Kurdish Refugee Children in Japan: Unpacking Structural Violence from a Conflict Analysis and Resolution Perspective

I. Humanitarian Assistant for Refugees by the Japanese Government

According to the UNHCR (2012), the Japanese government is the second largest donor to the UNHCR for protecting refugees and asylum seekers in the world. Despite this fact, according to the Ministry of Justice in Japan (2014a), 3,260 asylum seekers alone applied to be recognized refugees by the Ministry of Justice in 2013. In comparison to 2012, the number of asylum seekers has increased by 125%. The difference between humanitarian assistance for refugees outside of Japan and for those refugees inside of Japan is significantly contradictive.

According to Japan Lawyers Networks for Refugees (2011), the refugee population in Japan has increased about ten times during the past ten years. By increasing the population of refugees in Japan, second generations of the refugees were born in Japan or spent more time in Japan than in their home countries. Even though some refugee children have spent more time in Japan than in their home countries, the Kurdish refugee children, in particular, experience a lot of structural violence in Japan because Japan is not used to co-existing with foreign peoples.

1. Galtung’s (1969) Structural Violence Theory

According to Galtung (1969), structural violence is built into the state structure without “a clear subject-object relationship,” which is visible as action. Structural violence is “exercised even if there are no concrete actors one can point to directly...
attacking others, as when one person kills others (Galtung, 1969).” For example, killing a person by another person is seen as personal violence. However, killing one million people by another one million people is seen as structural violence. Structural violence comes from various aspects of society including poverty, war, and law.

This paper describes how structural violence theory (Galtung, 1969) can help people to realize about the issue of Kurdish refugee children in Japan, by analyzing the structural violence concerning identity, institutions, and policy toward these children.

II. Kurdish Refugee in Japan

According to the Ministry of Justice (2014b), asylum seekers with Turkish nationality make up 20% of asylum seekers, who applied to be recognized refugees in 2013. However, the Ministry of Justice has never recognized the Kurdish refugees with Turkish nationality. On the other hand, 52% of the asylum seekers who have the Myanmar nationality received humanitarian assistance (Ministry of Justice, 2014a). In other words, the asylum seekers including the Kurdish refugees with Turkish nationality, who do not have the Myanmar nationality, find it difficult to receive humanitarian assistance by the Ministry of Justice.

Once Kurdish asylum seekers’ applications for refugee status are rejected, the Immigration Bureau suggests that they go back to their homeland (Mcneill, 2005). However, Japan joined the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees in 1981. In the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the principle of non-refoulement does not allow “returning asylum seekers or refugees to (be sent to) a place where their life or liberty would be at risk (UNODC, N.D.).” Therefore, Japan has a responsibility to
protect the Kurdish asylum seekers, rather than to send them back to their home country. Despite the fact that Japan are part of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugee, structural violence against asylum seekers in Japan continues to persist in the county, as these refugees are not properly protected by the Japanese government. The asylum seekers came to Japan to seek security and protection; however, the Japanese government’s treatment of asylum seekers creates an atmosphere of structural violence against, which breed insecurity and hostility towards these refugees.

Also, many Kurdish asylum seekers, because of their legal status, are detained in the Immigration Bureau Detention Centers which function as prisons. In the detention centers, medical care is not fully prepared; therefore, many asylum seekers face to health problems. According to Mcneill (2005), a Kurdish refugee was denied temporary release from the detention center to receive medical care, even though the refugee had health problems. Some asylum seekers, who did not receive health care faced death, because of poor medical care in detention centers. This is another example of structural violence, as asylum seekers could not receive medical care even though they knew their health conditions were not good.

