



BROKEN YET RESILIENT: A REFUGEE'S JOURNEY TO A PLYMOUTH LAW DEGREE

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Introduction

This narrative chronicle is a deeply personal and often painful journey through the complexities of migration. Its content may not be pleasant for everyone; it dives into the often-traumatising realities of migration and provides a detailed account that will, I hope, enhance understanding of the headlines we frequently encounter in the media.

I first reflect on my early life, as my family and I fled from war-torn South Sudan and sought refuge in Northern Sudan. Next, I describe the circumstances that led some of my family to relocate to Syria and the challenges we faced. I then explore the difficult decision to leave Syria, which involved crossing some treacherous international borders, ultimately finding a new home and a fresh start in the UK.

Subsequently, I discuss how these life experiences influenced my decision to pursue a degree in law at the University of Plymouth. My engagement in work at the University Law Clinic was instrumental in shaping my aspirations, boosting my confidence and ambitions. Finally, I will share insights working with Devon and Cornwall Refugee Support (DCRS) and explore how these experiences have influenced my future aspirations in law. This account illustrates my journey and highlights the resilience and determination it instilled in me, as I navigate the next chapter of my law career.

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Born in South Sudan

I was born in 1995 in South Sudan, a nation often characterised by struggles and conflicts, in Eastern Africa. My family is quite large, as I have three siblings. My father, a soldier in the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) was deployed on a mission when my mother was pregnant with me, and I was born in his absence.

During these challenging times, we lived with my uncle Jock, my dad's younger brother. The instability of the war forced us to constantly move from one location to another, never able to settle down. When I was just three years old, a strange man approached our house, and in my innocent excitement I ran to hug him, mistakenly believing he was my long-lost father.

The sights and sounds of war were all around me during my childhood. I vividly remember hearing the soldiers' singing songs as they marched and the echoing sounds of gunfire that filled the air. These experiences left a deep impression on me; while playing with my friends, we would mould guns out of the clay we collected from the banks of the river. The soldiers' melodies inspired us, and I longed for the day when I could become a soldier, armed and proud, just like them, to fight for the independence of South Sudan.

My elder sister Rebecca and brother Luka lived and attended school in a government-controlled city called Malakal, with another uncle. The distance between Malakal and our home in Nasir was vast, both geographically and politically. Nasir was under the control of the SPLA, while Malakal remained under the authority of the Sudanese government, which was based in the capital Khartoum. Travelling between Malakal and Nasir could take months, not merely due to the physical distance but because of the grave dangers involved. Crossing from one side to the other was perilous; if the government forces apprehended someone trying to move into SPLA territory, they could face severe consequences, including execution, particularly for those with family ties to the SPLA. This constant fear and the reality of our divided nation loom large in my memories of those formative years.

I do not remember the exact year but when I was 5 or 6 years old my family received the harrowing news that my father had been seriously injured in battle and was being transported to Kenya for medical treatment. We did not know if he would survive and were entirely dependent on my uncle Jock, a dedicated doctor working with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) at a local clinic. This was also a tumultuous period when government forces had taken control of certain areas and were advancing towards our village. As terror and uncertainty swept through the community, my mother, sister Nyaluak and I joined other terrified civilians seeking refuge in the forest that bordered the village. When the SPLA managed to repel the government forces, we cautiously returned home, only to discover the devastating impact of the conflict. Many lives had been lost, and in a frantic rush, my mother made her way to the

hospital. The news she received there was a terrible blow: my uncle had been killed while tending to the wounded. The grief that enveloped us was too painful to bear.

Weeks later, when government forces regained control, the only option left for us was to relocate to a distant village, seeking safety from the violence that had become a grim backdrop to our everyday lives. I vividly remember the moment my father returned and found us in a makeshift displaced persons' camp. It was night, and by the light of a small fire, I was roasting fish, lost in my thoughts, when I felt his presence beside me. He asked if I knew where his family was and the moment, he introduced himself, everything changed. Overwhelmed with joy, I threw my arms around him, reassuring him that he was my father. He lifted me into his arms, and we hugged tightly, tears streaming down our faces. The emotions were raw and powerful as we realised, we had found each other again. Fortunately, despite dire injuries to his right arm, he had survived a harrowing ordeal.

My father shared the heartbreaking news that he had not completed his treatment due to the shock of learning about his brother's death. The civil war between South and North Sudan, which erupted in 1947 even before Sudan gained independence from British colonial rule, had claimed countless lives, including many within my family. Millions of South Sudanese people had been displaced and had scattered worldwide in search of sanctuary.

Before the war, South Sudan was a landlocked region that had experienced significant neglect. Although Sudan was colonised by the British, vast swathes of territory evaded their governance, and no infrastructure such as roads, schools, or medical facilities was established. This systemic marginalisation ultimately ignited a rebellion against the northern government.

My father had joined the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), an organisation founded by Dr John Garang in 1983, which aimed to liberate marginalised South Sudanese and empower them to choose their destiny, either as part of a more unified Sudan or to strive for independence. Over the years, this conflict has resulted in the tragic loss of more than two million South Sudanese lives, including those of many relatives and friends.

