

“Young Strong Men Should Be Fighting” – The Vulnerability of Young Male Refugees

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Introduction

European discourse on refugees has changed dramatically since 2015 – from a discourse on the vulnerability of refugees to a discourse on security, i.e. from refugees *in* danger to refugees *as* danger (Gray and Franck 2019). This discursive shift mirrors and enhances ever more restrictive refugee regimes – protection *against* refugees instead of protection *of* refugees. However, neither of these two discourses does justice to the individual and often complex situations of refugees and neither of these discourses perceives refugees as acting persons with political and social rights. Both discourses can be read as postcolonial forms of desubjectivation (Lorence 2018). At the same time, these two discourses do not appear separately, but complement each other in a form of biopolitics in which the body of the refugees is represented and perceived either as a suffering or a threatening one (Fassin 2001). In this way, understandings of refugee agency are framed in a specific way fundamentally excluding the possibility for refugees to find and develop their own way into receiving countries and societies: Either they are seen as helpless victims or as problematic perpetrators. This representation corresponds to a differentiation according to gender and age, which largely excludes young male refugees from the narrative of vulnerability and thus makes them vulnerable in a specific form.

Vulnerability as a postcolonial construct

“All refugees are vulnerable”, is the title of an article by Lorenz (2018) in which he deconstructs this seemingly self-evident statement from a postcolonial

perspective. The attribution of vulnerability represents a form of epistemic violence that by definition renders refugees powerless and speechless. In this sense, humanitarian aid also always means the denial of subjectivity and of possibilities for action. “There is no care without control” (Agier 2008, 4). Humanitarian protection of refugees is the “left hand of empire” (ibid., 200): Cultural and/or individual inadequacies are paternalistically compensated for instead of imperialist mechanisms of oppression and exploitation being epistemically analyzed and politically fought. The vulnerability paradigm clearly shows the origin of this term from disaster research, even though, throughout its development, vulnerability research has repeatedly turned against the idea of vulnerability being natural and inevitable (Lorenz 2018, 64–66). The vulnerability of refugees is attributed to causes in political systems and human behavior – but these causes are supposedly beyond the sphere of influence of those who provide humanitarian aid. They can only combat the consequences and symptoms.

This not only obscures the post-colonial, imperialist structure of the globalized world order. At the same time, the right of refugees to assistance becomes a consequence of an individual’s need for help rather than a legal right. This ambivalence is already present in the Geneva Convention, whose preamble refers to the “social and humanitarian character of the refugee problem” as well as the “deep responsibility for refugees” (UNHCR n.d.). And, of course, the term “well-founded fear” in the definition of refugees also represents an at least partial psychological characterization of refugees that can be translated into vulnerability. On the other hand, however, specific individual rights of refugees arise from the Geneva Convention in combination with the Declaration of Human Rights, which are not only humanitarian but can also be read as empowerment.

According to Pupavac (2008, 273), this concept of refugees as particularly needy persons was not prominent during the Cold War, when refugees were depicted as political heroes and served as an argument for the moral superiority of capitalism over real existing socialism (cf. also Chimni 1998). While a political-legal approach to refugees was dominant during this time, since the fall of the Soviet Union, claims by refugees have primarily been argued on a humanitarian basis. The rights of refugees have increasingly receded into the background; the “suffering” of these people, not the danger of political persecution, is in the foreground. This leads to a form of biopolitics in which the “suffering body” of refugees is the justification for protection and support. Embodiment (in the literal sense) of suffering becomes a condition for be-

ing considered an "authentic fugitive" (Fassin 2001). This representation goes hand in hand with a "feminization" of the image of refugees along classical gender roles of helpless women and strong men. This deprives female refugees of the possibility of self-determined action and tends to exclude male refugees from the status of refugees (Judge 2010).

