

# Creating safe spaces, a sense of belonging and 'ibasho' for women refugees in Tokyo

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Loneliness, isolation, and a lack of support are common refugee-migrant experiences. They must cope with forced uprooting from their homelands, a loss of social networks, and a lack of legal rights in host countries. Belonging and connection are not just a source of emotional comfort but often a precondition for survival. We usually think that material needs take priority in the support of the most vulnerable. While everyone, of course, needs shelter and food, without some secure emotional space they often are not able to access the immaterial resources that are also necessary for survival.

The situation in Japan is more desperate than in many other host nations due to a lack of established ethnic communities, restrictive refugee recognition policies, and the dire lack of support provided for asylum seekers while they are experiencing the long and circuitous process of recognition. Women refugees usually face more difficulties than men. Due to intersectional discrimination, women are often discriminated against by both those in host countries (especially in a country with a low ranking in the global gender gap) as well as within their own refugee communities. This means that, compared to their male counterparts, women are placed lower within what is called the 'hierarchies of belonging' which 'allow[s] and grant[s] access under a form of restricted and limited entitlement but also discriminate in terms of using such an entitlement to access different resource and

opportunities'. Specifically, the situation can be more pressing and problematic for refugee women due to the lack of available work, the lack of any family-oriented sociality, and the possibility of sexual violence. Taken together, there are even fewer opportunities for institutional support and social connection for female asylum seekers in Japan than for their male counterparts.

We examine the experiences of two African refugee-migrant sisters, struggling to locate, integrate into, and at times, create social networks sufficiently robust to provide support and stability. In the context of an undeveloped state and civil society refugee support apparatus, as well as a migrant community that is more oriented around the needs and desires of men, we explore the rather unusual support offered by student-led efforts through the Sophia Refugee Support Group (SRSG), a student-run volunteer group based at Sophia University in Tokyo, to provide a sense of belonging or *ibasho*, 'a place or community where one feels at home' in Japan.

## **Background**

Mina and Sasha (pseudonyms) fled separately from their homes in West Africa due to persecution by the police. After they witnessed and objected to the arrests and killings of family members in protest at the seizure of their land for oil mining by the state, they became targets. Mina fled in 2016 and Sasha in 2020, reuniting in 2020, in a country located in Central Asia. While they initially believed they were safe and settled, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 forced them to flee once again. They arrived in Osaka, Japan in February 2023 and relocated to Tokyo to immediately apply for refugee status. The sisters are from a family of seven, but like many refugees persecuted by the state, all the siblings have had to scatter, and so far, the sisters have not been able to locate them and are unsure of their safety.

State support for refugees in Japan is very limited and the little that is available is difficult to access. In Japan, like most countries without refugee camps, asylum seekers are called 'urban refugees' and are scattered throughout the city; their

personal connections are thin and rather fragmented. The West African community in Japan is small and dispersed, composed largely of men who are working at different levels of legality simply to survive. These manual labour jobs are not usually available to women, which means women do not have access to a workplace that is often the source of camaraderie and information, as well as money. The few friends they have are mostly men: Mina explains that they had ‘not seen a [African]-a female [African]. Most of our friends are guys. Only a few female friends’.

Japan annually allocates large donations to international organisations and Japanese NGOs’ overseas activities to support refugees outside its borders, but there are few organisations that focus on supporting refugees already *in* Japan. As the number of refugee applicants grows but are not accepted due to restrictive immigration policies, the bureaucratic procedures increasingly treat people as ‘cases’, rather than as people to be granted asylum, or until the decision is made, as people to support. This interim support is one of the fundamental requirements of all signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, that Japan signed in 1981. Much of the care of asylum seekers, until their cases are reviewed, is outsourced to the few refugee support groups. It usually takes several years for an application to be reviewed, and then approximately only 1.7 percent between 2017 and 2022 have been accepted. There are many asylum seekers like the sisters who cannot go back to their home country, and thus they are caught in limbo. Those who work in these organisations—knowing the poor chances of getting refugee recognition and the lack of support resources available to refugees—are often quite pessimistic, a feeling that is communicated to asylum seekers.