When the SPLA recalled my father for duty, he advised us to stay with another uncle Yien who lived in Khartoum. We arrived in about 2003 and faced the challenge of starting a new life. My uncle sheltered us, and I began attending school, where I made new friends. We played football every day after classes, but the joy was fleeting, as my uncle Yien was arrested multiple times. It was then that my mother revealed to me his role as a political activist, advocating for the rights of the South Sudanese people, which was a dangerous pursuit under President Omar El-Bashir's regime. In that harsh climate, being a South Sudanese revolutionary or politician branded you as an 'enemy of God.'

This indoctrination had advanced alarmingly, with the military perpetuating a narrative that framed South Sudanese rebels as non-believers who would be justly punished in the afterlife. Young recruits were told that participating in the fight against the SPLA would guarantee them a place in paradise, regardless of their actions, killing or being killed. This manipulation had nothing to do with Islam but rather formed part of El-Bashir's strategy to mobilise uneducated men for his brutal agenda of oppression and mass execution.

Living as second-class citizens in their homeland, South Sudanese people in the north often resorted to menial jobs, selling wine or cleaning houses to survive. Many of us lived in poorly constructed homes of clay or mud, vulnerable to destruction at the hands of government police whenever it suited their whims. Our properties were often seized, and innocent individuals were jailed for engaging in trade as their only means of survival. The constant threat of violence in our own country was a bitter pill to swallow.

My first encounter with law enforcement as a 12-year old child left an indelible mark on my understanding of justice. I witnessed police destroy homes and brutally beat defenceless people, making arrests without warrants or justification. It horrified me to think that if the police in our own country treated us as lacking in dignity, how could we expect a foreign police force to show any respect towards migrants in other countries?

Soon after we arrived in Khartoum, my elder sister Rebecca married a man who worked as a customs officer at Khartoum Airport. Despite his official position, his status as a South Sudanese in Khartoum was often met with suspicion, so they decided to relocate to Syria. This decision came on the heels of a troubling incident: two of my brother-in-law's colleagues had mysteriously disappeared, leaving their families in a state of confusion and despair. This unsettling environment served as a stark reminder of the precarious existence we faced as South Sudanese, forever grappling with the shadows of war and oppression.

Subsequently my uncle Yien became a target of the government's security forces, leading to a series of arrests and relentless interrogations of my mother. Our lives transformed into a living hell, marked by fear and despair. In early 2009 the situation escalated when a car struck me, resulting in a broken hip and wrist. This unfortunate incident served as a catalyst for Rebecca, who flew back to Khartoum and persuaded my family to make the difficult decision for me to live in Syria with her. This choice meant leaving my mother, father, beloved uncle, friends, school, and all our relatives behind. As I flew to Syria with Rebecca, I clung to the hope that I could find some form of medical treatment for my untreated hip injury.

Syria

Upon our arrival in Damascus, the severity of my condition hit me hard. I was unable to walk or place my right leg on the ground due to the pain and incapacity. The taxi ride with my sister was uncomfortable, both physically and emotionally, as I could not fully engage with the world around me. I was introduced to my nephews, which gave me a brief sense of warmth amidst the turmoil. However, I spent my second day confined to Al-Assad University Hospital.

The month-long stay in the hospital was filled with numerous tests, consultations and difficult decisions. The doctors ultimately determined that I would require a total hip replacement. However, they were concerned about my young age and the ongoing growth of my bones, which complicated matters. Furthermore, the operation was far too expensive for us to afford. When I left the hospital after a gruelling month, I felt only marginally better, armed with a concoction of painkillers that barely dulled my agony. I spent most of my days in bed, overwhelmed with sorrow as I recalled my family, friends, school, playing football, and swimming in the beautiful Blue Nile River. Those memories felt like distant dreams in the face of my family's misfortunes.

As I lay in bed racked with pain, I could not help but wonder when I would be reunited with my family and friends. Would I ever walk again? Would I ever kick a football again? These questions tormented me as I slipped deeper into despair, feeling the weight of my situation pressing down on me.

My sister and her husband worked at the same local nursery in Damascus as the one my nephews attended. Whenever they were at work, they would call home to check on me, providing me with a sense of connection and care. Fortunately, my sister and her family were recognised and registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an organisation that offers aid and protection to those forced to flee their homeland due to conflict.

As the pain gradually subsided, my sister took the initiative to register me with the UNHCR. After a few weeks, I received UNHCR protection ID, which gave me some semblance of security. Slowly, I began to regain a bit of my independence. When I could put my leg down, I ventured outside using crutches, often accompanied by my nephews. We explored the area around our home in Damascus, and I slowly started to forge new friendships. Occasionally, we would attend church in Bab Tuma, an ancient neighbourhood in Old Damascus.

However, we were reminded of the risks we faced with the ongoing political unrest. My brother-in-law had originally fled from Sudan to Syria without collecting his pension and had not informed the government of his departure. Pension is typically granted to individuals who have

worked at a single job for a considerable period in Sudan and left under pressing circumstances. There was due to be a national referendum in Sudan in 2011, before which there was a peace agreement in place between North and South, so in late 2010 my brother-in-law believed it was a safe time to return to Khartoum to secure his pension from Al-Bashir's government.

