

The Past and Future of Forced Migration Studies

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Keywords: involuntary migration,
refugees, forced displacement,
multidisciplinary analysis,
academic research



In the contemporary world, international protection, humanitarian assistance, and access to asylum procedures are lifesavers for many people who have been forced to flee their homes to escape conflicts, abuse, and discrimination. Over the last ten years, there has been a frightening growth in the number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) following the emergence of new hotbeds of tension in different parts of the globe. The current figure is around 80 million people. Humanitarian crises have been triggered by civil wars in Yemen and Syria; the latter conflict has produced 5 million refugees and 6.6 million IDPs since 2011. Since 2013, 4 million Venezuelan citizens have fled the violence and misrule of the national government, while over 100,000 people have left Nicaragua due to daily violations of human rights. The African continent continues to be a powder keg, constantly generating new flows of involuntary migrants. Recently, these have concerned the Central Sahel region, Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to name a few. In addition to refugee crises of more recent origin, there are humanitarian emergencies that have lasted for several decades and are still far from being resolved. In this regard, the examples of Palestinian and Afghan refugees are emblematic as some of the most enduring situations of forcibly displaced persons in the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented new and compelling challenges to the international community with regard to refugee protection. It has led to greater difficulties and limitations in movement and admission to receiving countries, while it has intensified the illicit business of smugglers. In parallel, the global health emergency has severely reduced access to medical services for forcibly displaced populations and exacerbated the economic difficulties of these vulnerable people. According to recent surveys by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), pandemic-induced poverty, in turn, has produced an increase in gender-based violence, especially in terms of domestic violence and forced marriage. Moreover, it has deprived many children of the financial support necessary



to continue their studies. Not least, it has resulted in many displaced families being obliged to return to their home countries due to the loss of their livelihoods in host states.

The refugee issue, which is now more topical than ever, has caught the attention of academics over time. Early studies began to appear in the interwar years, when some scholars manifested their interest in the massive forced population displacements that occurred following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian empires after the end of the First World War. Later, the ethnic reshuffling tragically organised by Nazi Germany across Europe beginning in the late 1930s further stimulated scholarly debate. The creation of the International Refugee Organization in 1946, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in 1949, and the UNHCR in 1950 provided additional incentives for research on involuntary migrants. In the aftermath of the Second World War, remarkable studies on legal and institutional aspects related to the definition and protection of refugees were published. These included the pioneering work of the political scientist Louise W. Holborn on the main international organisations active in this field.¹

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, anthropologists and human geographers initiated decisive studies on forced displacements. Their curiosity was directed at changes in cultural and religious practices, social relations, political and economic organisation, growth, and development among populations compelled to flee. The analysis of the adaptation mechanisms of involuntary migrants was, for instance, at the heart of the Gwembe Tonga Research Project, which was launched by the anthropologists Elizabeth Colson and Thayer Scudder in 1956. This famous study examined the impact of the building of Kariba Dam and the subsequent flooding of the Middle Zambezi Valley on approximately 57,000 Gwembe Tonga, who were obliged to relocate.² The great novelty of this study lay in its strong ethical and social connotations. Beyond its strictly academic value, it was aimed at encouraging policy makers to take initiatives to support refugees by showing the latter's difficulties in resettlement and discomfort during and after flight. For the first time, forcibly displaced persons appeared not only as a category to be analysed but also as people to be helped.

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1 Louise W. Holborn, "The League of Nation and the refugee problem", in: *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 1 (1939), pp. 124-135; Id., *The International Refugee Organisation. A specialized agency of the United Nations. Its history and work*, London: Oxford University Press, 1956; Id. et al., *Refugees: a problem of our time. The work of the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees. 1951-1972. Vol. 1-2*, Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975.

2 Elizabeth Colson, *The social consequences of resettlement: the impact of the Kariba Resettlement upon the Gwembe Tonga*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971.

