Interview Story 1: Life as a Refugee Student in Thailand

Amy: Thank you for joining me today. Could you begin by introducing yourself?

Moe: My name is Moe. I was born in Myanmar, and my family came to Thailand around 2009. **We lived in a refugee camp for about 15 years**, and now I'm in Mae Sot preparing for the **GED exam**. Most refugees in our camp **haven't had access to higher education**, so this exam is very important for us.

Amy: What was life like before in Myanmar, and how has it changed since coming to Thailand?

Moe: Honestly, I was very young when we left Myanmar, so I don't remember much. But I know that now we cannot return—civil war makes it impossible. **Life here is safer, but difficult in other ways.**

Amy: What has been the biggest challenge for you?

Moe: Documentation. We **don't have Thai national IDs**. We only have UN cards, which means we **cannot freely travel, apply to universities, or access many services.** Every time I want to leave the camp, I need permission from UNHCR officials. Without documentation, opportunities are always limited.

Amy: How about your basic needs—food, healthcare, education?

Moe: In the past, the UN covered healthcare costs. Now we must pay ourselves, which **is very expensive**. If we go to Thai hospitals, we need documents, so that's another problem. Education is also challenging—mostly of the classes focused on English. **We also have computer lessons or classed focus on life skills once every two to three month.** Many teachers are foreigners who come from the U.S. or Australia.

Amy: Do you face difficulties with language?

Moe: Yes, especially with Thai. **I can understand some, but speaking is hard.** At school, we only learn basic Thai. This makes it difficult when applying to schools or jobs.

Amy: Have you learned any practical skills at school?

Moe: Yes. We have classes in communication, cooking, and service work. I chose the cooking course because I enjoy making juice and snacks. I even did an internship in a restaurant. I liked it very Much.

Amy: Do you see yourself continuing in this direction? Maybe working in a restaurant?

Moe: I'm not sure. I want to continue studying if possible. But if not, I might work with NGOs. I'm already doing an internship with an organization that supports migrant education. **In the future, I hope to return and work there as staff.**

Amy: Do NGOs offer classes for you?

Moe: Yes they do, but they only offer **online classes**. And there are only twenty students in a class.

Amy: What about your social life? Do you have friends here?

Moe: At school, yes, but once we return to different camps, **we lose touch**. In Mae Sot, I don't have many friends. **It can feel isolating.**

Amy: If it is possible, what do you think can be done to improve your life? Or others are like similar refugees like you in Thailand?

Moe: Still I would say it is a legal document. Without an ID, we can't achieve higher level of education. Getting an ID is expensive for most of us, **which is about 13,000 Thai Baht.**

Amy: Thank you for sharing. For the last question, what's your dream for the future?

Moe: If I can get a scholarship, I want to study abroad or at least in the university in Thailand. I will choose to **study Political Science** so I can work as a political leader. I want to make my community better, offer them a **better education system** and support them to learn new things such as Computer and IT.

Interview Story 2: Researching the Lives of Myanmar Refugees in Thailand

Amy: Could you share how you first became involved in researching Myanmar refugees in Thailand?

Hong: Around **2023, when international travel resumed after the COVID-19**, I came to Thailand. Through conversations with my friends working in international organizations, I learned that Thailand hosts a large number of Myanmar refugees. At first, I had little knowledge of this community, but soon I realized the scale of the situation. In Bangkok, I visited informal schools and NGOs supporting refugee children. However, **later I found that Mae Sot, a town on the Thai-Myanmar border, is the primary hub where refugees concentrate.** That was when I decided to investigate more deeply.

Amy: From your research, why do Myanmar people come to Thailand?

Hong: The main reason is economic survival. Life in Myanmar has become extremely difficult due to poverty and political unrest. They do not come to Thailand because they like it. In fact, many of the refugees told me that if possible, they would prefer to return home. **But compared to Myanmar, Thailand offers relatively higher wages and safety, so they come here.**

Amy: What do they usually do in Thailand?