In Khartoum he remained in contact with us until he was scheduled to meet with his former boss. After that meeting, our communication abruptly ceased. My sister Rebecca reached out to numerous contacts in the hope of finding out what had happened to him. The last information we received was harrowing: he had been convicted and sentenced for leaving his job without prior permission and was told he would be released after serving a short sentence, with the assurance that he could collect his pension upon release. Since then, we have not received any word about his status, leaving us in a painful limbo, hoping for his return while grappling with uncertainty and possible loss.

In 2011, as the Arab uprisings began to unfold in Syria, we were highly concerned about our future safety. During the previous two Christmas seasons, my sister and her husband had given me \$200, most of which I had kept, so in 2011 at the age of 15 I had in total about \$500 in savings.

One day, a friend from church shared his plan to travel to Turkey. He intended to register with the UNHCR there and eventually work to sponsor his family's relocation before the situation in Syria worsened. He invited me to accompany him, but I hesitated, uncertain whether I could manage the journey since it would likely involve a lot of walking. He reassured me that some of his friends from Syria were familiar with the route and could assist. When we met his friends, they informed us that the walk would only take 20 minutes. I had to explain that I could not even walk for one minute, so they offered to carry me, as well as providing food and a taxi journey, for a fee of \$200, which I had enough to cover, so I agreed. I decided not to inform my sister of this plan, as I knew she would never allow it.

We left Damascus by taxi in December 2011, which took us to a small village near the Turkish border. The atmosphere was tense as we prepared to cross into Turkey with our Syrian friends, who were familiar with the treacherous route. Crossing this border was one of the most challenging experiences, as what was meant to be a brief 20-minute trek turned into an arduous journey through hilly, dense forests that lasted over thirteen hours.

In the days leading up to our departure, I had begun to recover from my time at Al-Assad Teaching Hospital in Damascus, where I had received medical treatment. The doctors advised me to stay hydrated, and I took their instructions to heart, drinking lots of water. However, in my naivety, I had failed to pack any for the crossing, convinced it would be a quick trip. As the

hours dragged on, I soon found myself utterly exhausted and parched, struggling to carry on. The pain forced me to take breaks multiple times as my body begged for rest. In desperation, I resorted to gnawing on tree leaves to stave off my relentless thirst.

As we navigated our way through the dark woods, a palpable fear hung in the air. The Syrian had informed us that if the Syrian border guards spotted us, they would not hesitate to shoot. This ominous warning echoed in my mind: our lives were at stake, and we had to make it to Turkey before dawn broke, which would increase the risk of detection. My exhaustion grew until I could no longer manage my belongings. Reluctantly, I left behind my clothes as I struggled to carry anything at all. My friend was there to support me and eventually we reached a village on the Turkish side. There, a car was waiting, and after climbing in, we were driven to the home of a man named Abu Ali.

Turkey

Upon arriving at Abu Ali's house, we were greeted warmly with food and water. However, I struggled to force water down my throat and the thought of food made my stomach churn. Later that afternoon, I managed to contact my sister and fill her in on my situation. Hearing her voice brought me a sliver of comfort and she expressed immense relief to know I was safe, as she had feared I might have fallen into the hands of rioters or Syrian security agents. Yet I felt torn, grappling with the reality of my weakness and the precariousness of my situation.

We stayed at Abu Ali's place for three days as he made arrangements for us to travel to Istanbul, where we would stay with one of his friends. Once in Istanbul, my friend and I decided to visit the UNHCR office to initiate our application for asylum. When we arrived, we received disheartening news that we would need to return in three months. Abu Ali's friend, a Syrian, advised us about the challenges of registering with the UNHCR in Turkey. He recounted stories of Syrians whose applications had not been processed, many of whom had waited for months to receive a call for an interview. They had ultimately decided to leave for Greece, believing they would encounter a more efficient UNHCR process there. Some passionately urged us to join them on their journey. My friend chose to accompany them, but I felt compelled to stay in Istanbul for a few days longer to search for work.

However, the reality of my situation hit hard as I was unable to find work and had only \$200 left. With the time ticking away, Abu Ali's friend organised my departure with another group heading to Greece. I paid him \$150 for the arrangement, leaving me with a mere \$50 to spare.

We set out in the early evening, driven from Istanbul to the Greek border near the village of Alexandroupolis. The air was chilly, and rain began to fall as we walked for two exhausting

hours. When we finally arrived at the river marking the boundary between Turkey and Greece, panic suddenly erupted among the group. People began to sprint as they spotted Turkish border guards approaching us. A few individuals courageously leapt into the water, swimming across to the safety of the Greek side. With no time to think, I followed suit and jumped into the freezing cold river. Fear coursed through me, but I swam vigorously, driven by the instinct to survive. Many of our group were less fortunate as they were apprehended by the Turkish border guards and were returned to Istanbul, where they faced imprisonment. As I reached the other side, a wave of uncertainty washed over me, but I knew that making it across was my first step toward a new chapter.

