

## Post-migration Stressors and Educational Coping Mechanisms among Adolescent Refugees in Malaysia

Mie Mie Kyaw<sup>1</sup>, Rohaya Abdul Wahab<sup>2</sup>, Rosilawati Sueb<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, UiTM Puncak Alam Campus, 42300 Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia, <sup>2,3</sup>Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, UiTM Puncak Alam Campus, 42300 Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia  
Email: mie2kster@gmail.com, rohayairhamna@gmail.com

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### Abstract

Refugees in Southeast Asian countries have commonly exposed to social and economic marginalization due to a lack of legal framework for refugee protection. Due to the complicated global issues, refuge problems have been escalating day by day. The focus of this study is to explore how the adolescent refugees build educational coping mechanisms in spite of encountering a wide array of stressors in the first country of asylum, Malaysia. This study is based on the qualitative research, case study approach, with a group of purposively selected nine Myanmar refugee adolescents (aged 12-17) from two faith-based learning centers under non-formal education in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This study has adopted an adolescent-centered research approach. The findings of the study reveal that education plays a key role in building a secured life conditions as well as the bridging mechanisms for their future for refugees. *A model of educational coping mechanisms* that is suitable for working with refugee adolescents is presented. This study highlights that education plays the key role in social stability for individuals from refugee background.

**Keywords:** Adolescents, Educational Coping Mechanisms, Malaysia, Post-Migration Stressors, Refugees

### Introduction

Many people in the world are forcibly displaced due to a wide array of reasons such as persecutions, conflicts, natural disasters and many more. According to UNHCR Global Trends Report (2021), 82.4 million people in the world were inevitably left their countries of origin. Out of these displaced people, 26.4 million people were refugees and approximately 4.2 million people were asylum seekers. Due to the escalating problems of conflicts in the world, refugee problems become one of the crucial issues of concern in the world and it is not possible to be solved by 'one-size-fits-for-all' solution.

Based on a wealth of literature, the experiences of refugees under different contexts are complex and varied but refugees are portrayed commonly as the ‘vulnerable population’, “groups of people within a population that are at increased risk for poor physical, psychological, and social health outcomes and inadequate health care” (Derose et al., 2007, p. 1 as cited in Oliver, 2016). Refugees in general encounter a wide range of stressors in all phases of their migration. The basic motives for refugees to migrate arise from the need to meet the basic needs, and to find a better employment and good living conditions (Slack & Heyman, 2020). Refugees have suffered from social inequalities and deprivation of Human Rights that are the commonly discovered themes by several studies in the countries of asylum. The challenges of forced migration and being refugees are well-documented in the literature such as difficulty in adaptation to a new environment, marginalization, and acculturation, loss of family structures, family ties, social relations and social resources (Marsiglia et. al., 2001), and low rate of access to social services and health care. These challenges tend to worsen the hardships of refugees in adapting to the new environments (El Koury, 2019). Refugees are regarded as one of the most vulnerable, marginalized and discriminated groups in most of the studies because refugees are unable to respond to mistreatment and claim their rights. Refugees are regarded as the victims of forced migration (UNHCR, 2021).

According to the refugees and forced migration literature, not all the refugees are at-risk due to a lot of challenges or forced migration. Having survived challenges and many struggles, some refugees tend to be resilient and resourceful if they receive reasonably facilitative conditions. Many international researches on refugees have investigated the impact of pre and post-migration experiences as key factors that reinforce the successful adaptation of refugees to the new environment. Successful adaptation can bring the lives of refugees with the opportunity for growth (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). A number of studies confirm that successful adaptations of refugees are influenced by several factors such as including ages of refugees at arrival, individual coping mechanisms, and reception by the host community and society (Sam & Berry, 2016; Panter-Brick, 2021). Many studies on refugee identify education as the unique needs of refugee children. There are researches that highlight the positive educational adjustments of refugee children in their post-migration phase despite they have experienced the personal or family trauma (Parthenis & Markou, 2015). Many scholars have been studying the concepts of ‘risks’ and ‘coping mechanisms’ since two decades ago. Resilience research on children has predominantly focused on children’s development, investigating who have developed competencies despite being exposure to multi-dimensional challenges (Luthar et. al., 2000). Educational resilience is defined in terms of educational success or developing educational competencies of at-risk individuals despite the environmental circumstances that make these individuals reduce their possibilities to succeed (Kumpher, 1999). Kumpher (1999) has associated the concept of ‘resilient integration’ with successful adaptations of individuals after a period of disruption or stress. However, to date scholarly research related to the experiences and perceptions as well as the coping mechanisms of refugee children in Malaysia is still very limited (Kok et. al., 2021).