The ground-breaking book *Imposing Aid* by the legal anthropologist Barbara Harrell-Bond, published in 1986, had a similar purpose.³ By examining the refugee crisis that affected the Ugandan population in early 1982, Harrell-Bond produced the first independent evaluation of an assistance programme organised by international agencies in response to the emergency influx of involuntary migrants. In so doing, she addressed policy makers with the primary aim of placing refugees at the centre of humanitarianism. This is what has motivated anthropological research up until the present day. Anthropologists continue to study key concepts such as home and homeland, nationalism, and identity in relation to forcibly displaced people. In particular, recent studies have criticised the traditional concept of territorial attachment based on the idea of the nation-state. They have progressively introduced the concept of deterritorialization to justify the existence of different types of attachment that involuntary migrants feel not only towards the place where they live, but also towards the memory of a distant or imagined homeland.⁴ This has meant rejecting the view that sees sedentarism as normal and territorial displacement as pathological. Moreover, it has given due emphasis to the lived experience of forcibly displaced people, which had long been neglected.

Attention to the lived experience of refugees has also consistently featured in studies conducted since the late 1950s by psychologists, who have focused on the impact of forced displacement on the mental health and behaviour of those who experience it.⁵ This field of research, which began to grow steadily following the refugee emergency generated by the Vietnam War, has highlighted the dysfunctional effects of involuntary migration on individuals. Numerous studies on the main psychological disorders that occur in forcibly displaced persons have been published. There has been lengthy discussion on the emotional trauma suffered by these people, the sense of marginalisation they feel, and their difficulties in adapting to the new reality of resettlement in camps and host societies. There has also been scholarly interest in family separations and victims of political violence, as well as in refugee minors and practices in psychology to support involuntary migrants. Since the 1990s, mental health studies have also combined traditional analysis relating to the diagnosis of mental disorders with new research on positive psychology.

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3 Barbara Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid. Emergency assistance to Refugees*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

4 Liisa Malkki, "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees", in: *Cultural Anthropology* 1 (1992), pp. 24-44; Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference", in: *Cultural Anthropology* 7 (1992), pp. 6-23.

5 Claudius K. Cirtautas, *The Refugee: A Psychological Study*, Boston: Meadow, 1957; Maria Pfister-Ammende, "Mental Hygiene in Refugee Camps", in: Charles Zwinmann and Maria Pfister-Ammende, *Uprooting and After*, New York: Springer-Verlag, 1973, pp. 241-251.



The latter is concerned with stimulating positive thinking and emotions in refugees, bringing out their strengths and activating their mental resources to encourage resilient behaviour and favour integration.⁶ On the whole, psychology deserves credit for emphasising the most intimate dimension of the experience of flight by exploring the conscious and unconscious cognitive processes of those compelled to flee their homes in order to help them cope with the trauma of forced displacement.

Although political science, anthropology, and psychology have shown an interest in studying refugees since the post-war period, forced migration studies has established itself as a truly autonomous and multidisciplinary field of research since the 1980s. In that decade, the amount of research on refugees increased exponentially, not least in response to a surge in the number of asylum applications in Europe and North America. These applicants were people escaping war and violence, primarily from Africa, the Middle East, and South East Asia. The need to provide them with quick and effective solutions was the main motivation behind this new research. In 1981, the *International Migration Review* led the way in what would be a decade of extensive academic production by publishing a special issue on refugees, which largely dealt with national assistance policies, legislative developments in asylum procedures, and international humanitarian aid. It also contained an article providing indications for creating a theory of forced displacement and a rich research bibliography with over 800 entries.⁷

Further proof of the increasing scholarly interest in involuntary migrations are the various highly qualified research centres founded around the world in the 1980s. The Refugee Documentation Project, later re-named the Centre for Refugee Studies, was created at York University in Toronto in 1981. The Refugee Policy Group was founded in Washington, D.C. a year later. In 1982, the Refugee Studies Programme, now called the Refugee Studies Centre, was established by Barbara Harrell-Bond at the University of Oxford. As part of the Department of International Development, it aimed – and still aims today – to build knowledge of the causes and effects of forced displacement, thus helping improve the lives of involuntary migrants.

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6 Eranda Jayawickreme et al., “From trauma victims to survivors: The positive psychology of refugee mental health”, in: Kathryn Gow and Marek Celinski (eds.), *Natural disaster research, prediction and mitigation. Mass trauma: Impact and recovery issues*, New York: Nova Science Publishers, 1993, pp. 313-330; Sevasti Foka et al., “Promoting well-being in refugee children: An exploratory controlled trial of a positive psychology intervention delivered in Greek refugee camps”, in: *Development and psychopathology* (2020), pp. 1-9.