Life in Greece

I arrived in Greece on 31 December 2011, stepping into the drizzly streets of Alexandroupolis. The weather matched my mood, gloomy and uncertain. My body ached with exhaustion; my legs throbbed painfully as I walked through the unfamiliar city, my stomach growling in hunger.

While wandering toward the town centre, I was unexpectedly intercepted by the police. Fortunately, I was able to communicate in English, which facilitated my transfer to a detention centre where I found myself surrounded by individuals from various nationalities, each with their own stories of hardship and quests for a better life. When my name was eventually called, I was ushered into a small, stark room and instructed to press both hands into a tray of black ink. Confused, I questioned the necessity of this, but the officer responded harshly and rapidly in Greek, and I struggled to understand. His tone, however, made it clear that he expected compliance, so I obliged, pressing my ink-covered hands onto a piece of paper as he directed. After taking my photograph and recording my name and date of birth, I was sent back to the yard.

I spent two days in that detention centre before being relocated to Salonika. I encountered other displaced people there, each carrying the heavy burden of their pasts. Soon after, we set off for Athens, arriving during the first week of 2012. I spent my first night there outside without warmth on a makeshift bed on the pavement, with no idea where I was headed or whom I could turn to, as I knew no one in Greece or any other part of Europe. I had a profound sense of loss and loneliness. My thoughts drifted to my sister and nephews, and the ache of missing them was palpable. As dawn broke, I rose and searched for a public restroom. Eventually, I stumbled into a local coffee shop, hopeful for relief.

The owner, a kind man who turned out to be a fellow countryman, welcomed me warmly and allowed me to use the bathroom. This gesture of kindness felt significant amidst the cold reality

of my situation. He offered me tea, which I gratefully accepted, and I asked him about the location of the UNHCR office. Unfortunately, he was unaware that one existed in Greece. His name was Mr Adam, and he was a recognised political refugee. His honesty was refreshing yet disheartening as he unfolded the grim realities of Greece. Once one of Europe's wealthiest nations, it had been ravaged by the financial crisis of 2008, leading to widespread unemployment. He warned me that many Greek citizens were struggling to make ends meet, and in the face of desperation, some young men had turned to the drug trade for survival.

I asked Mr Adam if he could help me connect with any organisations in Athens that offered support to refugees and he mentioned two: the Hellenic Ministry, which had assistance from American missionaries, and an organisation called Caritas. I decided to visit the Hellenic Ministry, which was a life-altering choice. There I found an incredible community and made lasting friendships. The atmosphere was warm and welcoming, providing meals, showering facilities and a sense of belonging. One of the most striking moments there was when I met a man who knew my family in Syria, which was both unexpected and comforting. He invited me to stay with him for a few nights at his home, where I found a temporary refuge.

This friend, Michael, had also fled Syria and arrived in Athens a few months earlier. Despite the challenges he faced, he managed to stay afloat financially. His relative in Canada had sent him a few hundred euros, allowing him to secure a modest studio flat for just 100 euros a month. However, Michael's generosity was evident: he welcomed another five people into his home, allowing us all to sleep on the floor. We felt immense gratitude for having a roof over our heads during uncertain times.

Subsequently the police issued me a valid document for 30 days. This paper bore my name and photo, serving as my proof of identity in Greece. One morning, I went to Caritas to collect food when police officers stopped me. They asked me for my xartia (document), and I was momentarily confused, unsure of what they meant. Despite my attempts to communicate with them in English, they were uninterested. To my dismay, they proceeded to arrest me and took me to their police van. Inside, I encountered numerous other migrants from various nationalities. We were taken to a detention centre in the outskirts of Athens, where we were held for hours without any proper search or explanation, after which we were simply told to leave.

However, my physical situation had become increasingly difficult. The pain in my hip, which I had been living with for a long time, flared up, making it nearly impossible for me to walk more than a few meters without stopping due to sharp discomfort. I had no money to pay a bus fare back to central Athens and estimated it would take me at least seven or eight hours to walk back. Soon afterwards, a familiar figure emerged from a taxi. It was one of the guys I had

spoken with at the detention centre, who had been released shortly after me. He'd spotted me limping along the roadside and immediately gestured for me to get in. I hesitated, explaining that I had no money for the fare. To my surprise, he reassured me not to worry about it.

I gratefully accepted his offer and climbed into the taxi, but even as I sat there, a small voice in my heart whispered that if I had just stayed at Michael's house, I could have avoided the humiliation I had experienced that day. However, I knew that I could never have anticipated how my day would unfold and focused instead on the kindness of my newfound friend.

When I arrived back at Michael's house, he emphasised the importance of obtaining the *kókkini kárta* or 'red card', which serves as an identity document issued by the police to migrants in Greece. Michael took me to a Greek organisation that explicitly supported people under the age of eighteen and those with disabilities in obtaining a red card; and they offered me an appointment a few days later. After my visit, I decided to take the long walk to the Allazabon immigration centre, where I planned to queue early to increase my chances of being among the first people called for the red card.

That night, I learned that some individuals made a living by queuing and selling their positions in line. I spent a long, cold night outside Allazabon, marking it as one of my most challenging experiences. When the gates finally opened at 8:30, police officers called a few random names to enter, after which they admitted the first fifteen people in line. The remaining individuals were told to try again next time.