Refugees in danger versus refugees as danger

For some EU countries, the short summer of "Willkommenskultur" (Welcome Culture) in 2015 represented a highlight of this humanitarian access to refugees in all its ambivalence. The need for help and protection of (especially Syrian) refugees was out of question for a short time and was widely supported by the population, especially in Germany and Austria. At the same time, however, these characteristics of refugee status were directly linked to other characteristics that cannot be derived from the Geneva Convention, in particular a willingness to integrate and gratitude towards the receiving state. Thus, in mainstream discourse, the one-sided right of refugees to protection and life opportunities has been used to construct an exchange relationship in which any "non-good behavior" of the refugees leads and should lead to the loss of rights. A legal relationship thus became a mutual moral relationship, the termination of which seems justified if one of the two sides does not fulfill its obligations. Other discourses focus with similar consequences on particularly talented refugees and the services they can provide for their country of residence. Here it is obviously implied that non-talented or less talented refugees are less worthy of protection. Overall, discourses that demand special capacities from refugees lead to similar criteria being applied to refugees as to voluntary migrants, thereby contradicting the legal situation (Judge 2010, 13).

In the German-speaking countries, this understanding of duties and neglect of duty of refugees reached a discursive climax after it became known that "migrants" (among them, incidentally, only very few refugees) had sexually harassed women in Cologne to a very considerable extent on New Year's Eve 2015/16. These incidents confirmed the prejudices against refugees and migrants by an increasingly nationalistic and xenophobic mainstream. And those who continued to support refugees (in some cases with considerable personal effort) had nothing to counter these prejudices but the (quite implausible) assertion that refugees were not capable of such acts.

Problematischer erscheint hingegen eine antirassistische Politik, die mittlerweile in einer paternalistischen Identitätspolitik verstrickt ist, in der ihr Gegenüber – die Geflüchteten – stets nur Opfer sein können, darin also Unschuldige (...) In dieser Reaktion steckt indes eine Entmündigung [...]. Diese Reaktion spricht von einer Moral der Schuld, in der die anderen immer nur Getriebene ihres Schicksals sind, niemals aber verantwortliche Menschen sein können. [An anti-racist policy appears problematic, which is meanwhile entangled in a paternalistic identity policy, in which its counterpart – the refugees – can only ever be victims, i.e. innocent people. This reaction, however, contains an incapacitation [...]. This reaction speaks of a morality of guilt in which the others are always only driven by their fate, but can never be responsible people.] [Monika Mokre's translation] (Perinelli 2016).

After the short period of general good will towards refugees in 2015, the discourse and the political handling of refugees have become harder and harder by leaps and bounds, so that in retrospect the paternalism of 2015 appears rather as a golden age even in a critical view of the “Willkommenskultur”. An image of the general helplessness of refugees has given way to a mainstream discourse according to which refugees are usually “economic refugees”, if not criminals or even terrorists who do not deserve “our” protection. The humanitarian discourse has increasingly been overlaid and thwarted by a security discourse – from “refugees *at* risk” to “refugees *as* risk” (Gray / Franck 2019). Moral condemnations of refugees now already begin with the (inevitable) illegal border crossing into the EU (Ingvars and Gíslason 2018).

This approach to flight as guilt and danger is exemplified in the program that the Austrian coalition government has set itself in January 2020.¹ This can already be seen in the slogan advertising this program – obviously expressing a compromise between the neoliberal-conservative Austrian People's Party with its focus on migration control and the Greens: “Let's protect climate and borders”. Consequently, the chapter on “Migration and Asylum” (190-200) is primarily concerned with border protection, repatriation to countries of origin and transit, compliance with the Dublin Agreement, readmission agreements – in other words, measures that prevent an asylum application and/or remaining in Austria. Positive measures concern the protection

1 See: https://www.wienerzeitung.at/_em_daten/_wzo/2020/01/02/200102-1510_regierungsprogramm_2020_gesamt.pdf

and legal status of minors (197) and the empowerment of women (199). Measures for women and young girls are also listed separately in the chapter on integration, which primarily mentions the duties of migrants (205, 207).²

The vulnerable refugee has become an exception, the recognition of which makes it possible not to completely abandon the claim of humanitarian commitment. "Recognizing the intersectional formulation of oppressions based on race and gender (as well as sexuality, class and other axes of social identity) that has been identified by black feminist and feminist postcolonial scholars [...], we trace the gendered and racialized images of threat and vulnerability through which refugees come to be read as risk or as at risk" (Gray and Franck 2019, 278).

