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The Politics of Labeling Refugee Men as "Vulnerable"

Lewis Turner *

Critiques of humanitarian work with refugees have increasingly called for refugee men's "vulnerabilities" to be recognized. The deployment of "vulnerability" reflects the term's centrality within contemporary humanitarianism, and its rapidly expanding use in feminist analysis. This article argues that calls to see refugee men as "vulnerable" fail to critique, and even seek to expand, "vulnerability" as a mechanism of humanitarian governance. This approach is likely to lead to more humanitarian control over, and racialized violence toward, refugee men themselves. In an era of calls for decolonial approaches, more radical critiques are required, which center the concepts, understandings, and resistance of refugees.

Introduction

Refugeehood is a "vulnerability contest" (Howden and Kodalak 2018). In order to access protection, aid, shelter, or resettlement, refugees often have to first be recognized as "vulnerable" by humanitarians or state actors. Refugees have their "vulnerability" measured by their identities, legal statuses, family units, bodily abilities, income, expenditure, sexual practices, livelihood strategies, food consumption, and shelter conditions, to name but a few. Within both academic and humanitarian circles, increasing attention has gradually been placed on the ways in which assessments of "vulnerability" treat refugee men. Critical scholars have noted the ways in which long-standing assumptions about the essential, or inevitable, "vulnerability" of refugee "womenandchildren" (Enloe 1993) can lead both to refugee women's infantilization and to the needs of refugee men being overlooked, or their "vulnerabilities" ignored. Some humanitarian agencies meanwhile, gradually and partially, have begun to evaluate whether their work is adequately meeting the needs of refugee men, often by focusing on groups such as unaccompanied boys and male survivors of sexual violence. In short, for a range of actors, refugee men's "vulnerability" is increasingly on the agenda. This article focuses

Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany
*lewis.turner@abi.uni-freiburg.de

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on the politics of increasing attempts to label refugee men as "vulnerable." It asks: what does this labeling of "vulnerability" *do*, and what agendas does it serve? How should it be understood within the context of contemporary humanitarianism? And is it sufficiently radical in its critique of that humanitarianism?

This article argues that while an increased focus on refugee men's lives is welcome, the labeling of refugee men as "vulnerable" is both analytically and politically problematic, with potentially very detrimental effects for refugee men themselves. In using the framework of "vulnerability" to try to both raise the profile of refugee men's needs and to challenge the essentialization of refugee women, scholars and practitioners offer interventions that function as internal critiques of "resilience humanitarianism," which aims to create "resilience" out of "vulnerability." While in academic work on refugee men the notion of "vulnerability" is rarely defined, within the humanitarian system it is a signifier that incites and legitimates intervention. These critiques of humanitarian work with refugee men, including some I wrote myself, therefore ask for a more consistent application of "vulnerability" policies, without challenging the notion of "vulnerability" as a framework through which to understand refugees' needs, or how that framework facilitates humanitarian control over refugees' lives and bodies. They inevitably involve calls for the expansion of the domain on which humanitarian actors feel empowered to act. Given that humanitarianism always controls as it cares, strikes as it heals, and dominates as it "empowers" (Agier 2011; Harrell-Bond 2002), the expansion of this domain is not necessarily to be welcomed.

In recognition of the increasing calls for the decolonization of (our study of) different forms of intervention in the "Global South" (Rutazibwa 2019a; Sabaratnam 2017), I argue that a more radical approach is necessary. As I explore in the penultimate section of this article, scholars should not assume that "vulnerabilities" are a relevant category of analysis for refugee communities, but rather should foreground "the experiences and knowledges" of refugee communities themselves (Rutazibwa 2019b, 66). Rather than perpetuating systems that encourage refugees to perform powerlessness, scholars should seek to understand the modes of control and violence enabled and enacted through humanitarian uses of "vulnerability," and to highlight and support refugees' resistance to humanitarian governance, and to the imposed categories, such as "vulnerability," to which their lives are subjected.

Methodologically, this article builds its argumentation on several key pillars. First, it draws extensively on the cross-disciplinary literatures on "vulnerability," with a particular focus on feminist scholarship. Second, it offers a critical analysis of humanitarian reports and academic production that focus on refugee men and "vulnerability." Third, it is heavily informed by extensive primary field research about refugee men and masculinities within the Syria refugee response, which was undertaken in Jordan from September 2015 to August 2016. This fieldwork involved participant-observation in

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Za'tari Refugee Camp[1] with a Jordanian NGO—Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD)—working on its programs on "sexual and gender-based violence prevention" and "civic engagement." This fieldwork furthermore included over sixty semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugees, humanitarian workers, and other actors involved in the Syria response, and most of these interviews focused on humanitarian work with and understandings of refugee men. The vast majority of these interviewees have, at their request, been anonymized. Because of this fieldwork, this article focuses primarily on materials produced about the Syria refugee response, while also drawing on discussions of refugee men's "vulnerabilities" in other contexts.