This study is based on the forced immigrants from Myanmar, one of the Southeast Asian countries. According to the annual reports of Human Rights Watch (2016) and Amnesty International (2017), Myanmar has been recorded as having a long history of human rights abuses, discriminations against ethnic minorities, religious-based discriminations, women

rights abuses, child soldier activities, and many more risk factors. Many people embark on the dangerous sea voyage to the neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Bangladesh. The present study is related to the adolescent refugees from Myanmar who have faced a variety of challenges in the native country as well as the country of asylum, Malaysia. Since Malaysia is not the signatory countries of 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol so that there is no national legal asylum framework for refugees and asylum seekers in these countries. Refugees face the same penalties as those undocumented migrants, such as detention, corporal punishment, upon conviction and deportation (Adnan, 2007). Refugees have been deprived of basic rights, legal employment opportunities and limitations in social supports.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to investigate the challenges that Myanmar adolescent refugees experience in the country of asylum, Malaysia and their educational coping mechanisms. Specifically, the objectives of the study are:

- To investigate post-migration stressors of Myanmar refugee children in Malaysia
- To explore their educational coping mechanisms under non-formal education system

### **Methodology**

The focus of this study is to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of selected Myanmar refugee adolescents in Malaysia. To achieve this goal, the researcher utilizes a qualitative research design in the form of a case-study research method. By adopting a case study method, the researcher makes the rich description of a particular issue and to explore deeply on the issues concerned (Yin, 1994). The researcher has included 9 purposively selected refugee adolescents from faith-based learning centers under non-formal education system in order to focus on the particular characteristics of the population that would directly link to the objectives of the study. The researcher has participated in the study as a volunteer English teacher, an interviewer, an observer, and a community helper. The researcher has adopted the insider-outsider role in the data collection process of this study. On account of the insider status, the researcher has conducted the study by applying the same local knowledge, the same culture and discussion on relevant issues of the study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Dunstan et. Al., 1989). As an outsider, the researcher has taken up the roles of a researcher, an observer, and an interviewer who has not shared the membership status with the participants.

In this study, multiple sources of data have been collected by using semi-structured individual interviews, observations and field notes. For the data analysis of this study, the researcher has followed Braun and Clarke (2006) step-by step thematic analysis guidelines. Trustworthiness within the study has been achieved not only by using collaborative and participatory research methods have been applied but also data triangulation, member checking and document analysis were included for the purpose of “verification, refutation and refinement” of the collected data (Heaton, 2004, p. 9). This research has been based on adolescent-focused approach. Confidentiality of the data and ethical considerations have been maintained in every step of the research processes due to the sensitivity of the subject matter and the security of the research participants. Participants have been treated as the ordinary students. The researcher takes into consideration of the protection of informants from harm and the right to privacy that has been put as priorities in this research study.

**Findings**

All the participants in the study have come from different parts of Myanmar but they have been similarly subjected to poor living conditions and different kinds of persecutions that make them leave their homeland. The negative pre-migration experiences of the participants not only destroy their life but also give a negative impact on their lives in the country of asylum. Some participants leave their home towns with family members but three of the participants in the study are unaccompanied minors. These adolescents face the social, emotional, educational challenges in the country of refuge. Specifically, as their post-migratory experiences, they have experienced financial difficulties, poor living conditions, family dysfunctions, limitations in prolonged educational attainment, low quality educational acquirement, acculturation and mental health problems. The themes that emerge from the findings are described respectively.