Thus, the definition of vulnerability is transformed from a general figure of disempowerment and desubjectivation to an individual question of survival. In his own, almost admirably naive clarity, Donald Trump has put the answer to this question in a nutshell: "Look at what's happening all over Europe. It's a mess and we don't need it. [...] When you look at this migration, you see so many young, strong men. [...] And you're almost like, 'Why aren't they fighting? You don't see that many women and children'."³ Critical comments on this statement – such as those in the article quoted – focused on current statistics that show that more and more women and children are fleeing to Europe – but not on considerations of whether young men should really be expected to "fight".

Women and children first!

A content analysis of British newspaper articles published between September 2015 and March 2016 (Gray and Franck 2019) clearly shows the images associated with vulnerability: It is about "womenandchildren" (Enloe 1993, 166). Children, women, especially pregnant women, and in some cases old or disabled refugees become the symbol of the vulnerability of refugees. Even the death of women and children is seen as a greater tragedy than that of men in the articles studied. When men are described as victims, they are minors,

2 These measures include a ban on headscarves for girls up to the age of 14, where there are plausible doubts as to whether this actually serves integration.

3 See e.g.: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2016/05/16/trumps-claim-that-young-strong-men-dominate-the-european-migrant-crisis/?arc404=true>.

elderly and/or physically disabled men, or in some cases family fathers. These images of “refugees in need” are also reproduced by those who seek to create understanding and compassion for refugees. For example, a photographer who worked for the UNHCR reports that he was told to take pictures of women and children (Turner 2016). This fulfills and reproduces the public’s ideas about refugees; at the same time, these images also correspond to the helpers’ own image of their task. “(F)or many humanitarian workers a young Syrian man with gelled hair and turned-up fake leather collar ... looks like a threat, not like a beneficiary.” The fear of these young men cannot be reconciled with the professional ethics of humanitarian workers, so these young men become invisible: “(T)hey simply do not occupy a place in the humanitarian imaginary” (Turner 2016).

This does not mean, however, that young men do not appear in the reporting. They are described as a threat, often because of their sheer presence: “Describing the ‘Jungle’ camp in Calais, for instance, one article highlights how neighbouring residents speak of being ‘terrified by the presence of hundreds of men living rough, just yards from their front doors’” (Mulholland 2015, quoted from Gray and Franck 2019, 281).

The analysis also makes it clear that images of refugees have shifted along the axis from humanitarian aid to securitization from August/ September 2015 to early 2016 – from the emblematic image of the drowned Alan Kurdi to “representations of the in-comers as a (racialized, masculinized) threat” (Gray and Franck 2019, 283). After the events in Cologne, not only the discourse on refugees in the German speaking countries changed dramatically but the image of vulnerable refugee women disappeared for the most part also from the British media. “(T)he idea that racialized women need to be ‘saved’ from their oppressive cultures and from the hardships of their refugee journeys recedes into the background in the face of the more immediate concern for the ‘saving’ of ‘our’ women. Refugee women, who were previously held apart as a particular group in need of support, are now reabsorbed into the threatening (masculinized) mass of ‘refugees’ written large” (ibid., 286).

Young male refugees are under general suspicion of deviant behavior, of violence – especially sexualized violence – and of the ability and will to secure their survival by illegal means. These attributions of “foreign” masculinity are part of a colonial tradition:

According to Butler, the unclear character of racism is thus less an independent axis but rather a condition for being able to articulate gender orders.

And vice versa, the diffuse, precisely indefinable gender roles function as a resonance space for racist ideas. The one expresses itself through the other and thereby re-actualizes itself. [...] What black feminists aptly described decades ago with their view of race and gender: 'All Blacks are men, all women are white.' (Perinelli 2016).

