Christina Clark-Kazak

AGING IN AND OUT OF PLACE

Lived Experiences of Forced Migration Across the Life Course

Forced Migration Studies

Collection Editors

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LPP

For Martyn and Margaret Clark, who inspired thousands of young people to challenge societally imposed age limits.

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Abstract

Tracing the lived experiences of childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age in forced migration contexts, *Aging In and Out of Place* explores how social age as an identity marker changes over time, space, and place. By centering stories of displacement in Canada, the US, Germany, the UK, and Australia, this book analyzes the impact of national and international policies and their engagement with individual and collective identity markers, including age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, race, and religion. Providing innovative insights into the underexplored area of social age in forced migration research, policy and practice, *Aging In and Out of Place* is ideal reading for students of interdisciplinary courses including Forced Migration and Refugee Studies, Childhood Studies, Development Studies, and Gerontology, as well as policy makers.

Keywords

aging, displacement, mobility, childhood, family, identity, youth, gerontology, policy

Contents

Learning objectives

By the end of this book, readers should be able to:

- Critically analyze, and explain, the socially constructed nature of aging in diverse migration contexts.
- Understand how migration experiences impact how people experience different stages of the life course.
- Provide examples of lived experiences of aging in different migration contexts.
- Identify relevant resources for further research, practice, and policymaking.

1
Introduction to social age and forced migration

This book is about the lived experiences of people who are born, grow up, transition to adulthood, age, and die in forced migration contexts. While much of the policy, media, and research focuses on one age category—like refugee children—*Aging In and Out of Place* instead analyzes the trajectories and relationships of human beings migrating across the life course. My intent is to show how forced migration is a human phenomenon, involving and impacting people in different stages of life and in intergenerational families, households, and communities. While the book covers many different aspects of aging from cradle to grave[1] in forced migration contexts, it is not exhaustive. Rather, by highlighting the richness of a comprehensive approach to both social age and forced migration, I hope to inspire more holistic discussions, research, policy, and programming.

A social age approach

This book takes as its point of departure the idea that the aging process is both a biological fact of life, but also socially constructed

in particular times and places. A baby is obviously physically, cognitively, and emotionally different than an older child or an adult. But the meanings attached to human development and the socially acceptable roles at different stages of the life course vary significantly across different cultures, religions, and communities. Historians have also shown how the social construction of aging has varied across time (Cunningham, 1995; Burgard, 2021).

I use the concept of "social age" to describe these socially constructed aspects of the human development and aging processes. Social age refers to the localized, social meanings and roles ascribed to different stages of the life course (Clark-Kazak, 2009b). Social age also encompasses power relations embedded in intergenerational relationships (Clark-Kazak, 2013). For example, in societies that venerate old age and equate "elders" with wisdom, children may be socially defined as those who "don't reason" or "don't understand" (Clark-Kazak, 2011, p. 9). Taking a relational approach to aging allows for an analytical process that acknowledges the intersection of social age with other power relations.

Black feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the concept of intersectionality as a metaphor to show how power structures and relationships overlap (Crenshaw, 1989). In this book, we will think about how social age intersects with other factors like gender, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, class, racialization, religion, ethnicity, and migration status to understand diverse experiences of aging in forced migration contexts. In other words, a Black Muslim Somali woman who arrived in Canada as a refugee and does not qualify for Canadian Pension Plan payments will have a different experience of old age than a White, Christian,

Canadian-born man who has access to both private and public pensions.

Limitations to the dominant chronological approach to measuring age

In cultures ordered by chronometric time, chronological age is the dominant way of measuring age. This has spilled over into western medicine, psychology (Rogoff, 1991), education (Veraksa and Pramling Samuelsson, 2022), and law (Bhabha, 2009; Crock and Martin, 2018). International legal instruments predominantly refer to chronological age. For example, the Convention on the Rights of the Child—the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world—defines a child as "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (article 1).

