

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

*When You Find Yourself Working with
Asylum Seekers and Refugees*

What do we expect?

Most of us expect to decide what kind of life we want to live. It might not be easy but we can choose what to study and where to live and whether to have a baby and how to work towards the kind of livelihood and lifestyle that suits us. We develop our own sense of identity and grow connections with friends and community networks. We make a home our own, and take care of our families, raise our children as we see best. We might detour on the way and we all make mistakes, but these are the choices we make.

Some people face day-to-day realities that remove all those choices: they face unreasonable and unjustifiable constraints, hostility and discrimination, humiliation, aggression and violence; they are impoverished and disempowered. Many ordinary people suffer abuse by powerful players in social or political systems where other people or the state or the legal system should be protecting everyone, but they fail to do so. Although many people stand up against such abuse, when abuse of a few becomes acceptable to the community, and those who have the power to protect society fail to do so, your only choice is to keep yourself and your loved ones safe. You change how you dress and act, change where you shop, change job. When that isn't enough, you have to look for a place where you and yours will be all right:

A wife leaves the house and moves ten miles away to a women's refuge.

A young man migrates south to London.

A father kisses his wife and children goodbye and gives the driver \$500 to take them over the border.

To escape the harm done by inequality and unbridled discrimination, people like us leave behind their livelihoods and careers, and walk away from most of their family and all of their friends, and most of what they have owned and worked for. They leave the places where they learned everything they know, where they speak the language, understand 'the System', have contacts. These people end

up in unfamiliar places, not knowing what their future will be, knowing their family is scattered across continents, and that they must start from scratch.

Why this book and who is it for?

Few of us escaped the heart-breaking image of a dead toddler, Alan Kurdi, washed up on a Mediterranean beach on 2 September 2015. For thousands of people across the UK, the immediate impact of meeting a refugee or refugee family for the first time has become a fairly regular, very personal experience. The family that has just walked through your office door is an ordinary family who couldn't carry on living where they lived. Now they are coping with the consequences of everything they have been through. They have to rebuild their lives in an unfamiliar society. Perhaps they will cope fine without your help, but they will probably cope better and rebuild a decent life faster with an extra hand.

In this chapter I am using 'refugees' to mean people who have the experience of coming to the UK to seek safety. In your work, and in later chapters in this book, different terms and definitions are sometimes needed, including those defined in immigration law and others, and I'll clarify those as we get to them.

You might specialise in health, mental health, education, English, youth work, social work, advice, housing, employment. Your field might be sports, arts, food, or engagement, campaigning and fundraising. You might already have extensive experience supporting vulnerable people, or focussing on women, or children with learning disabilities, or older people, for example. This book is for people who work in community, faith, voluntary or statutory organisations. It is also for activists, freelancers, trainers, trustees and volunteers. If you are part of any kind of group or organisation, or just have a new family move in next door and find yourself helping refugees, it is for you. Whatever your role, in most parts of urban Britain today, if you work 'hands on' and face to face in primary, community or local services of any kind, you will find yourself working with refugees.

If you are a 'hands-on' practitioner or work closely with practitioners, and you find yourself working with refugees, then this book is for you.

Whether planned or not, you will find that with confidence and willingness to adapt, you already have most of the skills and experience you need. You will need a certain amount of new knowledge about refugee issues, entitlements and support, and ideas for adapting your existing activities to see your work through to your satisfaction. Your time and resources are no doubt already stretched, but hopefully you have team and management support and your other service users are sympathetic. But with or without team backup, the **first intention** behind

this book is to broaden awareness and provide information, sources of expertise and ideas to help you respond effectively to the person in front of you.

Why this book now – has something changed?

Why this book now? Refugees have always come to Britain. Have the ‘flood-gates’ opened? Is this book necessary because our systems can no longer cope? In fact, no.