Returning home without a red card, I felt disappointed but a few days later, I visited the organisation where I had an appointment. There I saw a support worker named Maria, who observed that I seemed to be too young to be travelling alone and asked if I had any documentation. I provided her with the 30-day document I had received and asked for her assistance in obtaining the red card. She explained that due to my age and disability, she would write to the police requesting that they call my name at Alazabon and she would inform me when to go back there. As the date was uncertain, I decided not to wait and to try my luck by returning again to Allazabon two days before it opened and found myself among the first few people at the head of the queue. This time, I was allowed in and was finally given a red card.

At my next meeting with Maria, I proudly presented my red card, and she was amazed. She congratulated me and said she would check with a children's hostel to see if there was accommodation that would enable me to return to school. A few days later, she informed me that a bed was indeed available and provided me with the address and location.

Before relocating to the hostel, I visited Doctors Beyond Borders to obtain pain relief. The doctor requested an X-ray of my hip and spine. I could not discern what it revealed, but the

doctor treated me with notable kindness. He scheduled a follow-up appointment for two weeks later, handed me 20 euros for transport and offered his private practice address for the next visit. However, I decided not to get on the bus as I needed to buy some food and left the remaining money with Michael to manage.

The Hostel

Life at the hostel started in February 2012 at the age of 16. A nurse called Georgina from Doctors Without Borders escorted me there, where I met two social workers, Vasiliki and Christine. After a brief discussion, they showed me my bunk bed in a shared room designed to accommodate four. They also introduced me to other children living in the hostel, many of whom came from diverse backgrounds, including Afghanistan, Syria, Iran and Pakistan. Each story was unique, but we were all united by our experiences as displaced individuals.

From the moment I moved into the hostel, I began to learn the Greek language. I was enrolled in an intercultural secondary school, a melting pot of cultures and nationalities. Many of my classmates were from countries such as Albania, Bulgaria, Georgia, etc. The school had an intriguing history; it was originally established to accommodate Greek students whose families had returned to Greece after migrating to places such as the US, UK, Canada, and Australia in the aftermath of the country's Civil War between 1946-1949. With such a tumultuous past, I hoped that contemporary Greeks would have a compassionate understanding of what it means to be violently uprooted from one's homeland and forced to leave their homes and loved ones behind.

However, I discovered that Greece's complex migration system was far from welcoming; in fact, it often felt hostile. I had many encounters with the police, where I was stopped and detained for hours and then released, only to be detained again shortly thereafter. Crimes against migrants in Greece went unpunished, creating an atmosphere of fear and vulnerability. A particularly notorious manifestation of this violence was the rise of the Greek far-right party Golden Dawn, which engaged in a campaign of brutal assaults against migrants.

Indeed, a close friend and fellow resident at the children's hostel. Hostel encountered such an attack. He had left early one morning to travel to Allazabon to renew his red card and unfortunately crossed paths with several Golden Dawn sympathisers on his way to the metro station. They brutally attacked him, leaving him severely injured and unconscious. They also wrote messages on his face using broken glass, indicating that migrants who refused to leave Greece would be subjected to further violence and murder. Luckily, my friend was taken to

hospital and survived. This event and others like it strengthened my belief in the individual's right to escape persecution and every human being's fundamental right to life and protection.

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[In subsequent passages omitted from this report, the author continues to narrate his experiences as a migrant in Greece, before hiding as a stowaway on a ship to Italy and later on a train to Paris, until he arrives at 'The Jungle' refugee camp in Calais.]

United Kingdom

At the age of 19 on 5 May 2015, after two long months at the refugee camp in Calais, I finally managed to make my way to the UK. I arrived in England just before midnight, cramped in the narrow space between the chassis and the axle connecting the back wheels underneath a lorry. It was raining and the wheels were throwing dirty water and grit from the road surface over me, as I clung on for dear life. After a few hours of travel, the lorry came to a halt at a set of traffic lights. Realising this might be my chance, I quickly manoeuvred out from underneath, just as the lights changed. I crawled away hastily to avert any potential disaster as the lights turned green. The drivers of the cars waiting behind the lorry were visibly startled when they spotted me. Some began taking photos, likely confused about how a person could have hidden under a moving vehicle. I imagined that many of them returned home that day, filled with questions about my dramatic escape.

I walked along the roadside for some hours until I stumbled upon a bus stop. There, I approached a woman and inquired whether she knew of any nearby police station. She informed me there was no police station close by and advised me to continue toward the town centre to seek assistance. Regrettably, I did not catch the name of the town I was in. When I reached a public park, exhaustion took over, and I paused to rest as my legs ached profoundly from the journey.

While at the park, I noticed a man collecting garbage. I mustered the courage to ask him if he could contact the police on my behalf, as I had just arrived from France and wished to apply for asylum. He kindly informed me that he could not do so since I had not committed any crime. He returned to his work while I took a moment to recuperate, before resuming my walk to the town centre.