While chronological age is therefore sometimes believed to be a "universal" and "neutral" measure, it is insufficient as the sole measurement of aging in migration contexts for three key reasons. First, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, people in contexts of migration do not necessarily know, or have documents to prove, their chronological age. Because many international agencies and governments rely on chronological age to administer programs and determine eligibility for services and access to rights, this lack of documentation poses practical problems. As a result, many western liberal democracies have invested significant resources and political capital into age assessments through dental, bone density or sexual maturity measurements (Sypek *et al.*, 2016), despite critiques of their accuracy and ethics.

Because of the margin of error of +/- 3 years and the inability of age-disputed young people to freely consent to age assessments (Silverman, 2016), some researchers have gone as far as to call them "junk science" (Noll, 2016).

Second, in migration contexts, social and physical markers may be as, if not more, important than chronological age to determine relationships across the life course. Many cultures and religions practice rites of passage that determine when one is considered to be an adult. Puberty is a biological characteristic that signifies adulthood in many cultures, particularly once a person is physically able to bear children. Similarly, physical changes like menopause and greying hair may be interpreted as the beginning of old age. Other socially significant events like marriage and parenthood may signal a transition from youth to adulthood, as will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Third, chronological age is itself socially constructed, made meaningful in contexts ordered by chronometric time, where there is significant difference of opinion about the age that is appropriate for voting, driving, marriage, engaging in consensual sex, remunerated work, retirement, etc. This shows that chronological age cut-offs, while administratively efficient, are arbitrary and not as neutral as implied in legal and policy documents. Indeed, even within the same immigration law, there may be different chronological ages defining "children" (Clark-Kazak, 2025).

Life course approach

This is not to suggest that the chronological passage of time is completely irrelevant to studying aging. Rather, this book is interested in aging across the life course precisely because the

passage of time has different socially significant meanings. The life course approach, combined with the social age analysis developed above, is concerned with how chronometric time is made meaningful in people's lives, rather than assuming that chronological age tells the whole story.

The life course approach analyzes aging through a series of transitions or life events, which people pass through over time (Kulu and Milewski, 2007). These socially significant transitions and events are made meaningful within particular social relationships and geographic and temporal contexts (Giele and Elder, 1998). Migration research is interested in how life course decisions, such as marriage, family planning, or retirement, influence migration decisions and vice versa (Gardner, 2009, 2021). In this way, the chronological and historical passage of time are mapped onto both aging and migration. We will return to the temporal nature of migration and aging in the last chapter.

What is forced migration?

Migration refers to the movement of people. It has been part of human history since the beginning of time. However, in the contemporary context of sovereign states, governments are increasing concerned with "managing" and categorizing migration. Under international law and policy, and domestic legislation, there is generally a distinction between "forced" and "voluntary" migration. Forced migration describes situations where people are driven from their homes due to violence, persecution, human rights abuses, or environmental degradation. Voluntary migration occurs when people choose to move for family, work,

or education purposes. Forced migration is the primary focus of this book.

Of course, in reality, this forced-voluntary binary is not clearcut. Even people who are forced to leave make decisions about when to flee, where to go, and how to move. Similarly, people who migrate for family, work, or educational purposes may be constrained by financial or social pressures. A person's immigration status may also change. For example, an Afghan young woman studying in Australia as an international student may have claimed refugee status after the Taliban retook control and banned women from studying and working. Or an asylum seeker in the US may marry a US citizen, providing a pathway to permanent residency through marriage sponsorship.

While the emphasis of forced migration often is on movement, it also includes immobility (Bélanger and Silvey, 2020). People may be trapped behind closed borders, like Palestinians who cannot leave Gaza. Or people may initially be displaced across a border, but then be confined within refugee camps or detention centers or face limited access to services and opportunities because of precarious migration status. Therefore, in this book, I include a variety of legal statuses under the umbrella term "forced migration". *Aging In and Out of Place* follows the life course experiences of refugees, resettled refugees who may arrive in a new country as permanent residents, asylum seekers, and people with precarious status.

