Please, can somebody break this glass bottle for me?

Have you ever been in a bottle
A colourless bottle
With a tightly closed top
Because you are not allowed to leave?

You can see the flowers and trees
But can't smell the roses
You are not allowed
You can see the bees and insects
But can't feel them on your skin
They are not allowed to sit on you

Extract from a poem by Loraine Masiya Mponela

Further extracts from this poem can be found on pages 274 and 305.

Samuel, talking about why he needed asylum, and what happened when he was refused asylum and sent back home:

I remember how my father was attacked in his shop by some of his enemies. They set our house on fire and shot my father. My mother and sister were away at the time in my aunt's house. I managed to escape from the killers of my father …. We escaped to the town where my mother grew up … [but] they came to our house, raped my mother and sister, asked me about my father, and when they confirmed my father's identity, they shot my mother and sister. I was also shot but I managed to escape and reached a local church. The church pastor helped me leave the country and come to the UK.

My mental health problems started when I was deported back to my country [from the UK]. I was arrested after arriving [back home]. [I] was identified as the son of the man who was killed as he had converted, and as the son who had managed to escape. I was accordingly raped and tortured, stabbed and beaten in prison. I was in prison for a whole year. After coming out of prison, I was seeing things, hearing voices, talking to myself. I also suffered loss of memory and had to struggle to remember things.

[Back in the UK again] my mental health problems got worse when I was in immigration detention …. I was very suspicious, very watchful of my environment and I wanted to kill myself. I thought myself to be a failure and did not feel that there was any future for me, or [that] I could ever lead a normal life.

(There is more from Samuel on page 115 and in Chapter 9.)

1 Why do people seek asylum? The global context

Rukyya Hassan

We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings. We left our relatives in the Polish ghettos and our best friends have been killed in concentration camps, and that means the rupture of our private lives … Once we were somebodies about whom people cared, we were loved by friends, and even known by landlords as paying our rent regularly. Once we could buy our food and ride in the subway without being told we were undesirable.

Hannah Arendt, *We Refugees*, 1943

Introduction

I am no stranger to harrowing tales. Indeed, working in the field of mental health, they are something of an occupational hazard. Time and experience do not make you immune to such stories; yet, necessarily, you become able to listen without being too shocked, and, remarkably, you seem to be able to lay aside most of what you have heard, without carrying it around for days afterwards. Some things can remain, however – snatches of conversations, flashes of imagery, or sudden rushes of emotion – long after the patient has left your clinic.

One such harrowing tale was that of a young man, a destitute asylum seeker I saw in clinic one day. I remember glancing quickly through the healthcare notes beforehand – *single male, failed appeal, awaiting deportation*, *nightmares and flashbacks worse, increased medication, can't cope* – and wondering what I could possibly do for him. When we met, he described how he had been repeatedly detained and tortured because he was from a persecuted ethnic group; how when the militia arrived with tanks, they shot indiscriminately and people dropped all around him. Their cattle had fled, wounded, caught up in a conflict beyond their understanding, screaming, squealing, wailing – he could hear those sounds at night, every time he closed his eyes.

It occurred to me that I had never even thought about the animals that live with some farmers: their livelihood, but also part of the family; depended upon, but also cherished in their own right. I felt overwhelmed, not just by his account but also by a sense of futility: that there was nothing that could make me truly understand what he had experienced; that our lives were so very different; that everything about him seemed entirely foreign – the country I did not know anything about, the language whose unfamiliar sounds grated against my ear. And, after all, there was nothing I could do anyway. But as he spoke, the notes I had glanced at briefly suddenly came together with the story of the man in front of me, with his shaking

hands and the haunted eyes which could not quite meet my gaze, a story overlaid with the sounds of gunfire and wounded cattle on a frenzied rampage. I discovered that he was not in fact a single male: he had a wife and children, left behind when he fled his country for his life. He did not know if they were alive or dead and had not been able to contact them. Nobody had asked him about them.

