**EXPERIENCE OF ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES FROM BURMA IN MALAYSIA**

*ABSTRACT: Many Myanmar refugees had to flee from their homeland because of the violent acts of the Burmese military. This qualitative study investigated the refugees’ and asylum seekers’ experiences of being ‘in limbo’ in a country that does not provide them with legal status or protection as they await resettlement. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understating of the life of being a refugee and asylum seeker to help clinicians and social workers be prepared while serving refugees who experienced persecution and multiple resettlements. Data were gathered in Malaysia through an in depth semi structured interview guide with 10 refugees who were persecuted and forced to immigrate from Myanmar. Using the constant comparative analysis method, data were analyzed and three common themes included constant fear/trauma, living on the outskirts, and hope for the future were revealed. Implications for working with refugees who have experienced prolonged persecution, forced immigration, and multiple resettlements are discussed.*

*KEYWORDS: asylum seekers, human rights violations, Myanmar, refugees, refugee trauma*

**BURMALI SIĞINMACILARIN VE GÖÇMENLERİN MALEZYA’DAKİ DENEYİMLERİ**

*ÖZET:* Birçok Myanmarlı göçmen kendi yurtlarından Burmalı asgari güçlerin zorba ve şiddet içeren hareketleri yüzünden kaçmak zorunda kaldı. Bu nitel çalışma, sığınmacıların ve göçmenlerin, hiç bir yasal hakkin ve korunmanın sağlanmadığı bir ülkede “unutulmuş” bir bölgesinde yerleşme sürecindeyken edindikleri yaşam deneyimlerini araştırdı. Bu çalışmanın amacı, klinisyenleri ve sosyal hizmet uzmanlarını, işkenceye maruz kalmış ve pek çok kez yer değiştirmek zorunda kalan göçmenlerle çalışırken, onların hayat tecrübelerini ve yaşadıklarını anlamasına yardımcı olarak alanda karşılaşabilecekleri sorunlara hazırlamak. Veriler Malezya’da, işkenceye maruz kalmış ve göç etmeye zorlanmış 10 Myanmarlı göçmenle yapılandırılmış mülakat tekniği ile toplanmıştır. Karşılaştırmalı analiz metodu uygulanarak veriler analiz edilmiş ve *sürekli korku /travma,* *uçurumun kenarında yaşamak* ve *gelecek için umut* olmak üzere üç yaygın tema elde edilmiştir. Uzun suren işkencelere, zorla göç etmeye ve sürekli yer değiştirmek zorunda kalan göçmenlerle çalışırken uygulanabilecek tekniklere ise tartışma bölümünde değinilmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: göçmen, göçmen travması, insan hakları ihlali, Myanmar, sığınmacı

# INTRODUCTION

Burma, also known as the Union of Myanmar, is located in Southeast Asia with 56 million and 135 ethic groups, including Karen, Karenni, Burman, Kachin, Shan, Mon, Rakhine (formerly known as Arakan), and Chin. (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011). Among these groups, Burman has the majority of the ethnic population in Burma and the main religion of the country is Buddhism (89%) (Cohen & Asgary, 2016).

Before declared independence, Burma was a British colony and divided the land of kingdoms. Under colonial rule, the British brought many minority ethnic groups to use them as military forces and promised them to have an independent state in future the (Martin & Allsebrook, 1994). During Wolrd War II, Burmans had fought against the Japanese army and established Burma in 1948 (Ehmer, 2015). Since 1962, the tension between the Burman politicians and minority ethnic groups has been increasing (Ehmer, 2015; Lintner, 1990). Those groups have protested the government and fought for their rights against the Burmese military, yet it has ended up with either displacement of those groups from Burma, or banishment of them to refugee camps (Lintner, 1990).

It has been well-documented that the military junta led to chronic human rights violations against minority groups in Burma, and military use physical and sexual violence, such as brutalities against civilians, raping women, raiding, burning crops and places of worship, to control the minority groups (Fike & Androff, 2016; Malseed, 2009). Due to oppression and persecution, over 1 million people have fled from Burma to neighboring countries such as Thailand, Bangladesh and Malaysia, and approximately half-million displaced people have been granted refugee status by the United Nations (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee [UNHCR], 2015).