Visibility

With the coverage in the press, it appears that huge numbers of refugees are arriving in Britain, but this is simply not the case. Refugees have always come to the UK, and the asylum system is tightly controlled by the Home Office. Although there are short-term peaks and troughs in ‘flow’, the annual number of claims for asylum in the UK is little different now to the year 2000 as persecution and war persist around the globe. The number of people being given ‘refugee status’ has actually dropped (although the definition of ‘refugee’ needs proper attention and is discussed in Chapter 3).

What has changed is the *political visibility* of refugee flows. Our media revels in dramatic footage of desperate people (almost all of whom are still in other countries), and the news and electoral agenda in Britain swirl around attitudes to foreigners and migration of all sorts as migrant flows and net migration rise and fall. Since the global credit crash and before, ‘austerity’ policies and changing UK demographics have stretched services and housing in the UK. The public has become sharply aware of who gets what, and refugees are part of that discussion.

Visibility is a double-edged sword. Syrians have been in the news for several years and are met by both compassion and panic. People ring charities because they really want to do something; they offer Syrians a sincere welcome, food, clothing, a bed, money, kindness. But how many British residents are aware that similar numbers of desperate Sudanese are asking for asylum, and how many British people have even heard of Eritrea? As well as the swelling of sympathy, there is the reaction: a news commentator compared them to cockroaches; would-be politicians scream that we are at breaking point.

Apart from numbers arriving to seek asylum now, we don’t really know how many refugees are in Britain. History shows that when a country becomes safe again, large numbers of people leave their place of refuge and return home to look for their lost sister, care for their mother, reclaim their land, rebuild their homes. The Home Office has no system for recording how many people who have sought refuge leave of their own will.

You might want to know how many refugees live in your area and where they are from. Such facts would help services prepare and plan. But those numbers don’t exist either. We know the larger cities have substantial refugee

populations, especially in more deprived areas where there is cheaper housing and there are larger migrant populations already. More asylum seekers are housed in the cheaper accommodation of the North West than anywhere else in Britain. Many young unaccompanied asylum seekers are in the care of the local authorities that cover the 'ports of entry' such as Heathrow (Hillingdon), Dover (Kent) and in Croydon, where the Home Office handles new claims. But in terms of readying yourself or your organisation, your awareness is what lets you see what isn't easily visible to others.

So this book is not written in reaction to a sudden increase in refugee numbers. Sadly, there will always be another Syria, or Sri Lanka, Srebrenica, Rwanda, Third Reich, Armenia, Tudor Reformation. Where will people flee from in the next ten years (North Korea? Iran?), and will we notice?

Organisations

Refugees have been among our service users for years. Practitioners have been supporting them as part of their daily work, addressing people's vulnerability, complex needs, inclusion and 'reaching the hard to reach'. But as individuals and British society have become more alert to refugees, refugees have appeared on the agenda of organisations that deliver services and support as a *distinctive category* of service user. 'Refugee support' has become a visible, legitimate and urgent concern for practitioners and finance directors alike. It is increasingly written into job descriptions, workplans and budgets.

There are two sides to any organisation. There is the textbook idea that organisations are structured and planned arrangements of people playing different roles, working together to achieve objectives that move towards an agreed goal. And there is the daily lived experience of individual staff and members with personal motivations and dynamic relationships with colleagues. They work within more or less helpful rules and targets, and have to justify their actions to others in the organisation, who in turn report to funders, commissioners and politicians outside the organisation who have different priorities. Senior staff, funders, commissioners and politicians have the power to cut off the resources staff need, in particular their salaries. Outsiders have the power to cut off the resources the organisation needs to exist. There never are enough resources, especially time.

Organisations that serve and support real people are always having to change and react to the complex, unpredictable and even chaotic lives of the people they serve. Unpredictable needs can disrupt organisational activities and processes in ways external judges might not understand. In this context, people within organisations often dread uncertainty and disruption because these create extra demands and could threaten their future.

Refugees' lives often introduce exactly that uncertainty and disruption to the organisations they approach. The people themselves may move through a series of crises, which are unpredictable and hard to manage resources around.