7 Egon F. Kunz, “Exile and resettlements: Refugee theory”, in: *International Migration Review* 1-2 (1981), pp. 42-51; Barry N. Stein, “Refugee research bibliography”, in: *International Migration Review* 1-2 (1981), pp. 331-393.



Specialised interdisciplinary journals arose in the same decade to give this new, burgeoning field international forums for sharing research. *Refugee Reports* and the *World Refugee Survey* started to appear in 1980 and 1985, respectively, as official publications of the NGO U.S. Committee for Refugees (since 2004, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants). In 1982, the first issue of the *Refugee Survey Quarterly* was launched by the UNHCR Centre for Documentation and Research, publishing wide-ranging analyses of issues related to involuntary migration. In 1987 and 1988, the Refugee Study Centre began publishing the *Forced Migration Review* and the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, both containing reflections on forced displacement from a primarily ethno-anthropological perspective. In 1989, the *International Journal of Refugee Law* was founded to address topics related to the refugee phenomenon from a legal point of view.

More critical analysis and greater attention to theoretical aspects have characterised the lively academic debate on refugees since the 1980s. This debate has involved various disciplines, each of which has contributed to forced migration studies in its own way over time. International relations scholars, for instance, have explored the link between the state system and refugees, interpreting involuntary migrations as an inherent component of world politics. According to IR researchers, the refugee phenomenon is a consequence of the creation of separate sovereign states, which fail to give adequate protection to forcibly displaced persons and exclude them from the «normal citizen-state-territory hierarchy».⁸ Research on the causes and effects of forced displacement with a more theoretical slant has also been published by international relations scholars. Some studies have pointed out that refugees can be at the same time both a consequence and a cause of conflicts and have explored the circumstances under which refugees constitute a hindrance to peace-building processes.⁹

Reflections on the impact of refugee flows on global security have also appeared, with a focus on the debated connection between involuntary migration and transnational terrorism after 11 September 2001.¹⁰ Institutional response to forced displacement is another hot topic among international relations theorists, who have examined international support to refugees and states in terms of asylum procedures and burden sharing.¹¹ Non-institutional

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8 Emma Haddad, “The Refugee: The Individual between Sovereigns”, in: *Global Society* 3 (2003), pp. 297-322.

9 Gil Loescher, *Refugee Movements and International Security*, London: Brassey's for The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1992.

10 Sharon Pickering, “Border terror: policing, forced migration and terrorism”, in: *Global Change, Peace & Security* 3 (2004), pp. 211-226; Daniel Milton et al., “Radicalism of the Hopeless: Refugee Flows and Transnational Terrorism”, in: *International Interactions* 5 (2013), pp. 621-645.

11 Astri Suhrke, “Burden-Sharing during Refugee Emergencies: The Logic of Collective Action Versus National Action”, in: *Journal of Refugee Studies* 4 (1998), pp. 396-415; Alexander Betts, *Protection by Persuasion: International Cooperation in the Refugee Regime*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009.



interventions have also been considered, especially with regard to the involvement of NGOs, transnational civil society, and private actors in refugee governance. Overall, research in international relations has contributed to refugee studies by exploring the macro factors that mould how states and the international community respond to forced displacement. Looking at regional, national, and global dynamics, IR research has the potential to further deepen understanding of critical issues related to involuntary migration, such as human rights protection and international political economy, in the near future.

