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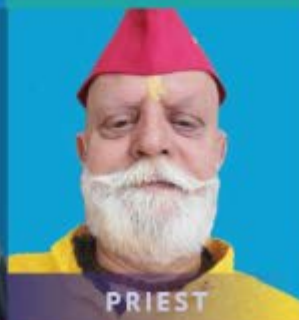
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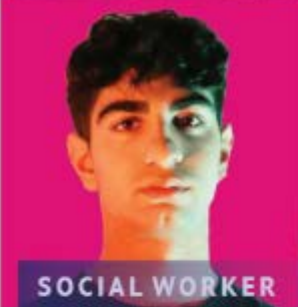
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**Refugee Youths Hong Kong**

Education for Refugee Children

A COMMUNITY IN NEED - THE REALITY OF REFUGEES LIVING IN HONG KONG

Refugees are supported rather minimalistically in Hong Kong – after fleeing some form of persecution or violence many look forward to coming to a place of refuge, only to be disappointed by the quality of life that they are subject to. The following article not only discusses the issues that refugees face in Hong Kong, but follows the Initiatives by an Impeccable individual, Chirag Nainani, a 16-year old who has helped the refugee community tremendously.





Refugees partaking in a football class taught by Chirag Nainani

Could you imagine living in one of the most expensive cities in the world with a monthly allowance of 3000 HK dollars? Perhaps a rather trivial and ignorable amount for many upper class individuals, worth an expensive night or two on the frolic streets of Lan Kwai Fong, but for the asylum seekers residing in Hong Kong, this sum defines their entire livelihood. A minimal provision of \$1500 for rent, \$1200 for food coupons, \$300 for utilities, and \$200 for transportation – information sourced from South China Morning Post article (<https://www.scmp.com/yp/discover/news/hong-kong/article/3147254/hong-kongs-government-gives-refugees-hk50-day-food-and->) – governmental policies pertaining to asylum seekers in Hong Kong are unequivocally weak and insufficient. A city where refugees are not permitted to legally work and are often viewed in one way or another as deviants in society, the poor economic and social treatment of refugees has marked the end of the so-called "Hong Kong Dream," one that is ostensibly based on ideals of independence, self-reliance, and entrepreneurship.

In Hong Kong, it is largely the liminal

status of the asylum seekers that prevents the full actualisation of their self-determination and financial autonomy. This is mainly exacerbated by the unfavourable legal circumstances surrounding the refugee community in Hong Kong, where the non-signatory status of Hong Kong for the Refugee Convention means that only a few asylum seekers over the years have been granted refugee status. Even the successful applications have been facilitated by the intervention of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); an international Refugee Agency that provides vital protection to the refugees, and ensures that everyone has the right to asylum and safe refuge after fleeing persecution or violence.

Since 2014, the government in Hong Kong has initiated a Unified Screening Mechanism (USM) policy where applications for protection under either Convention (Refugee Convention or the Convention Against Torture) are screened by the Immigration Department. If an application under the Refugee Convention is successful, the applicant then falls under the responsibility of

the UNHCR, who will seek a country for resettlement. If the application is successful under the Convention Against Torture (signed by Hong Kong), then the person will be granted temporary protection in Hong Kong, but there are still no official channels in place to provide resettlement. According to the Anti-trafficking Review, this has led to a substantiation rate of approximately 0.8%. Therefore, the USM is often a lengthy process that is riddled with bureaucratic complexities, while the asylum seekers in Hong Kong continue to face challenges in the form of discrimination, financial troubles, and poor living conditions. Many of these refugees have to live in squatter huts or tin-roof shacks in the New Territories and other remote areas, leading to higher transportation costs that are worsened by the constant commute to and from governmental agencies for refugee applications.

As all legal paths have eventually led to a dead-end for the legitimate recognition and promotion of rights for asylum seekers, many organisations across Hong Kong as well as members of society are partaking in various initiatives to promote refugee empowerment. One such individual is Chirag Nainani, a 16-year old who has based his voluntary goals and portfolio on assisting



the refugee children in Hong Kong by offering various classes to support their development and social integration. Inspired by his mother's work with Christian Action, Centre for Refugees – an NGO that assists the refugees in Hong Kong – and his passion for athletics, Chirag's refugee outreach program is based on offering aid in the form of football classes, homework help, and even school interview preparation.

Firstly, Chirag provides football classes for refugee children, alongside the assistance of a trained and experienced coach, and aims to create a

"safe space for children to run around, get some exercise in, and simply have fun."

With limited access to food and water and the continuous navigation of the bureaucratic maze of Hong Kong, such classes allow children to evade their stressful situations at home and engage in physical activities. Respecting the financial barriers that these refugees face, Chirag has also hosted bake sales

in order to cover transport costs for these classes, and the local clubs have provided him with access to use their pitches for training on a regular basis.

Currently, the children are training at ESA, an indoor training facility that provides an innovative range of training arenas and machines to improve sports performance. The inadequacy of Hong Kong governmental policy highlights the importance of such classes and voluntary work towards improving the quality of life of asylum seekers and fuel a sense of self-sufficiency.

As one of the major issues that refugees face in Hong Kong is mental health or similar psychological problems - largely brought on by an over-reliance on insufficient institutional programs and limited social inclusivity - these classes can also provide the asylum seekers with a sense of community by fostering interactions with other like-minded children.