Refugees may be vulnerable on many fronts, and have interwoven needs all happening at the same time – some of which will probably be new to you and your colleagues. They often have few means to draw on as they work towards real-life goals: they don't have a car, or a bank account, or broadband. They aren't familiar with NHS and mental health service workings, nor the school system, local authority housing, tax, benefits, employment law, zebra crossings or other British institutions, systems, culture and manners. They don't have contacts and can be isolated (do *not* assume they have a supportive 'refugee community' to turn to). Some might have postgraduate degrees, but others might not be literate even in their own language. Like any migrant, they may not speak or understand or read and write English.

When you find yourself working with refugees, you will almost always find you are working beyond your job description: adapting plans, relationships, rules, priorities. You and your organisation find yourselves having to invest time and effort to learn new things, which is costly and might only help one person or family. There isn't even a guaranteed return on that investment, because the refugee may be rehoused, deported or may just move tomorrow. Later, when someone new arrives, she or he will be completely different and need different things. In the midst of these unfamiliar demands, you and your colleagues at all levels also have to look after yourselves and protect the organisation.

The **second intention** of this book is *to give practical assistance to your work with refugees, within the real-life world of the organisation.*

Nowhere else to turn

So refugees are more visible, and organisations are now paying them direct attention. The other thing that has changed is specialist support relating to refugees that you might have drawn on in the past. There never was enough, and shifting resources and ideologies in the past decade mean a lot of what was there has gone. Few local statutory or voluntary sectors have refugee services. There is less expertise available and a fraction of the communication links there were in the recent past.

As a consequence, refugees have fewer places they can turn to for help or that you can refer them to, and as a 'client-facing' practitioner there are not many places you can turn for advice/guidance or backup.

Take note, though: even when there were specialist services, there was a tendency across the social and community sector to refer a refugee away to 'a refugee organisation' or 'a refugee community group' because...

'We don't do refugees.'

This often appears to have been because practitioners assumed refugees are somehow different to 'us' – *other* people who needed *other* services, not the people *we* are responsible for helping. Or perhaps this tendency came from

the sense that ordinary people like us cannot help them, we can't cope, we don't know enough, only 'refugee specialists' can help. This is not so. When a refugee has toothache, she or he needs to go to a dentist, not to a refugee organisation. When a woman refugee is isolated, she wants to meet other people, perhaps other women – it doesn't really matter if they are refugees or not, and it might be better if they aren't (see Box 1.1).

Box 1.1 'We don't do refugees'

A woman approached us who had a disabled child. She had financial and practical support in place but was lonely and finding it hard to stay positive. We found there was an organisation near where she lived that existed to bring together families and carers with disabled children to break down isolation and create opportunities to socialise and make friends. I was delighted; she was an isolated mother of a disabled child – exactly who they had set up to support.

We rang them and asked for details so she could join their activities. Their reply was: 'We don't do refugees.' All they heard was 'refugee' and they rejected her.

Ironically perhaps, the fact there are so few refugee specialist services left means this 'referring away' can't really happen any more, which might not always be a bad thing. The current situation is that organisations with a specialism in one field – be it children, emotional wellbeing or sport – are finding they must adapt and deepen that specialism to include refugees. This is not new, nor is it only refugees who are affected. Specialists in one field are always adding new expertise to existing expertise. Primary schools built expertise to integrate children with special needs. Disability organisations developed their services to support carers. Women's groups are debating responses to transgender equality.

In other words, there is a new role for hands-on staff who find themselves working with refugees now. Your role is no longer to find out who to refer to. But you don't need to learn a whole new specialism either. You just have to expand the specialist knowledge and experience you already have so you can relate it to refugees. The task will connect your expertise with a broad range of issues and other specialist fields. There is advice and guidance out there to back you up, but the services that produce and provide such resources can't take on the role of giving direct support to your participant, member or client.

So the **third intention** behind this book is *to help you deal directly with what you might previously have been able to refer onwards*. You need to expand your role and expertise, because there is no one else to do the job.