Although there is little attention on these uprooted minority groups on literature, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR; 2013) point out that among those minority ethnic groups, especially Rohingya Muslims from Burma are the world’s most persecuted minority, who exposed to systematic discrimination, violence, political torture, ethnic cleansing, and displacement. According to the Human Right Watch report (2013) Myanmar Muslims’ basic human rights such as health, education, marriage, employment, and freedom of religion are violated and denied their ethnic identity and citizenship status. As a result of harsh living conditions, restricted human rights, and cruel policies against ethnic groups in Myanmar, many people are forced to leave their homeland to neighborhood countries (Song, 2018; Wake & Cheung, 2016). Even though, many people were able to flee from Myanmar, those stressors that were experienced in Myanmar continue in during the immigration and resettlement process, which result in grief, complex trauma, PTSD, anxiety, and depression (Hall et al., 2015; Shedlin et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2017). These mental health problems are often compounded with the difficulties of acculturation and adjustment to their new life (Jamil et al., 2007), as well as the added trauma of discrimination and racism, islamophobia, and xenophobia in the host country (Majeed, 2019; Ziersch et al., 2020).

Due to geographical proximity and shared religious beliefs, Malaysia has been sympathetic to Burmese refugees (Wake & Cheung, 2016). According to UNHCR reports (2020), as of July 2020, 153,190 refugees and asylum seekers from Myanmar are stranded in Malaysia. Refugees who are registered with UNHCR in Malaysia are able to get a UNHCR card, which provides them refugee status and financial and medical assistance. Besides this card, Malaysian law does not provide direct projection or give them at least temporary work permits (Wake & Cheung, 2016). Although the UNHCR card aims to protect the refugees, many refugees are still persecuted, treated disrespectfully, and have a fear of detention from Malaysia (Wake & Cheung, 2016). Besides the refugees with UNHCR cards, there are many illegal refugees who reside in Malaysia. Based on our knowledge, there is no study has conducted with those, however, it is predictable that living in Malaysia with the illegal statues should be more difficult than the legal refugees who are registered by UNHCR.

This study, thus, focused on gaining a better understanding of the life of being a refugee in limbo in Malaysia. Given the current growth of refugees, it is important for clinicians to understand the resettlement process and refugees' experiences prior to resettlement. The depth and extent of stress and trauma begin in their homelands and continues for as long as it takes to be resettled.

1. **METHOD**

Focus groups conducted with 10 refugees from Myanmar with the help of a translator using an in-depth semi-structured interview guide. Interviews were conducted in a health clinic in Malaysia and participants were recruited through a physician who works voluntarily with these refugees. Participants were 8 men and 2 women, and the mean age was 31.4 years *(SD = 9.61).* All participants were unemployed in Malaysia. Data were transcribed and analyzed using analytic induction and constant comparative method (Glaser & Straus, 1967) to develop categories and identify common themes in the transcripts. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, investigator triangulation was used to allow multiple researchers with different perspectives to discuss the same problem, hence strengthening the integrity of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

1. **FINDINGS**

Findings of the present study revealed three major themes: Constant fear/trauma, living on the outskirts, and hope for the future.

**3.1.** **Constant fear/trauma**

Refugees fled to Malaysia and known as “urban refugees” shared stories of working illegally, exhortation, entrapment, and living in constant fear. The trauma and fear familiar while they lived in Myanmar was no different than that experienced in Malaysia – they were vulnerable to police harassment and arrest. UNHCR cards were described as largely meaningless and often destroyed when presented to law enforcement officials, as one participant said:

“*When I go outside, I worry...of getting arrested or getting stabbed. I am always terrified. One day I was on the way back from work, I got mobbed and beaten up. Thank God I didn’t get stabbed.”*

Participants from Rohingya, fled on boats heading to Malaysia, reported that their boats were stranded for days at sea until rescued by Sri Lankan authorities. After 3 or so years in Sri Lanka, many made their way to Malaysia. These refugees also stated that they owed agents thousands of dollars to get in the boat. Although, this process is a financial burden for them, they spent their all savings and left their families behind. Because families can often only afford to pay the boat fare for one member and the men are the ones that are sent away to find jobs abroad. Rohingya male participants, some of whom left wives and children in Myanmar, stated that

 “*We heard and viewed on the internet that the horror our families were currently facing…”*

One participant recalled a conversation with his parents in Myanmar, “*I will probably die of starvation before the military gets me*.” Participants reported hearing from their families and though they are away from Myanmar, they are still fearful and not at peace in Malaysia.

* 1. **Living on the outskirts**

Unfortunately, Malaysia does not have legal policy or law for the refugees to meet their basic needs such as health, employment, and education. Although refugees who are given UNHCR card is able to receive treatment, refugees who have not the UNCHR card have to pay extremely high cost to access health care. For example, participants explained that hospitals would charge refugees additional “fees” plus being required to pay hospital charges in advance. The inability to belong, work legally and educate their children and/or themselves made refugees feel entrapped:

“*I cannot go back and I cannot stay here either (unless there is a change in the Myanmar government).”*

They rely on help from fellow refugees and non- governmental associations to apply for refuge in UNHCR-friendly countries. The process however can take years, more than 10 for some. In the meantime, they live in limbo.

