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Published online: 19 Dec 2023.

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Vulnerability governance as differential inclusion: the struggles of asylum seekers in Marseille

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ABSTRACT

Concerns with 'vulnerability' increasingly proliferate in global and regional pacts, international and domestic legislations, and policy discourses and practices regarding migration and international protection. Also in France, vulnerability governance has made its inroads, and policy documents hail vulnerability considerations as a strengthening of the politics of reception and integration of asylum seekers and a means to improve accommodation and care. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Marseille, I argue that vulnerability governance, situated within the context of securitization of migration and budget constraints in the reception system, leads to a 'differential inclusion', which is partial, conditional and precarious. By examining the understanding and operationalization of vulnerability within French migration legislation, policies, and governance practices, the study exposes how normative constructs of gender and sexuality inform the identification and hierarchization of vulnerable persons. Ethnographic evidence illustrates how these norms are perpetuated by governance actors, including civil society, and sometimes strategically mobilized or internalized by asylum seekers in their quest for recognition and assistance. In conclusion, the article highlights how protection-seeking migrants also contest the authorities' understanding and operationalization of vulnerability. Through protests and legal actions, they expose the state's role in producing and differentially distributing vulnerability through abandonment and destitution.

Introduction

A chilly morning in February 2020, I was meeting Louis, one of my West-African interlocutors, outside the first reception centre for asylum seekers in Marseille.[1] Standing among the 20ish people who had come at dawn to get a front spot at the queue, I noticed a poster informing those waiting that pregnant women, girls, elderly people, people whose mobility, hearing or seeing are impaired, and those in need of a translator, would be prioritized on Tuesday afternoons. A young man without apparent health impairments, Louis did not fit these categories, and in any case, it was Monday. I

nevertheless kept ruminating on the implications of the poster, which was one among several indicators during my fieldwork that concerns with 'vulnerability' were becoming ubiquitous in the governance of migration and asylum. France's adoption of the 2021 National Vulnerability Plan, which hailed vulnerability considerations as a reinforcement of the politics of reception and integration of asylum seekers, confirmed this impression. The French development reflects a broader 'vulnerability turn' in global and regional pacts, international and domestic legislations, and policy discourses and practices regarding migration and international protection (Atak et al. 2018; Cavatorta 2021; D'Halluin 2016; Flegar 2018; Freedman 2018; Heidbrink 2021; Leboeuf 2021).

In this article I argue that rather than universally reinforcing the reception and integration of asylum seekers, 'vulnerability governance' subjects protection seeking migrants[2] to a 'differential inclusion', which is partial, conditional and precarious. To investigate how this governance through vulnerability works, we must situate it in the context of the ongoing securitization of migration and budgetary shortage in the reception system – what critical French migration scholars have referred to as a 'reception with closed arms' (Mésini and Dahdah 2021) and a 'crisis of hospitality' (Akoka 2017; Agier 2018). Rather than facilitating a reception system adapted to the specific needs of asylum seekers, vulnerability governance works as a form of hierarchization and prioritization that subjects asylum seekers and other protection seeking migrants to gendered and racialized norms of recognizability as vulnerable subjects. The partial, conditional and precarious inclusion of asylum seekers in the national reception regime, and differentiated access to accommodation, legal advice and social assistance, implicates governance actors in differentially distributing precarity.

Following a section on context and methods, I situate the contribution of this article in relation to literature on vulnerability and the governance of migration, humanitarian borders, and gendered humanitarianism, and introduce 'differential inclusion' as a conceptual framework for the analysis. The next sections map the inroads of vulnerability into French migration legislation, policies and practices of governance, and how it is operationalized by state and non-state actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers in Marseille. Drawing on ethnographic examples and interviews, I examine how normative understandings of gender and sexuality underpin the identification and categorization of some individuals and groups as 'vulnerable', and how such norms are reproduced by governance actors (including civil society actors) and sometimes by asylum seekers through their attempts to obtain recognition and assistance. The final sections examine how protection seeking migrants denounce the state's violations of their rights and dignity through demonstrations and legal actions. In doing so, they also expose the limitations and contradictions of vulnerability as a form of migration governance.

Context and methods

Marseille is the second largest city in France, approximating 900,000 inhabitants. Historically, its port function has made Marseille a privileged place for migrants entering the country (Temime, Echinard, and Sayad 2007). Marseille lays amid the EU southern borders and Mediterranean migratory routes, with a three-hour drive to the Spanish and Italian borders. A one-stop reception desk[3] centralizes asylum applications for four of the six departments in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region: Bouches-du-

Rhône, Vaucluse, Alpes-de-Haute-Provence and Hautes-Alpes. In 2018, 4796 applications were recorded by the reception desk, up 20% from the previous year (Mésini and Dahdah 2021). The number of persons seeking asylum decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic but picked up again in 2021 (Préfecture de la région Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur 2020). In late 2020, 6590 asylum seekers, including 2735 newcomers, were registered at the first reception centre in Marseille. The five most important nationalities were Turkish, Nigerian, Algerian, Guinean and Albanian (Forum-réfugiés 2020). During that year, 916 cases got access to dedicated accommodation within the national reception scheme (Chappart 2021; Forum-réfugiés 2020). Nationwide, 18% of initial applications were answered positively, and among the 69% who appealed the decision, the protection rate was at 24% (CNDA Rapport d'activité 2020).