You and integration – What is 'refugee'?

Finally, when you find yourself working with refugees, you also find yourself a potential agent for integration and social change.

When you ring a women's centre and ask them to help you support a refugee ('No, thank you, I don't want you to Google a refugee women's group for me; the person I am supporting would like to come to *your* centre'), you change how they see their role towards refugees too.

When you challenge a doctor's receptionist ('Yes, they are entitled to register with a GP; no, they don't need to have proof of address; yes, I am sure about that. Would you like a copy of the NHS leaflet that explains it?'), you are improving access for other refugees (and other people) at the same time.

When you look someone in the eyes and treat them as an equal, normal human being, you create a slightly healthier, stronger society.

So my **final intention** through this book is *to do my bit so we all make this society a more meaningful place of refuge for people who have lost so much* (Box 1.2).

Box 1.2 Objectives

- To broaden awareness and to provide information, sources of expertise and ideas to help you respond effectively to the person in front of you.
 - To give practical assistance to your work with refugees, within the real-life world of the organisation.
 - To help you deal directly with what you might previously have been able to refer onwards.
 - To make this society a more meaningful place of refuge for people who have lost so much.
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Ordinary, unique, active

Throughout the book I am going to keep coming back to three central concepts about people who are refugees:

Refugees are ordinary.

Each refugee is unique.

Refugees are active agents of their own futures.

Refugees are ordinary

People are people. They worry about their mother, get cross with their kids, don't mind working but don't want to have to work all the time, like a nice meal, enjoy a good film, have happy and sad memories from childhood, have ideas for the future.

People who have had to escape persecution are still only people, only human, ordinary. They still worry about their mother. Through no fault of their

own, they have been through extraordinary and often traumatic circumstances, and that might make them extraordinary to some extent. However, they are only extraordinary in the way any of us would become a bit extraordinary if we lived through extraordinary times and experiences. No miracles, no exceptional toughness or talent for survival. Not people who are 'better than us at handling death' or who are more used to oppression and loss and therefore don't feel it as much as we would.

What does she do in those circumstances? What any of us would do, she depresses. It's an ordinary response, no one should be surprised about it.
(Paraphrase from health visitor)

They are ordinary: persecution is not. To say refugees are ordinary is not to say it is ordinary to be a refugee. It is not ordinary to be subjected to discrimination, persecution, state-sponsored or state-tolerated aggression, abuse, injustice and violence. That is an entirely different matter. That is never ordinary. It must never become ordinary.

It is easy for you to feel a bit overwhelmed. You feel that if you faced what they have gone through, you would go under: I am just an ordinary person – how could any ordinary person cope with what he has been through? Mostly, like any ordinary person, this man you are talking to has just somehow managed to keep going despite everything. Maybe in similar circumstances I would just about manage to keep going, just about survive – maybe I would become a little extraordinary too? I hope I never find out.

If refugees are ordinary, what are they not?

Ordinary but not hopeless. People might have had experiences that crushed them. You will meet some people who are in the darkest places, but they do not stay there for ever. The seasons come and go, children learn to walk, new friends share delicious food. The past may have been appalling, the present may be tough, and there may be crises, flashbacks and delayed reactions for the rest of their days, but most of the time things are better than they were, and the future should be better than this.

Ordinary and not without standards. Refugees are trying to rebuild their lives and restore their dignity and a sense of pride and positive identity. They have standards and mostly they would like to raise those standards. Charities I have worked for have received 'donated' bin liners of old clothes that donors were probably sorting out to throw away, including stretched bikinis, worn-out and stained trousers, handbags with broken handles. Whether desperate or not, no one wants to be treated as if they are worthless. That is demeaning when really support should be enabling.

Ordinary and not in our debt. No person deserves to be a refugee, no person asks to be a refugee, so where a refugee is given help, it is a necessity, it is about decency – it isn't a loan. It does not mean they are in our debt.