While refugees do not expect much sympathy or care from the immigration officers, more perplexing is the coldness that many report feeling from the non-profit and non-governmental supporters in Tokyo. Even when providing aid, a lot of the supporters and volunteers from this civil society sector personally distance themselves from refugees—the very people they are there to support—by not making any attempts to engage directly with them. Perhaps more than other migrant groups who might be in their host nation by choice, refugees have very few options. As such,

refugees are in greater need of connection, respect, dignity, and belonging in the unfamiliar and foreign environment of their host country. Sophia Refugee Support Group (SMSG) seeks to provide this.

With the goal of creating a more welcoming Japanese society regardless of one's race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and gender, SMSG has seven main activities to support refugee-migrants in Japan: awareness raising, food deliveries, hygiene deliveries, Japanese language classes, translations for refugee applications, and immigration detention centre visits. In SMSG, we realised that what is missing alongside other direct material support such as food deliveries and Japanese language classes, is a sense of belonging and place. In SMSG, we seek to provide what in Japan is called '*ibasho*'. In every culture, there are different understandings, but it is commonly agreed that people need social and emotional connections, to tie them to each other and to a place. While immigrants arrive at host lands in groups or through chain migration, refugees more often come by themselves, and thus their opportunities to form personal connections let alone communities are much more challenging. To create a sense of '*ibasho*' where the socially marginalised feel accepted, safe, and connected, SMSG has also been holding informal social gatherings called 'Refugee Cafés' since its establishment in 2017. These informal get-togethers with 40 to 50 refugees and students are held on a monthly basis on Sophia University campus and have a different theme depending on the month. During these Cafés, people are given the opportunity and the safe space to socialize, share, and create new friends through food and games: a chance to bridge socially and culturally different realities.

Since its establishment, SMSG has supported nearly 300 refugees across Japan. They usually find us by word-of-mouth, through churches and institutional refugee support organisations. Most of the refugees in Japan, including those who receive SMSG's support, are male. Nevertheless, SMSG strives to create a space for our female refugee friends through these Cafés, which often becomes the only place in their lives where they can interact with others. The majority of SMSG's student members are female, so we are able to create intimate gendered bonds across otherwise

contrasting life experiences. It was our female members who realised the need for personal hygiene care including sanitary napkins during the COVID-19 pandemic and began the assembly and delivery of hygiene products to those who could not leave their homes. We continue sending out these packages today.

Additionally, many student members in SRSG are mixed-race (ハーフ, *hāfu*), have experience crossing borders and returning to Japan (帰国子女, *kikokushijo*), or are exchange students (留学生, *ryūgakusei*). While we are in no way comparing the scope of the challenges of our experience to that of our refugee friends, the experience of displacement and alienation is not completely unfamiliar to most of us. As such, these Cafés serve as an *ibasho* not only for all refugees, but especially for female refugees, it serves as a place to exchange stories, frustrations, and small victories that are shared by women. Cafés are also a place where the women refugees can more easily talk with refugee men. As other places, including the scattered refugee communities, are often dominated by men, Cafés serve as a place where refugees, both women and men, can openly speak about their experiences with compatriots but also members of the host society, on an equal footing. It is a place for women refugees to create spontaneous social connections, where they can share daily updates of their personal lives.

## **Home, belonging, and *ibasho***

For any refugee fleeing persecution, ‘home’ is a complex and often contested notion that differs by nationality, age, gender, and personal biography. ‘Home’ includes material housing but is also related to the immaterial and intangible senses of feeling of belonging, and of identity. It can also encompass elements including ‘familiarity’, an in-depth knowledge of the place and people built over time as well as feelings associated with safety, security, comfort, privacy and connection. But the characteristics of home are more complicated for those who experience forced migration, leading to the question, what if one cannot find a sense of ‘home’, a feeling of familiarity, safety, and connection in their host lands?