The ethnography used for this article is based on fieldwork in Marseille conducted between 2020 and 2022 in the framework of a European project.[4] Fieldwork included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and collaborative creative methodologies. Due to restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic an initial mapping of actors was conducted based on online ethnographic research, including mining data from webpages, and participating in Facebook and e-mail groups of relevant actors. On-site participant observation was conducted in two selected grassroot civil society organizations. The core activities of the first organization included the distribution of necessities and orientation towards various support structures, mainly to newly arriving migrants. The other organization offered legal advice, distributed food, organized cultural activities, and mobilized to contest dysfunctions in the asylum reception system. Participant observation included deep hanging out, participation in the organizations' main activities, informal conversations with asylum seekers and activists, and observations at relevant sites such as the first reception centre.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three types of actors: local authorities and 'state operators' (3 interviews),[5] civil society organizations operating in the domains of law, health and basic needs (5 interviews), and migrants who were or had been seeking asylum, recruited through the two organizations and through a reception centre specialized in housing 'vulnerable populations' (3 women and 7 men). All but two of the migrant interviewees were from West Africa. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, or recorded by note-taking, and analysed together with the ethnographic material. To ensure anonymity, names in the article are pseudonyms, and indirect person identifying information such as country of origin has been left out. The research received ethical clearance from the Data Protection Officer at my university, and efforts were made to maintain high ethical standards throughout the research process, including efforts to avoid causing harm during and after fieldwork. Minors were not interviewed.

Analytical perspectives on vulnerability and the governance of migration

This article contributes to the growing body of literature that critically examines how diverse discourses and practices concerned with 'vulnerability' increasingly inform migration and asylum governance, and the functions and effects of such 'vulnerability governance' (Sözer 2020; 2021; Leboeuf 2021; Lind 2020; Heidbrink 2021). Several authors have focused on how discourses and practices concerned with vulnerability exclude people who are not legally defined or recognized as vulnerable from protection

and/or care (Rozakou 2020; Camminga 2020). Some, like Sözer, argue that the notion of vulnerability is inherently exclusionary notwithstanding efforts to make it inclusive by multiplying the recognized categories of vulnerability, while others, many of them drawing on Butler (2004; 2009; 2016), attempt to rethink it as an inclusive concept by recognizing the shared vulnerability of all human beings. Several authors have pointed to how concerns with vulnerability represent a humanitarianization of international protection (Leboeuf 2021; Ticktin 2011). Instead of upholding state responsibilities to provide universal rights and care, vulnerability governance limits such care to those who are recognized as vulnerable, replacing legal entitlement with selective humanitarianism (Fassin 2016). According to Sözer (2021) neo-liberal transformation of humanitarianism has made in legitimate to assist only a fraction of the forced migrant community, through limited mechanisms and for limited ends.

Vulnerability discourses have also been criticized for the association between (female) gender and vulnerability (Lewis 2019), and for linking deservingness of protection with innocence and the lack of individual agency (Baines 2004; Ticktin 2016). Research suggests that the concept tends to reinforce gendered and racial stereotypes and can be stigmatizing and paternalizing (Freedman 2018; Lewis 2019; Sahraoui 2020; Sözer 2021). Vulnerability governance has also been seen to facilitate states' control over populations residing on their territories, including controlling the presence of migrant populations (Ticktin 2011), imposing controls over their bodies (Musso 2020), as well as effectuating forms of neo-liberal responsibilization (Brown 2017; Sahraoui 2020). The entanglement of care for migrants with the control of nation-state borders has been highlighted by authors focusing on the care/security (Williams 2016) or the care/control nexus – (Aradau 2004; Fassin 2001, 2005; İşleyen 2018; Sözer 2020, 2021; Ticktin 2011). As Williams (2016, 27) argues 'humanitarian discourse and rationality is increasingly integrated into the ways in which border enforcement efforts are both framed and justified', producing what Walters (2011) refers to as 'humanitarian borders'.

Contributing to this body of literature, this article mobilizes the concept of 'differential inclusion' to analyse how vulnerability is understood and operationalized in migration control and international protection. This concept has been used to move beyond binary formulations of inclusion and exclusion in order to capture the complexities of exclusion and inclusion of migrants within the sphere of rights at borders and in receiving societies (e.g. Andrijasevic 2009; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). A main focus has been on differential inclusion based on various formal statuses under the law (Bosniak 2007), and on how 'citizenship' recognizes certain populations as legitimate bearers of rights while other populations are marked as inexistent (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). 'Differential inclusion' highlights the proliferation and hierarchization of subject positions, and the entrenchment of gender and sexual norms in the procedures that regulate inclusion. For instance, many countries have introduced mechanisms to distinguish women who are deserving and innocent victims of trafficking from undeserving and criminal irregular migrants (Andrijasevic 2009; Jacobsen and Skilbrei 2010).