There are lists of ‘what refugees have done for us’ that keenly proclaim how much more refugees put more into politics, society and the economy than they cost the country in the first few years. But this shouldn’t be necessary. What is more, they don’t have to earn the right to refuge – it is an essential element of a civilised country that it provides refuge to those who need it; as it is ‘in our gift’, so we give it. Refugees shouldn’t even have to feel grateful. ‘Grateful’ implies supporters are doing something beyond the call of duty and deserve special recognition. It is fair that any person appreciates the effort another goes to for them, but ‘grateful’ implies that it would be acceptable not to help them.¹ However, as anyone who has worked with refugees will tell you, the gratitude and reciprocal generosity you sometimes receive can almost be embarrassing.

Ordinary and not angels. In the British population there are British people who are angelically kind and honest, people who are somewhere in the middle (most of us) and people who are genuinely hard to like. So it is with refugees. I am not talking about the crooks who cynically attempt to cheat the asylum system. I just mean average ordinary people, who have escaped danger to find safety, and happen to be truly lovely or actually not very nice. You might be bowled over by the warmth and sincerity of one refugee, only to find the next refugee grumpy, dismissive or a bit manipulative. You might be stunned by how frank and open one person is, while someone else is giving you highly selective information, dressing up the picture they present to you. You may be caught out by one person’s liberalism in contrast to the lack of sympathy and sexism shown by another. Generally unpleasant behaviour might be a personal trait, but bear in mind that most of us ordinary people don’t behave very well when we are miserable, short on resources, frustrated by endless bureaucracy and constantly anxious.

Ordinary and equal. Refugee does not mean more important or less important. It doesn’t mean more entitled or less entitled. It doesn’t mean better or worse. Ordinary means equal. People have a right to be treated as equals, with dignity and respect, neither better nor worse than anyone else, regardless of their sex, race and country of origin, religion, sexual identity, age, disability, marital status, whether pregnant or transgender. When we base our work and interactions on everyone being equal and with a right to equal treatment, we have a sound footing to go forwards on.

Ordinary and not ‘other people’. The problem of people seeing refugees as ‘other’ people, ‘them’ and somehow different to ‘us’ will no doubt float up in your work, and it surfaces several times in this book.

1 Not always grateful. There is a wonderful article by Dina Nayeri called ‘The Ungrateful Refugee’ (*Guardian*, 4 April 2017), www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/04/dina-nayeri-ungrateful-refugee.

Each refugee is unique

Each person who has come here for refuge is unique. (Just as every ordinary person is unique.)

Each person's experiences are unique.

Each person's response to their experiences is unique.

Therefore, their response to their current situation (and their relationship to you) is unique. One person might cry all day, another might stand for election.

There is a huge range of variables (and unique combinations) in each refugee's life: their sex, age, nationality, education, current family situation and so forth. What they went through individually (and with their family) will be completely different to the person from the same town who stands next to them. Their journey through Britain's asylum system will be different to their sister's (Chapter 2).

You will find patterns, though – probabilities and likelihoods. Their entitlements and access to support are fixed by a combination of their asylum or refugee status and other cross-cutting legislation around health and social care, equality, human rights, children's rights and more (Chapter 3). Refugee populations face multiple disadvantages linked with equality characteristics, such as mental health disabilities that make individuals vulnerable to discrimination and compound poverty and disempowerment over time (Chapter 4). Many people will struggle with access processes and have limited means and language to engage with you (Chapter 5). They often need your help to negotiate with other organisations (Chapter 7). But these general patterns don't tell the whole picture, and, above all, do not tell you about the person you are talking to today.

To summarise, start from the knowledge that nothing is certain; there is no typical experience or normal refugee. You might see similarities, but look for differences. You can't simply learn a set of facts and reactions to a standard set of 'refugee problems', so your preparation has to be about your readiness to learn, to listen and build trust from the first contact, and your ability to find and make new contacts and resources to help you in your work.

