

Perceived Discrimination and Psychological Distress of Myanmar Refugees in Malaysia

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Abstract—The purpose of this research is to explore the psychological distress and discrimination experienced by refugees from Myanmar in Malaysia. A narrative inquiry approach and an in depth interview were chosen to get in touch with the social world of the refugees. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory was used to examine the psychological distress of the participants in their social context. The findings revealed the social, economical and psychological discrimination experienced by these refugees while waiting for the opportunity to be relocated to a new country.

Index Terms—Discrimination, narrative inquires, psychological distress, refugees, social context.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2010 approximately 81,516 documented refugees resided in Malaysia with 93.3% (76,120) from Myanmar [1]. Malaysia has the highest number of Myanmar refugees after Bangladesh, and Thailand. As Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol [2], hence the Malaysian government does not provide asylum system to regulate the refugees' status. As illegal immigrants these asylum seekers and refugees are subjected to fine, imprisonment, whipping for illegal entry and over staying if they are caught [3]. Like most refugees throughout the world, whether they are in relief camp or temporarily settled, they often suffer health and psychological problems as a result of inadequate nutrition, lack of health care and psychological trauma from relocation (Shears & Lusty, 1987; Young, Bukoff, Waller & Blount, 1987) cited in G. Vernez [4].

In Malaysia, refugees are scattered throughout the country with most of them living in the Klang valley. As illegal immigrants under United Nation High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) protection they lived in low cost flat, construction sites and make shift camps in the jungle. [5]. Without any legal status the refugees have to face many life challenges to meet their own survival needs. They work in restaurants, construction sites, plantations, vegetable farms and other odd jobs to earn their living. They lived in constant fear and are always in the move to avoid detection by the immigration officers. For those under the protection of UNHCR they lived in community centers which are informal schools for these refugees' children.

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According to Bronfenbrenner [6], ecological theory the individual experience is shaped by the larger social context in which he or she lives. At the micro system the immediate influence of the lives of the refugees are their immediate family members and those whom they interacts directly in the community learning centres. This level of micro system may further expand into the meso system when they interrelate with other refugees' community learning centres. This meso system will develop into the exosystem as it expand progressively encompassing environments which will have direct or indirect impact on the individuals such as the interaction between workplace and the local government [7]. As these refugees do not possess any legal status their life experiences are not much influenced by the cultural, social, political and legal system at the macro level where the effect of the larger principles of cultural values, customs, and laws which might have a cascading influence throughout the interactions of all other layers of the ecosystem

According to Coll, Lamberry, Jenkins, McAdoo, Crnie, Wasik and Gracia [8], discrimination can potentially be experienced at all ecological levels but the most important is the immediate contextual factors in which the individual lives. According to Welsh, Sigelman, Bledsoe and Combs [9], ethnic density is an important factor in the social context of discrimination. Individuals of the same ethnic group tend to live together in same areas because of greater level of social support, cohesion and social connection. As they clustered together in poverty stricken neighborhoods this in turn might further increased their psychological distress. This is because according to cognitive theory the deeper the individual's personal commitment to an ethnic identity, the more vulnerable he or she would be to psychological distress [10].

This study examines the social discrimination and the psychological distress experienced by the refugees in Malaysia while waiting for resettlement in third world countries such as America, Australia, Canada, Norway and Denmark [11]. Jackson, Brown & Kirby [12] regard discrimination as intentional acts that draw unfair distinction based solely on ethnic basis that have favorable effects to in group but negative effect to out groups (p.194). This social discrimination is subtle and elusive. Besides having to withstand the act of prejudices, these refugees also have to deal with the psychological consequences of social discrimination. They frequently expressed and experienced the feeling of being helpless, powerless, sad and fearful. This experience of discrimination might lead to increased levels of chronic health problems, physical disabilities, depression and poor psychological well being. This is further evidenced by previous research which supported that "perceived discrimination constitutes a significant stressor which can jeopardize the physical and mental health" of minority group

members [13].