It is important to note that most forced migration worldwide occurs within and between countries of the Global South. Table 1.1 below summarizes the numbers of people displaced

Table 1.1 Top source and host countries at end of 2022

Source country	Host country
Syrian Arab Republic (6.5 million)	Iran (3.4 million)
Afghanistan (6.1 million)	Turkey (3.4 million)
Ukraine (5.9 million)	Germany (2.5 million)
	Colombia (2.5 million)
	Pakistan (2.1 million)

Source: UNHCR, 2023a

worldwide as represented in UNHCR statistics at the end of 2023. These data also indicate that 40% of displaced people are children under the age of 18, while only 4% are over the age of 60. Comparing the demographics of displacement with the population in the country of origin shows that fewer people migrate as they age, begging the question of what happens to older people, who are often left behind (HelpAge International, 2024b). We will return to this point in Chapter 5.

While not ignoring the reality of forced migration in lower income countries of the Global South, this book foregrounds the lived experiences of people who have arrived in Canada, the United States, Australia, Germany, and the United Kingdom as resettled refugees, refugee claimants (also called asylum seekers), or irregular migrants. Resettlement is the process by which refugees whom the UN Refugee Agency has been identified as needing protection in a country of asylum are brought permanently to another country. The US, Canada, and Australia have led global resettlement efforts over many years, with some variations depending on the political party in power at any given time.

Asylum is enshrined in international and domestic laws. While everyone has the right to seek asylum, the refugee status determination (RSD) process varies by country. Most of the RSD systems use the refugee definition found in the 1951 UN Convention: a person who fears persecution because of race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group. Germany is a main European destination for asylum seekers and refugees, as shown in Table 1.1.

Finally, there are people who have been forced to leave their countries, but do not fit the narrow definition of the 1951 Convention and/or are not legally entitled to enter another, so have to resort to irregular migration to access precarious protections. Rich countries in the Global North have increasingly developed "architectures of repulsion" (FitzGerald, 2019) to try to keep potential asylum seekers out though visa policies, immigration detention, including in offshore facilities (see Chapter 7), and agreements with other countries. The UK has developed the hostile environment policies, recently codified into law, in a futile attempt to deter irregular migration. The US has the largest undocumented population in the world.

In this book, I have chosen to focus on forced migration to Australia, Canada, the US, the UK, and Germany because of the scale of resettlement and irregular migration, but also because the cultural situation is often very different from forced migrants' countries of origins, posing specific questions about the social construction of aging and family relationships. Moreover, in these rich countries of the Global North, governments should have the resources and capacity

to uphold age- and migration-specific rights, but the reality is that sometimes these policies fall short.

Legal and policy approaches to aging and migration

Indeed, the notion of universality of human rights means that any person, anywhere, is supposed to have the same rights and protections. For example, the next chapter highlights some of the rights that apply under the CRC to all children, including children in migration contexts. However, in practice, people in migration contexts have fewer opportunities to exercise their rights than citizens. Hannah Arendt referred to this as "the right to have rights" (1943). As a result, the international community has negotiated specific refugee and migration treaties, as well as the non-binding Global Compacts on migration and refugees. These legal and normative standards contain specific provisions on family unity, health, education, and work, which are intended to protect non-citizens.

The UN agency for refugees (UNHCR) has also developed an age, gender, and diversity policy in recognition of the differential experiences of migration due to intersecting power relations. UNHCR has guidelines on children, including children who are separated from their families (see Chapter 2), and on older refugees (see Chapter 5). Similarly, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has developed operational guidance on age, gender, diversity, and protection. While imperfect (Clark-Kazak, 2009a; Thomas and Beck, 2010; UNHCR, 2017), these are important starting points to acknowledge how migration processes

affect people differently, with age and life course being important factors.