III. Structural Violence for Kurdish Refugee Children in Japan

1. Structural Violence from Identity Differences

According to Statistics Japan (2013a, 2013b), only 1.6% of the population in Japan consists of foreign people. As shown in these statistics, Japanese society is very homogenous. As a result, most systems of Japanese society are formed only for Japanese
people; furthermore, many Japanese people do not notice the invisible violence towards foreign people that takes in place in their society, especially against refugees in Japan. Japanese people believe there is no domestic racism because most of population in Japan is of the Japanese ethnic group. However, inside of Japanese society, other ethnic groups including Korean-Japanese, and Ainu people, who are indigenous people, are living in Japan. Also, the racial discrimination toward those ethnic groups has been an issue. Although Japan joined the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 1995 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, N.D), Japanese people find it difficult to coexist with different ethnic groups including Kurdish asylum seekers.

In case of Kurdish refugees, their facial appearance is similar with people from the Middle East or Europe rather than Japan. Therefore, Kurdish refugee children are easy bullied by their Japanese classmates because of their different facial appearances. If this situation happened in the US, the Japanese classmates would be seen as racists. However, Japanese children have little experience taking classes with children from different ethnic groups; therefore, their behavior is seen by them to be natural more than racist. From the perspective of the Kurdish refugee children, they are facing structural violence from the Japanese, and are being bullied by their Japanese classmates. Even if the Japanese children do not physically harm the Kurdish refugee children, the structural violence significantly affects to the Kurdish refugee children’s psychological conditions. Also, some Kurdish children may try to change their norms in order to integrate into Japanese children communities resulting in them abandoning their Kurdish cultures, norms, and identity.
Galtung (1991) stated that identity is one of basic human needs. Identity needs are “roots, belongingness, support, esteem (Galtung, 1991).” Being bullied because of facial differences can be seen as denying Kurdish refugee children’s identity; therefore, Kurdish refugee children cannot satisfy their identity needs. Not satisfying identity needs can be seen as denying one of their humanity, and the situation in the schools creates structural violence against Kurdish refugee children.

2. Structural Violence Institutional System

i. No Racism Education

There are two issues that contribute to structural violence for the Kurdish refugee children at schools. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2001), the Japanese government promotes to mitigate racial discrimination among Japanese citizens by education. Although Japanese children learn about racism at schools, the Japanese children learn the racism by studying history such as the Civil War in the US. Even though the US has a totally different environment as Japan such as diversity, most Japanese children cannot realize the seriousness of racism in their society. When those Japanese children grow up and meet people who are of a different ethnic group as them, their behavior can make them seem like racists because of the lack of racism education. Furthermore, their behavior can effect discrimination towards the future of the Kurdish refugee children.

ii. Inefficient Responses for Families with Diversity
Moreover, although the minority children, including the Kurdish refugee children, have a language barrier, they can be provided Japanese language education at public schools by requests (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2011). However, the Kurdish refugee children still struggle to have equal education services.

In the case of a female refugee, who has three children that are attending public schools in Japan, she has language barrier. She continually suffers from the fact that she cannot talk about her children’s education with their schoolteachers’ because of the language barrier (Amnesty International Japan, 2013). In this situation, if there is no facilitator between the school teachers and the parents of the Kurdish refugee children, the Kurdish refugee children can not be provided equal education from both school and their parents. The school system is another form of structural violence against the Kurdish refugee children.

### 3. Structural Violence from Policy

#### i. New Residence Card

Since July 9th, 2012, the Immigration Bureau (2012) made a new policy of residence cards, which is an identification card for foreign people in Japan. At the same time, the policy of registration for foreign people was abolished. Under the policy of registration for foreign people, asylum seekers, who are not recognized refugees, also could register their identification at city halls. However, under the new policy, local governments do not provide identification cards to those asylum seekers. Kurdish refugee children have their identity, which is Kurd. However, they are forced to remove their
identity because there is no way to prove their identity in Japan. In the situation, Kurdish refugee children may struggle to keep their identity in the Japanese society. The new residence card policy, which made Kurdish refugee children to in a way lose their identity, is another form of structural violence against Kurdish refugee children.

ii. Foreign Policy between the Turkish Government and the Japanese Government

Also, the relationship between the Japanese government and the Turkish government started twelve decades ago with a visit from Ottoman Empire’s Ertugrul Erigate to Japan. Since then, the two countries have supported each other. Japan and Turkey have had various interactions between them such as economic and cultural exchanges (Turkish Embassy, N.D). As a result, the Japanese government often describes Turkey as one of their closest allies for a long time.