'Differential inclusion' captures well recent developments in the reception of asylum seekers. Not only the restrictive entry regulations and securitization of migration, but also the limitation of welfare and working rights, and the expansion of the detention and deportation regime (De Genova and Peutz 2010) characterize France's current asylum policies. There has been a multiplication of procedures and statuses which

determines which kind of 'reception' and 'integration' a person will be included in, a case in point being the steep increase in 'accelerated procedures'.[6] Vulnerability plays an increasingly important role in defining who is entitled to rights and support and what kind of rights and support one is included in. Vulnerability assessments can play a role in determining which 'procedure' persons are allocated to and who gets access to accommodation, legal help, social assistance and other material reception conditions while they are waiting for a response to their asylum application. It thus becomes important to investigate the conditions under which certain asylum seekers are recognised as vulnerable, and the kinds of partial, conditional and precarious inclusion that operate through vulnerability governance.

Vulnerability's inroads into French migration and asylum legislation and governance

Vulnerability emerged as a category of public policy in France in the late 1960s and 1970s (Thomas 2008). Initially occurring within the domains of medicine and healthcare, it expanded to policies across a variety of domains, and gained momentum as a category for public action in the early 2000s, designating in particular the elderly, pregnant women and the sick (Brodiez-Dolino 2016). The framework of vulnerability was inscribed into French migration and asylum law a decade later, through the 2015 transposition of the EU directive on reception conditions of asylum seekers (2013/33/EU) into the *Code of entry and residence of aliens and the right to asylum* (CESEDA). A list enumerates the categories considered vulnerable; minors, unaccompanied minors, people in a situation of disability, elderly people, pregnant women, single parents with minor children, victims of human trafficking, persons suffering from serious illnesses or mental troubles, and persons having been subjected to torture, rape, or other serious forms of psychological, physical, or sexual violence, such as female genital mutilation. Procedures are also established for their identification and support. The French Asylum and Immigration Law of 2018, known as 'Loi Collomb', introduced further provisions for the protection of vulnerable foreigners through strengthening the identification and support mechanisms.

The need to take vulnerabilities into account is acknowledged in several other recent policy documents, including the National reception schema and the Regional schema for Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, which focuses particularly on the challenges associated with delays in lodging asylum applications and thus in identifying and assessing applicants' vulnerabilities.[7] In 2021, the Interior Ministry adopted a 10-point plan to reinforce care for vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers. In the plan, vulnerability is associated both with inherent characteristics and with trauma suffered upon departure and along the route:

> The women, men and children who seek asylum in France have often fled atrocities and come to us at the end of a long and difficult journey of exile, which has left a lasting impression. Whether they are suffering from psycho-trauma, are victims of violence, unaccompanied minors, people with physical disabilities or applicants who are vulnerable because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, these profiles are now more numerous, and their vulnerable situation requires appropriate care from the moment they arrive. (*Ministère de l'intérieur 2021*, 3)

The here and now of the French reception system is thus presented as a time–space of care for the vulnerable.

Beyond the European asylum and refugee law and policy, vulnerability has also gained traction in humanitarian discussions related to the management of refugee situations internationally (Sözer 2020, 2021), and are included in policy recommendations from the UNHCR and IOM (Flegar 2018). France is a signatory to the United Nations' Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, which both advocate for the recognition and protection of vulnerable refugees and migrants.[8] The usage of the concept in EU law and policy as well as UNHCR and IOM's policy documents is inconsistent and the reasons for why someone is categorized as vulnerable are not always clearly distinguishable, and, like the French policies, include both categorical and situational understandings of the term (Atak et al. 2018; Flegar 2018; Leboeuf 2021). Given the polysemy of vulnerability as a 'travelling concept' (cf. Thomas 2008; Bal 2002; Leboeuf 2021), the next section discusses in some detail how it is understood and operationalized in the governance of migration and international protection in Marseille.

Identifying the vulnerable

To initiate an application, asylum seekers must register at a first reception centre to obtain an appointment at the 'one-stop desk', which consolidated the services of the Préfecture and the French Immigration and Integration Office (OFII). At the one-stop desk, officials utilize a brief questionnaire outlined in a circular from 2015 to identify individuals with 'specific adaptation needs.'[9] The questionnaire lists pregnant women (requesting the due date), sensory disabilities, limited mobility, assistance requirements for daily activities, and 'spontaneous' self-reported health issues. The designation of an individual as 'vulnerable' significantly influences the conditions under which asylum seekers will await further processing, particularly in terms of access to accommodation. Accordingly, the question of by whom and how identification is best carried out, has become a point of contention among local actors.

International protection is a responsibility of the state, and the French Immigration and Integration Office is responsible for carrying out the initial vulnerability assessment upon registration of an asylum claim. The way in which these assessments were carried out was subject to criticism by migrants rights activists as well as our migrant interlocutors. The persons being assessed were often unaware that a 'vulnerability interview' that would determine material reception conditions was taking place during the appointment at the 'one-stop desk', and therefore failed to bring up relevant information about 'inherent characteristics' or their situation that would allow them to be categorized as having 'specific adaptation needs'. Additionally, there were instances where interviews took place without the presence of an interpreter or focusing solely on whether the individual was already being housed informally, in which case the basic asylum benefit (ADA) would be reduced.