Centering lived experiences through stories

Because of these differential experiences of migration and aging, this book uses stories to illustrate how people navigate dynamic displacement contexts. In contrast to homogenizing and essentializing discourses about "refugees" and "migrants", I seek to amplify the humanity of people who have been displaced from their homes, their communities, and their networks. At the beginning of each chapter, I use the story of one person to illustrate some of the key themes related to aging and migration. These stories are not intended to be representative—they are only one person's experiences among millions. Rather, the point is to demonstrate how borders intersect with people's lives, and how immigration status has significant consequences for important life decisions, like education, marriage, parenthood, and retirement. Some of the people profiled in this book are well known; others are not. Indeed, as a human phenomenon, migration permeates life in both extraordinary and ordinary ways. I wanted the book to show how displacement affects people across the life course, but also in very different life circumstances.

I chose to use stories that were already publicly available in media and other print sources. Researchers in forced migration studies have drawn attention to the problem of over-research, where people who have been displaced feel obligated to tell their story over and over again: to receive legal status, to access services, and to satisfy media and researchers' need for information. I made a

conscious decision not to reproduce this harm by insisting on new empirical data for this book. Rather, I repurposed material in existing, publicly available sources, with credit to the original authors, some of whom chose to tell their own stories. If we listen carefully, we can find stories of migration in our families, communities, newspapers, literature, and political discourse. By centering these stories, I encourage readers to proactively and intentionally tune into migration narratives in their own spheres of care.

Conclusion and outline of chapters

This chapter has shown that both migration and aging are human processes that occur within diverse contexts and intersecting power relations. *Aging In and Out of Place* takes a social age approach to highlight life course events in forced migration experiences in countries of resettlement, asylum, and irregular migration in the Global North. Starting with birth, through childhood (Chapter 2), youth (Chapter 3), adulthood (Chapter 4), and old age (Chapter 5), the following chapters provide insights into how forced migration informs key life events. Chapter 6 then turns to the question of changing intergenerational relationships in forced migration. The final chapter sums up ways to think about aging in and out of place through the lens of time.

The purpose of this book is to center aging and life course in discussions of forced migration. While attention in forced migration studies has already been paid to specific age and migration categories, like refugee children, my intent here is to provide a

framework for thinking about the intersection of migration and aging in *all* discussions about forced migration. While the scope of the book is broad and cannot cover all aspects of the life course, it provides an entry point for more systematic and holistic discussions about aging when teaching and learning about forced migration.

2
Birth and childhoods in exile

Introduction: Child rights and realities in situations of forced migration

This chapter explores lived experiences of birth and childhood in situations of forced migration. Infants, children, and young people under the age of 18 are accorded specific rights under domestic legislation and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)—the most widely ratified international convention. This Convention recognizes that refugee children have the same rights as nationals, including the right to education, health, birth registration, and nationality (article 22). Underpinning the CRC is the best interests of the child principle (article 3). This means that adults and decision-makers should always think about what is best for the child(ren) involved in any situation. In addition, article 12 gives children the right to participate in decisions that affect them. Although all countries except the United States are party to the CRC and should respect children's rights, the reality is that many children and families face

structural barriers to realizing their rights in forced migration contexts of discrimination, xenophobia, and limited resources.

Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 1, birth and childhood are socially constructed. This means there are particular social and cultural meanings attached to being born and growing up. The different meanings and expectations related to different phases of the life course are also influenced by gender, religion, ethnicity, racialization, birth order, and other factors. For example, Mayall's (2002, p. 52) research with Muslim children in the UK found that girls had "a clear, gendered understanding of how their life now and in the future should be lived, based on Islamic teaching. … religious observance for girls took up less time, since they did not have to learn the Koran, but only to read it and learn about Islam". Children and their families will also experience birth and childhood differently depending on their positionality within intersecting power relations in their home and host countries (Denov, Mitchell, and Rabiau, 2023). In many cases, children born or growing up in exile straddle different cultural and social expectations about how they should behave and what activities are or are not appropriate for children.