This gaunt, haggard man sitting before me in despair, pleading for the nightmares to stop, had not always been like that. His extraordinary story was full of ordinariness too. There had been people who loved him, enjoyed his company, and sought his eye in a joke; a child who clung to his leg when he returned home; animals that recognised his voice when he entered their pen. All of this had been erased in every interaction he had had with healthcare services. He was merely an asylum seeker with PTSD waiting to be deported: one of many, perhaps deserving of pity, but not of interest. Erasing people's stories means that we are left only with the unsurmountable barrier of difference, that there is no rich tapestry of narrative in how we relate to other people; even beyond that, it means we are destined never to understand, or even to begin to understand, what people have experienced.

This chapter takes an overview of the context within which people may have arrived in the United Kingdom seeking asylum, and what they may have experienced in the course of their journey. Mental health and well-being are, of course, always embedded within a wider social, cultural, and political context. When this context is familiar, or we can easily relate to it, we rarely consider it specifically and it may seem natural to focus solely on an individual. But what happens when the knowledge we have is incomplete or no longer applies, when we are faced with something well outside most of our experience? Understanding the context in which people may seek asylum helps us better understand the person in front of us and allows us to situate individual stories in a wider, more meaningful whole.

Leaving home and seeking asylum

There was a war in my country, and it lasted for decades. It had started even before I was born, and it 'ended' only a few months before I came to the UK. Any war is never clean: no matter how you try to construe it. There were crimes against humanity committed by the government during that war.

I had a brother who worked as an informant for the intelligence department. He had access to very sensitive government information, including its military operations. This led to his assassination by the military. And then there was a threat to my safety as well because of the association I had with my brother.

The government has a well-knit system; they store data of people that they have an adverse interest in, and since the risk is by the state, moving to an internal safe area isn't an option. Nowhere is safe and there is no place to go to seek safety in my country. So, the risk I am facing is not a generalised risk if I had to return; I am an individually targeted person and this means even any change in the general situation in the country would not make a difference.

I have learned that people flee their country when their lives are in grave danger, it's an instinctive reaction. All living creatures do it – it is natural. Safety and security is a fundamental necessity for any living creature, not just for humans. People are fleeing their country of origins when they are facing risk, such as political persecution, war, torture, sexual violence and the list goes on and on.

Joseph

Ruptured lives: Why do people leave their homes and become refugees?

The desire for home is part of being human. We long for a place of our own, belonging, and rootedness. Home is much more than a mere plot of land or a house; it is the web of relationships that provides us with stability and identity, through people and other living creatures, the environment, and inanimate objects. Leaving your country as well as your home means leaving the familiarity of everything you know: your house, family, community and social networks, occupation and social roles, possessions, land passed through generations, graves of loved ones, memories that are inextricably woven through the landscape, your sense of belonging, and perhaps your very identity.

Most people, then, do not readily leave without a compelling reason. Many have no choice. It is rarely a quick decision, or the first option, even for those who leave voluntarily to seek a better life elsewhere. For some, it will require more courage than anything else they have done in their lives.

For many, too, leaving home is involuntary. For those who leave and become refugees, their home has, by definition, become a place of fear and danger. There are many possible reasons for this, often with different causes acting simultaneously (Box 1.1).

Box 1.1 Why people are forced to leave their homes

The reasons can be broadly summarised as follows:

- Conflict – war and organised violence
- Persecution or repression of individuals
- Instability in 'fragile states'
- 'Modern slavery' and human trafficking
- Climate change

This list is not exhaustive, and the categories are not mutually exclusive. Difficulties often converge and act cumulatively. For example, there may be a long-standing regional conflict in a fragile state where a minority ethnic group has been persecuted. A political activist is targeted and flees following imprisonment and torture. They are subsequently trafficked through several countries.