Here, too, we can clearly see the biopolitical and gendered embedding of the discourse on refugees. If it is not about the suffering (mostly female) body, then it is about the physical threat of male refugees. The suffering body needs care, the threatening body needs control and/or exclusion (Judge 2010). At the same time, the physical threat by male refugees is updated in other contexts, for example in the fear that refugees will take jobs away from locals because of their physical strength or that they will be more sexually attractive to local women.⁴

Gender-specific reasons and experiences for refuge

So, whoever is a vulnerable refugee – young men are not. But in war situations young men are vulnerable in a specific way, because not only Donald Trump, but also the respective belligerent parties believe that they "should fight" – for whatever or against whatever. In civil war situations, for example in Syria, the different belligerent parties try to recruit fighters by force; the same applies to the Taliban and the IS in Afghanistan (Rasuly-Paleczek 2017, 65). "(T) the most vulnerable and constantly targeted population group in situations of war is non-combatant men of battle age, since they are perceived as a threat to the forces at war" (Suerbaum 2017, 126; see also Tan 2017, 44). Thus, young men have to leave the country if they do not want to participate in acts of war. "There are a lot of young men leaving Syria because they don't want to be in the military. It's better than being Syrian and killing one another."⁵ As in many other countries, desertion is punished with imprisonment in Syria. In a political-legal discourse on flight, the refusal of military service on grounds of conscience could be considered a reason for asylum; in the humanitarian

4 This focus on physical characteristics also plays a role in the relationship between refugees, as JUDGE (2010) shows using the example of Afghan and Syrian refugees in Athens.

5 See <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/05/world-afraid-young-refugee-men-160530110614219.html>

discourse on individual suffering, this consideration has no place. Instead, draft resistance of refugees is interpreted as cowardice and the flight to Europe as a violent invasion – in the words of Czech President Miloš Zeman: “I am profoundly convinced we are facing an organized invasion and not a spontaneous movement of refugees.”⁶

Danger for the sons is often the reason for the flight of the whole family, as Magdalena Suerbaum records in her anthropological study of Syrian refugees in Egypt. This also results in a specific sense of responsibility of these young men for their family; in the words of one of the interviewees: “Men should be strong. They are stronger than women. They should support the family. I work and study at the same time. This makes us men. We stand more than we can” (Suerbaum 2017, 125).

On the other hand, men also assume their responsibility for the families by setting off alone to Europe in the hope of being able to bring their family of origin and/or wives and children on a safe path. “They tell us, ‘We do this dangerous trip on our own, we get asylum, and there is a law in the European Union that the family can come,’” says Christof Zellenberg, the chairman of the Europa Institute [...]. “You see few newcomers over 50”, he adds, because “this is a grueling trip, and you need to be young and strong.”⁷

But this murderous journey is often even more dangerous for young, strong men than for families, women and children. According to the UNHCR, in Libya, for example, young men are forcibly recruited by various parties to the civil war.⁸ And under the very often inhumane conditions in camps and en route, the meager state care, the always inadequate resources of NGOs and even the efforts of traffickers for their clientele are primarily given to those who are considered more vulnerable. Lewis Turner (2016) reports on the situation in Jordanian refugee camps: “Men are significantly more likely than women or children to be refouled to Syria for alleged security reasons, to suffer from particular forms of police harassment, and to be forcibly encamped (or otherwise punished) by Jordanian authorities for labor market violations.” Although it is generally very difficult for refugees to find paid work in Jordan, it is assumed that this possibility is open to men. In the

6 See <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/05/world-afraid-young-refugee-men-160530110614219.html>.

7 See <https://www.nationalreview.com/2015/10/why-europes-migrants-are-men/>

8 See <https://www.dpa-international.com/topic/unhcr-warring-libyan-parties-using-migrants-fighters-urn%3Anewsml%3Adpa.com%3A20090101%3A200117-99-508611>

camps, families without an adult man are considered more needy than those with a family man – although this thesis is not supported by UNHCR statistics. Therefore, single women with children receive more financial support and better access to basic infrastructure, which should be open to all. The refugees often respond to this by registering women with children as families and their accompanying family fathers as single men. Additional pressure on refugee men comes from the obligation (recognized by themselves and their families) to support the family in the country of origin, even if they are not financially able to do so (Kamal 2017, 90 and 92).

Also, special psychosocial programs or spaces are more likely to be provided for women and children – partly because the financiers of NGOs are particularly interested in special services for these groups. Programs for dealing with sexualized violence that want to include male victims of sexualized violence often meet with incomprehension or even rejection by financiers, since, they assume that, by definition, men cannot be victims of sexualized violence (Turner 2016).