Home is not something that can be taken for granted or assumed, but is an ongoing process, with a goal and a set of practices. But in the most fundamental sense, the very definition of refugee means away from, and temporarily without a home, seeking refuge in a place that is not home. Even without material stability and geographical fixity, refugees and other displaced people still seek these affective qualities. In Japan, we might say, ‘*anzen*’ (安全, physical safety) and ‘*anshin*’ (安心, emotional security). This is exactly what *ibasho* points to.

*Ibasho* is a term that became popular through the neoliberal fragmentation of family and work during the 1990s in Japan, a way to identify a collection of immaterial and affective needs that were once taken for granted as the personal, social, and capital grounding in a secure (if at times stifling) Japanese post-war society. *Ibasho* (居場所) is a term that has no exact equivalent in English as it is used colloquially. Scholars have defined *ibasho* in multiple ways: ‘a place where one can feel secure and be oneself’, ‘a place or community where one feels at home’ or even ‘any place, space, and community where one feels comfortable, relaxed, calm, and accepted by surrounding people’. It is interrelated to one’s well-being, identity, and belonging. Some have pointed out that *ibasho* has three elements: it is a physical or virtual place where one feels comfortable, accepted, and secure, where good relationships are found, and marginalised people can envision a future for themselves in the current society. At best, studies have depicted how *ibasho* can lead to empowerment, serving as a refuge for the excluded and oppressed to change their society.

Now with the rise of foreign residents and transnational marriages in Japan, the idea of *ibasho* has allowed scholars to recognise and reconceptualise the problems that multicultural students and immigrants face, linking to the marginalisation from education and housing in Japan. However, studies on *ibasho* for refugees in Japan—those who seek asylum by crossing international borders—remain scarce.



*Refugees at an SRSO Café. Credit: Shota Nagao (member of SRSO).*

## Finding safe spaces and *ibasho* in Japan: The cases of \*Sasha and \*Mina

After fleeing persecution and escaping war, Sasha and Mina expected to find some acceptance and support when they finally arrived in Japan. Like many refugees, they thought Japan to be a modern and enlightened place, safe and peaceful. Mina explains that despite not ‘plan[ning] to be here, circumstances brought me here.’ They also saw that Japan often publicly touted its support for refugees. But the Japan and its ‘unsmiling law’, as Sasha describes, that they encountered on arrival was cold and unwelcoming. Even though they are generally welcomed by ‘regular’ Japanese people they meet in their daily lives, they are often viewed with suspicion by those who they thought were supposed to be helping them. They are often told by both immigration officials and support workers to ‘go back to your own country’, and

that ‘you cannot survive in Japan’. Of course, like most asylum seekers, they too wish that circumstances were such that they could return to their home country. And while given the low levels of support provided to the urban refugees in Japan, it does indeed seem that survival is difficult, even in this rich and prosperous country. In an interview, Sasha explained that encounters like these make you feel ‘like you shouldn’t be here. You’re not supposed to be here. And you being here doesn’t make sense. So sometimes, they make you feel like you’re at the wrong place or you can’t find safety here.’ At one level, the sisters agree: they should be somewhere else; they should be home. But that is not currently possible.

Despite the fact every refugee’s story is different—their actual homes, the persecution that they have suffered, their path to whatever landing place they might have found—the sisters also emphasised that they felt the state support services did not recognise their individual circumstances. Mina claims that refugees, especially from Africa, are frequently mischaracterised by official institutions as untrustworthy and ignorant. Like asylum seekers around the world, the two sisters are required to explain their persecution story and reasons for fleeing their home countless times to officials, in minute detail, as if officials are searching for any small discrepancy. That is, rather than finding ways to help vulnerable populations in great need, they are looking for any minor discrepancy as a justification for rejection of their application.