Hong: Most work in low-skilled, low-paying industries, such as agriculture in rural areas, seafood processing in Bangkok, or construction. Their salary is also different from that of Thai workers. On farms in Mae Sot, Thai workers might earn 300–400 baht a day, but Myanmar refugees earn only around 200 baht. For children who work there, it can be as little as 100 baht. It's common to see children leaving school early to work in order to sustain their family. In Bangkok, many children are employed in seafood factories, peeling shrimp or cleaning fish.

Amy: Has the situation improved in recent years?

Hong: Not significantly. **These are systemic issues, mainly driven by the lack of legal status, language barriers, and low education levels.** In many families I visited, children dropped out after primary or middle school to work. Parents often say: "My children will not have a better future through education. It's better for them to work." That's why early marriage is also common; many teenagers are married by 14 or 15.

Amy: Does the time they have lived in Thailand make a difference to their living situation?

Hong: Not much. Those who came earlier tend to speak Thai better, and their children often grow up bilingual. **But economically, it doesn't always transfer into better opportunities.** I met long-settled groups like the Karen "long-neck" villagers near Chiang Mai, who sell handicrafts to tourists. Even after living in Thailand for ten years, they had never left their small villages. Although language helps, without education or legal status, opportunities remain limited.

Amy: What about access to education for refugees?

Hong: Education is one of the biggest challenges for them. Most "schools" are actually informal learning centers run by NGOs or refugee communities. Teachers are usually former students themselves, so they have limited qualifications. Their salaries are low, which is around 5,000 baht a month. Many schools rely heavily on foreign NGOs to subsidize teacher wages. For example, in Mae Sot, one Taiwanese NGO has supported salaries for more than ten schools for nearly twenty years.

Another way for refugees to achieve better education is through GED. With this exam, students can apply to universities abroad. A few students have succeeded in getting full scholarships in the U.S., U.K., or Hong Kong. This can truly change their lives, but such opportunities are rare and demand strong academic preparation.

Amy: What about livelihood projects or entrepreneurship among refugees?

Hong: NGOs often run workshops teaching cooking, sewing, or handicrafts. Some social enterprises—like The Borderline in Mae Sot—sell refugee-made crafts. However, making products is easy; the hard part is finding buyers. Without strong sales channels, sustainability is always a problem.

As for entrepreneurship, some refugees want to start small businesses like snack shops, restaurants, or hostels. These ventures might require only a few thousand dollars, but without access to credit, they cannot start. Banks won't lend to them. They lack legal status and documents.

Amy: Have NGOs tried microfinance solutions?

Hong: In the communities I studied, I didn't see functioning microfinance systems. Some organizations consider small loans, but the risk is high. Since loans may not be repaid, and businesses may fail, few organizations would like to bring up this support. But the demand is real. **Even small-scale support, like helping one or two individuals with start-up capital, can make a difference.**

Amy: How do Thai people generally view Myanmar refugees?

Hong: Surprisingly, not very negatively. **Thai society is relatively tolerant, and the government already protects local workers by restricting refugees to low-skilled jobs.** Refugees fill labor gaps but are not seen as competitors for higher-skilled positions. Still, Thai citizenship is extremely difficult to get, even after 20 or 30 years of residence.

Amy: Do refugees themselves want to settle permanently in Thailand?

Hong: Almost none. Every refugee I've spoken with says they want to go back to Myanmar due to their culture, identity, and family ties. **Thailand is not home; it is temporary.**

Amy: From your perspective, what are the most meaningful ways to support this community?

Hong: At the government level, **I don't expect major policy change.** But NGOs can play a crucial role. Here may be three examples:

1. **Identity documentation** — helping refugees obtain some form of ID can open many opportunities. Sometimes it costs only 10,000 baht (about USD 300) to secure a legal card.
2. **Small business support** — providing seed funding or microloans for small ventures like food stalls or group housing can empower families.
3. **Education** — both basic education and pathways like GED programs are essential.

Among all the vulnerable groups I've worked with globally, Myanmar refugees in Thailand face some of the largest unmet needs, and is comparable to African slums. **Even small interventions, like funding a teacher's salary or helping one student access international education, can change lives.**