Conflict and war cause significant displacement. In 2020, around half of all refugees worldwide were from four states in conflict: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar. Among refugees who reach the United Kingdom, the majority are from areas of conflict. People may also flee other forms of violence, such as that of organised criminal groups.

Persecution refers to being targeted as an individual due to a specific characteristic, or as a member of a particular group. The internationally accepted definition of a refugee makes reference to five possible grounds for persecution: race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion (UN General Assembly, 1951 p. 137). These grounds are also recognised as covering persecution on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity and gender-based human rights abuses, such as female genital mutilation, domestic violence and forced marriage, and rape of women in the context of war and conflict. Such examples also illustrate that persecution may happen where the state is not itself the perpetrator, although some definitions have in the past required this. This has now been expanded to recognise people becoming refugees both when persecution is being perpetrated by the state and when there is a failure of the state to provide protection against persecution by others.

There is no universally accepted definition of persecution as such, although there is agreement that it includes threats to life or freedom and serious violations of human rights, such as torture (see Box 1.2). Other types of harm may also amount to persecution, for example, the cumulative effect of lesser harms, such as some forms of discrimination (UNHCR, 1992).

Box 1.2 Torture

Definitions:

Torture is both a broad concept and a specific form of deliberate mistreatment that fulfils particular criteria under international law.

Legal definitions rely on the meeting of a number of criteria, including those related to the capacity in which the person inflicting the suffering is acting.

Amnesty International uses the following definition:

> *Torture occurs when a person in an official capacity inflicts severe mental or physical pain or suffering on another person for a specific purpose. This can be, for example, to extract information or a confession for a crime, or more generally to spread fear in society.* (Amnesty International, 2021)

The United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) defines torture more specifically as:

> *Any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions*. (UN General Assembly, 1984 p. 85)

Even if these criteria are not all met, such as due to unclear intent, survivors may still have been subject to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Types of torture

- Physical – such as beating and stabbing, electric shocks and burning, positional trauma (e.g., suspension), asphyxiation
- Sexual – such as rape, instrumentation, and other forms of sexual assault
- Psychological – such as sleep deprivation, sensory deprivation, prolonged isolation, humiliation, threats, and use of psychological techniques to break down the individual
- Environmental – such as exposure to extremes of temperature, contaminated food, and water

In practice, these are artificial distinctions. For example, sexual torture can have both physical and psychological aspects.

Although prohibited by international law, torture is practised in the majority of countries worldwide, including those that have ratified the UN Convention against Torture. In 2019, the UK government refused to hold an independent inquiry into its complicity in torture and rendition, despite the United Nations Committee against Torture recommendations that it do so (UN Committee against Torture, 2019).

Fragile states have a 'combination of exposure to risk, and insufficient coping capacity of the state, system, and/or communities to manage, absorb, or mitigate those risks', with consequent 'negative outcomes including violence, the breakdown of institutions, displacement, humanitarian crises or other emergencies' (OECD, 2016). Citizens of relatively stable countries often overlook or take for granted the governing capacity and institutions of the state, such as the police, courts, and regulatory bodies. In fragile states, the core institutions struggle and cannot provide the public services and civic order expected elsewhere. Parts of the territory may be outside state control, perhaps with competing militarised power bases. Potential impacts of this on the population can be profound. Law and order readily break down, and relatively minor incidents may trigger outbreaks of mass violence or conflict.

There is some difference of opinion regarding how exactly fragility is conceptualised and measured, with criticism of the concept itself as simplistic and superficial (Nay, 2013). Nonetheless, it is helpful to consider the types of indicators involved, which are often found in combination and exist on a spectrum – political, societal, economic, and environmental – contributing to overall instability. The most unstable places are often also areas of conflict, but not invariably so. Increases in fragility worldwide are paralleled by increases in forced displacement. Whilst a large proportion of internally displaced persons and refugees originate from extremely fragile areas such as Syria, Afghanistan, and South Sudan, it is worth remembering that fragile states also host large numbers of refugees from neighbouring countries. In 2016, for example, six of the top ten countries hosting refugees were themselves considered fragile states (Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Iran, Kenya, Pakistan, and Uganda) (OECD, 2018).

