

Refugees Matter!

Amplifying the voices of refugees and asylum seekers in Japan

Outcome Report from APNOR's Japan Refugee Consultation

February 2021



Asia Pacific Network of Refugees

Credits

This report was written for APNOR by Masooma Ramazan and Najeeba Wazefadost. Thanks to Open Society Foundations for supporting the APNOR Japan consultation.

Images

Cover: Haneda Airport, Japan. Photo by Dennis A. Amith [via Flickr](#) under Creative Commons.

Page 4: Participants in the APNOR Japan Consultation on Zoom. Image by Masooma Ramazan.

Promotional material for the consultation, by APNOR/Masooma Ramazan.

Page 6-7: Individual speakers during the consultation. Images by Masooma Ramazan.

Executive Summary

The Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR), with the support of Open Society Foundations, held a virtual community consultation on 17 December 2020 designed to gather feedback about the experiences and concerns of those seeking asylum or living as refugees in Japan.

A total of 12 refugee-led groups were consulted from across Japan. Refugee participants came from Bangladesh, Somalia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Syria. Although there was a good cross-section of participants, APNOR encountered many challenges mapping out and connecting with refugee-led initiatives in Japan due to the fact that most refugees and people seeking asylum in Japan are living in limbo and uncertainty and are struggling to meet daily survival needs.

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting almost every country and community across the globe and creating multiple challenges, refugees and people seeking asylum in Japan face particular vulnerabilities.

Specific concerns include:

- maintaining safety measures in overcrowded accommodation and detention centres;
- lack of access to countries of asylum or resettlement due to border closures; and,
- lack of income support for those who have lost their jobs.

APNOR's consultation with the refugee community in Japan raised the importance of community safety and wellbeing and the need for stronger community infrastructure in times of crisis such as a global pandemic.

This report aims to consolidate refugee community voices in Japan and provide feedback on the gaps, challenges, and barriers they face in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Refugees in Japan want to have a voice and represent themselves, to advocate on the issues impacting their lives and contribute to solutions.



Above: Participants in the APNOR Japan Consultation on Zoom. Image by Masooma Ramazan.

Below: Promotional material for the consultation, by APNOR/Masooma Ramazan.



A CONSULTATION with Refugees in JAPAN : REFUGEES MATTER

#RefugeesRise
#RefugeesLead

Save the date for this virtual consultation;
17 December 2020 , 5:30pm-7:30pm Japan Time

Register Now:

Apnor.refugees@gmail.com or via Eventbrite
<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/a-consultation-with-refugees-in-japan-refugees-matter-tickets-130748304699>

Asia Pacific Network of Refugees

Consultation findings

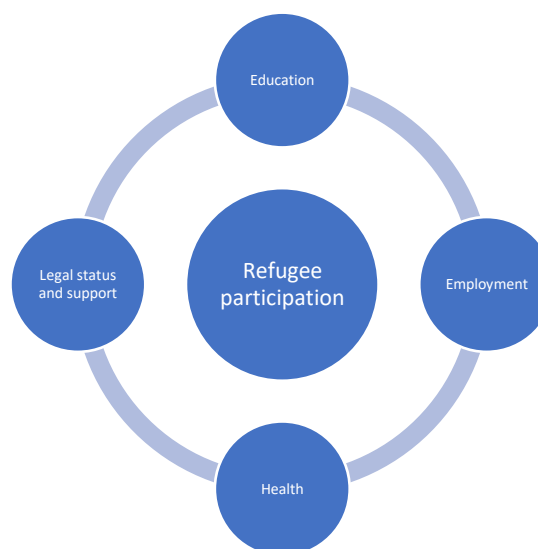
At this consultation, discussions commenced with the question of what it means to be a refugee and what participants understood by the terms 'refugee representation' and 'meaningful refugee participation.' This aimed to get participants thinking about the level of engagement and leadership within the refugee community on matters affecting their everyday lives. Participants were encouraged to share any experiences of their engagement at either a local, national or regional/international level.

Most participants directly voiced the **barriers to participation** they faced at all levels, including the lack of livelihood opportunities, food and shelter and worry for their families overseas. Some participants pointed to the fact that other refugee members were not able to participate in the consultation because they could not afford to lose any income by attending the consultation. For some, participation could be better enabled if more access to opportunities were provided and further resources invested to strengthen the capacity of refugees.

> Refugee participation needs to be better enabled by providing greater access to opportunities and investing resources to strengthen the capacity of refugees to participate.

Priority issues

Following this exercise, participants were invited to discuss the issues, needs and challenges people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds in Japan face. The top five issues of concerns ranked by participants related to: legal status and support, health, education, employment, and – underlying many other concerns – refugee participation in decision-making.



Legal status and support

Participants identified multiple challenges relating to their legal status and the support available to them to **navigate asylum processes** and to integrate in Japan. Many of the refugees indicated that Japan was not the destination which they necessarily chose, and described the significant challenges they faced in accessing the required identification documents to support their protection claims. In addition, many highlighted the lack of legal support and representation by lawyers at meetings and interviews with immigration officials and the struggles they faced in finding accurate information about refugee policies in Japan. Most often refugees were left in confusion. Children born to refugees in Japan also find it difficult to claim a legal status even though they were born in Japan.