At the same time, the relationship between the Turkish government and the Kurdish ethnic group is antagonistic with each other. In this situation, if the Japanese government admits the Kurdish refugees from Turkey, their relationship with the Turkish government can be negatively affected. If the relationship gets worse, it significantly affects Japanese economics. Therefore, the Japanese government has difficulty accepting Kurdish refugees from Turkey. This Japanese foreign policy made it hard for Kurdish refugee children to resettle in Japan. As a result, the foreign policy forced Kurdish refugee children to face structural violence, which is a low possibility to gain refugee status in Japan.

iii. Influence from policy toward the Kurdish Refugee Children
In the case of the second generation of the Kurdish refugees in Japan, they are struggling to survive in Japan. Even though they are provided education services until high school, they cannot receive high education services, such as help in attending universities. Also, they cannot work legally in Japan because they are not recognized refugees by the Ministry of Justice.

As a result, many Kurdish refugee children are starting to work illegally instead of going to schools. The future generations of these refugees have no choice when they choose their occupation for surviving in Japan. When they work illegally, labor forces the Kurdish refugee children to face direct physical violence. For instance, Kurdish refugee girls, who are working in prostitution, are sexually violated. For the Kurdish refugee boys who are working in construction, they are physically violated. As a result, those Kurdish refugee children are facing a vicious cycle between physical violence and structural violence (Noh, 2014).

4. Result of Structural Violence: Trauma

A Kurdish refugee boy drew a painting of his family: his father, his mother, himself, and his sister; and, he drew ‘X’ on his father’s face. His tutor was surprised that he drew an ‘X’ on his father’s face, so she asked him why he drew an ‘X’ on his father’s face. In order to answer the question, he started to draw another painting of his father in a prison.

In fact, his father is in the Immigration Bureau detention center because of his legal status, which is not recognized as a refugee by the Ministry of Justice. However, the Kurdish boy finds it hard to understand his father’s legal situation specifically. Therefore,
the Kurdish boy does not know why his father is in a prison due to the fact he did not do anything wrong.

The policy for asylum seekers affected the Kurdish boy’s father; furthermore, his father’s situation affects the Kurdish boy’s psychological state. Having trauma is one of the signs of structural violence. Moreover, childhood is a significant period for growing up for the Kurdish children. However, structural violence from identity, institutional system, and policy toward asylum seekers in Japan generates structural violence for the Kurdish refugee children, who are in a similar situation with the Kurdish boy.

IV. Conclusion

Inside of Japanese society, there is a lot structural violence against asylum seekers. However, most Japanese people do not realize the refugee issues in Japan. Also, the discipline of Conflict Analysis and Resolution has not developed in Japan. Therefore, many Japanese people find it hard to understand why refugee issues in Japan are problems. This paper addressed the problem by describing the second generation of the Kurdish asylum seekers in Japan with Galtung’s (1969) Structural Violence theory.

There are three forms of structural violence in Japanese society toward the Kurdish refugee children. First, Japanese people are not used to co-existing with foreign people; and as a result, Japanese children bully the Kurdish refugee children because of their different facial appearance. Second, public school system are not open to diversity. Therefore, Kurdish parents find it difficult to discuss about their children’s education with their teachers. Lastly, both the new policy of residence card and the foreign relationship between the Japanese government and Turkish government generate
structural violence for the Kurdish children, as they neither are provided higher education
or safe working conditions. As a result, the Kurdish children have trauma because of the
structural violence in Japanese society.

Approaching the Kurdish refugee children issue in Japan by Galtung’s (1969)
structural violence helps Japanese people to notice the structural violence that is taking
place in Japan. Any attempt to solve this issue cannot be started without awareness of this
issue by not only Japanese people but also the international society.
References


Noh, M., Personal Communication, April 1, 2014