Modern slavery and human trafficking: 'Modern slavery' includes slavery, servitude, forced and compulsory labour, and human trafficking, all of which may result in people being moved within countries and across international borders, and being unable to return, or in fear of returning, to their home. Human trafficking refers to the acquisition and transfer of people through the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, deception or abuse of power or a position of vulnerability, for the purpose of exploitation (UN General Assembly, 2000).

Human trafficking is a lucrative international industry that generates financial or other benefits for traffickers through the commodification of people and often involves organised criminal groups. People may have been deceived through promises of employment or kidnapped expressly for the purpose of exploitation. It differs from migrant smuggling, which usually involves some form of payment to a smuggler to assist with travel through an irregular channel, and the ending of the relationship following this transaction. Some people may experience both, and both perpetrators and migration routes may be the same. Although smuggling may appear to be a voluntary interaction, migrants' vulnerability and the significant disparity in power mean that it too may involve abuse and exploitation and lead to the endangering of life and safety for many.

In the United Kingdom, it is estimated that there have long been at least tens of thousands of victims of modern slavery, including trafficking. The extent of the problem over many years led to the Modern Slavery Act 2015. Subsequently, the number of cases referred to UK authorities as potential victims of slavery increased. In 2019, there were 10,627 people referred, of which 4,550 were children. Albanians and Vietnamese were the most common non-UK nationalities referred (Home Office, 2020a).

Climate change: Unfortunately, some of the people worst affected by climate change are already the poorest and most disenfranchised, with the least developed countries often

being the most vulnerable to its effects. Millions have already fled their homes in anticipation of, or in response to, natural disasters or more insidious changes, often after years of attempting to mitigate or adapt to them. As climate change progresses, so too will its impact, with some predictions that it is anticipated to become the largest driver of involuntary displacement worldwide. The majority of this displacement occurs internally within countries, but climate change effects are also inextricably linked with other factors that lead to people becoming refugees. Food and water insecurity readily leads to resource-based conflicts, and there is often a complex interplay between conflict, persecution, poverty, and climate. For example, by 2019, changes in rainfall in Somalia had destroyed crop and livestock productivity and this, alongside violence from armed groups, led many to flee to neighbouring Ethiopia.

Some statistics

According to UNHCR figures (UNHCR, 2020), at the end of 2019, about 79.5 million people worldwide had been involuntarily displaced from their homes as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or serious disturbances of public order. Of these, around 40% (a disproportionate amount) were children. Approximately 1% of the world's population (1 in 97 people) had been forcibly displaced, compared to 1 in 159 in 2010, and 1 in 174 in 2005.

Of the 79.5 million forcibly displaced, 33.8 million also left their country, whilst the remaining 45.7 million were internally displaced within the borders of their own country (Figure 1.1). Events in only a small number of countries can lead to significant changes in migration trends worldwide. For example, in 2018, approximately two-thirds of all refugees came from Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, and Somalia, whilst 2019 saw the situation in Venezuela deteriorate to the extent that numbers of those displaced abroad exceeded those for many other longer-standing conflicts.

It is estimated that 30–34 million (38–43 per cent) of the 79.5 million forcibly displaced persons were children below 18 years of age. In 2019, unaccompanied and separated children lodged around 25,000 new asylum applications, and by the end of 2019 at least 153,300 unaccompanied and separated children were reported among the refugee population, though these are considered to be significant underestimates due to the limited number of countries reporting data.

Journeys: The missing link

I fled my country due to persecution from the government because of my political beliefs.

One fateful day after a non-violent protest, I was arrested and severely tortured and detained by the forces of law and order. I managed to sneak myself out of the police station that same day. This made my situation worse because I was now facing double crimes and was seriously wanted. I resorted to living in awful hideouts for a couple of years before fleeing to the UK. Living in hopelessness and despair has been the most distressful moment in my entire life.

