TRANSCRIPT - GCYF PODCAST

A Young Refugee Builds His Future- Conversation with ATA ULLAH

STREETSMART SERIES Ep.1

AC: Welcome everyone to the first episode of our podcast series. I am Anu Chakravarty with the Global Center for Youth Futures based in Atlanta. I am also often referred to as Professor C particularly by my students over the years.

I want to welcome our guest today- Ata Ullah is speaking with us from Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. Cox's Bazar is the world's largest refugee camp. He arrived there in 2017 to escape the attacks, and destruction of Rohingya towns and villages by the Myanmar military forces.

The military has claimed it was targeting only Rohingya rebels, but it is well documented that the attacks against unarmed Rohingya civilians (children included) have been excessive and systematic –prompting the International Court of Justice in 2020 to warn the democratically elected government of that time to protect the population from genocide.

A military coup followed in 2021 – and the destruction of Rohingya lives and property, and the forced expulsions, continued. With the military also engaged in battles against various other ethnic armed groups- Rohingya refugees have remained in limbo.

Ata Ullah, you were 13 years old when you arrived in the refugee camp in 2017. Even though it is hard to make plans for the future in a refugee camp (you told me this in our first conversation), and your generation has been called the "lost generation" because you have lost access to books and anything by way of meaningful higher education in the camp -- you have taken the initiative to pursue various opportunities for higher education, including online programs and internships offered by programs abroad. You have also founded the Next Generation Rohingya Network to organize young refugees work to find their place in the world.

Ata Ullah, thank you so much for sharing both the difficult and the inspirational parts of your journey with us today. Shall we start with how things were back home, and the events that led to your arrival in the refugee camp?

AU (2:29): Yeah, thank you so much. First of all, I'd like to express my gratitude for inviting me for your podcast at the Global Center for Youth Futures. I am so excited to be here. …My name is Ata Ullah. I am from Myanmar, grew up in [the area of] Myungdaw in Rakhine state which is based in the northern side of Myanmar.

I grew up in a peaceful village but I had to face systematic genocide…[we also had to face] discrimination, lacked formal education, and restriction on movement…and also limited access to opportunity in higher education ..like high school, not even allowed to go to university or college….

But for me, I was too young there…also I did not have much knowledge of political issues. But unfortunately, as all the people of the world know that on 25th of August 2017 we had to flee the nation because the Myanmar military had started to massacre – killing, and burning our villages. So for that reason we had no option to stay there. We [had to] seek refuge in the neighboring country of Bangladesh. On this day, 25th of August 2017, we reached…over 1 million people reached Bangladesh to this refugee camp. This is how things have gone in Myanmar actually while I was there.

AC (4.20): I remember in our conversation the last time we talked—that the thing you missed the most is your bike. At the time you had to flee persecution and attacks, one of your most prized possessions was your bicycle.

AU (4.42): Yeah…it was my bicycle which was gifted by my father …he had given it to me just 6 months …then I had to leave it …there is no option to bring it here because we had to cross a lot of mountains and come far by walking….so I miss it a lot, that was my bicycle.

AC (5:12): Can you tell us a little bit, Ata Ullah, about what conditions are like in the camp?

AU (5:21): The condition in the camp…I can say [we are] struggling, daily struggling ….for example, in closing our current area…there is now no open space to play. We struggle also with food….huge families with 10-12 members…they are only getting per person $11 or $10 a month. It is not enough. Also there is no employment opportunity, for those who are uneducated especially….And also there is a barrier for movement. You cannot go anywhere in Bangladesh. There is, at the moment, restrictions from the government side. People are not getting health care. This is the basic thing….everything remains uncertain. Nobody knows what [will] happen tomorrow….so everyone is trying to take care of themselves.

I can say one more thing… there is an education barrier for youth in our refugee camp….so they cannot access higher education here. Even the primary education, those who are [teaching] are not qualified enough. …So the current situation is [we are] struggling …to survive here.

In the summer, for many people you will see… there is not even any tree…[for cover], for green nature. That is impacting a lot on the situation.

AC (7:41): So…there is overcrowding….

AU (7:43): Yes

AC (7:44) ….there are no open spaces….

AU (7:46): yes

AC (7:47): …access to education is severely limited…

AU (7:49): yes

AC (7:50): ….the amount of money you are allocated for food is not enough per person per month is not enough….

AU (7:56): Yes…

AC (7:58): ….What is the mood of young people,, Ata Ullah, in the camp?

AU (8:02): Yeah….I think the mood of young people …I can say it's changing….for example… when they don't have any kind of opportunity, they can see nothing [they feel that there is nothing in their future]….They are just 'spending time'… basically wasting time by doing nothing, I can say….