Increasingly, the French government outsources reception, detention, and deportation functions to civil society actors, including tasks related to vulnerability governance. For instance, the first reception centre in Marseille is run by Forum réfugiés-Cosi, a non-profit organization with the stated goals of defending the right to asylum and promoting

the rule of law. The functioning of the first reception centre is defined by the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII) through a public tender-system, effectively making the organization a 'state-operator'. While the OFII conducts the so-called 'vulnerability interview', vulnerabilities can also be detected and signalled by the first reception centre. According to one of the employees we interviewed, some migrants felt more comfortable speaking about their vulnerabilities there, than at the Prefecture, which was associated with border policing. However, to the protection seeking migrants we interviewed, the boundaries between state and non-state were not always clear, as CSOs were increasingly producing 'state effects' (Trouillot 2001) through their involvement in asylum management.

Asylum reception centres are also operated by civil society actors through public tenders. Professionals we interviewed reported receiving little training in identifying and supporting vulnerable persons, although some mentioned having attended a course in identifying victims of trafficking. From 2018, vulnerability assessments can also be carried out in detention centres in view of the possible need to adapt the conditions or duration of detention, thus extending the scope of vulnerability governance also to some migrants categorized as in an irregular situation by the authorities. Despite this expansion of vulnerability assessments to different actors and different moments in the asylum process, a challenge noted by some of our interlocutors from civil society organizations was that vulnerability, in being inscribed in the personal files of asylum seekers, tended to remain 'frozen' in time and 'out of sync' with their changing situation. An employee at a reception centre for 'the most vulnerable women' explained that despite their efforts to inform authorities about changes in individuals' vulnerability status (e.g. recovery from an illness or recent development of a disease), these labels seemed to 'stick' over time. The allocation of accommodation primarily followed lists established by the Préfecture, leaving little discretion to other actors involved in the reception process.

'Who *are* vulnerable?'

The importance of being recognized as 'vulnerable' to how one is included into the reception system, notably regarding access to accommodation, makes the question of *who* the vulnerable *are* a site of contention. The listing of vulnerabilities used by OFII, disseminated to civil society actors through outsourcing and training, considerably reduces the scope established by the EU reception directive and French law. This narrowing down has rightly been criticized for reducing vulnerability to 'visible embodied factors' or 'objective vulnerability', which an employee at the first reception centre hailed as an emblem of the supposed neutrality of their services.[10] The limited scope of the questionnaire is tied to pre-defined categories of people, and ill-suited to identify more contingent, contextual, and multi-layered forms of vulnerability. As noted by Freedman (2018), this type of vulnerability assessment relies on an assumption that vulnerability is (easily) identifiable and objectifiable in an individual, as suggested also by the visualization of vulnerability on the poster at the first reception centre, which used simple drawings to visualize the prioritized categories. This representation also brings to the fore the inconsistencies traversing who gets to be included in the measures devised for the 'particularly vulnerable' across different sites, and the partial, conditional and precarious inclusion of those so labelled.

Despite the authorities focus on the 'objectivity' of vulnerable assessments, many of the protection seeking migrants we interviewed, and the activists and CSOs supporting them, deplored the lack of transparency around criteria used by the administration to identify and assist the vulnerable. To quote a representative of an organization assisting travellers and newcomers, 'The current interpretation of the notion of vulnerability by the administration seems rather elusive, hence the even greater vulnerability of their [migrants'] situation.' The interviewee here importantly points to how missing explicit rationales for differential treatment and opaque exercise of administrative discretion may produce and differentially distribute vulnerability. The burden is put on migrants to fit into the categories defined as vulnerable through elaborate 'truth procedures' (D'Halluin 2016; Fassin 2001; Fassin and D'Halluin 2005), but without the criteria according to which they will be assessed being clear to them. As one of our interlocutors from an organization offering legal assistance and basic necessities put it, this lack of transparency 'makes it very difficult to get the OFII to name you vulnerable'.

While categories based on 'illness' and 'gender' may seem stable, their emergence as designations of vulnerable asylum seeker, their delineation, and the procedures for establishing that one belongs to them are subject to change. Fassin (2001) and Ticktin (2011) detail how the legitimacy of the political body was replaced by the care and support required by the vulnerable and ill body in the 1990s, as health and suffering became increasingly important in determining eligibility for legal residence in France. The introduction of a so-called 'illness clause' into migration law, made unusual pathologies a road to residency papers for the few, while the majority of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants were increasingly criminalized as 'bogus' or 'illegal' (Ticktin 2011). Medical assessments and testimonies about trauma, psychological distress and serious illness thus gained importance as documentation of 'the truth of the body' that would prove vulnerability and worthiness of care (Fassin and D'Halluin 2005). This humanitarianization of asylum policies, shifted the weight from a rights-based framework to a more discretionary and subjective decision-making process based on assessments of suffering and risk (Fassin 2016; Leboeuf 2021; Vaughan-Williams 2015).