II. METHOD

This research adopted a narrative inquiry approach to further explore the life experience of these refugees. This approach enables the participants to “re-member, re-visit, re-visualise, re-cover, re-new their experiences so as to make sense of their lives [14]. Thus it is hoped that through these emerging narratives and interactions with the research participant’s one is able to further understand the challenges faced by the asylum seekers.

The 6 research participants were identified during a 5 day intensive English camp conducted for a group of 20

Community based teachers from UNHCR. The intensive 5 days interaction with these teachers provided a platform for communication and clarification with the research participants. Further in depth interview were conducted with the research participants in their teaching learning centers. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore their perception and experience living in a foreign country as asylum seekers. All interviews were conducted face to face. The interviews were audio taped for later analysis the participants were briefed about confidentiality and the purpose of the research. Informed consent was signed when they agreed to have their interview sessions recorded. The interview scripts were further transcribed. The verbatim statements were quoted without any changes. The voices of the participants were further triangulated by refugees who were living in the same centre as the participants. Overarching themes emerging from the data were identified and categorized. Data analysis followed Chase’s suggestion of multiple lenses and voices [15]. These included the voices of the refugees. Two dominant themes were identified from the data analysis. These themes were social discrimination and psychological distress.

III. RESULT

A. Social Discrimination

As the participants did not possess any identification card (ID) or legal status they constantly lived in fear and anxieties. They felt themselves to be outcast having no access to education and health care services. They lived in constant fear of arrest and detention. As one of the participants lamented,

“There was a time, a young boy desperately need to be sent to a clinic, but he didn’t have UNHCR card, they cannot get discount .It was really difficult.” Besides the refugees also found themselves in an environment where they are being exploited by the local residents and neighbor. For examples they are charged higher rental and are not paid by the employer. One of the participants commented *“The landlord charged us more rentals because they do not trust us. When we work, we get little payment and we have to hide in the kitchen and sometimes our boss does not pay us but we cannot say anything.”* Even the local transport operators discriminated them. For example one of the participants mentioned *“Taxi drivers do not take us as they are suspicious*

of us.”

Without an UNHCR ID cards their movement were restricted for they are afraid of being caught by immigration officers. For example a participant commented *“Even police will catch us and ask for money. We were so scared because policemen can put us in jail”* .If they are caught and without anyone to defend them they will be jailed or whipped. As one participant lamented *“it takes a long time to apply for an UNHCR ID, without which we cannot go anywhere .The school children told us their parents are not able to go out because they have no ID card.”*

The refugees were not only being bullied and exploited but are being treated as if they had no identity and are trapped within their own communities. They are afraid to venture out of their confined communities for fear of being robbed of caught by the police as one participant lamented *“We were robbed as the robbers recognized our faces as refugees and they were very sure that we dared not report as we do not have an ID”*

In response to the different harsh treatment and discrimination, the refugees strived on their hopes and dreams for a better future in a new country. They constantly worried about the future of their children and emphasized the importance of education as a means for them to secure a better life and future. For example one participant commented *“If the children don’t learn English, they are not able to survive if later they have a chance to be relocated to a new country like America or Australia.”*

Socially the refugees’ children are deprived of the access to education which is the basic necessity for development and personal growth. In Malaysia only 20% of the Myanmar refugee children attend structured education projects conducted by UNHCR. [16]. 80 % of the children attend community-based schools located within the refugee population which are accessible to the children. These communities based schools are self supported and depended on public donation. With limited financial resources these schools lack qualified teachers and basic educational resources. Most of the classes are held in rented flats or shop houses with no proper chairs and tables. Most of the learning centers are located in two levels of shop houses in the city. The classrooms in these centres were cramped with pupils of different age groups thus making teaching difficult. Since there were no after school curriculum most of the boys are left running around the streets or working illegally as restaurants’ helpers to supplement their family income. As for the girls they stayed back after school to help make craft items for sale. Due to the unconducive learning environment and family poverty many of the adolescent refugees dropped out of school to find work to supplement their family’s income.

