: religious devotion overrides labor standards. Our working papers argue the opposite. When "service" involves engineered consent under menace of penalty, sleep deprivation and hazardous conditions for minors, captive consumption, debt pressure, and a visible transfer of surplus value upward, the category of volunteerism becomes a rhetorical cover—not an explanation.

If MCGI wishes to refute the exploitation thesis, the burden of proof is practical, not theological: show safety protocols, show age safeguards, show working-hour compliance, show that exit doors are genuinely open, and show that labor and product systems are not structured as captive extraction. Until then, "voluntary naman" remains an inadequate defense for a labor system that functions, in key respects, like modern unfree labor.

Notes and references

[1] Post-MCGI Society Research Team, MCGI: A Modern-Day Slavery Economy (Working Paper, Open Review edition, 2026).

[2] Post-MCGI Society Research Team, Unregulated Child Labor in Religious Contexts (Working Paper, Open Review edition, 2026).

[3] Post-MCGI Society Research Team, Beyond “Free Will”: Debunking the Volunteerism Defense in MCGI’s Labor System (Journal/Research Note, 2026).

[4] International Labour Organization, “Forced labour: definition and indicators” (ILO explanatory materials; “menace of any penalty” standard).

[5] International Labour Organization, Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), Article 2(1).

[6] Mark Granovetter, “Threshold Models of Collective Behavior,” American Journal of Sociology 83, no. 6 (1978): 1420–1443.

[7] Republic Act No. 9231 (Philippines), provisions on hours of work and night-work prohibition for children aged 15 to below 18 (10:00 PM to 6:00 AM).

[8] Implementing Rules and Regulations of Republic Act No. 9231, provisions on hours of work, night-work prohibitions, and hazardous/worst forms of child labor.

[9] Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

[10] Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

[11] Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).