The journey from my country to the UK was with an agent who went ahead and arranged it with the airport officials (I do not know how), and I was smuggled through the airport and into the plane without passing through the necessary checkpoints. I was constantly nervous throughout my journey. Despite arriving in the UK safe, I was frightened each time I saw a police officer. This feeling only left me the moment I was granted asylum.

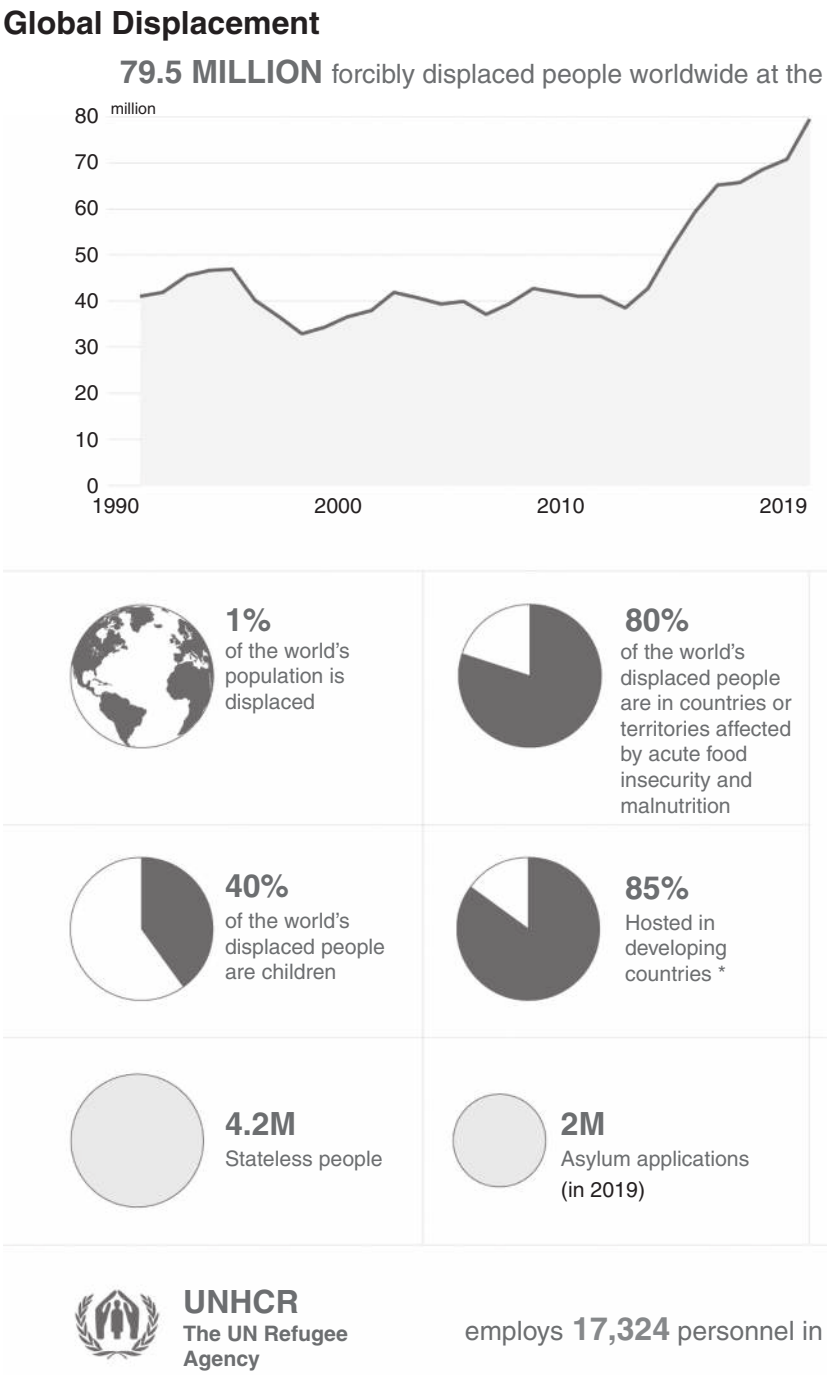

Figure 1.1 UNHCR global refugee statistics 1990–2019.
More information available from www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html

