

## FOREWORD

The Policy Advocacy team of Asylum Access Thailand interviewed Lina (Pseudonym) on June 17th, 2021. She is a 22-year-old Ede ethnic refugee from Vietnam and currently volunteering to support refugee communities and assist the lawyers as a paralegal and interpreter at Asylum Access Thailand. She shared the story of her life as an urban refugee in Bangkok and her volunteer activities.

### **First of all, could you introduce yourself and tell us your life until you fled to Thailand?**

My name is Lina, 22-year-old Ede ethnic from Vietnam. I have been living in Bangkok for six years with my family; my father, mother, and younger sister. When I was in Vietnam, I went to school and completed up to grade 10. However, I could not continue my study because I had to flee when I was 16 in 2015.



My father had been arrested and imprisoned for nine years in Vietnam because of his religion and political opinion. Even after being released, he was still on five years probation. Thus, He was not allowed to move freely to other places. When he needed to go somewhere else, he had to request permission from the local police or the authorities of the people's committee of the commune. Since a high risk still remained that the police could arrest him again, my family had to leave our country immediately. It was quite a tough moment for us because we had only one day to pack up and leave for Thailand that we had no idea about.



***We had only one day to pack up and leave our country.***

## How is your life in Thailand?

The first three years in Thailand were the most challenging times because everything was new to me, including food, culture, and language. Besides, I could not live near the Vietnamese community at the time, so we had to survive alone with my family. Imagine that you neither speak Thai nor English, but you have to survive by yourself without any support. You might need to see a doctor, go to a store, or so. At that time, I was frustrated since I did not know how to deal with and settle in the new environment. However, since then, I started learning the culture and languages on my own through Thai TV dramas, the Internet, and books. Today I feel my life is getting better than ever. Yet, numerous problems still remain because we are refugees meaning we do not have legal status in Thailand.

Even though my family and I are recognized as refugees and given UNHCR-produced ID cards, acknowledging a well-founded fear through the Refugee Determination Process, we are still illegal here. With this condition, it is hopeless for us to work and earn income that is significantly important to survive. What's more, regarding education, it is exceedingly difficult for some people who do not have UNHCR cards to enroll in schools. Even if Thai public primary or secondary schools accept them, some refugees face language barriers as not everyone can speak Thai. Seeking to study at high school or higher education at universities is even more challenging to be accepted. In addition, even though we have UNHCR cards, some hospital receptionists question why you come here and refuse us.



*Be a bridge to connect refugees with lawyers.*

**Currently, you volunteer as a paralegal and interpreter at Asylum Access Thailand. What made you do so?**

At the end of 2018, three years after I had fled to Thailand, I moved to live in my community and started going to a church. At the church, I met some new people, and one of them was an interpreter at Asylum Access Thailand at that time. One day, he asked me if I was interested in joining as a paralegal. I said, "yes, maybe I can try," and then I joined at the beginning of 2019. Because I thought it was helpful for not just me but also my community. For instance, interpreter training and paralegal training by the lawyers give me valuable knowledge and lessons. I can learn on the job and transfer such knowledge and information to communities. Since some refugees cannot speak Thai and English, they cannot access information, lawyers, or Asylum Access Thailand services. Moreover, refugees confront various troubles in their daily lives. For instance, they are exploited at work, refused by hospitals, so on and so forth. In those cases, I help them out as a paralegal by being a bridge to connect refugees with lawyers.

## What is your role as a paralegal?

I usually plan and conduct a legal clinic geared toward providing information to communities with my team and the lawyers. Firstly, my team member and I brainstorm what information the refugees in a community need and adopt a topic for a legal clinic. Afterward, we ask the refugees to take part in it with clarification for the theme and benefit of joining. The process of inviting participants takes much time because some are highly cautious of people around them, especially when asked for their names or UNHCR ID numbers. Hence, it is essential to gain trust and develop rapport with them. If we are friendly and they open up their minds, we can eventually invite them. We usually have 10 to 14 participants per legal clinic and provide them with training with other paralegals, interpreters, and lawyers. However, during the covid-19 situation, the legal clinic is put on hold at this stage. Now, we are tackling how we can implement a legal clinic remotely.

To be honest, when it was still early days, I was in the dark since I had no clue about this volunteer, what a paralegal is, and how I can be an interpreter. It took two years to accumulate experience and get used to it, but now I am having fun.

## What do you think Bangkok urban refugees need the most today?

What refugees need the most are jobs and money because we cannot survive without them. However, we are not allowed to work legally due to the absence of legal status and work permits. Under the covid-19 pandemic, some refugees in my community receive food support from various organizations every now and again. Yet, we cannot all rely on the support since it is not enough to satisfy everyone's needs, and it is irregular frequency. Having said that, we need to survive. Hence, we need jobs and income for meals, room rent, health expenditure, or even milk for a baby.

## What do you want Thai citizens to know about urban refugees?

It is a tough question. I am not sure if Thai citizens know about urban refugees. Even some of my Thai friends knew refugees in camps, but not urban refugees in Bangkok. When you hear the word "refugee," you would receive a negative impression of sad or poor. I hope Thai people genuinely understand the experiences and situations we suffered in our countries and had to leave. We could not have options of which country to go to and when and how to flee our countries. We came here but not for stealing job opportunities from Thai citizens. We just want to survive. I would like you to know about us, our lives and our situation.

***We had no option of which country to go to and when and how to flee our countries.***

## What do you desire in the future?

When I see other Thai young people, I feel very jealous because I simply want to be like them deep inside. When seeing them, I think I wish I were them, wish I could have the ID card, wish I could go traveling wherever I want to go and wish I could continue seeking higher education. Comparing them to myself, it gets me thinking that I do not have anything they have. I live here and am scared of outside. Some people give me a hard time with a question that put me on the spot, such as why you came to our country without any legal document. I desperately need a place where I live safely with legal status and without any fear.

If possible, I still want to move to the United States to see my grandparents and relatives. My grandparents had been waiting for us to come for six years. But my grandmother just passed away on COVID-19. She dreadfully missed us. At present, I have only my grandfather. He wishes he could see us at least the last time alive.

Last but not least, I have many things I want to do in the future. Although it is difficult for the foreseeable future, I want to study more down the road.

## AFTERWORD

In Thailand, approximately 96,000 refugees live, and so do circa 5,000 urban refugees and asylum seekers of some 40 nationalities in Bangkok. They encountered difficulty and fled their countries of origin due to various reasons such as war, conflict, gender, religion, ethnicity, or politics. Especially, urban refugees are merely recognized by the public as they live invisibly with fear and struggle.

Lina is one of those who underwent a period of hardship in her country and fled to Bangkok, Thailand. Today, she has been volunteering as a paralegal and interpreter to be a bridge for the community and support other refugees. As she mentioned, even though all children have the right to receive education in Thailand, some barriers are still lying in practice. Likewise, at hospitals. Many other obstacles are still existing in their daily lives. Among those, she particularly underlined the importance that refugees need legal status to stay safe and jobs so as to survive and make a living since they cannot all depend on charitable support.

She answered every question we asked without hesitation, although some of the questions might have brought back sorrowful memories. Because she strongly hoped that we genuinely understand urban refugees in Bangkok, their lives, and difficult situations.

Asylum Access Thailand provides more information, news, and updates that walk you through learning more about refugees and their situations on our website, Facebook, and Twitter. If you are interested in learning about the legal clinic that Lina has been engaging, please find more at

<https://asylumaccess.org/where-we-work/thailand/legal-empowerment/>