Sociology, for its part, has contributed to the advancement of refugee studies by examining the impact of social processes and changes on forced migration at the micro, meso, and macro levels, in both origin countries and receiving countries. Assuming that individuals' freedom of choice is conditioned by social structures, sociologists have highlighted the interactions between political, educational, and religious institutions, on the one hand, and individual agency, on the other, to explain refugees' behaviour.¹² This has meant questioning the traditional division between voluntary migrants and involuntary migrants, which is based on the distinction between economic and socio-political factors as causes of displacement. In addition, by highlighting the connections between various levels of analysis, sociological research has made it possible to present forced migrations as an inherent aspect of globalisation. According to this interpretation, the refugee phenomenon is an outcome of 'global social relations', which are based on inclusion/exclusion mechanisms that increase the disparity between poor states and rich states.¹³ Compared to traditional nation-centred approaches, this analytical reflection has broadened research perspectives considerably, incorporating transnational flows and relations and placing social, communications, and transport networks that link departure countries and receiving countries at the centre of the academic debate.¹⁴ Moreover, recent sociological studies have examined the influence of non-state actors on refugees and IDPs. These actors include local and religious communities but also criminal associations and warlords, whose battle for power against the state often acts as a stimulus for population displacement in countries with weak governance.¹⁵

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12 Anthony H. Richmond, "Sociological Theories of International Migration: The Case of Refugees", in: *Current Sociology* 2 (1988), pp. 7-25; Oliver Bakewell, "Some Reflections on Structure and Agency in Migration Theory", in: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 10 (2010), pp. 1689-1708.

13 Stephen Castles, "Towards a Sociology of Forced Migration and Social Transformation", in: *Sociology* 13 (2003), pp. 13-34.

14 Nina Glick Schiller et al., "Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration", in: *Annals of the New York Academy of Science* 1 (1992), pp. 1-24; Nicholas Van Hear, "Refugees, Diasporas and transnationalism", in: Elena Fiddian Qasbiyeh et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 176-187.

15 Thomas B. Hansen and Finn Stepputat, *Sovereign Bodies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Another discipline in the social sciences that has been interested in the refugee phenomenon is political theory, which has offered insights into normative aspects of the global refugee humanitarian emergency. In particular, political theorists and philosophers have approached the critical issue of duty allocation between states with regard to involuntary migrants.¹⁶ Scholars have made careful considerations on the inequality of the contemporary system of refugee distribution, in which the majority of forcibly displaced people pour into a few poor countries for reasons of geographical proximity and ease of access. This has pushed political theorists to demand a more balanced subdivision of duties which is attentive to different states' capacities for integration, based on the factors of territorial sustainability, economic growth, and political stability.¹⁷ Critical analyses have also emerged on the limits states place on the admission of refugees, the moral duty for states to facilitate integration, and the conditions for an ethical return of involuntary migrants to their home countries. Political theorists' research has thus proved relevant in guiding policy makers towards solutions that pursue justice not only for refugees but also within the international community.¹⁸

In spite of the prolific academic production in the social and political sciences, one discipline that did not partake in the academic debate on refugees for a long time is history. Until the beginning of the 21st century, studies on forced displacement led by historians were scarce, which often made scholars think of forced migration studies as an ahistorical research area. This is in part justified by differences in analytical perspectives. On the one hand, refugee studies has always been a distinctly policy-oriented field, aimed at providing quick and practical responses to current problems. On the other hand, history prefers a broader analytical approach which combines synchronic and diachronic analysis and looks at the past to explain contemporary phenomena without the limitations of policy-determined labels. As a result, historians have often distrusted refugee studies due to its close ties to the policy-making process. At the same time, politicians and scholars in the social and political sciences have underestimated the role of history in investigating forced displacement, as they have long considered this discipline of little use for the study of refugees.¹⁹

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16 Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, New York: Basic Books, 1983; Matthew J. Gibney, "Asylum and the Principle of Proximity", in: *Ethics, Place & Environment* 3 (2000), pp. 313–317.

17 David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; Matthew J. Gibney, "The duties of refugees", in: David Miller and Christine Straehle (eds.), *The political philosophy of refuge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

18 Marion Couldrey and Jenny Peebles (eds.), "Return: voluntary, safe, dignified and durable?", in: *Forced migration Review* 62 (2019); Arianne Shahvisi, "Redistribution and moral consistency: arguments for granting automatic citizenship to refugees", in: *Journal of Global Ethics* 2 (2020), pp. 182–202.

19 Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006; Philip Marfleet, "Refugees and History: Why We Must Address the Past", in: *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 3 (2007), p. 136.