Vulnerability as a governance tool must also be understood in light of the historical construction of a gendered [female] refugee victim (see e.g. Baines 2004; Johnson 2011). In the 1980s, feminist mobilizations within the international arena led to the foregrounding of women's vulnerability and their specific needs in matter of protection (Freedman 2010; Ticktin 2011; 2011b). With increased attention to, and medicalization of, the global problem of violence against women, the ability to elicit compassion and care increasingly shifted from the political dissident towards the vulnerabilities of women's bodies (Ticktin 2011b), which were gradually included into policies on asylum and migration. More recently LGBT + have been added to the list of vulnerable asylum seekers who may have 'specific adaptation needs' (Fassin 2016). LGBT + have not found their way into the questionnaire used to assess vulnerability though, and none of our gender or sexually non-conforming interlocutors had been recognized as vulnerable at the initial vulnerability assessment at the Préfecture. It was rather through the intervention of specialized civil society actors that this came to affect the conditions under which they were included in the reception system.

The national vulnerability plan and the national reception schema both foreground the need to create adapted reception places for a 'vulnerable LGBT public'. A national

call for expressions of interest in establishing such places published by the Interior Ministry in 2021, specified though, that this was not a question of creating additional places, but rather of specializing existing places for the reception of this public, at constant cost, since these places would not require any development likely to generate additional costs. According to our interlocutors in asylum reception centres, their budgets were already very limited, making the follow up of residents challenging. The inclusion of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers at a 'constant cost' exemplifies the way in which vulnerability governance works as a tool for managing the structural shortage of budgetary funding allocated to reception conditions through hierarchization and prioritization of the 'most vulnerable'. As we will see in the following, the differential inclusion of women and sexually non-conforming individuals remains partial, conditional, and precarious.

Vulnerable women and mothers

At the time we interviewed Joy and Important, a married couple from West Africa, they were waiting for an answer to their asylum application. Housing had been one of their main struggles during the waiting time. Being the parents of a toddler and Joy being pregnant, they were offered a short-term stay through the Service Plus[11] in a hotel used for emergency housing. The sanitary conditions were extremely poor, and the rooms infected by bedbugs, but moving out would mean that they were back on the street. Joy explained how someone from a civil society organization had taken her to a shelter they ran for women victims of violence, 'If this organisation knows that you have no problem with your husband or that you are still living with him, they don't house you'. Joy was allowed to stay while they looked for another solution, but Important was not included in this conditional and temporary care, 'They said they can't take care of me, only my wife and children. I accepted that because … Sometimes I slept outside, I slept at my friends' houses, but at least they [my wife and kids] were safe.'

Across the three categories of authorities, civil society organizations and migrants, interviewees uniformly presented 'women and children' as particularly susceptible to harm, suggesting that 'women have an unchanging vulnerability and need protection and care by the state or other paternal powers' (Butler 2015, 140).[12] Within a paternalistic and patriarchal understanding of gender and vulnerability, women are generally seen as more vulnerable when single and thus without a 'male protector'. The gendered attribution of vulnerability manifests through a particular attention to women's biological bodies (Boehringer and Ferrarese 2015). As evident from the list used by the French Office of Integration and Immigration to identify vulnerability, women are identified as vulnerable mainly in relation to their reproductive functions, and as exposed to (male) domestic and sexual violence. The case of Joy and Important illustrates how vulnerability governance subjects asylum seekers to such gender norms through differential inclusion. In order to be recognized as in need of housing and social protection, Joy must foreground her role as mother and pretend to be severed from her husband. To obtain assistance as a vulnerable victim, she must also give up, at least temporarily, the projects she had envisaged with her husband of creating a better life for themselves and their children in Marseille. The recognition of women as vulnerable tend to depend on them occupying the subject position of the passive victim without agency (Andrijasevic 2009;

Jacobsen and Skilbrei 2010), which may, as Freedman (2018) argues, undermine their own autonomous strategies and projects.

Civil society actors sometimes reproduce paternalistic and essentializing understandings of gendered vulnerabilities in order to fit within the funding structures or to strategically mobilize such understandings to obtain recognition and rights by the authorities (cf. Mesarič and Vacchelli 2021). The use of so-called 'public contracts' to select service providers for reception measures, have incorporated many CSOs into a budgetary logic where who is to be cared for and the cost of such care is defined by the authorities. As one of our interlocutors, from an organization that accompanies newly arrived migrants explained:

> A woman with children will move the administration much more easily, and the administration has certain capacities to support women and children. We certainly examine the situation more carefully when a woman and children knock on our doors than when a young person asks for support because we know that he has no chance and that we'll waste our time looking everywhere for something impossible [...]. For a young man, it's true that we are not really searching that much, because we know that he won't get anything.

It is necessary to also note the limitations to the care offered to those identified as vulnerable registered by the interviewee above. Despite the fact that the administration has 'certain capacities to support women and children', this is far from automatic, and the inclusion of women as vulnerable remains contingent, partial and precarious. Freedman, Sahraoui, and Tyszler (2022, 13) note with regard to female asylum seekers in Paris, that even for the 'lucky' women who obtain a place in an emergency accommodation centre, there is no possibility of stability or permanence. The partial, conditional and precarious inclusion of women into reception and humanitarian arrangements was dominant also in Marseille. One of our interlocutors was a West African woman who had arrived on her own with her three-year-old son to Marseille a few weeks before we interviewed her. Through the assistance of a migrants' rights organization, she managed to obtain housing in a hotel through the Service Plus. However, since she was still waiting for her appointment to register as an asylum seeker, she did not yet receive the basic asylum benefit (ADA) and had to depend on assistance offered by humanitarian organizations to cover her own and her son's basic needs.