Youth are becoming separated…for example…some youth are trying to go to some other country…by going [to seek] asylum….they take boats…to Malaysia especially they are going…. Because they cannot control [anything here]…they are not comfortable staying here…those from the city, those who have some kind of knowledge, basic education and experience…are doing jobs….some are doing daily labor for work…so this is what they are doing …Their mood….everyday there are changing their mood…their mindset ….everything is changing everyday …

AC (9:21): Right…it keeps shifting and changing… The young people who are getting on boats to Malaysia…what are they hoping for…. To make that journey, take those risks, leave their families behind to go to yet another country…

AU (9:40): Yeah… the main reason is… some Rohingya refugees are living in Malaysia…some people have relatives there. In Malaysia, they are seeing that they are getting more access rather than in Bangladesh…through illegal way [they take] boats or ships and go to Malaysia…that is what they are doing …for the opportunity they are going there mostly, I can say.

AC (10:13): I see…and you said that some young people are doing jobs in the camp…what kind of jobs are they doing?

AU (10:20): Yes… they are engaged in some NGO jobs…for example…UNICEF is providing some employment opportunity ….some IOs (international organizations) and INGOs

(international nongovernment organizations) are providing jobs ….they are doing such kind of jobs there…

AC (10:59): They are providing some basic employment opportunities to young people?

AU (11:03): Yes…

AC (11:05): …But I would imagine that those jobs are nowhere near…. The number of jobs that are being supplied…those opportunities are nowhere near the number of young people who need jobs…. And are those skilled jobs or mostly unskilled jobs?

AU (11:23): Yes…there are some jobs …like it mostly depends on their qualification…jobs provided by the INGOs is depending on the person's qualifications…but many people are not getting such opportunity because I can say that we are uneducated for most of the people …most people have not been able to access such kind of opportunities…

AC (11:50): Right.. right.. I see….um…I remember you telling me that you are a curious person. And that line stuck with me. Tell us a little bit, Ata Ullah, about why curiosity matters …do you think it is your secret superpower….that you have been able to pursue opportunities…look for opportunities and fend for yourself and try to help others …do you think your curiosity has helped you along?

AU (12:20): My curiosity has helped me a lot, I can say. Because without being curious…I can never be here [with education] today. If I did not have any curiosity, I would not be able to access any kind of online resources….taking some courses from international university …online….[curiosity has helped] also my work in the refugee camp…it has been amazing….

I want to also adopt this kind of curiosity in the people [of the camp]. Without curiosity, no one can ever achieve their goal of further improvement in their academic journey and professional journey.

Curiosity has really helped me. I can say that I am in a situation, a country, a place in which every resource is limited and every opportunity is restricted…so when you have such kind of curiosity, it would not give you a space to sleep [will not let you be complacent]…..I remember [hearing] in one course: 'If you are interested in learning, no one can stop you…' or 'If you are willing to learn, no one can stop you. If you are not willing to learn, nobody can help you.'

AC (14:17): I like that….. How did you learn about these online programs that were being offered by universities abroad? How did you find these opportunities?

AU (14:31): It was 2020 when I started my online career… I started having a mobile phone—I am connected with a digital device with online technology. When I bought this mobile phone, I was interested in how I can use it….to promote, or to learn something from there [online

resource]. Also one of my teachers who is living here ….he also helps me. He has guided me how to access online resources [while] being in the refugee camp. He always encouraged me—'if you have the internet, you have the world with you'. That is something that helped me find such opportunities…. [Once] I started the journey, it became a lot easier.

AC (15:29): So right now, you have completed school and you are pursuing other courses online…is that where you are at in your educational journey?

AU (15:37): …In October 28th, 2024, I have completed the RHEAP **[**Refugee Higher Education Access Program] journey. I am taking some two online courses right now. I am also doing part-time jobs….just trying to have some higher education in the next….

AC (16:05):… yeah…. But you took the initiative recently to found the Next Generation Rohingya Youth Network. …So how did that idea come about while you are pursuing your studies and how did you go about building the network? Tell us a little bit about…the origins of the idea and the process of building a group of young people united around that idea?

AU (16:35): For me… this was an idea that suddenly came to my mind last year… I told you in our last conversation, many youth … thousands of youth are spending their time without any reason [sense of purpose]…. I think to myself: If I can do, for example, I am learning something through online, taking some courses…..then why not I can be someone who can help them also to be like me? To bring them onto the stage to be heard…although we are in a situation in which everything is restricted…opportunity is restricted. You have nowhere to go.

I was wondering: how can I build….how can I encourage them, get them to such kind of work through online..I mean, digital literacy… For me, digital literacy helps me a lot to find such kind of opportunity …so I am curious to build such kind of skill onto the youth of our community

AC (18:03): How does the average young person spend his or her time? Do they have access…is access to mobile phones a pretty common thing in the camp?