However, it would be incorrect to argue that history has been completely uninterested in forced migrations until recently. Some historical research on this topic appeared as early as the 1940s and 1950s, with a focus on forced population transfers after the First and Second World Wars. Nevertheless, this research has not been classified as refugee studies, but rather included among studies on interwar Europe, genocide, or transnational and global history more generically. With the flourishing of research on forced migration in the 1980s, historical research also advanced in this area, albeit at a slower pace than in other disciplines. This new research included a greater degree of critical analysis and attention to non-European case studies than before. Moreover, historians began to consider hitherto unexplored aspects of the refugee issue, such as national policies with regard to involuntary migrants in the past and their repercussions on refugees' lives.²⁰

The real leap forward in historical research on refugees, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, occurred at the beginning of the 21st century. Since the early 2000s, numerous studies have been published on the history of international organisations, as well as on the role of NGOs and other non-state actors in managing forced migrant flows around the world.²¹ Historians of the postcolonial period have stressed the impact of decolonisation on involuntary migrations. Forced displacements in interwar and post-war Europe have been broadly scrutinised, with particular attention to their impact on receiving countries and the response of these countries to these massive population shifts.²² Studies on transnational cooperation and the origins of humanitarianism have also been published, together with several studies on refugees and their protection in antiquity and the early modern period. Philipp Ther's recent book *The Outsiders* stands out as one of the most significant examinations of the refugee phenomenon in the modern and contemporary world.²³ It chronicles the history of forced migration in Europe from 1492 to the present day, also examining the lives of refugees after their arrival in host countries through the analysis of several biographical case studies.

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20 Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985; Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

21 Jérôme Elie, “The Historical Roots of Cooperation between the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration”, in: *Global Governance* 3 (2010), pp. 345–360; Peter Gatrell, “Western NGOs and Refugee Policy in the Twentieth Century”, in: *Journal of Migration History* 2 (2019), pp. 384–411.

22 Frank Caestecker, *Alien Policy in Belgium, 1840–1940: The Creation of Guest Workers, Refugees and Illegal Immigrants*, New York: Berghahn, 2000; Peter Gatrell and Liubov Zhvanko, *Europe on the Move: The Great War and its Refugees*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017.

23 Philipp Ther, *The Outsiders. Refugees in Europe since 1492*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019.



In recent years, historical research has begun to occupy a central place within the academic debate on forced migrations. The study of the dynamics, causes, and implications of past refugee movements provides information that is essential to better understanding forced displacement in the contemporary world. Not least, the memory of past migrations frequently influences the choices of forcibly displaced people today, which confirms just how much refugee studies ought to be concerned with history, and vice versa. However, there are several areas in which historical research still has a significant contribution to make. These include a greater commitment to examining the personal stories of refugees using, for instance, the tools of oral history and social history. This would help to correct the traditional image of forced migrants as passive victims by emphasising their agency during displacement and in influencing policy choices within world refugee governance. Further reflection by scholars in cultural history is also desirable, as it would shed light on the cultural representations of displacement and flight. Finally, research in political history could prove crucial in exploring the political dynamics and significance of the refugee regime across space and time.

Novel lines of research have emerged recently from the combination of the various disciplinary approaches considered above. This essay will conclude with a brief examination of these new areas of study, since they are indicative of the growing social engagement of refugee studies and provide hints as to the future evolution of the field. Critical analysis of the gender dynamics of forced migration is one crucial area of research. Early, pioneering studies appeared in the 1980s, drawing attention to refugee women as a forgotten minority.²⁴ However, their analytical approach was rather limited, as they primarily dealt with sexual violence perpetrated against women, who continued to be portrayed as fragile and as disempowered victims. Research on gendered aspects of forced migration has become more prolific since the 2000s. These novel studies have centred on women's experiences of displacement, expectations, and opportunities regarding resettlement, obtaining asylum, and potential repatriation. By giving a voice to refugee women for the first time, this new research has finally recognised their agency and capacity for action. Moreover, it has explored the impact of gender identities and relations on the everyday lives of forcibly displaced individuals, also covering the experiences of LGBTI people.

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24 Genevieve Camus-Jacques, "Refugee Women: The Forgotten Majority", in: Gil Loescher and Laila Monaham (eds.), *Refugees and International Relations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 141–147; Jacqueline Greatbatch, "The Gendered Difference: Feminist Critiques of Refugee Discourse", in: *International Journal of Refugee Law* 4 (1989), pp. 518–527; Doreen M. Indra, "Ethnic Human Rights and Feminist Theory: Gender Implications for Refugee Studies and Practice", in: *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2 (1989), pp. 221–242.