(In)vulnerable men

Critics have pointed to how the focus on women's vulnerability produces men as the 'designated invulnerable' and is used by the state to legitimize the lack of support offered to single male asylum seekers (Palillo 2022; Sözer 2021). The exclusion of single men from the category of the vulnerable was confirmed by several of our interlocutors 'As a single, young man, you do not have a chance to get housing', as one of our migrant interlocutors explained. The court case N.H. and others v. France, illustrates how male bodies are construed as 'not vulnerable enough' to need protection and care by the French state. In 2020, France was convicted by the European Court of Human Rights for violating the prohibition of inhuman or degrading treatment (article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights) in a case involving three male asylum seekers.[13] The applicants had waited months for acknowledgement that they had lodged asylum claims, and in the meantime were not able to access housing, did not receive the

financial allowance for asylum seekers, were not allowed to work and were at risk of deportation. The applicants argued that the French government seemed not to identify asylum seekers as a particularly disfavoured and vulnerable population. To its defence, the government argued that due to a temporary saturation of the reception structures, those able to justify a particular vulnerability related to age, health, or family situation had been prioritized. The court, however, recognized the applicants as victims of degrading treatment and a lack of respect for their dignity. French authorities were responsible for the conditions in which the applicants had been living for several months: sleeping rough, without access to sanitary facilities, having no means of subsistence and constantly in fear of being attacked or robbed, the court concluded.

Apart from the fact that the applicants were young and male, their good health was also cited by the authorities as explaining why they had not been considered vulnerable. This criterion was also highly present in the vulnerability assessments conducted by the OFII in Marseille. 'You have to fall sick to get accommodation', Louis, whom we met in the ethnographic vignette to this article, told me after we sat down outside the first reception centre to talk about his experiences as an asylum seeker. Louis had been part of a delegation of asylum seekers and migrant rights' activists meeting with the OFII around the question of vulnerability. 'We found it hard to understand how the authorities apply the criteria of vulnerability', he explained 'so we went to talk to them. They told us it was first and foremost people who are very ill who are vulnerable enough to get housing'. The 'ill body' thus continues to convey a particular legitimacy within a humanitarianized reception system, despite repeated 'panics of suspicion' that migrants may be faking or self-inflicting illness in order to obtain a residence permit (Laranché 2020; Ticktin 2011).

Louis' engagement in various migrants' rights organizations and experiences with the asylum authorities while waiting for his application to be processed had taught him the importance of correct labelling for being included in reception provisions such as accommodation, legal advice and social and economic support. Having recently been provided with a 'vulnerability certificate', he presented himself to me as 'really vulnerable'. 'I have proved my vulnerability now, and I am waiting for an answer whether I can get a place in an asylum reception centre', Louis explained. The disease that proved his vulnerability to the authorities had been aggravated by the precarious conditions under which he had been living, alternating between the street and emergency housing for several months. His health condition now paradoxically testified to his right to less precarious waiting conditions.

The exclusion of single young men like Louis from the category of the vulnerable except if they are seriously ill, must be understood in the context of the securitization of migration and the construction of a gendered [male] refugee threat (Allsopp 2017, Lewis 2019). Before they were offered a hotel place through Service Plus, Joy and Important had been living with a group of protection seeking West-African (mainly Nigerian) migrants, in an occupied social housing building. The eviction of the building in November 2021 illustrates the gendered and racialized construction of migrant's vulnerability as they are articulated within the care/control nexus of compassion and security concerns (Fassin 2005). At the time of eviction, the city council appealed to the state to secure housing for the most vulnerable among the asylum seekers.[14] On the other hand, the residents of the squat were portrayed as a security problem The mayor of the area

claimed that among the squatters there were 'migrant smugglers', 'mafia' and 'women forced into prostitution'. Such criminalization of (male) migrants, and association between squatters and criminal networks, smugglers and human trafficking, contributed to constructing racialized male migrants as undeserving of protection and as a security threat.

Taking vulnerability to the street and the court

In July 2021 a demonstration arranged by a self-organized group of asylum seekers (Association of the Pada's Users, AUP), brought the struggles around who gets to be recognized as vulnerable to the streets of Marseille. The AUP was founded in March 2020 to fight for the rights of asylum seekers and to denounce the failure of authorities to uphold these rights. Increasingly known among asylum seekers, the organization grew to gather more than 500 members, from 25 different countries. The demonstration was staged as a direct interpellation of the French Office of Immigration and Integration (OFII) and its understanding and operationalization of vulnerability. As one demonstrator asked during his speech: 'Is a person without resources not vulnerable? OFII, tell us what vulnerability is? We don't understand. Who are the vulnerable people? OFII, take your responsibilities! Respect our rights!' The banners at the front of the march drew attention to the vulnerability of gendered bodies: 'Isn't a pregnant woman vulnerable? Isn't an isolated woman with children vulnerable?'