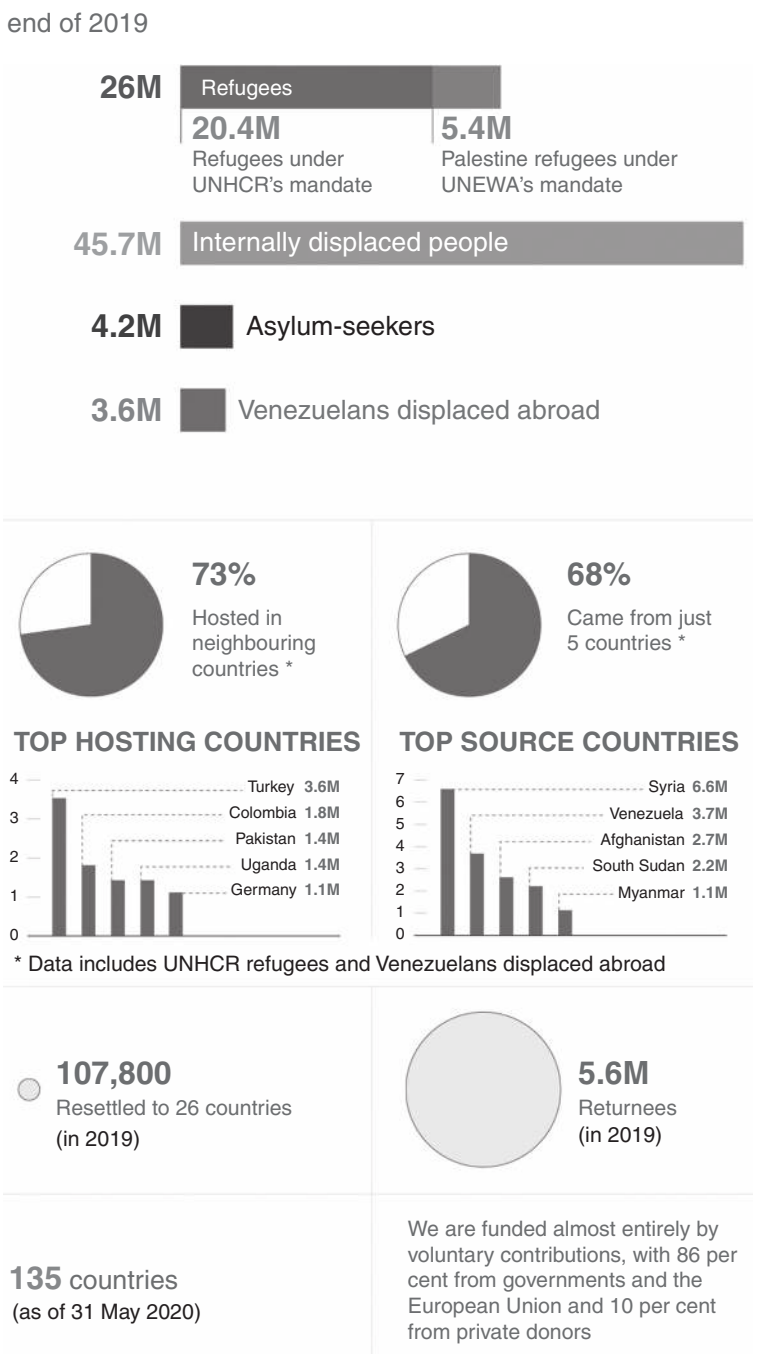

Figure 1.1 Continued