B. Psychological Distress

The lack of employment and financial support translate into emotional distress among the refugees. As most of them are asylum seekers since they do not possess any UNHCR identity card they are being bullied by employers and are unable to seek cheaper medical treatment. A lady participant narrated a devastating situation where she found an old asylum seeker having to work endlessly but did not get

much money. He was feeling frustrated because he was unable to help his family and had expressed the desire to die. She also expressed the emotional stress when they are unable to support themselves with their daily necessities. She further commented *"Sometimes we don't have money, we cannot buy tooth paste...we need to pay the electricity, utilities, food and paper to teach the children"*

Although there are 30 full time refugees' teachers in all the learning centers but only 15 of them are fully sponsored by UNHCR and are paid a monthly salary of 600 ringgit per month. One of the participant commented *"I have been teaching here for almost four years but I haven't been paid."*

To ease their financial distress of their friends the refugees' teachers assist each other financially by sharing their monthly salary of 600 ringgit with another colleague who is an unpaid teacher. In response to their financial constraints these participants felt that they have to remain useful by contributing to their community. Hence they have to be community bond by sharing what they have with one another. They have to live in congested rented flats or shop houses where the classrooms are used as bedrooms during the night.

Although some of these unemployed refugees' teachers might have derived some psychological comfort from the shared struggle but material deprivation and symbolic connotation might induced in them the feeling of worthlessness and failure.

Even as temporarily residents of Kuala Lumpur, the refugees are constantly fearful of their children future. They aim at educating their children in their native language besides English, mathematics and science. For example one of the participants commented *"since some of the children have been staying out of their country for many years they are not able to catch up with their own language, so learning English will enable them to survive if later they have a chance to be relocated to a new country."*

Without any travelling documents, these refugees are afraid to look for work for fear of being arrest and detain in immigration detention camp where they will be confronted and brutally handled by immigration and enforcement officers. Refugees who are detained spend months in immigration camps with some hope of release by UNHCR. To the refugees the UNHCR is their only anchor and hope of protection and resettlement. However, this hope is becoming dimmer as UNHCR is also facing an uphill task of trying to provide protection to these refugees because Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention [17].

IV. DISCUSSION

The refugees' experience of discriminated and hardship living in a society without any legal status were both positive and negative. They willingness to minimize their experience of discrimination and to accept the unalterable facts of life which had helped them to survive and to remain community bond. By holding to their belief of achieving their hopes and dreams which were interwoven with their love for their community it has helped them to cope with the social discrimination and psychological distress positively. They

were happy to work as a community sharing what they have for the benefits of their children. Since they are allowed to teach their children their homeland language besides English they hope they will get resettled in other country much easily. Moreover if they act negatively to this social discrimination and hardship they may be regarded as physically and psychologically weak. Thus they opted to cope 'safely' by avoidance and acceptance so as to preserve themselves and salvage a minimal degree of self esteem and self worth [18]. By holding strongly to the attachment of their traditional ethnic values and communal cultures they were able to cope with the exclusion and rejection. Noh [13] in their study also suggest that forbearance or passive coping reduces the emotional impact of ethnic discrimination.(p.203). The belief that life is precious strengthens their resilience in their struggles for freedom which will one day be realized, if not for they but at least for their children. These refugees will continue to work through any hardship and stay alive for the sake of their families in their homeland. The will to live for their children further strengthen their struggles to strive in an environment of discrimination and persecution. The strongly held ethnic identification also aids them in buffering their stress of language difficulties, social and psychological discrimination.