We will turn now to the story of a Syrian family resettled to Canada to illustrate four key points in this chapter. First, the location and registration of birth has significant impacts on the immigration status of the child and their ability to exercise their rights. Second, people giving birth outside their home communities often do not benefit from the same medical access and social and cultural supports as they would if they were in their country of origin. Third, childhood is not a homogeneous experience. It is affected by different cultural, social, and religious practices, as

well as an individual's own positionality in relation to racializa-
tion, (dis)ability, gender, sexual orientation, birth order, and family
circumstances. Finally, while child rights are ostensibly universal,
as codified in the CRC, in reality, children are differentially able
to exercise their rights because of migration status, geographic
location, constrained financial resources, and discrimination.

Birth across borders: Ibtesam Alkarnake's story

In February 2017, Ibtesam Alkarnake, a Syrian woman, made
international headlines for giving birth hours after arriving in
Canada as a resettled refugee. Ibtesam, her husband and four
children aged 5 to 17 had been approved for private sponsorship
to Canada[2] through a church in the rural town of Fort McMurray,
Alberta. The sponsorship process took over a year, during which
time Ibtesam became pregnant. Originally, officials had indi-
cated that Ibetsam could not travel, but after the church inter-
vened, a health check was performed and she was given the all
clear, as her due date was at least a month after the travel date
(Kassam, 2017).

On the flight from Jordan, where the family had been living in
a refugee camp for five years, Ibtesam's water broke. She didn't
tell anyone. "It was the hardest decision for the baby and for
the whole family," Ibtesam told CBC News through a translator.
"Because I felt I was going to lose the visa. That's why I took the
decision" (cited in Thurton, 2017). She endured hours of labor
pain during stopovers in Frankfurt and Calgary (Kassam, 2017).
Only once she had arrived in Fort McMurray did Ibetsam tell one

of the sponsorship volunteers and was rushed to hospital, where she gave birth shortly thereafter (Thurton, 2017).

Ibetsam's baby, Eyad, acquired Canadian citizenship at birth. The other members of the Alkarnake family landed in Canada as permanent residents and could apply for Canadian citizenship after fulfilling language, residency, and knowledge requirements. Eyad has only known childhood and life in Canada, while his sister was born in Jordan and his three older brothers have lived in Syria, Jordan, and Canada. Therefore, the siblings have had different experiences of both childhood and migration—neither of which are homogenous processes (see Chapter 1).

Birth in forced migration contexts

While statistics are difficult to obtain due to gaps in birth registration (see below), the UN Refugee Agency estimates that more than 1.9 million children were born into refugee life between 2018 and 2022 (UNHCR, 2023a). As shown in Eyad's story, where babies are born has a significant impact on the health and safety of their mothers, but also their own immigration status and quality of life.

Refugees and asylum seekers often have difficulty accessing culturally appropriate and medically safe prenatal care, labor and delivery. Many refugee camps do not have adequate obstetrical care infrastructure, resulting in high maternal and infant mortality rates. For the Alkarnake family, this was one reason why Ibetsam travelled so late in her pregnancy: "My wife didn't want to go into labor in the camp," her husband, Medyan Alkarnake said (cited in Thurton, 2017). Research in Rohingya refugee

camps in Bangladesh shows that the primary obstacle to accessing adequate maternal care is cost (Parmar *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, resettled refugees and asylum seekers in higher income countries that do not have medical insurance face costly medical bills that can drive them into debt.

Those who do have access to free prenatal, obstetrical and postpartum services may still face discrimination and/or culturally inappropriate care. For example, Elahe Yazdani, an Iranian refugee in Australia, describes giving birth alone in a hospital at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic as "traumatic" and "one of the saddest stories of my life" due to language barriers, discrimination, and lack of informed consent (cited in Burfitt, 2023). Newcomers may also have more difficulty accessing postpartum care and support. For example, in a focus group with Afghan refugees in the US, one woman said, "I was alone too, and I did not have enough experience on how to raise the babies" (cited in Kirkendall and Dutt, 2023).