AU (18:16): It is…it was challenging when we reached here in Bangladesh… about seven years ago. But now, day by day, as the world is digitalizing, people are having mobile phones. Two weeks ago, I read an article about this kind of data….about 300,000 people are using mobile phones within the refugee camp over 1 million [people]….It's obvious to access a mobile phone, but sometimes internet can be an issue. It is accessible by going to different places to communicate.

AC (19:07): I see….but while you can access internet now and then, here and there… you have to find the right place and right time to access the internet… but your frustration, your feeling was that young people were using the mobile phone but …they were mostly spending their time on social media and for entertainment purposes…rather than using the device for any

constructive purpose, to find a way to advance their skills and knowledge base. Am I correct? Have I understood that correctly?

AU (19:41): Yes…

AC (19:43): So then…how did you go about building …. telling people, spreading the idea around, motivating people to get into the network with you

AU (19:55): Yeah…first of all, I started with my friends….for example, who really believe [in] me…my colleagues and friends helped me to spread such kind of idea….We were going through a network, for example, if I found someone …let us say I have 10 friends or 20 friends….and I connected them….they are also searching with other members of the community….this way we spread …explaining this idea ..it is cost-effective [for members], I mean …there is no need to pay….we conduct weekly workshops….every Friday morning. They can easily attend through their phones …they need not come physically to attend anything….so it is accessible for them.

AC (21:04): What kind of workshops do you offer …on Fridays?

AU (21: 10): Yeah…mostly on 3 broad topics. One is digital literacy, like I said. Second one is leadership, and the third one is educational resources. For example, how to access and how to navigate the educational resources from different platforms. This [is the] way we are guiding them.

AC (21:30): Can you tell us a little bit more about that? How do you mean how to navigate and access digital resources?

AU (21:42): I mean…. digital resources are like digital literacy….um…

AC (21:45): So…finding the way around a computer, for example, or I mean…learning how to log into a zoom call, or learning how to sign into an online course….is that …?

AU (22:00):…Yeah…got it… First of all, we select some topics on digital literacy, and sub-topics on these……we hire, and also me and my friend are experts on such kind of work. So we give them a topic to create a presentation …they research on it… how to access things and how to sign in and access resources from apps …On this we first prepare the theme, then we have the serial [sequence] …how we will present and on which day. So every Friday we conduct the workshop. I also contribute to conducting the workshop, guiding them on how to access things…first of all, there is preparation. Then on the day of the workshop, there is mostly practical applications, and through screen sharing, they show everything practically what they are doing …so they [audience] can find things easily and navigate…

AC (23:13): I see… um…How many members does the network have, Ata Ullah, at this time?

AU (23:20): At this time, in our group, we have about 160 members.

AC (23:27): 160? And how many people on average show up for these, sign in or log in to these online meetings?

AU (23:35): Mostly it depends on the situation. …We divided into parts…people join on different days, for example. There are many camps, so we said some will be joining on this Friday, and the others will be joining next Friday…. mostly, about 60 attend [regularly] out of 160

AC (24:04): So….what is the big…sort of…the big vision that you have for young people?

AU (24:11): What is the big….?

AC (24:12): ….Vision. The big picture… the big aspiration?

AU (24:17): I want to see… that my community, my people…the youth in my community will be the same as in other countries…so they can conquer the world. For example, they don't need to stay here ….they can be someone who can access everything, the rights of this planet. They can be the person, for example, in America, in other countries….[where] the youth is the power of the community. So why not we can be in this time and in this situation….I want to see my community be also like them.

AC (25:02): And when you talk about these very important things …so eloquently, so passionately… how do you find your peers responding? Are you able to motivate them? Do they respond in a positive enthusiastic way? Or….are they participating in events but not terribly motivated or enthusiastic about their own prospects?

AU (25:29): Its quite challenging…because sometimes people's minds are different. It's hard to convince everyone. But most of them are curious [about] this mission…. to contribute….Keeping in touch…[…..] ..is key to keeping track of them.

AC (26:00): Ata Ullah, that brings me to my question about leadership. …You are a leader [but] do you think of yourself as a leader? What do you think leadership is, in your view? And…perhaps…what are some of the difficulties you face as you try to lead?

AU (26:21): I don't consider [myself] to be a leader…. Because according to my perspective, leader is the one who does not order. For example, I can say that many leaders order…they do not lead. Leader should be the role model for the team. He has to act first, then the team will be his follower. Leadership does not mean taking the [high] position, ordering others. A true leader will work sincerely to represent the community, and to represent the true reality of what is happening. …

I know there can be several challenges. Also for me, in the camp, there are many kinds of challenges…but you have to make a strong decision in such kind of situation. If any challenges come, you have to coordinate on it. ….Sometimes challenges come, many challenges come. But you have to be ready to over such challenges.