**Different Arrays of Stressors upon Adolescent Refugees**

When the participants arrived to the country of asylum, they have faced new sets of challenges that were totally different from the challenges they experienced in the home country. Their social status has not been recognized due to 'refugee non-recognition' policy of the country of asylum. The refugee adolescents in this study have been living under illegal status so that the participants have suffered from the difficulty in legal employment, housing problems, access to formal educational attainment and healthcare and lack of social supports like most of refugees from other areas of the world. There is a difficulty in connection with people in the local community that poses barriers to connection, particularly stemming from lack of linguistic and cultural competences. These participants feel a sense of fear and instability as the negative consequences.

In the country of asylum, these students experience educational challenges such as limited access to formal education, lack of sufficient resources, educational support and financial support. In this study, 'loss of identity', and 'social exclusion' are the new type of stressors that have been identified as part of educational challenges for refugees. These school going-aged refugee children face not only limitations in formal educational access but also there is a lack of systematic support socially and educationally for them. The interview data, observational notes and the official documents prove that the refugee children are 'educationally vulnerable population'. The refugees are temporarily residing in this country but nearly all of the refugees expect the opportunity for receiving education as a mean of surviving in the challenging situation.

According to the findings of the study, the prominent society-based challenges for refugees in this study are 'denial of child rights' and 'social exclusion'. The autonomy and the values of individual rights of refugees have little meaning to them. Not only Malaysia, but also most of the countries in the world are implementing special measures to prevent illegal migration across borders. Due to the restrictive measures on illegal immigrants, the rights to various social services, including the education for children are negatively affected. According to the findings of this study, the refugee communities are trying to do informal self-integration to the local community by learning the language, applying the social and cultural practices of the host country. They also try to minimize their negative experiences and social discrimination by informally integrate themselves such as using the local language fluently, and have adopted the cultural practices of the local community.

### **Educational Coping Mechanisms of Adolescent Refugees**

Based on the analysis of data from the study, it is well documented that the refugee adolescents face the challenges in different phases of migration. Although there are a multitude of stressors in their lives, their adaptation to the negative situations are documented such as doing well in school, having social ties with peers and community members, knowing the laws of society, development of self-control and a sense of togetherness. Through the interview data of the participants, they have the desire to move on and to live a purposeful and meaningful life in Malaysia. Their focus on education and the positive expectations on future have been found as their individual experiences, too. They accept that their life experiences concerning with migration as negative and full of challenges. Additionally, the participants have recognized that they have received the sources of support from their immediate family, extended family, school and peers. These individuals make sense of their situations and they are able to manage the stressors cognitively, emotionally, psychologically or behaviorally.

Although they are facing academic challenges, the participants have demonstrated their positive attitudes towards leaning through their words and expressions. The student's academic performance has been improved by regular attendance of school and positive academic engagement. These students have found that they have learnt basic reading, writing, mathematics and science concepts. It is very clear that these individuals have specific interests, dreams, hopes for the future and different sets of knowledge. They have different expertise and competencies.

Although there are exposures of stressors in their environment, the negative emotional responses such as 'fear', 'panic', 'depressed' were not expressed in the interviews of individuals' migration experiences. They are friendly and well-liked by peers and do not show any signs of depressiveness, aggression, and restlessness. They solve the problems constructively such as help-seeking, self-encouragement, comfort-seeking and commitment. The behaviours of these refugee students prove to be inclusive of self-initiated, goal-directed, eagerness to learn. Religion, spirituality and related practices also play the important role and the participants have been found to be important coping resources in dealing with day-to-day living.

Although there are limitations in formal educational attainment in the country of asylum, the curriculum under non-formal education has proved to be relevant and meaningful to fulfil their immediate needs, and related to students' own interests and goals. It also helps to promote good school engagement and intrinsic motivation in all students. Moreover, caring relationships with teachers and refugee community have been shown to be particularly important for students from refugee background that support them to better adapt to the new environment, language, and meet their educational needs. The data from this study also reveal that these adolescents have an optimistic outlook on challenges. They believe that the hardships are the stepping stones for future.