Fortuitously, soon afterwards I spotted a police car and waved it down. As the officers approached, I explained my situation, saying that I had just arrived from France and wanted to apply for asylum. To my relief, they asked if I was comfortable sitting in their car or if I

needed more space to rest my aching leg. This moment marked my first positive encounter with law enforcement. My previous experiences with police – marked by fear and negative perceptions, including arrests, violence, and a lack of consideration for individual welfare – were transcended by this act of kindness.

My expectation was to be met with hostility and physical restraint, given my past encounters with police, including my home country, where racial prejudice prevailed. Instead, the officers demonstrated genuine concern for my wellbeing and explained that they would take me to the immigration centre in Dover, which would take a few hours.

On arrival at the Dover immigration centre, I was handed over to the immigration team. I spent a day there, where I had two separate screening interviews with border force officers who sought to understand my background and reasons for coming to the UK. The following day, I was transported to Croydon, where I spent two days at a hotel, awaiting relocation from London.

After two days, I was assigned to Cardiff, the primary office of the Home Office responsible for South-West dispersals. I then stayed for 20 days at the well-known Lyn Hotel, a place of temporary accommodation for asylum seekers. During my time there, I met a caseworker and a security staff member, both of whom were from South Sudan. Before my dispersal to Plymouth, a solicitor from Duncan Lewis Solicitors represented me in my asylum case.

At that time, asylum cases were processed relatively quickly and during my stay at Lyn Hotel I had my substantive interview. The questions posed were intense and probing: I had to explain why I had come to the UK, the consequences I would face if I were returned to my country, and how I could prove my identity as a Sudanese national without official documents. The officers also required details of my journey from Sudan and questioned my motives for applying for asylum in the UK, rather than the other countries I had been through.

The answers to those pivotal questions fundamentally secured my status as a recognised refugee in the UK under the 1951 Refugee Convention (often called the Geneva Convention)¹ for five transformative years. 1951 Refugee convention

After my temporary accommodation in Cardiff I was dispersed to Plymouth, where I received an invitation of assistance from the British Red Cross (BRC).² When I arrived there I was met with a warm welcome, a stark contrast to my experiences in other cities before Plymouth. The staff introduced me to various essential services that would significantly ease my transition.

¹ 1951 Refugee Convention <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-relating-status-refugees>>

² British Red Cross <<https://www.redcross.org.uk/>>

They registered me with a General Practitioner (GP) and the central library, and guided me to the local post office, where I would obtain my weekly living expenses of £35. In addition, I was introduced to Devon and Cornwall Refugee Support (DCRS), a charity that serves as a vital bridge between asylum seekers and the Home Office, advocating for asylum seekers' rights and needs.

After several weeks of navigating the complexities of the UK asylum system, I reached a significant milestone: I was granted refugee status and officially recognised as a refugee in the United Kingdom. This recognition was a huge relief, especially after my tumultuous and trying experiences within the Greek immigration system. The painful recollections of my time in Greece, marked by beatings and humiliation, now felt distant as I held in my hands a document that represented my identity as a legal refugee. This piece of paper symbolised a new beginning for me, empowering me to pursue opportunities that would shape my life and future.

Previously I had lived in accommodation provided by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) where I was prohibited from working and could not be outside my accommodation without prior approval. This changed substantially with my new status: I was now able to enjoy the freedoms that came with being recognised as a refugee, including the ability to relocate anywhere in the UK of my choosing and to follow my dreams.

In just three months, I formed a close-knit circle of friends in Plymouth, many of whom shared similar backgrounds, and embarked on continuing my education. I enrolled at a local college to pursue Functional Skills Levels One and Two, GCSEs and access to Higher Education, as my ultimate aim was to apply to Law School at Plymouth University.

Law School

Attending law school had always been my dream, but I never believed it would become a reality. I always had a strong desire to study and achieve something meaningful. However, this ambition had been consistently thwarted by my past circumstances, constant displacement and instability. My hopes of gaining an education had been dashed in Khartoum, Syria, and even in Greece. An adage from my homeland resonated with me: It suggests that when a person aspires to achieve something, the chances of success often favour those who may not need the opportunity as desperately. Nevertheless, I refused to let that discouragement weigh me down. In 2020 when I was 24 the opportunity to further my

education finally presented itself at higher education level. I was more than ready to seize it and pursue my aspirations.

Why law?

My desire to attend law school was deeply rooted in the traumatic experiences and horrific atrocities I witnessed back in my home country, where the consequences of divisive governance fuelled by self-interest, corruption, and ethnic rifts left indelible scars. These elements were not just byproducts of a failing system; those in power deliberately manipulated them to advance political agendas that disregarded the welfare of the populace.

Throughout my journey, which had taken me across different countries and exposed me to various immigration systems, I encountered countless individuals who shared a similar plight. Many of them, like me, needed the expertise of an immigration lawyer to navigate the complexities of their situations. These experiences profoundly shaped my understanding of the challenges faced by immigrants and fuelled my determination to become an immigration lawyer myself. This aspiration was more than a career choice; it was a calling to assist those who find themselves in the same precarious circumstances that I once faced.