The NGO *Médecins Sans Frontières* reports similarly about the situation on the Balkan route:

A recent study by MSF [*Médecins Sans Frontières*] showed that male migrants are more likely to be subjected to violence from state authorities including the police and the military, smugglers and vigilante groups [...]. They are also more likely to be detained during their journey and be repeatedly 'pushed back', expelled and deported (Arsenijević et al. 2018, 87).

Here, too, the NGOs are focusing primarily on families, women and children. The study quotes two male refugees: "(F)or single people, guys like me, nobody cares. [...] So we, single men, are simply left on the street. [...] I went to Miksaliste [support hub for migrants] and asked if I could stay there just for one night and go in the morning. They said 'no, this place is only for minors and families, you can't stay here'" (ibid., 91). The study also cites refugees on the Balkan route who report that traffickers are more concerned with the basic needs of women and children and that male refugees have been forced to support families in difficult terrain and to carry their luggage.

This form of differentiation also finds its way into official policies towards refugees. For example, the Helsinki Committee reported in 2017 that the Hungarian government had introduced different transit zones for families, unaccompanied minors and men traveling alone. While the first two groups were given priority, only one unaccompanied man per week was allowed to ap-

ply for asylum (*ibid.*, 87). And the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, known as a liberal, declared his country's willingness to accept 25,000 Syrians as early as 2015, but explicitly excluded men without families from this program.⁹

No permission for arrival

Refugees and migrants of all sexes embark on the perilous journey to Europe with high hopes – and are usually disappointed in these hopes. This situation leads to gender specific consequences, in some ways, affecting men more than women (while, in other ways, women are more negatively concerned). “Men often lose their ability to fulfil their traditional roles of protector and provider and find themselves ill-equipped for new urban or camp-based market opportunities” (Buscher 2015, 6).

In addition to the often much lower – if any – earning potential and life chances, young fugitive men in particular clearly experience rejection by the majority population. A young refugee from Eritrea realistically says: “If I always see bad things about refugees in the media, how can I make friends with them?” Of course, this also applies, and possibly to a greater extent, when it comes to contacts with women: “Over 80 percent of the young men interviewed were single and childless. Many of them also want to get in contact with women of the same age. But the negative image attributed to them when it comes to dealing with women, and in some cases racially exploited, is well-known to the refugees and makes it more difficult for them approach other people in an unbiased way.”¹⁰ Here can also be seen one explanation (of many) for the events of Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015 and similar forms of sexual assault.

(A)ll male associations can be really dangerous for women – and also for other men [...]. This applies to the army, the prison, the mob on Father's Day, or even to soccer fan culture. But also many male refugees, especially those from North African countries, are forced by the racist Aliens Act into men's associations. [...] Forced housing [...] (becomes) a place of frustrated,

9 See. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/05/world-afraid-young-refugee-men-160530110614219.html>.

10 See <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/14219/young-male-refugees-struggle-with-disappointment-and-mental-health-issues>

subalternized groups of men [...], in which affective and sexual misery also prevails. For these men it is difficult to meet someone, they are not allowed to work, cannot buy anyone a beer, have no room of their own where they can take someone home with them and are therefore considered unattractive in the market of sexual or romantic possibilities (Perinelli 2016).

In many European countries, it is also apparent in asylum procedures and with regard to residence rights that young men are more likely to be deported (Bosworth et al. 2016). In this vein, until the takeover of the Taliban in summer 2021, the Austrian asylum courts, regularly ruled that returning to Afghanistan were not a problem for young men who are able to work - although the German expert Friederike Stahlmann, for example, came to the opposite conclusion due to the dangerous security situation and lack of health care.