The demonstration and its slogans are instructive regarding how asylum seekers experience vulnerability governance, and how they challenge the way it functions. A first thing to note is how those being assessed call for the criteria of assessment being made available to them (tell us!). The 'we don't understand' performs an important critique of the failure to uphold rights defined by the state itself, such as the right to shelter for pregnant women and women with children. While the trope of 'vulnerable women and children' evokes a humanitarian register, the demonstration also drew attention to the rights of asylum seekers, and the 'illegality' of the current reception regime. Several cases involving the denial of material reception conditions by the French Office of Immigration and Integration have been brought before the courts by such organizations as la Cimade, le Réseau Hospitalité et la Fédération des Acteurs de la Solidarité migrant, contributing to an increasing 'juridification of vulnerability' (Leboeuf 2021). Some cases have confirmed, while others have invalidated, the authorities' rights to withhold assistance or make it difficult to access (Mésini and Bonis 2021).

In November 2022 the State was convicted by the administrative appeal court of Marseille for illegally restricting reception criteria in the Provence region. The case concerned the vulnerability criteria employed by the authorities in filtering access to the Service Plus, through which Joy and Important had been offered short-term housing in a dilapidated hotel. Ever since 'the long summer of migration' it had become increasingly difficult, including for pregnant women and families, to access shelter and social services through Service Plus, an organism that was intended to complement the under-dimensioned accommodation possibilities within the national reception system. One of our interlocutors, working with housing for asylum seekers, had witnessed how the categories of vulnerability were progressively narrowed down. She told us,

> I was discussing with the State and the Prefecture what to do with the lack of accommodation places for families arriving in Marseille. A representative of the State informed me that it was too expensive to house them all and that from now on we had to find a less expensive solution. I replied that according to the law, we were obliged to find accommodation for families with minor children. The State representative replied that then we would have to review the majority age.

The Marseille Asylum Observatory (Observatoire Asile Marseille 2018) documented the restriction of criteria for accessing the Service Plus. From families with children under 10 years old in 2016, to families with children under 3 years old in 2018. For pregnant women access was progressively restricted from six to eight months with a medical certificate attesting 'a serious health problem'. The interpellation of one of our interlocutors, working for a migrant's right organization, about not providing accommodation for women in the last trimester, was dismissed by the response 'Pregnancy is not a disease'. Hence the practice of demanding medical certificates attesting 'specific adaptation needs' also from pregnant women. While the new criteria also included 'women victims of human trafficking and conjugal violence', these latter were not incorporated in the questionnaire and were left to be discovered at later stages. As a consequence of the increasingly restrictive interpretation of the categories 'pregnant women' and 'children', many families were left on the street or seeking accommodation in some of the city's squats (Jacobsen 2022), or like in the case of Joy, were forced to attempt to 'fit' the increasingly stricter criteria by performing their isolation and exposure to (male, sexual) violence.

'As asylum seekers, we are all vulnerable'

Léo from Central Africa arrived in France as a 17-year-old and was housed by a family through an NGO informally accommodating so-called isolated minors. When I met him a year later, Léo was volunteering for the local asylum seeker association, assisting with food distribution and legal advice based on his own experiences. Prompted by me to reflect on what 'vulnerability' meant to him, Léo talked about the consequences of physical and social displacement.

> Some are perhaps more vulnerable than others, but all asylum seekers are vulnerable. Because it is not with a light heart that one leaves home. When you leave, you lose all the points of reference in your life. And that is what makes you vulnerable in the first place. Because you don't know where to hold on, you don't know where to walk, you don't know anything.

Léo continued by evoking the difficulties of 'emplacing' oneself in a non-hospitable environment 'If you give hospitality to someone who comes to your house, the person will not go crazy. But if someone arrives somewhere and he has no shelter and he has no food … hunger causes fights.'

Like Léo, many of the activists and CSO representatives we interviewed linked vulnerability to the material conditions under which people wait for an answer to their asylum application. In Marseille, the precarious housing situation and the lack of accommodation dedicated to asylum seekers is particularly acute. In an interview with a representative from the municipality, they stated that 'The most important question for people in a situation of exile is the one of accommodation. Obviously, if health problems did not already exist, they will develop because of unsanitary housing conditions.'[15] Unlike the

attention to illness' in vulnerability assessments conducted by the authorities, health issues were seen as emerging from the precarious living situations of those who are not offered shelter. Others pointed to how excluding asylum seekers from the formal labour market through restricting their right to work and to withdraw cash from the basic asylum benefit, accentuated their precarity.[16]

While French policies focus mainly on 'inherent vulnerability' it acknowledges that certain situations may also expose people disproportionally to harm. However, this situational harm tends to be assigned, as in the National Vulnerability Plan, to the countries they flee and transit, whereas France is portrayed as a time–space of care. In contrast, the asylum seekers we interviewed insisted on the harm they suffered 'here and now', such as the lack of housing, the lack of access to food, fear of being deported and the uncertainty related to the legal processing of their asylum claim. Nabil, who was active in the asylum seeker organization, saw the precarious material conditions of asylum seekers waiting as a de facto denial of their right to asylum:

> If you live in the street, how can you prepare for the OFPRA? If you live in the street, you can't think properly. You are traumatized, dead already, you are crazy, having lost everything. Sometimes I think they are using this as a strategy not to give asylum.