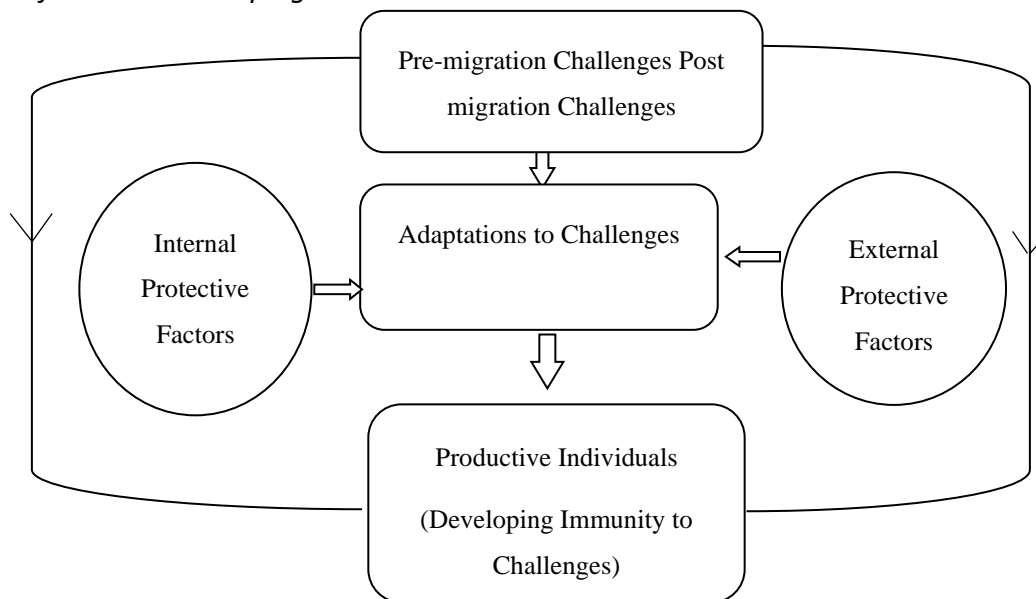
*Model of Educational Coping Mechanisms*

Figure 5.1 Immunity Model of Educational Coping Mechanism

A model of educational coping mechanism is derived from the findings of the study. This study is guided by theories of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Kumpfer's Resilience Model and Social Capital Theory. The first part of the model is related to the challenges that refugee individuals experienced in their migration processes. The accumulated data suggests that all the participants in the study have experienced many types of stressors in their home country such as violence, persecutions, economic hardships, and social problems. The participants have suffered the negative experiences since they were born. These inevitable consequences make them to flee from their native country. These adolescents have suffered from deteriorating of family structure, different kinds of losses and uncertainties of future. All the self-reports prove that these adolescents continue to experience challenges such as financial problems, loss of citizenship, academic challenges, emotional distress and social problems in the country of asylum.

The second part of the model explains about how these refugee individuals deal the challenges due to their migration processes. Generally, refugees are considered to be vulnerable group because of the stressors caused by traumatic experiences in their country of origin and during the flight, and the adaptation to a new life and culture in the host country. Studying the negative outcomes of negative experiences has been the predominant aim of research on refugees for a long time in the refugee literature (Lustig et al., 2004) While many studies focus of the impact of traumatic events on refugees, some studies focus on the adaptation processes of refugees across different refugee contexts (Bronstein et al., 2013; Weine et al., 2014). The focus of this study is that the negative experiences of refugee adolescents prove no effect on their present life situations and their educational attainment. The collected data on the focused individuals in this study has shown that they are able to manage their lives academically, emotionally, socially, psychologically and physically. They try to confront the challenges with optimism and confidence. This study group has proved that they have their unique adaptation patterns to the multi-dimensional challenges and develop coping mechanisms. There is no consensus to define or measure coping mechanisms in the

