

Nathan Duong

Spring 2025 Keylor Travel Grant Recipient (Malaysia)

The Keylor Travel Grant allowed me to step beyond articles, policies, and academic literature to investigate the human impact of refugee illegality. In my thesis, “Rights vs. Rhetoric: Determinants in the Abuse of Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia,” I sought to research and contextualize widespread reports of protracted refugee detention and human rights abuses committed by Malaysian authorities. Prior to receiving the Keylor Travel Grant, I struggled to reach adequate levels of depth in online sources. I found in my literature review that Rohingya refugee detention across Southeast Asia remained vastly underexplored among academics, leaving me unable to heavily rely on scholarly work for information specific to the Rohingya-Malaysia case. Turning instead to government policy documents, court decisions, and news media, I collected essential background knowledge but was nevertheless unable to bring my research beneath the surface level. These sources primarily provided information into policy’s impact on Rohingya refugees -- however, policy is not the sole determinant of refugee affairs. My research lacked consideration of other dimensions of refugee affairs, including public perception and extrajudicial conduct. Traveling to Malaysia to conduct fieldwork interviews and site visits -- enabled by the Keylor Travel Grant -- put me face-to-face with these determinants and transformed my research.

The Keylor Travel Grant allowed me to speak with refugee community leaders, service providers, human rights advocates, a prominent legal aid attorney, and a resettlement staffer at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). I spoke at length with interviewees about how their lived experiences and refugee service work are shaped by

Malaysia's citizenship laws and immigration enforcement practices. These fieldwork interviews allowed me a deeper level of analysis, and rooted my findings more directly in the experiences of impacted individuals and refugee rights defenders.

These interviews also provided me with new findings as well. Across my interviews, I learned that Rohingya refugees face widespread extortion by low-level Malaysian immigration enforcement authorities. Enforcement authorities arrest Rohingya refugees regardless of their registration with the UNHCR, and rely upon non-affiliated third parties to contact and extort low-income Rohingya families in exchange for their relative's release. This widespread extortion had not surfaced across any of my previous desk research, though closely aligned with my analysis of the arbitrary nature of immigration enforcement under Malaysia's legal system.

I also spoke with Collin Andrew, a longstanding leader in refugee legal aid in Malaysia. Our discussion into his casework yielded critical insight into the Malaysian legal system -- his interview later became an integral piece of the legal analytical framework of my thesis. In a surprising turn of events, I learned that one of the court decisions that I had been examining -- a deportation case involving several Rohingya refugee minors held at the Belantik detention center -- had actually been one of his cases. Following this revelation, we spoke extensively into the creative and pragmatic legal methodology he used to secure wins in refugee rights cases under a legal system which criminalizes refugeehood. I learned how, despite Malaysia's non-ratification of the major international conventions regulating refugeehood and statelessness, Collin Andrew invoked sections of other international conventions in tandem with Malaysian law to successfully argue refugees' cases. Here, the Keylor Travel Grant allowed me to take my thesis research beyond court documents to gain critical legal insight from the attorney behind the case.

This fieldwork research trip provided me with significant personal growth as well. As a result of these travels, I became more certain of my abilities as a researcher and professional. I had initially been very anxious at the prospect of arranging a solo research trip in a country -- and continent -- where I had never been before. I was nervous at my ability to gather useful findings from interviews, as well as at my ability to navigate interview locations off of the beaten path in a foreign country alone safely. Taking this leap of faith proved to myself that I am capable of gathering fascinating research insights, safely navigating unfamiliar situations, and conducting myself with professionalism to communicate effectively across cultural differences. This research trip also reaffirmed my long-term interest in a career in refugee affairs and international human rights law. Speaking with legal professionals who have successfully invoked international law to secure refugee protections in difficult environments inspired me to pursue a career in international law. I also learned that I have a passion for working directly with impacted individuals in the field, prompting me to explore paths in human rights investigative work. The Keylor Travel Grant was an essential part of both my thesis research and my personal growth. I am immensely grateful to have had the opportunity to conduct this fieldwork research, and firmly believe that the growth I experienced and lessons I learned throughout this trip will guide me as a human rights professional for years to come.