More perplexing, this attitude is sometimes shared by the support groups and civil society volunteers in Tokyo. The sisters explained that often, these civil society volunteers assume that they are too ignorant to understand the criteria or processes—let alone their rights—that make it possible for them to secure enough resources to survive until their refugee application is evaluated (a process that takes on average almost four years). While these legal procedures are complicated, unless asylum seekers have this information, they cannot navigate the maze of bureaucratic procedures necessary to survive. Mina and Sasha, and many other of our refugee friends, feel that they are revealing their pain and suffering so ‘supporters’ can tick boxes for paperwork, without hearing or understanding their situation and their needs to help them address those needs.



The sisters' wants are modest: at the most basic level, simple recognition, as individuals and in time as legal refugees in Japan. Once a month, at Refugee Café, students and our refugee friends come together to unwind. There is no agenda, no goal, nothing to do. There is no financial aid to be given (SRSG does not have many resources), and no vetting of people, no evaluation of the veracity of stories or worthiness of their cases. In one striking moment, Sasha told us that she felt that in Sophia Refugee Support Group, her story is believed and her voice is heard. She explained, 'the students remember details [in the same way that] family remembers details.' She asked some of the SRSG members for fufu, an African grain, to be included in their monthly food box; to surprise Sasha for her birthday, we included fufu in their package, with a personalised letter. She said, 'I was quite impressed when I noticed that some people pay attention to what I say and remember.' These details, and their free and respectful sharing, is one of the features of *ibasho*, a place where the particularities of people are recognized and valued, not as ways to secure resources but more simply and elementally, for them to be heard, to be seen and to be appreciated by others.

Mina explains what 'home' means to her: 'Where you have your peace of mind and safety. [Where] you're always eager to come back to. That's your home.' Even when the sisters have received material support in the form of an actual physical space to stay, it is often the emotional aspects of how this support is provided that are just as, and in some instances, more important. And the home-like features of *ibasho* have become a crucial reason for Mina and Sasha-like many other of our refugee friends-to continue returning every month to join SRSG's Cafés.

During SRSG's Cafés, people are given the time and platform to share and listen to other participants' stories about their homelands—including Japan—and their current situation. An Iranian refugee spoke about the brave young women in her home country who are challenging religious oppression. Another refugee shared updates on the military coup d'état that continues to affect Myanmar more than two years later. While to most people in Japan, these are far-away happenings, to our refugee friends, they are facts of life that they and the loved ones left behind deal with every

day. Sharing stories is a way to not only share something about those you love but also a part of their own story, some of the reasons they ended up far away from home, in Japan and at a Café.

Sasha explains her first time at a Café:

*There was one particular time when someone came to do a presentation on how they were in the Shinagawa Detention Centre. I saw a lot of [students] crying, especially the guy that was in control of the computer, the boy who usually does the MC. That guy, I've never seen him cry. I was like 'These people can actually feel. I can really rely on these people. They have an idea of what's happening to us.'*

An *ibasho* is not created simply by securing enough resources for survival. While much of a refugee's life is devoted to securing just these resources, for any place to be an *ibasho*, people need connection, recognition, acceptance, and respect. Although there is a lack of established communities and social networks in Japan for both female refugees and Africans, Sasha and Mina feel that SRSG provides them with a sense and a place of belonging through affective ties. Despite their precarious migration status, Sasha and Mina say the Cafés 'help us to relax, to relieve our stress which is emotional stuff we need to take off our mind. We feel relaxed, we feel loved, and accepted. We feel like you feel our pains more than the other organisations'.

*\*Sasha and Mina are pseudonyms.*

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*Main image: Iranian slogan, '女性 (Women), 人生 (Life), 自由 (Freedom)' written across a refugee woman's sign at an SRSG Café. Credit: Shota Nagao (member of SRSG).*