refugee literature. Coping mechanisms of refugees have been described as the potentials to deal with multi-dimensional challenges that occur by receiving the protective processes. Their educational coping mechanisms of these refugee children can be related to the concept of 'resilience'. 'Resilience' is defined as a specific human capacity that gives the cognitive, psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual strength to recover from the stressors and grow positively (Kumpher, 1999). Wignild and Young (1993) have described five characteristics of resilience: (1) self-confidence (2) resistance (3) a sense of stability (4) self-awareness (5) ability to balance. Resilience in people can be developed two protective factors such as the genetic make-up and the external protective factors (Werner & Smith, 1982). The individuals have developed self-esteem, appropriate decision-making or problem-solving skills, spiritual or religious beliefs, self-confidence, empowerment, a positive outlook, autonomy, a sense of empowerment, and resistance to challenges (Kumpher, 1999).

The last part of the model describes how these refugee adolescents develop educational coping mechanisms in spite of having many challenges in their lives on daily basis. Based on the findings from the study, these adolescent refugees exhibit positive responses to the incumbent various challenges in their lives. These individuals receive support from their parents, schools, and community members. These refugee adolescents demonstrate positive personal characteristics. The internal and external supports help these individuals to develop coping mechanisms and they are able to deal with the most difficult life events. Previous studies prove clearly that coping is a universal aspect of refugee lives but refugees are not able to cope with challenges uniformly. The outcomes of resilient processes can be 'positive', 'negative' or 'neutral'. These adolescent refugees experience negative pre-migration and post-migration challenges. The people who give support to them come from the same background and they are susceptible the same impact under the same environmental pressures.

Garmezy and his colleagues (1984) have conducted Project Competence to understand how resiliency influenced individuals when they experienced stressful situations. This Project Competence study has proved that the resilience processes of individuals that resilience of individuals have developed under three different conditions: compensation, challenge and immunization. In this study, the amount of stressors and the extent of stressors that the participants experience in their lives outweigh the capacity of protective factors they in their lives. In relating to these concepts of resilient factors to this study on adolescent refugees from Myanmar, these adolescent refugees can be judged to respond to the negative life challenges as 'neutral'. Their adaptability to the challenges can be translated that they are able to resist the challenges by getting immune to challenges. The challenges that they encounter on their daily life do not have any negative impact on their educational attainment, social and emotional wellbeing. They assume challenges as part of their life and become psychologically strong individuals. They assume education as the bridging mechanisms for their future life. They are able to create the closed circuit with the people who give support from the same social background. These refugee adolescents are building their lives through the immunity of the challenges in the overburdening community.

**Discussion**

This study is based on the personal narratives of the refugee children, the interview data from the school principals the teachers and the parents as well as the analysis of the public and private records of the documents that refugee children of different ages are suffering from major negative factors due to forced migration. All the refugee adolescents in the study commonly show that they have been able to overcome the challenges successfully through the protective factors in their lives. The protective factors in their lives make to develop educational coping mechanisms. This study has addressed the multiple challenges faced by the adolescents in the country of asylum, Malaysia. The challenges they encounter are categorized into financial, emotional, psychological, academic, linguistic, and social challenges. Their post migration challenges are linked with poor health, deprivation of basic needs, the difficulty of leading everyday lives, environmental risks, economic hardship etc. Socioeconomic stress carries the negative effects on the development of children of all ages and damaging their safety and security. The findings of this study demonstrate that loss and grief have a negative impact on lives of refugees in the host countries that might go beyond their resistance level. This study provides a clear evidence that loss of home, loss of family ties, loss of identity, and loss of self-identity are unique challenges for refugees. A multitude of stressors make these adolescent refugees vulnerable as well but they did not consider the possibility of going back to their country of origin and they seemed unprepared for deportation. By drawing the similar facts from the literature and with reflections of the present study, it is clear that the stressors and challenges make the refugee individuals 'fight or flight' decisions in life. The refugee participants need time to adjust themselves to adapt to the new country and culture. It is clear that these individuals receive the support from their families and community in making adjustments to their new life. The family members and community members are from the same disadvantaged society and they are facing the similar challenges in the same context. The coping mechanisms of refugee children are assumed to be immune to challenges. This study shows that the positive assets of children and their positive coping mechanisms should not be overlooked. Challenges and stressors do not always predispose the people from refugee background to negative outcomes. Their hopes and positive outlook can help them to survive, thrive and grow. Children can overcome negative life challenges and go on to build successful lives. Despite the stressors, limitations, disruption, and loss, the refugee individuals may still feel that the negative experiences have also made them give psychological strength in life, change their life-styles and acquire new values in their lives. Based on the findings from this study, refugee issues across the globe have been one of the important issues that have become the focus of international attention on multidisciplinary researchers. Refugees have been generally described as vulnerable groups in the global society.