Although, now the Malaysian government provides assistance to refugees such as the right to work and improved access to education and health care for those refugees holding UNHCR identity card but majority of them still live in an environment of discrimination and marginalization. As international assistance for refugee have decreased over the years, UNHCR still continues its effort to improve the social prospect for refugees such as access to employment, better education and health care. They provide home for children and financial assistance to assist the refugee communities in developing their own hand crafts for sale. To elevate these refugees from their present situation more local communities should volunteer in assisting UNHCR by providing these refugees with improved social services such as health, education, employment and other basic needs. Private donors, corporate entities, social organizations and individuals may extend their expertise and services or resources to meet the educational needs of the refugees' children. Since language and education are important predictors of successful economic integration there is an urgent need for more social and nongovernmental organizations to assist these refugees in providing better educational environment equipped with basic learning facilities and sufficient paid staff. Education is seen as an important tool for these refugee children for it is necessary in reinforcing their dreams of resettling in a third country or their homeland in the future.

To provide financial aid to further assist those refugees' teachers who are not under UNHCR sponsorship in their financial burden. Furthermore local communities can provide monitoring and intervention programme such as counseling services to assist the refugees in coping with their psychological distress. For those refugees who are wrongly convicted in court, legal assistance should be provided to defend them as they did not have the chance to defend themselves financially. As one of the participants commented, *"One of my friend was sent to the court, there was no lawyer,*

no legal representation and no translator.”

Assistance from mental health professionals are also urgently needed to assist in the rehabilitation programme of those refugees who are released from prison and detention camps. The fear, pain, ordeal and emotional hurt had traumatized them [16]. Besides, counseling is also necessary to assist in building the psychological well being of these refugees' children who are witnesses of the marginalization, discrimination and exploitation faced by their parents. There should be more awareness among the various human right groups of the struggles and humiliation encountered by these asylum seekers who were driven out of their homeland due to political instability. Thus to develop a more caring and civilized society, volunteers can assist in teaching the refugees children and adult the Malay and English language, coping and vocational skills which will increase the social and economic access of these refugees. Thus to protect and improve the lives of refugees there should be a common standard of dignity and security for all who are on the move regardless of the reasons for their dislocation, status and categories.

With inadequate financial aid and the presence of numerous signs that the public and Malaysian government actions are hardening, repatriation might be another preferred permanent solution. Although it might not be easy but with the collaboration of developed countries in providing financial assistance for economic development in the refugees' homeland, the refugees might be encouraged to settle in their countries of origin. Furthermore with improved social, political and economic development the refugees might return voluntarily to join their family members in their homeland.

While this current study only focuses on the aspects of Myanmar refugees' social context, the issue of personal factors in adaptation and acculturation remain an important consideration. Future research on topic of discrimination should explore the level of coping ability, personality traits, capacity building that may be related to how the individuals perceive and react to discrimination.

The findings are also limited to the small sample size of 6 adult participants who are refugees teaching in their respective centers and it cannot be generalized to the younger refugee population. Furthermore by using a narrative approach and a small sample size it may underestimate the true rate of social and psychological discrimination among the refugees. Future research should include refugees' children and adolescents for literature has shown that living as asylum seekers at young age might have developmental consequences. In addition this study did not focus on an in depth study of the refugees' coping abilities. For examples previous research shows that cognitive and behavioral responses that may be characterized as passive acceptance and avoidance – diminished the strength of the link between discrimination and depression [13]. It is also important to note that future research on discrimination should explore a mixed mode of quantitative and qualitative approach thus further enhancing the results of the findings.

V. CONCLUSION

Although it might seem impossible for the Malaysian government to provide continuous assistance to refugees due to resource constraints and equity considerations, it needs to resolve some humanitarian issues. As refugees they are vulnerable group of people with cultural and language problem trying to survive in a foreign country. These people hold a dream for their future, hoping to be resettled in a third country or to return to their homeland. Hence it is our responsibilities to treat them with dignity by complementing the efforts of UNHCR in providing food, health care, and education to their children, temporary employment, counseling and literacy instruction

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