



Being a refugee was not my choice.

This word still resonates within me. In the webinar series held by the Coalition of Refugees and Stateless Persons (CRSP) in July 2020 (Asylum Access Thailand is a member and coordinator of CRSP), a refugee guest expressed so.

My story of working for refugees had begun a half year before the webinar. I am a Japanese student at Thammasat University in Thailand, majoring in social entrepreneurship. On top of learning social entrepreneurship, one day, I had an opportunity to listen to an actual and poignant refugee story from a guest speaker who fled from Sri Lanka and stays in Bangkok as an urban refugee. It was the first time for me to perceive urban refugees' existence and their struggles. Even though I had some ideas that there were refugee camps along the border between Thailand and Myanmar, urban refugees were unheard of. Mainly because they live their lives invisibly with fear of being arrested, detained, and deported. The refugee's story was unimaginable and improbable for me, who can reside in my own country without persecution. His story moved me, and I deeply empathized with them.

Since then, I started exploring manifold issues that Bangkok urban refugees face and attempting to find a solution in my coursework project, Human-Centered Design. The project aimed to meet stakeholders' needs by incorporating human perspectives into a solution. Although there were countless challenges in their lives, I focused on observing educational and food issues in my refugee stakeholder community. Some of the children in the community used to attend Thai public schools as all children have the right to education. However, language barriers and financial issues led them to drop out of school as a consequence. They study at a refugee school today with no strings attached. However, the school also has challenges maintaining the quality of education due to the lack of volunteer teachers. It causes a failure to offer a satisfactory level of education to students. What's more, speaking of food insecurity, some households are unable to afford daily meals. They cannot secure enough meals even for children. In order to have meals, some are pushed into a corner to abandon education for children, not to mention daily necessities.

All these explicit problems are just the tip of the iceberg. I prototyped my HCD solutions to deal with these branched problems. Yet, as it stands, the ideas are dependent on external support, which implies that they are not sustainable for refugees. In other words, I sensed something that could drastically change their situation was missing.

On my journey of working for refugees, I noticed a common root cause or the heart of various refugee issues in Thailand. It is the absence of the right to work. Refugees are prohibited from working legally and earning income. Should they obtain the right, they could support themselves and have more options in their lives. In light of that, I have been working as Policy Advocacy and Communication Volunteer at Asylum Access Thailand and seeking policy reform under the mission of "making human rights a reality for refugees." However, it is extraordinarily arduous for only one individual or one organization to make a positive change. To that end, we need to take action collectively. So, what can you do for refugees then? It is of importance to start off knowing them and their pain. Once you are aware of them, you would have your opinions and thoughts. Your voice becomes powerful in advocating for policy reform and making a better place for all of us. Indeed, I was the one who had no idea about urban refugees before, yet now working for them. You are welcome to visit our website and Facebook page to learn more or join us as volunteers or interns. I call for your action!



Keito Takahashi (on the right side), Volunteer Advocate in Policy Advocacy and Communication
May 26, 2021