These interactions are extremely important for the social development of asylum seekers, especially as they are often subject to xenophobia and racism, which forces them to stay within the outskirts of society instead of freely integrating and blending in with the community at large.

Chirag has further said that once a refugee told him that, "all I want is for the world to treat us as human beings; the same way they would want to be treated."

A clear divide thus exists between refugee children and the rest of the society which leads to symptoms of low self-esteem, depression, and helplessness, as each refugee desperately tries to regain a sense of normalcy and acceptance into society.

One of the periods in the last few years where mental health issues have been particularly prominent amongst children is COVID-19, where the intense virus-prevention lockdowns and policies not only meant minimal access to the already scarce resources, but there was also a huge upsurge in feelings of anxiety and depression brought on by a severe lack of food and financial insecurity.

With many NGOs in Hong Kong already facing their own set of challenges during the pandemic – typically institutions that

refugees relied on to provide them with amenities that the government could not – this situation was also worsened by the limited access to food supplies and toiletries in supermarkets, with many refugees claiming how they did not have these items at home during the many COVID waves. It is within these times that Chirag was still able to provide football classes over zoom to the children in the form of drills or exercises that they were able to follow online and retain a sense of normalcy and continue some level of interactive activities.

Furthermore, additional efforts by Chirag to support the refugees in their daily life has included educational assistance in the form of a homework helpline and interview preparation to stimulate educational mobility across this sector. In Hong Kong, the refugees are allowed to attend government schools and are subsidised by the Education Bureau for monthly fees, school books, and uniform expenses, however, there is often a huge language barrier that exists at these institutions because many subjects and the curriculum is often taught in Chinese. There are also a few international schools in Hong Kong that offer full financial aid to refugees, one of them being Kellie International School who has in the last few years launched a new scholarship program for the disadvantaged communities in Hong Kong. Chirag helps many of the refugee children to prepare for interviews at the international schools – he also helped one of the refugee children from his football classes to prepare for the creative writing assessment and interview with the Kellie's principal. It is further important to recognise that even though there are public or international schools where refugees are able to study without costs, many students have to work twice as hard in order to maintain passing grades or to stay competitive with other students in school. As mentioned above, there are often huge language barriers that exist within these schools that prevent the full understanding of the school's syllabus dispersed across the



Chirag Nataraj and the refugees hosting their classes at the ESA facility in Hong Kong

various subjects. In order to mitigate this, Chirag has created a homework helpline, composed of a WhatsApp group that has close to twenty families participating and students can reach out whenever they please and they would be paired with a tutor help.

Whether it be difficulty with subjects of science, mathematics, or language, the refugees are able to be tutored under other high school or university level volunteer students specialising in that field, which is extremely beneficial for the refugees than attending school sponsored tutorials that are often expensive and unaffordable. Furthermore, to create a more level playing field between refugee children and other students, Chirag has also hosted coding classes to introduce them to technology and commonly used softwares in order to

Chirag has also stated the positive impact that these classes have had on the refugee's daily lives, adding that

"entertaining and giving them an opportunity to learn coding is something that many of them appreciate and get excited to do."

"give them skills that are in high demand in our day and age."

* Chirag's assistance and compassion to the refugee community also extends during the summer period – while many kids across Hong Kong leave to travel, refugees are unable to do so, and thus Chirag volunteers at Christian Action, Centre for Refugees over the two months of the summer break. During this time, Chirag helps to set up and attends World Refugee Day, supervises summer hiking trips, and volunteers to help out in trips to EpicLand. Therefore, it is evident the pivotal role that individuals such as Chirag play in order to help the refugees in their daily lives.



Chirag and the refugees at a charity football tournament organised by Kadoon Cricket Club

As explicated above, while there are many organisations and individuals such as Chirag who are actively striving for the improvement of refugee conditions in Hong Kong, there are many ways in which you can also contribute and make a difference for these refugees. A great and easy way to do so would be to donate to the many organisations such as Christian Action, Refugee Union, or the Justice Centre of Hong Kong who work with refugees and asylum seekers in Hong Kong.

These Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) provide assistance to the asylum seekers in the form of food, educational help, or even legal assistance, and donating to such organisations would increase their funding and capacity to further help these refugees.

Secondly, most of these NGOs have volunteer programs that are open to the general public, and participating in these programs allows individuals to offer their specialisation and expertise to the organisations and help them in their goal to make the refugee community stronger.

Chirag also has his own website called Refugee Youth, where he details his mission and initiatives as well as allows people from within society to volunteer; this can exist in the form of assisting with the homework helpline by volunteering as a tutor and even working with Chirag to teach the football classes.

It is important that people in Hong Kong strive to help this community in the best way possible and thus reconcile them with the rest of society. It is further crucial to remove a sense of stigma against refugees

and prevent their labelling as outcasts or deviants, and instead facilitate their integration with the community at large.

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Kirti is a second-year undergraduate student at Sciences Po Paris, completing her major in Politics and Governance, due for an exchange year at King's College London. At her university, she has studied migration, refugee conditions, UNHCR regulations, and has also volunteered at organisations such as Refugeek in the past that focus on teaching coding to asylum seekers in Hong Kong.