Accordingly, studies on the multiplicity of patriarchal dynamics that women and LGBTI refugees often face in their countries of origin, host countries, and camps have been published.²⁵ Some authors have emphasised the empowering impact that forced displacement can have on women and LGBTI involuntary migrants, precisely because it can provide them with the opportunity to renegotiate gender relations in both camps and resettlements by breaking patriarchal patterns.²⁶ Other scholars have shed light on gendered obstacles to integration for women and LGBTI refugees and on various forms of gender-based violence that these individuals suffer during their journeys or on arrival in a country of destination.²⁷ Overall, research on gendered aspects of forced displacement has the merit of helping to overcome the hitherto consolidated trend towards portraying women and LGBTI people as victims and homogenised groups. By giving due relevance to their experiences of flight, this research contributes to altering the asymmetries of power that often characterise humanitarian assistance programmes in order to effectively promote gender equality among the forcibly displaced population.

The connection between climate change and forced displacement is another popular issue within the contemporary debate on involuntary migration. So-called ‘environmental refugees’ have attracted the interest of many scholars, as well as a variety of criticism. The origins of this term date back to the 1980s, when it was used to refer to people who are forced to abandon their homes or countries due to the effects of environmental stress and natural disasters.²⁸ Climate-induced migrants flee floods, desertification, rising sea levels, and extreme weather events which jeopardise their survival and their ability to find means of subsistence. The expression ‘environmental refugee’, however, is a misnomer. It is not endorsed by UNHCR because it does not fall within the umbrella of the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees and the additional protocol of 1967, nor does it exist in international law. It is more correct to refer to individuals who have been displaced in situations of natural disasters and climate change. In this regard, academics are currently unanimous in rejecting the idea of a direct causal link between environmental factors and

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25 Sharon Carlson, “Contesting and Reinforcing Patriarchy: An Analysis of Domestic Violence in the Dzaleka Refugee Camp”, in: *RSC Working Paper no. 23* (2005), pp. 1–59.

26 Ulrike Krause, “Analysis of empowerment of refugee women in camps and settlements”, in: *Journal of internal displacement* 1 (2014), pp. 28–52.

27 Jane Freedman, “Sexual and gender-based violence against refugee women: a hidden aspect of the refugee ‘crisis’”, in: *Reproductive Health Matters* 47 (2016), pp. 18–26.

28 Essam El-Hinnawi, *Environmental Refugees* (report), Nairobi: United Nations Environmental Programme, 1985; Jodi L. Jacobson, *Environmental refugees: A yardstick of habitability*, Washington D.C.: World Watch Institute, 1988.

forced displacement. Instead, they have highlighted a nexus between climate change, economic factors, and situations of conflict and violence in determining cross-border population movements, which are a multicausal phenomenon.²⁹

Nevertheless, these people are granted international protection in some cases, which have been the object of recent study, particularly in geography, anthropology, and sociology. Since the second decade of the 21st century, sound empirical research has been produced, among which the pioneering work of Robert Zimmer stands out.³⁰ Based on evidence collected in Bangladesh, Vietnam, Ghana, and Kenya, Zimmer has examined the capacity of national legal frameworks to protect the rights of people who face displacement produced by climate change. Following his example, additional research has been published over the last ten years, focusing on several other case studies. These studies are proof of the growing academic commitment to producing useful field research, which can guide policy makers in adopting effective decisions to reinforce the defence of refugees' rights when aggravating factors stemming from environmental hazards emerge.