In addition, the hegemonic image of violent and potentially criminal refugees leads to a constant overestimation of the criminality of this population group on the one hand, and on the other hand to higher sentences, longer periods of imprisonment, and fewer chances of probation than for comparable offences committed by nationals. Frequently, criminal convictions result in the loss of residence permits and deportation (Mennel and Mokre 2017). Here, too, the intersectionality of gender and racial attributions is very clear: In fact, young men (regardless of their origin) are statistically more inclined to deviant social behaviour than other population groups. In reporting, however, criminal behavior is attributed almost exclusively to migrant men. Violent and sexual offences are particularly prominent, but statistically speaking, migrants are underrepresented here. Domestic and foreign perpetrators are more or less in balance when it comes to drug-related offences, while migrants are overrepresented in property offences (Pilgram et al. 2016). The over-representation of property crime can be explained without further analysis by the precarious financial situation of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers in particular, but it also correlates with income statistics that differentiate between Austrian and non-Austrian citizens.¹¹ Thus, even though immigrant men are over-represented in some categories, a causal relationship between criminality and country of origin is not backed up by statistics.

11 A relevant special evaluation from the integrated statistics of wage and income tax 2016 is available to the author.

“Being a real man”

Hegemonic discourses about refugees make it difficult for young male refugees to find their place in society and to unite their self-image with the image imposed on them by the outside world. The victim role assigned to refugees reduces the status of refugees of any gender to an object of charity but is furthermore only open to young men to a limited extent. In the “Willkommenskultur” of summer 2015, the role of the grateful victim was often projected onto young men¹². For many of them, this meant a considerable amount of support, but at the price of losing the opportunity for self-empowerment.¹³ In the meantime, this figure of the “good fugitive” is no longer available to most young men. They are not only second-class people in their country of residence, but also second-class refugees compared to “womenandchildren”. This is not only an uncomfortable position, but also one that can hardly be reconciled with traditional ideas of masculinity (not only in the Global South, but also in the Global North). “Everything used to go to men, now nothing. Back in Syria and in many other countries, men are in the first place. Because he [a man] is the pillar of the family. He is a leg of the chair, because they prefer kids, then women, then dogs and then men” (Arsenijević et al. 2018, 91). The living conditions in Europe also often make it impossible for refugees to realize their own ideas of life: “Be a real man”, pursue a profession, start a family. A Nigerian migrant in Austria summarized this situation: “Under these conditions, I was no longer able to live a clean life, that is, not to get involved in anything criminal [...]. But I had other options, namely [...] to find a woman with enough money and be her boy toy. That way I could have calculated how to buy my residence permit. So, I thought, ‘In order to stand my own ground and make decisions, I have to earn my own money’” (Simo and Simon 2015, 98).

The contradiction between self-perception and life hopes and the reality during as well as after the end of (the physical) flight leads to psychologi-

12 Different images of the “good refugee can be found in different countries of arrival. E.g., McCluskey (2017) describes at depth that, in Sweden, this image has rather been related to the “national Swedish value of gender equality than to the model of the “grateful victim.

13 See on this, albeit very undifferentiated: <https://www.dasbiber.at/content/sugar-mamas-und-ihre-fluechtlinge>. Critical herein: <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000062097156/ueber-sugarmamas-und-antaenzer>

cal problems that could only be meaningfully dealt with in a stable life situation. In addition, however, psychotherapeutic services are also provided primarily for women. Furthermore, many male refugees (as well as many European men) find it difficult to reconcile their self-image with the need for psychotherapeutic help as a 26-years old Syrian refugee explains:

In our countries, it is dangerous to speak of psychotherapy. People think you must be crazy when you speak of such things. But here, it is different. A lot of people need help. We also need help. Not just us, everyone. [...] But I would never dare to openly tell the people that I stay with at my accommodation center that I need such a doctor, a psychologist. They would think I'm insane.¹⁴

Summary and outlook

This paper pursued two analytical goals: On the one hand, it has been shown that discourses on the vulnerability of migrants and the threats posed by migrants do not contradict but rather complement each other. On the other hand, the aim was to show the specific genderedness of these two discourses, which in particular serve to exclude young male refugees from help and support.

Vulnerability and threat can be understood as postcolonial forms of biopolitics that reduce refugees to suffering or dangerous bodies. This understanding of refugees has been prevalent since the end of the Cold War; since 2015, the representation of refugees has shifted from an emphasis on vulnerability to one on danger, and at the same time both discourses coexist and complement each other. In particular, "womenandchildren" (Enloe 1993, 166) are understood as vulnerable and worthy of protection, while young male refugees are represented and perceived as a danger.