Due to the significance of geopolitical borders, where a child is born has important implications for their immigration/citizenship status and their documentation as a legal person. Under article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and article 24, paragraph 2 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, everyone has the right to birth registration, which provides proof of legal identity and is fundamental to securing other rights. However, people born in forced migration contexts may be denied this right for practical or socio-legal reasons (Cowper-Smith and Kane, 2024). As shown in Chapter 1, most refugees and displaced people are hosted in countries of the

Global South, which sometimes lack capacity to register births, even for their own citizens. Birth registration fees are a barrier for some families. Children born in transit, on dangerous journeys, to undocumented or unmarried parents, and/or in remote areas may also not be registered for logistical, security, or legal reasons. States may also deny birth registration due to socio-legal and gender discrimination. Some countries only allow fathers to register births, do not recognize children from same-sex relationships, and/or require marriage certificates (UNHCR & UNICEF, 2021). For example, many Syrian refugee children born in Jordan are not registered at birth because the Jordanian state does not recognize traditional Islamic marriage, which is common among Syrian refugees (Shanneik, 2021). As a result, these refugees cannot register the births of their children, who are deemed to be born out of wedlock (IHRC, 2015).

The significant number of people in migration contexts who do not have birth certificates has led to a phenomenon of "bureaucratic birthdates" (Seibel, 2016a), where international organizations arbitrarily assign a January 1 or July 1 birthdate with a year approximated by memories of significant political, historical, social, or natural events. While this allows refugees to access services, it can create problems when birth years are off significantly. For example, in my refugee sponsorship experience in Canada, I encountered an Afghan child who had lost a year of formal schooling due to displacement and was then placed two grades ahead of where they should have been due to a birthdate error in their paperwork. In addition to the challenges of adapting to a new school environment in a new language, this child effectively "skipped" three grades, which posed significant

learning challenges. The private sponsorship of refugees (PSR) program in Canada—through which the Alkarnake family also arrived—highlights differential expectations of childhood across different places. In the Canadian context, chronological age is the basis for legally binding rules that determine when a person can drive, marry, engage in consensual sexual relationships, etc. Throughout my many experiences as a sponsor over 15 years, I have also seen how Canadian-based sponsors may try to impose what they believe to be normatively superior or culturally appropriate beliefs about what children should and should not do. Because of the unequal dependency relationship baked into the PSR program, differential socially constructed views about childhood and parenting pose ethical dilemmas.

Children born outside of their parents' country of citizenship are also at greater risk of statelessness. A stateless person is "not considered a national by any State under the operation of its law" (Article 1(1), 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons). Under the CRC, states are legally obliged to grant citizenship to children who are born in their territory if they are not recognized as citizens of another country. However, in practice, this does not always occur. For example, children born to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are denied citizenship by the Myanmar government (as are their parents), but are also not granted Bangladeshi citizenship (Milton *et al.*, 2017).

When children do gain citizenship in their country of birth, they may have a different nationality than their parents and siblings, as Eyad's experience shows in the example above. In some cases, this causes family separation across borders. For example, the

children of a married couple from Nigeria and the Philippines were born in Nigeria, the Philippines, and the US. When their asylum claim in Canada was unsuccessful, the father was deported to Nigeria, while the children and their mother faced deportation to the Philippines until UN Human Rights Committee intervened (Stevenson and Rukavina, 2023).

Early years in displacement contexts

The early years of a person's life are a period of rapid physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. Displacement can have a significant impact on these aspects of development (Stevens, Siraj, and Kong, 2023). One challenge that families of infants and young children face is access to adequate, nutritional, and culturally appropriate food. In countries of first asylum in the Global South, limited funding and inadequate food rations can cause starvation, dehydration, and severe malnutrition, limiting growth and development of infants and young children (Khuri *et al.*, 2022). Those arriving in the Global North as refugee claimants or resettled refugees are at less risk of starvation, but still face food insecurity and limited access to, and knowledge of, available nutritious food sources, increasing the risk of diet-related disease (Nur *et al.*, 2021).

Young children in displacement contexts often have limited access to culturally appropriate, affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC). Lamb's (2020, p. 129) research in Australia, for example, found "most refugee families did not participate in quality ECEC, with key areas of exclusion being poverty, language, ethno-cultural discrimination, cultural divergence and trauma.