In addition to my personal motivation, I developed a fascination with the concepts of law and order. No government system or modern society can thrive without these principles as a foundation. My intrigue mainly focused upon the law's moral and practical dimensions, especially the doctrine of judicial precedent within the English legal system. This concept, which ensures certainty, predictability, and consistency, is crucial for maintaining trust in the legal system. By pursuing a law degree, I have deepened my understanding of these vital principles and apply them in my practice for the benefit of those who continue to endure the struggles I witnessed. This journey into the legal field was not just an academic pursuit; it represented an opportunity to have meaningful impact upon the lives of others.

The Immigration and Refugee Law Clinic

The University of Plymouth Law Clinic 'offers real advice and assistance to clients in the Plymouth community across a range of legal areas. Coordinated by law students and supervised by staff, the clinic provides hands on experience for students and provides a vital service to the local community'.³ During my law degree, my experience as a refugee in the United Kingdom was a crucial factor in my decision to engage with the work of the Immigration

³ University of Plymouth Law Clinic <<https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/services/law-clinic>>

and Refugee Law Clinic (IRLC). This service ‘provides information and assistance on issues of family life, long residence and naturalisation and registration for British citizenship’.⁴

The IRLC also includes the Refugee Family Reunion (RFR) project, which runs in partnership with the British Red Cross⁵ and which ‘seeks to help reunite refugee families who have become separated due to persecution, war and conflict. This project was set up to help people affected by loss of legal aid services in the city’.⁶ This initiative provides law students with valuable legal education and practical experience, while making a significant impact on the community. The IRLC operates as a non-profit venture and is registered with the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner, thereby ensuring the highest standards of legal care as it supports refugees seeking to reunite with their family members in the UK and provides them with essential legal assistance.

Intellectual skills

The intellectual skills I gained during the RFR Project enabled me to identify the legal issues within the international, national, and regional frameworks supporting family reunification. Most of the cases I encountered primarily fell under the Immigration Rules Appendix Family Reunion (Protection).⁷ According to the law, individuals granted refugee status or humanitarian protection in the UK can be joined by their close family members, including spouses and dependent children under 18 who were part of their family before seeking asylum.

Throughout my work, I observed that many refugees applying for family reunification faced similar vulnerabilities. Many family members I interacted with did not speak English and needed interpreters and placed their trust in my support to navigate the online application process. While RFR applications require various supporting documents, the refugees' home countries often have different documentation cultures. In many cases, marriage or birth certificates are not routinely issued or are only available upon request. In addition, such documents may have been lost during tumultuous situations caused by war or internal conflict. Some refugees were born at home rather than hospitals, or in displacement camps without proper medical facilities. Under these conditions, gathering the necessary evidence to support applications was a significant challenge, often requiring complex, detailed written explanation.

⁴ <<https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/services/immigration-and-refugee-law-clinic>>

⁵ n2

⁶ n4

⁷ Immigration Rules Appendix Family Reunion (Protection) <<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-appendix-family-reunion-protection>>

In addition, although RFR applications are free, hidden financial costs included travelling to conduct TB tests and obtaining translations of documents, despite the fact that most refugees are prohibited from working during their asylum process and thus are unable to save anything towards these costs.

Practical skills

Working on the RFR project allowed me to refine my practical legal skills, particularly in verbal and non-verbal communication. Under the mentorship of Rosie Brennan, Law Clinic Director, and Rachida Azaitraoui, RFR Immigration Adviser at the British Red Cross (BRC), I received outstanding guidance and training on enhancing my professional capabilities. This included observing client interviews, taking attendant notes, and conducting my own sessions with clients.

During the initial phase of my placement, I was fortunate to attend multiple interviews conducted by Rachida and Amy at the BRC office and Rosie and Katherine at the Law Clinic. Through these experiences, I refined my active listening skills. Implementing these skills during client interviews proved vital in establishing trust and encouraging clients to openly share their experiences, making them feel valued. I was particularly struck while shadowing Rosie, as she maintained eye contact and genuinely engaged with the client's concerns, reassuring them and prompting more in-depth sharing. At the conclusion of each interview, she summarised the discussion and provided clear guidance on the next steps, reinforcing to clients that their concerns are prioritised and respected.

Similarly, while observing Rachida's interviews at the BRC, I saw her skilfully ask open-ended questions like, "Tell me how you first met?" and "When did the relationship become intimate?" This approach fostered an environment that encouraged clients to speak freely and allowed us to understand their concerns from their perspective. I also learned the importance of prioritising emotional well-being during interviews, so that if a client showed signs of distress recounting past experiences, the interview would be paused and rescheduled, ensuring that their needs came first.

Later I applied these valuable skills by conducting interviews with various clients at the BRC, utilising online interpreters. At these interviews I was tasked with creating attendant notes, client care letters, or statements of truth following each session. One interaction stood out when the client asked me about my background. Through this exchange, I could sense his longing for connection after being separated from his family and friends for an extended

period. I related deeply to his story, as like him, I left my home country at a young age, leaving loved ones behind. Having become disabled and living with chronic pain, I understood the weight of separation, particularly as I contemplated reuniting with my mother under such changed circumstances. This connection reinforced my determination to pursue such work and to advocate for vulnerable members of our community.