Gender-specific reasons for men's flight, such as compulsory military service in war zones, are ignored, as are men's physical and psychological traumas. Governments, NGOs and even traffickers provide care – if at all – to women and children (Arsenijević et al. 2018). Even after the arrival of refugees, it is particularly difficult for young men to find support and international

14 See: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/14219/young-male-refugees-struggle-with-disappointment-and-mental-health-issues>.

protection is increasingly being denied on the grounds that young, healthy men can survive in their home country. Both in public opinion and through the judiciary, young migrant men are prejudiced against and punished more severely than natives (Mennel and Mokre 2017).

However, vulnerability – as well as criminality – are not an essential characteristic of certain groups of people, but are constructed in and from a specific context: “The concept of ‘vulnerability context’ considers the interplay between the features of these persons and their hosting communities, their interactions and experiences, and how different solutions for attention and inclusion affect them.”¹⁵ Vulnerability can therefore only be assessed on an individual level and not defined in a generalized way based on gender or age. Vulnerability also arises from government action, as the reports from different phases of flight show. In analytical terms, it would make sense here to use gender mainstreaming methods to determine the gender-specific effects of certain measures in the area of migration and asylum. For example, in 2021, Austria introduced a new paragraph in criminal law criminalizing participation in a religiously motivated extremist association “with the intent to thereby promote the commission of religiously motivated extremist acts”.¹⁶ It can be expected that punishment for political positions (formulated in a general way but clearly aimed at so-called “political Islam”) will primarily affect male migrants.

At the same time, it should be noted that numerous opportunities only granted on the ground of vulnerability by governmental and non-governmental organizations should be open to every refugee at every stage of his/her flight. It is an undue limitation of humanitarian commitment if vital infrastructure is only created for the most needy.

Refugees should not be provided with food on the basis of charity, but, due to legal and political considerations, they should have equal life opportunities as the long-term resident population.

With this claim, refugees also succeed from time to time in regaining their subject status through political activity. This represented a substantial part of refugee protests that have taken place repeatedly in various European countries for many years. In this sense, the Refugee Protest Camp Vienna, for example, propagated “We demand human rights, not charity” in 2013 and gave a donation, which was to benefit the protest, to an NGO with the request that

15 See <https://www.uni-med.net/progetti/raisd/>

16 <https://www.jusline.at/gesetz/stgb/paragraf/247b>

it be used for people in need. "So the point is to explain to other people that it is not about money, but about a solution. We are not asking for donations or rooms that then belong to us – at this moment we are talking about human rights" (quoted after Mokre 2015, 100).

In a similar way Ingvars and Gíslason (2018) interpret a protest of Syrian refugees in Athens in 2014. 13 Syrians organized a sit-in at Syntagma Square, in front of the Greek parliament. "In this way, the young Syrians paved the way for an emergent refugee masculinity through which male refugees could gain respect locally, regionally, and globally. They also challenged the media-ted narratives of migrant criminality, immorality, and greed" (ibid., 3). By articulating and embodying their claim to be part of the political community with political rights, they were able to gain this status, at least temporarily. In doing so, however, they also renegotiated their "masculinity". They found a role that was neither marked by the "feminization" of the victim role nor by the threat scenario of the criminal refugee, but rather had a self-empowering effect and opened up possibilities for action. This self-empowerment was based on the claim to the "right to have rights" (Arendt 1973, 177), with which refugees could escape the controlling care and representation by others, thus, gaining political agency by challenging refugee regimes.

Of course, these political activities are not open to all refugees – nor are they wanted by all. But they point to an approach to the problem of flight that has largely been lost in recent decades, namely rights and especially the right of inclusion in the political community. This access also offers the possibility of genuine solidarity between refugees and non refugees, without differentiation based on ascribed individual needs. This does not solve the problem of vulnerability, which is ultimately a profoundly human characteristic, very unequally distributed and dependent on numerous circumstances. But perhaps it does open up the view to individual vulnerability, which is the basic condition for dealing with it.

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