* 1. **Hope for the future**

Although these refugees had experienced high levels of torture and trauma, some refugees expressed their hope for a better life, and gratefulness for being away from Myanmar. One participant who had to leave his wife and five children in Myanmar (two of which had since died), reported that after enduring nearly unimaginable persecution and suffering in Malaysia, he is still happy and believed that God will help them overcome hard times. Also, all participants regardless of ethnicity, expressed the desire to go on living and demonstrated perseverance. One participant said:

*“We can’t go back there so only one thing -we have to find a way to other countries like America, Australia to get a chance to make our future better…”*

1. **DISCUSSION**

Due to ongoing persecution in Myanmar since 2011, people are fleeing from their homeland to safer places (Song, 2018). Since then, many Myanmar refugees took refuge in Malaysia, where lacks a formal legislative and administrative framework to provide refugee protection. Asylum seekers/refugees (ASR) in Malaysia do not have legal rights or access to work, education, or health care (Wake & Cheung, 2016). After fleeing their homelands, ASRs in Malaysia find they are in limbo and treated as irregular migrants, with no rights and no recourse to justice and subject to arrest and fines, caning, imprisonment, and deportation. To avoid being identified by authorities, many ASR flock to the cities where they try to blend in with the locals, earning the term 'urban refugees. ' Fleeing one’s homeland and living in peril is stressful if not traumatic.

Respondents described such conditions in their countries-of-origin that fleeing into the unknown was the only alternative. However, for some ASR this means trading one set of an intolerable situation for another. The uncertainty of legal status, on-going trauma and discrimination, and the inability to legally work can lead to living in constant fear and psychological stress, and physical and mental illnesses on Myanmar refugees. As suggested in previous studies, the immigration process is connected with serious psychological problems such as stress, anxiety, depression, feelings of loneliness, isolation, powerless, and loss of control (e.g., Hall et al., 2015; Riley et al., 2017). Further, arrival to the host country may increase the stress of refugees, because the attitudes and perceptions of local citizens toward the refugees can trigger the refugees’ trauma or their stress.

It is important to note that although Burmese refugees are exposed to violence and not welcomed to Malaysia and there are many factors that can trigger the refugees’ traumatic memories, those people are grateful for fleeing the oppression they are experiencing in Myanmar. They consider that being in Malaysia is a step for them to reach their freedom and for a better life. That is the only way to save their families left in Burma and their future.

**4.1. Implications for practice**

The restoration, maintenance, and development of hope would be beneficial for refugees. It is essential to develop robust community and social support systems to help refugees integrate into communities. For those that embrace religion, assisting them in procuring religious leadership can help to instill hope and teach faith-based coping skills. Additionally, culturally adaptable treatment models and expressive arts could alleviate stress and help refugees make meaning of their trauma. Further, enhancing the cognitive and behavioral strategies of ASRs to cope with stress and survive would be important for this population. Study findings also have implications for social workers working with ASRs. Social workers could help to transform the unequal social and power relationships between Malays and ASRs into egalitarian relationships through advocating for the rights and oppressed population.

1. **CONCLUSION**

This study has demonstrated the struggles of being asylum seekers and refugees in Malaysia. Myanmar refugees endure cumulative, prolonged trauma, which includes exposure to warfare, political torture, displacement, and separations from family members during the migration process. Also, Integration and adjustment of the host culture seem unbearable for many refugees in Malaysia. It is obvious this situation restricts their freedom, chances to get a job, and force them to live in the poverty. The present study results of the personal experiences of Myanmar refugees' while living in Malaysia awaiting resettlement showed that some of the challenges faced in stressors while living in exile included constant fear, trauma, routine extortion, entrapment, and continued discrimination. Although arriving Malaysia gives a chance to immigrate to other countries for a fresh start and new opportunities, the trauma of knowing that families left behind are being persecuted for their ethnicity and religious beliefs make it hard to be at peace and fully integrate in Malaysia. Even though ASRs continue to expose to ongoing discrimination and persecution, they desire to live and preserve their life. Not just policymakers, but social workers, clinicians, and citizens have an important role in the refugees’ life. By preparing an action plan, fighting for their rights, and -the most importantly - accepting them within the community would be valuable for all ASRs.

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