Nabil's suggestion that French authorities use destitution as a form of migration control resonates with Freedman, Sahraoui and Tyszler's (2022, 14) conclusion that destitution among asylum seekers is the consequence of a deliberate institutional abandonment in which welfare is weaponized as a deterrence mechanism.

Conclusion

In this article I have discussed some of the consequences of the increasing proliferation of vulnerability discourses and practices in the governance of migration and international protection. The discussion has made clear how vulnerability governance subjects asylum seekers to a 'differential inclusion', which is partial, conditional and precarious. I have argued that focusing on care for the most vulnerable works as a tool for managing the structural shortage of funding allocated to reception conditions. Due to the outsourcing of reception to civil society actors, these actors assume some state functions and become entangled in practices related to vulnerability governance. Normative understandings of gender and sexuality underpin the identification and categorization of some individuals and groups as 'vulnerable', and stereotypes of 'vulnerable women' and 'invulnerable men' are reproduced by governance actors and by asylum seekers as a means of obtaining recognition and assistance.

Examining asylum seekers understanding of vulnerability, and their contestation of how it is understood and operationalized by the authorities, enables a more profound understanding of what is at stake in the current proliferation of vulnerability in migration governance and international protection. The analysis has stressed the discrepancy between the humanitarian image of the French reception system as a time–space of care for the vulnerable with asylum seekers experiences of destitution and abandonment. I have demonstrated how protection seeking migrants do not passively occupy the position of the vulnerable subject, but strategically mobilize and actively contest the authorities understanding and operationalization of vulnerability. In denouncing violations

of their rights and dignity through protest and legal actions, they expose the state's implication in producing and differentially distributing vulnerability through abandonment and destitution.

Notes

1. Structure de premier accueil des demandeurs d'asile (SPADA)
2. The governance of international migration relies on different and often overlapping categories, with the most basic distinction being made between 'voluntary' migrants (economic, irregular), and 'forced' migrants (asylum seekers, refugees). While migration scholarship has shown these categories to be deeply problematic, their embedment in law and policy nevertheless makes them socially effective categories, including within the domain of vulnerability governance (see e.g. Karlsen 2023). I use the expression 'protection seeking migrants' here to problematize the ways in which these labels are currently used, and to reflect the fact that in this study, our interlocutors were differently positioned in relation to the asylum system; some had pre-registered as asylum seekers and were waiting to file an application, some were waiting for an answer for their application or their appeal, some had been granted a temporary protection, some had their application rejected and had consequently been irregularized, and some had been temporarily regularized under a different status.
3. Guichet Unique pour Demandeurs d'Asile (GUDA).
4. Fieldwork was conducted by Pascaline Chappart and me within the framework of the Horizon202 project PROTECT. (See Chappart 2021; Jacobsen and Chappart 2022).
5. State operators are public or private bodies entrusted with a public service mission by the State. Placed under the direct control of the State, they are mainly financed by it and contribute to state functions. Despite repeated efforts, local representatives of state authorities were impossible to reach for interviews for this project.
6. Between 2016 and 2020, 38.3% of the total demands for asylum were examined according to the accelerated procedure, and in 2021 46%.
7. Schéma national d'accueil des demandeurs d'asile et d'intégration des réfugiés et du dispositif d'orientation régionale (2021–2023) and the Arrêté relatif à l'actualisation du schéma régional d'accueil des demandeurs d'asile et des réfugiés pour la période de 2020 à 2022. See also Jacobsen (2020) on the lack of assistance offered to asylum seekers in the gap between pre-registration at the first reception centre and the GUDA appointment.
8. Although France is a signatory to these compacts, they are not explicitly mentioned in the French national legal framework or policy plans.
9. Arrêté du 23 octobre 2015 relatif au questionnaire de détection des vulnérabilités des demandeurs d'asile prévu à l'article L. 744-6 du code de l'entrée et du séjour des étrangers et du droit d'asile. https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000031400890
10. See for instance https://asile-en-france.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9:la-vulnerabilite&catid=8&showall=1&Itemid=117
11. The Service Plus is a complement to housing structures in Bouches-du-Rhône, providing hotel nights to persons oriented there via the emergency housing telephone 115 or the first reception centre for asylum seekers.
12. Baudier and Masson-Diez (2023) similarly note that gender as a criterion is never questioned in the extra-institutional spaces of reception and hospitality for minors that they researched in Marseille and other French cities.
13. N.H. and others v. France.
14. An instruction issued by the Holland-government specified that during the evacuation of bidonvilles, 'special attention should be paid to the most vulnerable persons' in the provision of shelter and material care (Caseau 2022). In the case described here, this provision intersects with the assessment of asylum seeker's vulnerability.

15. During the pandemic, the local emergency housing dispositive in Marseille was expanded. While the effort did reduce the number of people sleeping in the streets, the solutions remained highly provisional (short term, with repeated renewals) and according to our interlocutors seemed not to have a led to a change in the narrow understanding and operationalization of vulnerability (cf. also Marsaud and Bonis 2020).
16. Allocation Demandeur d'Asile, (ADA).

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

Funding

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