Elderly refugees constitute an additional and hitherto little-explored subset of the world's forcibly displaced population to which scholars have recently drawn attention. Research on the lived experience of older involuntary migrants is based on the practical need to offer targeted support to these individuals, who struggle to cope with flight and adapt to the new reality of displacement precisely because of their advanced age. They face additional complications due not only to health problems but also to mental disorders. Some studies have highlighted the frustration of older refugees at being unable to find employment that makes them feel useful to their family and community in host countries. Other have stressed the high risk of depression that these individuals face due to their greater difficulty in overcoming the trauma of flight and loosening ties with their countries of origin compared to younger refugees. Such work is undoubtedly a significant step towards a deeper understanding of the lived experience of elderly refugees. Nevertheless, research on this category of involuntary migrants is still considerably limited. Few studies have been published on this topic and those that do exist are limited to specific geographical areas. These limitations have contributed to delaying the proposal and adoption of durable solutions to

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29 Roger Zetter, "The politics of rights protection for environmentally displaced people", in: *Siirtolaisuus-Migration Quarterly* 1 (2017), pp. 5–12. See also Diane C. Bates, "Environmental Refugees? Classifying Human Migrations Caused by Environmental Change", in: *Population and Environment* 5 (2002), pp. 465–477; Roger Zetter, Camillo Boano, and Tim Morris, *Environmentally displaced people: understanding the linkages between environmental change, livelihoods and forced migration* (report), Refugee Studies Centre, 2008.

30 Roger Zetter, *Protecting environmentally displaced people: developing the capacity of legal and normative instruments* (report), Refugee Studies Centre, 2011.

the hardships endured by elderly displaced people.³¹

The topic of disabled refugees concludes this brief overview of new areas of research within forced migration studies. Existing research on displaced people with disabilities focuses on their specific needs and the obstacles they encounter during flight and in camps and urban resettlements. Papers by Shivji, Mirza, and Lätzsch, for instance, have stressed the practical barriers that prevent disabled involuntary migrants from accessing the most basic services, which include food and water distribution, educational facilities, hospitals, and social services.³² Some research has also reported sexual and psychological abuse and discriminatory behaviour towards the disabled. Other studies have looked at deficiencies in the management and infrastructure of camps and urban resettlements, usually due to the financial constraints of national and international aid programmes, which greatly complicate the stay of refugees with disabilities.³³ Evidence of the impact of these studies on the policy-making process can be seen in the fact that the UNHCR has recently stepped up its commitment to the defence of disabled people experiencing forced migration. Nonetheless, much remains to be done. Focus groups and individual interviews might be used in future research aimed at restoring full dignity to disabled refugees and stimulating targeted responses to their needs, thus alleviating at least part of the suffering they have experienced due to displacement.

The study of forced migration is a vibrant and thriving area of research which has come a long way since its inception. Its multidisciplinary nature has determined much of its success, allowing the production of comprehensive analysis that has shed light on the many aspects and dynamics that characterise forced displacements. In this field, theoretical research and political practice have coexisted and worked together for the benefit of the world's refugee population. Greater collaboration in the near future would further increase their positive impact on national and international protection systems for involuntary migrants. Increased attention by scholars to the needs and timing of the political agenda is desirable, as is additional attention by policy makers to wide-ranging analyses and methodological issues.

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31 Helena Scott, and Claudio Bolzman, "Age in Exile: Europe's Older Refugees and Exiles", in: Alice Bloch and Carl Levy (eds.), *Refugees, Citizenship and Social Policy in Europe*, Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1999; Lama Bazzi, and Zeima Chemali, "A Conceptual Framework of Displaced Elderly Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: Challenges and Opportunities", in: *Global Journal of Health Science* 11 (2016), pp. 54–61.

32 Aleema Shivji, "Disability in Displacement", in: *Forced Migration Review* 35 (2010), pp. 4–7; Mansha Mirza, "Unmet Needs and Diminished Opportunities: Disability, Displacement and Humanitarian Healthcare", in: *New Issues in Refugee Research Working Paper Series. Research paper 212*, Geneva: UNHCR, Policy Development and Evaluation Service, 2011; Cornelius Lätzsch, "Dimensions of Health Care and Social Services Accessibility for Disabled Asylum Seekers in Germany", in: Katharina Crepaz, Ulrich Becker, Elizabeth Wacker (eds.), *Health in Diversity – Diversity in Health*, Wiesbaden: Springer, 2020.

33 Mansha Mirza, "Disability and Humanitarianism in Refugee Camps: The Case for a Traveling Supranational Disability Praxis", in: *Third World Quarterly* 8 (2011), pp. 1527–1536.