AC (27:44): That's right…I don't mean to put you on the spot but can you think of an incident or an event where….you were faced with such a challenge and you had to problem solve your way through….set an example for your network in terms of problem solving, staying calm, and thinking through options?

AU (28:05): In my community, my network is not the only one…there are many initiatives**.** One day, a CBO-based organization contacted me and my team –saying 'you are doing something which is not relevant to….you are doing something in such a kind of way …..people are becoming addicted with mobile phones …you are saying to navigate everything from mobile phone…that is what they said, but we had to make them understand.

AC (29:07): How do you convince people that the mobile phone can be a useful resource and it can actually help the young people?

AU (29:18): In this situation, I have to give a real-world example. There can be many benefits….[it is not just] wasting time. I have to show them many kinds of resources and show them how it can help…how the mobile phone can be a useful tool for them

AC (29:50): What are some concrete things that you feel young people need, so that their chances of realistically accessing a better future… is improved?

AU (30:07): Many youth in our community need higher education first, and also opportunity to express their feeling…I know many Rohingya people…our youth [have] potential as change makers….without the opportunity, they are staying [held] back. Opportunities and resources are mostly what [they] need to grow in the future.

AC (30:41): Besides an education….I know there is simply not enough of a supply of it, and you are trying to navigate the situation by opening up the online….the mobile phone pathway…. To access the world outside, to take online classes as many as you can. ….and to learn something new. What else do you think young people need?

AU (31:09): As I said….Vocational training will be one of the best things….. also, employment opportunities is one of the many needs….also, a mood where they can feel free….Opportunity for them, I think, will be the most important thing.

AC (31:44): You talked about young people needing to express themselves…what did you mean?

AU (31:50): I mean…know many youth are willing to be the one who can make a change, to show their talent but not being able….in any sector- I know many youth can be a leader…they can be IT specialist, or civil engineer or doctor…. but they cannot do it here for lack of opportunity. That is what I am saying.

AC (32:31): Yeah…that's right. And…you do not have …..Rohingya refugees have not been given papers that will allow them to move around outside of the camp, is that right?

AU (32:44): Yes

AC (32:45): Assuming that such training does become available, the lack of mobility opportunities will become a constraint once again…

AU (32:55): Yes

AC (32:58): What is next for you Ata Ullah? What do you see happening in the next one or two years…the next five years….and I understand what you say when you told me It's hard to plan for the future …but what are the things that you feel you would like to have happen?

AU (33:21): I personally like to be a leader, and to study…. pursue higher education abroad. I am interested in international relations and political science…I want to major in…do my bachelors [degree] and masters [degree] in those areas….even do a PhD. So I have the plans for the next two or three years.

I am very optimistic that I can craft an opportunity through anywhere….get some help from the people around the world, and I am also trying.

Yesterday, a visitor came over…to tell us 'You refugee people…you have to plan. First plan, then everything will happen gradually.'

AC (34:29): Right, you need a plan. I couldn't agree more.

Ata Ullah, although a podcast only gives us so much time to talk, I want to say that we will be tracking your hard work. We will be cheering you on as you build you future and that of your community.

Please tell your co-workers, your co-founders, your colleagues, the young people in your community that we are inspired by the courage they are showing and the good work that they are doing…against all odds.

To our audience that is watching or listening, is there something that you want to say to them Ata Ullah? If you want to speak directly to them, what is it you might want to say?

AU (35:15): I want to say one thing…. We…the marginalized community, refugee people… are the changemakers…we are not victims, we have hunger for opportunity…if they get resources, they can do anything that they want.

So…I want to say: 'try to help them'- reassure them they can have access any kind of opportunity for higher education or anything else… so that they can reach their potential. The only thing they need is higher education and also resources for their improvement, not things which are lasting for a short time. …A long-term process, which is impactful for their whole life, not for 2,3,4 months. So, I will tell the audience- We need opportunity, not sympathy.

If there is any opportunity, then reach it to us…

AC (36:35): Ata Ullah, we will provide your contact information when the podcast becomes available…but does the Next Generation Rohingya Youth Network have a website?

AU (36:44): No…not yet. But we are trying for it…but we have other contact information.

AC (36:54): And you give me your permission to make your contact information accessible?

AU (37:01): Yeah…sure…it will be ok for me.

AC (37:05): I will do that.

Well, thank you so much everyone, for supporting the work of the Global Center for Youth Futures. Thank you, Ata Ullah, for sharing your time with us. I look forward to joining everyone for our second episode.

Until then. Bye-bye.