**Implications of the Findings**

By drawing the similar facts from the literature and with reflections of the present study, it is clear that the stressors and challenges make the refugee individuals resilient. People from disadvantaged society can overcome negative life challenges and go on to build successful lives. The refugee participants need time and social support to adjust themselves to adapt to the new country and culture. This study also shows that the positive assets of children and their positive coping mechanisms should not be overlooked. Challenges and stressors do not always predispose the people from refugee background to negative outcomes. Their hopes and positive outlook can help them to survive, thrive and grow. This



research illuminates that there is a burning need of caring community that gives substantial support to the lives of people from the developing countries. It is important that policymakers, social scientists, and educationists need to work hand-in-hand in addressing the issues of refugees, Human Rights, Child Rights, and social inequality in the context of displaced populations. This study proves that more extensive research studies are needed to develop to better understand basic needs of refugees of refugees. This study has identified some issues such as social exclusion, informal integration into the host society, and lack of recognition on social status of refugees. Further researches should be undertaken to these issues related to refugee policy and practices.

### **Conclusion**

The subject, 'refugee' has been studied in a variety of situations throughout the world. Refugees flee their homeland under forcible circumstances. They have to start a new life under unfavourable circumstances in the countries of refuge. They are not able to look back their past and go back to their country easily. The findings from this study demonstrate that refugees are safe from violence and persecutions in their post-migration stage but they need to continue their life with different sets of challenges and difficulties. They usually face socioeconomic challenges and limitations in rights. The data from this study prove that the lives of refugees are vulnerable but some are able to overcome the stressors while some people become at-risk under the same circumstances. These individuals proved to be adapted well with their own sets of capabilities and encouragement from the external support networks. This study represents the unique case because the lives of refugees in Malaysia are different from the lives of refugees from other contexts and under different countries with different refugee policies. According to this study, the urban refugee populations also need formal and informal support systems. They also need the formal skill training and capacity-building exercises. This study highlights that the refugee protection procedures are directly linked to the policies of the host country. The studies of refugee issue become more complicated under ever changing global problems and no linear refugee policies of refugee receiving countries. This study adds to the research body of refugee education by giving information that every individual has the right to receive education irrespective of their social status. This study also gives a clear message that it is important for policy analysts, policymakers to consider to provide intellectual support to refugees in the countries of asylum. The studies of refugee issue become more complicated under ever changing global problems and nonlinear refugee policies of refugee receiving countries. Meanwhile this study suggests that more comparative studies can be carried out investigating into coping mechanisms of other refugees from different countries and also to embark on quantitative studies that could include a bigger population of refugees. This study adds to the research body of refugee education by giving information that every individual has the right to receive education irrespective of their social status. This study also gives a clear message that it is important for policy analysts, policymakers to consider to provide social support to refugees in the countries of asylum. This study suggests that more studies are needed to explore not only the lives of refugees with different age groups, genders, cultures, historical backgrounds, and reasons of migrations but also many studies should be carried out by using different research methods to justify the findings. Moreover, this study gives the recommendation that refugee and forced migration scholars ought to consider looking more closely at the experiences of refugees, and asylum seekers as a conceptually distinct group of individuals and it is important to protect refugees whom are seeking safety yet are outside of the legal

protection of the 1951 Convention's definition.

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