Ethical skills

While working at the Clinic, I adhered to one of the most crucial professional skills: maintaining confidentiality. As I engaged with refugees, it was my responsibility to safeguard their sensitive information, including their identities, locations, religious beliefs and political views. After joining, I signed the Clinic's confidentiality agreement, which aligns with the BRC's fundamental policy of protecting clients' data. Upholding this responsibility was not just ethical; it was a legal obligation to ensure the privacy of individuals.

Overall, my experience working on the RFR project was transformative. It elevated my capabilities to a professional standard and enhanced my intellectual, transferable, practical and ethical skills. Whilst there I made significant progress in legal writing, document drafting and conducting client interviews, while striving to make a real difference to the lives of those in need. Recently these skills enabled me to secure a job as an Asylum and Immigration Caseworker at Devon and Cornwall Refugees Support.⁸

Working for Devon and Cornwall Refugees Support (DCRS)

DCRS is a charity dedicated to improving the lives of vulnerable individuals. It was founded by Isatta Khallon and her husband, who had themselves experienced the complexities of the immigration system, after fleeing from civil war in Sierra Leone to the UK. The Khallon family recognised the profound challenges faced by newcomers who found themselves in a new city where they did not speak the same language, and who struggled to locate halal shops and places of worship. What began as a humble endeavour to provide essential services from a room in their family home blossomed into a registered charity with a legal department, casework department, activity department, and befriending department. Each of these departments plays a pivotal role in shaping the futures of those they support, demonstrating a comprehensive approach to community service.

⁸ Devon and Cornwall Refugees Support <<https://dcrs-plymouth.org/>>

In Plymouth, DCRS serves as a critical frontline organisation, responding to the needs of asylum seekers dispersed to the area by the Home Office (HO). While Plymouth University Law Clinic handles cases both within and beyond the framework of the Immigration Rules, including some complex asylum cases, DCRS is directly engaged with the majority of asylum seekers. The organisation is committed to providing a wide array of essential services tailored to the unique needs of its clients. This includes legal representation through an overburdened legal team which often struggles to meet the high volume of cases alone. In circumstances where DCRS cannot provide direct legal representation, its dedicated caseworkers liaise with other law firms that hold Legal Aid contracts to ensure that service users receive the necessary legal support.

Whilst working at DCRS I have been able to apply, extend and strengthen the training, skills and experience in immigration law I gained at Plymouth University Law Clinic, and this has given me newfound confidence and motivation. DCRS functions as a vital bridge for asylum seekers, providing logistical support for their day-to-day survival. My experiences have equipped me with empathy and understanding whilst working with vulnerable individuals, many of whom have suffered profoundly traumatic and harrowing experiences. Supporting clients, especially those in acute distress, can pose significant challenges, but my personal journey enables me to relate to their struggles.

Next Steps

Looking ahead, I am determined to pursue a career as an immigration solicitor, envisioning a future devoted to defending the rights and dignity of migrants. This area of law is often overlooked, and migrants are often unfairly blamed for fleeing their home countries and seeking refuge abroad. According to the BBC, although the UK's net migration in 2024 was estimated to be 728,000, only 30,000 individuals arrived by small boats.⁹ This statistic represents a small fraction of overall migration, which contrasts sharply with the narrative constructed by some politicians. The media's disproportionate focus on 'small boat arrivals' has created misleading impressions that almost all migration occurs via this route, thereby obscuring the broader context of migration.

Compounding these challenges, many thousands of asylum cases end up trapped in legal and administrative backlogs. This means that individuals and families are forced to wait years before receiving a decision. My time spent seeking asylum in Greece serves as a poignant reminder of the individuals trapped in that country's immigration system, people whose lives

⁹ Daniel Sexton, 'Small Boat Channel Crossings Pass 30,000 in 2024' (*BBC News*, 31 October 2024) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgmvy0gpmgro>>

are put on hold while they navigate bureaucratic hurdles. In comparison, the UK immigration system, although flawed, has historically been more efficient, particularly before the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the current state of affairs reveals significant shortcomings that need to be addressed.

The reality many migrants face is heart-wrenching. Even when they are finally awarded citizenship, they cannot turn back the clock to reclaim the years of their freedom lost. How do they reunite with loved ones, or reclaim the life they once cherished? As someone working on the front line of immigration services, I am deeply affected each time a service user approaches me with a letter containing a negative asylum decision, yet I also experience immense joy when I can share good news after reading favourable outcomes. Through my work, I have learned that many individuals are traumatised by the letters they receive and often fear opening their letters, which fuels my determination to help and advocate for such individuals.

Conclusion

The decision to leave one's country comes with many unimaginable consequences. For many refugees, this is not a voluntary choice but a matter of life or death.

As a refugee who left my homeland at a young age, I have spent more time living abroad than in my homeland. Living alongside fellow refugees has enriched my perspective and made me strong. The challenges I faced have fostered resilience within me and I refuse to be defined by my disability.

My motivation propels me forward to help others facing the same plight. Despite the pain I have experienced, I strive to love the world while acknowledging my struggles. Thank you for allowing me to share my journey with you.