The refugee application process can take anywhere up to 10 years, and while waiting for the outcome, refugees stated that some are eligible to receive **financial support** from the government but this can take up to several months to apply for and the amount received is difficult to survive on (two-thirds that of the social welfare fund).

For many refugees in Japan, life was described as ‘peaceful’ but accompanied by **everyday fears and risks**, described in terms of the fear of sudden arrest or being picked up by police or thrown into a detention centre at any moment. Participants highlighted the fact that many refugees face homelessness on arrival in Japan.

Some described Japan as a ‘friendly foreign donor’ that contributes substantially to global humanitarian causes, however the country is **less compassionate, welcoming or accepting of refugees within its territory**. Participants strongly felt that just because Japan provides financial support to support refugees outside the country, it should not be considered a country that is welcoming to refugees.

Health

Participants raised concerns about the **lack of affordability of medical care** and treatments for refugees in Japan. Those who do not have the status of resident and are seeking refugee status may be seen as an illegal (undocumented) immigrant and have been detained.

Many refugees have experienced torture and trauma in their home countries and their **mental health has deteriorated** as they face the challenges of living in uncertainty in Japan.

Education

The issue of **access to quality learning, formal education, and skill-building opportunities** was described as a systemic challenge for refugees and asylum seekers in Japan. Refugees note that discrimination, racism, and xenophobia across Japan leaves them feeling isolated and marginalised.

The education system for refugee minorities was described as being ‘tough’ and there is lack of support from the main universities to support refugees’ access to tertiary education. Only a few refugees have received scholarships from universities that have helped them to learn

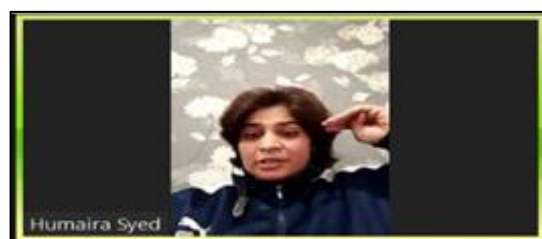
the language, find jobs, integrate and settle better.

The Japan Educational Learning Academy was identified as a good practice in terms of helping refugees with their education and supporting them to gain the right qualification to access their chosen career.

Employment

Employment was also described as a major challenge for refugees and asylum seekers trying to survive in Japan while their refugee status is being determined, and even after being granted refugee status. Most refugees are placed on short-term visas, like 6-month stay visas, which do not grant them work permits. Refugees have found it difficult to engage or mobilise potential employers as **businesses are reluctant to hire refugees on temporary visas**.

As well as challenges with work authorisation, there is also a **lack of skills recognition** for refugees wanting to enter more professional jobs including teaching and dentistry. Instead, refugees are forced to do manual labour and even these work opportunities are insufficient, insecure and most often involve cash-in-hand work.



“We need to have more trust building activities, and a safe space for refugees to [get] engaged and involved.”

Humaira Syed, Dukhter Foundation

Refugee participation

Most of the key stakeholders working on refugee issues in Japan were described as working *for* rather than *with* refugees. As one participant said: Most organisations in Japan are working with main stakeholders

like UNHCR or INGOs without actually including the refugees within discussions and hence most often refugees don't have enough information about opportunities.

It was indicated that there are not enough organised activities for refugees to support their participation, or much 'real consultation' happening at either a local or national level.



“Refugees want to engage in refugee matters not only at [a] national [level], but also want to act as resource and support to their conflict home countries, like in Bangladesh.”

Khadiza Begum

This is despite participants describing some of the leadership skills and potential they bring with them, such as Humaira Syed from Pakistan (Dukhter Foundation) who advocated for refugee work to be 'recognised and financed' so it becomes sustainable and not a 'one-off consultation.'

Summary of Solutions

1. **Employment** | Educate, advocate and mobilise the private sector in Japan to hire refugees, particularly those on temporary visas.
2. **Education** | Expand access to education for refugees and asylum seekers through further networking and engagement with universities, including increasing the number of scholarships available to refugees.
3. **Community awareness** | Address racism, discrimination and stereotyping of refugees through the development and dissemination of public awareness campaigns.
4. **Legal support** | Increase understanding about legal rights within refugee communities and expand access to pro-bono legal representation for asylum seekers as they navigate the protection claims process.
5. **Refugee participation** | Develop and deliver trainings for refugee leaders and refugee-led organisations on how to share stories, effective advocacy and diplomacy.
6. **Refugee participation** | Explore partnership models between key stakeholders and refugees to further develop refugee-led initiatives and increase refugee community involvement in decision-making processes in Japan.
7. **Health** | Improve access to and affordability of health services by refugees.

Further information

To find out more about APNOR and this consultation process, contact apnor.refugees@gmail.com.



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