

**M**edia reports on terrorism, migration, and pandemics strengthen public discourses about risk in today's world. States take precautions to anticipate risk (see Andrejevic, 2006; Beck, 2007; Bratich, 2006), including the risk of people entering its territory to seek asylum. Media consumers are persuaded of the dangers of living in a mobile age through pictures and reports of people crossing the seas by boat toward Europe or Australia and by foot across the Mexican-US border. Countries in Europe are fortifying their borders (Haedicke, 2009) and Australia puts asylum seekers who arrive on the mainland without a valid visa in detention until they receive a visa or are deported (Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011).

However, the perceived risk of what is generally referred to as refugees entering industrialized nations seems exaggerated as the majority of refugees live in Pakistan, Syria, and Iran (UNHCR, 2011a). A refugee (according to the Refugee Convention of 1951, which has been amended through the 1967 Protocol, ensuring universal applicability) is a person who *owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country (...)*. (UNHCR, Article 1, The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, UNHCR, 1951)

Asylum seekers are people who have not been recognized as refugees yet according to the Convention criteria and thus live in a state of limbo. The anticipation of economic, political, and social risks becomes evident in the ways in which asylum seekers are contained in locations like detention centers or low-cost housing (Witteborn, in press b) and depicted by news coverage as a threat (e.g., Leudar et al., 2008).

In 2010, 43.7 million people were displaced by conflict. Almost 850,000 asylum seekers and 10.55 million refugees were under the care of UNHCR. An additional 4.82 million Palestinian refugees are registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNHCR, 2011a). 154 refugees and 486 asylum seekers are currently officially registered and reside in Hong Kong (UNHCR, 2011b), which has not signed the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees whose 60th birthday is celebrated this year. Asylum

applications are assessed by UNHCR which also resettles recognized refugees to third countries (HKRAC, 2011).

## ***Raising Awareness in Virtual Space: NGO Support***

Asylum seekers have started speaking out against perceptions of being risk factors (Witteborn, in press, a), inverting the argument and pointing to the risks they themselves experience in daily life despite international protection mechanisms like the Refugee Convention. In Hong Kong, asylum seekers have voiced themselves in at least two ways: through NGO support and self-organization. In the past, the Society for Community Organization (SoCO, 2006) had asked members of the community group Voices of the Rights of Asylum Seekers and Refugees to write letters about their experiences in Hong Kong. They were submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Committee and the Panel on Welfare Services and Panel on Security. Here is an online example from 2005 (letters available from SoCO, 2006):

I am an asylum seeker and I have been in Hong Kong since July 2005. I don't have a right to work and can't go to the hospital without getting trouble with the police and getting arrested. I am now sleeping outside on the streets. Even a dog has a house and a place to stay and to live. I want to ask you if the right to live, to be alive is only for a few people or for all people in the world. And I want to know if you, the Human Rights Committee, know about our lives in Hong Kong. We are not really living here, we are just surviving. That's all, thanks! (N.a., December 21, 2005)

The account about homelessness and poverty of asylum seekers living in Hong Kong in 2005 shows how protection can turn into risk. In many of the letters, asylum seekers testified about uncertainty due to long asylum processes, poverty, or detention; topics which still apply to asylum seekers' lives in Hong Kong in 2011.

## ***Raising Awareness in Virtual Space: Self-organization***

Although NGOs can provide valuable social and legal support to asylum seekers, asylum seekers are still represented and spoken for. Thus, they have started organizing themselves to speak out about their experiences, to give advice to other asylum seekers, and to relate to the

# Asylum Seekers in Hong Kong

public. In June 2010 asylum seekers in Hong Kong created the website [www.seekingrefuge.hk](http://www.seekingrefuge.hk), providing information from accommodation, finances, NGO support, UNHCR, life in Hong Kong, to how to engage with police officers. The objectives of the website are to inform the general public about the situation of asylum seekers in Hong Kong, share information, and encourage the Hong Kong government and UNHCR to support asylum seekers more. Despite the fact that the website invites mostly English-speaking audiences, it is a start to represent the experiences of asylum seekers in their own voice:

Christian Action then gave me the address to go to the UNHCR in Yau Ma Tei. When I arrived at the UNHCR office they took my passport and my original plane ticket. (...) They asked for my story and documented it without giving me a copy of what I said. (...) They said that they would keep on interviewing me, but that also I should report to them, by calling them every day. And I did this for a long time. Eventually my money ended. So the only place I used to get my daily food was Christian Action. In the morning I got my breakfast from them. However, I had no place to stay. I was living in Star Ferry for almost 3 years sleeping under the pillars of the Cultural Centre. The only thing I survived off was what I received from Christian Action. I remember I would sleep under the Cultural Centre at around nine at night when the lights would dim. I would find cardboard boxes to sleep on. Early in the morning at around seven, the security would come to tell everyone to wake up and leave. (...) It was a long time before I heard from the UNHCR. (...) (June 16, 2010)

The account describes long processing times for the asylum application and again the memory of homelessness and poverty. These days, asylum seekers in the city receive some rental (UNHCR) and food support (International Social Services) for the period of their asylum application assessment, a period during which they cannot work. However, the assessment can still take up to five years, also due to UNHCR's limited capacities (HKRAC, 2011).

Related to the above concerns are concerns about lack of relations with locals and being misunderstood.

Although asylum seekers want to represent themselves in their own voice, they also understand that they cannot do this without institutional support. Relating in virtual space

can be one way of sharing personal accounts with local and international audiences as well as asylum seekers worldwide. Both, asylum seekers and locals can benefit from creating social relationships with each other. Asylum seekers often live in the city for several years and although they find some of their networks through churches, mosques, temples, and co-nationals, there is not that much contact with Hong Kong people. The same is true for refugees whose resettlement can sometimes take a long time. Getting to know asylum seekers beyond the asylum seeker label can help Hong Kongers learn more about the people who live in the city and that asylum seekers are part of globalization as are expatriate lawyers and bankers living in Hong Kong.

## ***Asylum Seekers Are Not Passive Victims***

Despite international protection mechanisms like the Refugee Convention asylum seekers have to live with the consequences of a heightened sense of risk in today's world, which becomes manifest in the protection of borders and the fear of the "wrong" migrant. And yet, asylum seekers are not passive victims. They leave their families and countries due to social and political reasons to seek protection. Yes, they leave for economic reasons too. This is where the public debate gets heated. Economic refugees do not meet the criteria of the Refugee Convention. The question is whether economic reasons should be taken into account, especially when reflecting on the role of industrialized nations in shaping the social, economic, and environmental problems over time in developing nations.

Moreover, asylum seekers are more than bureaucratic titles and UNHCR files. They are people with their own biographies, arrested in place and space. Although not the solution to asylum seekers' problems, new media technologies can assist asylum seekers reach out to the general public, governments, and NGOs, communicate their personal experiences, basic human needs like shelter, food, and work, and the potential people have for involvement in society. Virtual space can thus enable asylum seekers to represent their own perceptions of risk and respond to perceptions of being risk factors to society.

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