

Social networks and survival as an asylum seeker in Japan

Talia Stump
University of New South Wales, Australia

Keywords: Asylum seekers, refugees, social capital, refugee policy, Japan, immigration, social work.

Introduction

Japan has a reputation for being one of the most culturally homogenous countries in the world. It is a little known fact both inside and outside of Japan that there are asylum seekers and refugees in the country, despite Japan being a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Convention) and its 1967 Protocol since 1981¹. In recent years, Japan has seen rapidly increasing numbers of refugee applicants but approval rates remain startlingly low. In 2016, 10,901 people submitted applications for refugee protection but only 28 were recognised as refugees in spite of the vast majority of applicants coming from refugee-producing countries. Studies have criticised Japan's immigration system for overly isolationist ideals and inadequate refugee protection mechanisms (Dean & Nagashima, 2007; Flowers, 2008). There are very few government-funded supports available and asylum seekers struggle to meet their basic needs.

There is limited research available in English related to the social and welfare situation of asylum seekers in Japan. Amongst the handful of studies, there is a consensus that they face significant vulnerabilities in the areas of their finances, health and wellbeing (Banki, 2006; Koizumi, 2015; Obi, 2013). However, little is known about what coping mechanisms and supports asylum seekers draw upon to get by. This qualitative study aims to understand the experiences of asylum seekers in Japan through in-depth interviews with 18 key informants including not-for-profit organisations, lawyers, service providers and community leaders.

Acknowledging that individual characteristics greatly impact on people's ability to cope, it focuses on what external social supports are available and to what extent social networks play a role in facilitating coping and access to supports. Social capital theory, which emphasises the importance of social relationships in facilitating access to resources and increasing individual and community wellbeing, is drawn upon to further explore this point (Bourdieu, 1986).

Findings

The research uncovered that the life of an asylum seeker in Japan is marked by destitution, homelessness, discrimination and social exclusion. With a severe lack of formal government-funded supports available to asylum seekers in Japan, access to livelihoods was found to be the most significant means of survival. However, a number of key individual risk factors were identified as working against an asylum seeker's ability to engage in employment, leading to increased vulnerability and social exclusion. These were:

- Female
- Family with children
- Repeat refugee applicant
- No work rights (Provisional release or permission for provisional stay status holder)
- No Japanese or English language skills
- No supporter (usually a Japanese volunteer)
- Come from a less-established ethnic community group in Japan
- Experiences of detention
- Mental health concerns

¹ The 1967 Protocol wasn't ratified by Japan until 1982.

- Living outside of a major city
- African or Middle Eastern (non-Asian).

The pivotal role of social connections and networks in providing a means of survival for asylum seekers in Japan was repeatedly emphasised by participants in this study. Social networks enable asylum seekers to access the information and resources needed to get by in daily life. The main forms of social supports available to asylum seekers are not-for-profit support services, volunteer community supports and family and ethnic community support. How an asylum seeker establishes new social connections in Japan is greatly influenced by their method of entry into the country.

Overall, the research demonstrated that asylum seekers with strong bonding capital have better access to bridging capital, and experience higher levels of wellbeing than those without. Bonding capital refers to the ties that exist between people within the same social group or who are closely connected in some way (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). For asylum seekers this is primarily accessed through family members in Japan or participation within ethnic community organisations (ECOs). These connections foster the development of bridging capital, or external resources and connections which are vital for asylum seekers to access livelihoods and cope in Japan.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings from this study emphasise the need to review policy to increase the supports available to asylum seekers in Japan. A lack of basic assistance is forcing many asylum seekers into very vulnerable situations. Consideration of individual risk factors in policy and service design will assist the most vulnerable to access support. Greater attention should be given to initiatives which aim to build bonding capital amongst asylum seekers. This could include capacity building and funding for ECOs and investing in programs which build connections with the broader Japanese society. In Japan, asylum seekers present a particular opportunity to address the current serious labour shortage associated with a rapidly ageing population. Upholding protection rights such as providing access to livelihoods, ensuring adequate standards of healthcare and eliminating arbitrary detention can prove an asset to an economically fragile country.

References

- Banki S (2006) 'Burmese Refugees in Tokyo: Livelihoods in the Urban Environment', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 328-344.
- Bourdieu P (1986) 'The forms of capital' in G Richardson (ed) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Westport: Greenwood Press, pp. 241-258.
- Dean M & Nagashima M (2007) 'Sharing the Burden: The Role of Government and NGOs in Protecting and Providing for Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Japan', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 481-508.
- Flowers P (2008) 'Failure to Protect Refugees?: Domestic Institutions, International Organizations, and Civil Society in Japan', *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 333-361.
- Koizumi K (2015) 'Coping as an asylum seeker in Japan: Burmese in Shinjuku, Tokyo' in K Koizumi & G Hoffstaedter (eds) *Urban Refugees: Challenges in protection, services and policy*, London: Routledge, pp. 241-268.
- Obi N (2013) 'A review of assistance programmes for asylum seekers and refugees in Japan', United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Japan, *New Issues in Refugee Research*, Research Paper No. 259.
- Szreter S & Woolcock M (2004) 'Health by association? Social capital, social theory, and the political economy of public health', *International Journal of Epidemiology*, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 650-667.