Refugees are active agents

Refugees are active agents of their escape and adaptation. They are survivors, not victims. They are coping, recovering and working to rebuild their lives, which includes not only practical necessities for themselves and their dependants, but less visible priorities such as caring about distant family members or a sense of who they will be in the future.

As they build, they will pursue their own priorities and that means preserving and using their assets in the way they think best. They will shop around, might

test the boundaries now and then and perhaps accept a little more than they should at times. You might not always approve of their choices, but be careful before you judge. What they choose to do now is a tactic in a longer-term strategy, not their end goal, and most people want to get on with it.

You are a witness to their efforts; your actions facilitate theirs. You bring an essential toolkit of knowledge and skills. But they are not waiting for you to solve their problems. You, of course, are one of the assets they are juggling, so don't be surprised if things don't always go the way you thought they should. No matter what your skills or what you can offer, you are not in control of this relationship.

Learning from refugees and this book

This book exists because of refugees' own voices; it has grown from what I have learned when meeting and listening to individual refugees and families over more than 15 years. The testimonies, quotations and sometimes anecdotes are meant to give insight and ground what you are reading in the humanity and complex daily realities of a hugely diverse range of real people. Where I include direct quotations, they are anonymised, although I give what background I can where relevant, and please note the Acknowledgements which mention key individuals to whom I owe a lot. I also include real-life examples from my observations; some of the boxes are composites of several stories I have heard directly from people and gathered from primary sources over the years.

The book also combines expertise from many practitioners I have met or worked with over 25 years, many of them refugees. Their valuable knowledge, advice and expertise run through all chapters. Several have given their wisdom and knowledge freely and generously for this book, including input on accuracy and completeness, but any errors are mine alone.

The content and approach of this book have been shaped and tested by more than 15 years of giving direct support to primary and community practitioners who are *not* specialists in refugee issues but have found themselves working with refugees. I have learned from people on site, in meetings, in training and interactive workshops and by responding daily to practitioners' questions.

In this book I aim to answer practitioners' key questions:

What matters most?

What do I need to know?

What can I do?

I offer pragmatic ideas, working definitions and plain English rather than legal, clinical or pedagogical terms, although I make it clear where it is important to use specific terms in a more precise way. The way it is structured and presented,

including the Table of Contents, Index and Appendices, is designed to help the reader make good progress through the book, or to pick and mix over a cup of tea, but still be able to flick through the book while you are on the phone and quickly find what you need. You are welcome to quote in letters, reporting and bids if you think it will help: please do acknowledge the source.

The book falls broadly into two sections, Chapters 1–7 discuss experience and knowledge, definitions and information, diversity and approach, with, from Chapter 5, a growing focus on action. Chapters 8–10 are practical chapters by theme, addressing what you can do about the issues that refugees are likely to face, starting from most basic needs around surviving destitution and homelessness (Chapter 8), then health, mental health and disability (Chapter 9), and learning English, training and employment (Chapter 10). Chapter 11 is an overview of issues faced by refugee children and young people and options for supporting them. Chapter 12 draws some final conclusions about deeper meanings of ‘refugee’ and ‘refugee’.

In some chapters there are ‘Long Boxes’ with more detail on specific topics. There are a great many organisations and resources you can find online, but be careful that the site is not out of date as things change fast. Appendix A lists all organisations mentioned in the book, including the considerable number mentioned in practical chapters from Chapter 8 to Chapter 11. If you ring organisations for advice, please respect their time.

Box 1.3 Monitoring your own learning

Put a mark on the lines below to record where you think your knowledge is, and add a date.

Revisit now and then.

I have a good overview of refugees' experiences and issues they might face.

0% —————— 100%

I have an adequate working knowledge of refugees' entitlements for my job.

0% —————— 100%

I am confident my current activities and practices give effective support to refugees.

0% —————— 100%

I know where to find expertise or how to go about finding it when I need it.

0% —————— 100%

I have clear priorities for what I want to know next, to help me support refugees.

0% —————— 100%