In offering this analysis, the article seeks to contribute to debates occurring within the different intersecting bodies of literature on which it draws, primarily on gender and refugeehood, the contemporary humanitarian system, and the growing debates on men and masculinities in contexts of displacement and intervention. It offers specific insights into the functioning of gender and "vulnerability" within the Syria response, while also putting forward argumentation that is relevant beyond that context, and beyond debates on refugee men. Simultaneously, it engages with wider debates about "vulnerability," which has an increasingly prominent place in feminist theorizing across disciplines. Throughout this article, except when quoting others, I use the term "vulnerable," as well as "vulnerability" and "vulnerabilities," within quotation marks. I do so to foreground the ambiguity that underlies the multifarious usages of the concept, and to, as Cynthia Enloe (2019) argued quotation marks can do, "shine a neon light on a concept that people use as if it doesn't have consequences." It is the consequences of the rapidly expanding use of the designation of "vulnerable" that I am interested in exploring.

Following this introduction, the article will first offer an overview of the rise of "vulnerability" within both academic scholarship and humanitarian practice. It will subsequently turn to the specific topic of refugee men, and analyze the ways in which the concept of "vulnerability" is increasingly being used, within both scholarship and humanitarian reports, to describe the circumstances and needs of refugee men. Building on this analysis, it will argue that the approach of labeling refugee men as "vulnerable" is problematic, both analytically and politically. It imposes an analytical framework onto refugees' lives, and represents a call for an increased use of the concept of "vulnerability" within humanitarianism, and thus an expansion of, rather than a challenge to, the power that humanitarians exercise over refugee populations. More radical critiques, which center the conceptual frameworks of refugee populations themselves, are urgently required.

The Rise of "Vulnerability"

"Vulnerability," it is argued, is on the rise. Reviewing a range of scholarly work on the concept in 2005, Hogan and Marandola argue that the world is

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experiencing "a risk situation which has generalized vulnerability as never before" (Hogan and Marandola 2005, 455). I am skeptical of such sweeping claims, which are themselves part of the apparatus that renders a focus on "vulnerability" seemingly inevitable. What appears much more certain, however, and is widely documented, is that the *concept* of "vulnerability" is on the rise. Recognizing this trend, Alyson Cole describes "vulnerability" as a "new keyword" (Cole 2016, 262). According to Virokannas et al., in the 1980s "vulnerability" largely emerged from "environmental sciences in reference to the impact of natural or economic disasters on human populations," but has become increasingly commonplace ever since. It is now used in "medicine and public health as an epidemiological term" (Virokannas, Liuski, and Kuronen 2018, 2), "floods the modern legal discourse" (Pétin 2016, 91), and has even been proposed as the possible foundation of a new vision of law and politics (Fineman and Grear 2013). The range of entities to which "vulnerability" can apply is similarly expansive—"institutions, cities, populations, specific demographic groups, places, regions, nations: all can be vulnerable" (Hogan and Marandola 2005, 465). There is a science of "vulnerability," but science itself is also "vulnerable" (Hogan and Marandola 2005, 467). In Brené Brown, Cole argues, there is even a "vulnerability celebrity" (Brown 2012; Cole 2016, 270). It is an "extraordinarily elastic concept, capable of being stretched to cover almost any person, group, or situation" (Levine 2004, 398). Yet even when it is central to scholars' analysis, the concept is often under- or un-defined (Cole 2016; Hogan and Marandola 2005; Pétin 2016).

Various arguments have been put forward for the increased prominence of "vulnerability," including the War on Terror, growing economic precarity, and the rise of the "risk society" (Hogan and Marandola 2005). Alyson Cole describes "vulnerability studies" as part of the growing body of "contemporary work about the emotive aspects of politics, as well as the so-called 'affective turn' in philosophy and social theory" (Cole 2016, 261). It could thus be argued to be part of what has been critiqued as a broader turn toward ethics and away from politics (Danewid 2017). Cole claims, for example, that the move from "victimhood" to "vulnerability," motivated in part by the connotations of passivity and helplessness that many argue accompany the former term, is part of an abandonment of a "vocabulary of injustice" that needs reclaiming (Cole 2016, 269, 271). Otherwise, as one critical humanitarian worker said to me, it seems that there are no oppressors anymore, "it's all about vulnerability."[2]

Within feminist scholarship, the influence of the work of Judith Butler appears to have been particularly important in popularizing the concept (Danewid 2017). In works such as *Frames of War* and *Precarious Life*, Butler makes a case for the universality of "vulnerability"; it is inherent, she argues, to the human condition. At the same time, "under certain political conditions it becomes radically exacerbated or radically disavowed" (Butler 2009, 48),

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and one can thus talk about the universality of "vulnerability" and its unequal distribution (Butler 2004; see also Fineman 2008). Butler argues that while the inherent precariousness of the body means it is "vulnerable to injury . . . this does not mean that vulnerability can be reduced to injurability" (Butler 2009, 61). Because while "vulnerability" can lead to injury and suffering, "it also serves the condition of responsiveness . . . as bodies, we are exposed to others, and . . . this may be the condition of our desire," even if "it also raises the possibility of subjugation and cruelty" (Butler 2009, 61). In her critique of the uses of "vulnerability" in feminist scholarship, Cole describes definitions such as Butler's under the rubric of "vulnerability-as-interconnectivity" rather than "vulnerability-as-harm" (Cole 2016, 266). Importantly, however, as Cole argues, while scholars ask us to embrace the positive and generative aspects that recognition of universalized "vulnerability" is supposed to afford, "they still preserve and frequently employ the conventional and narrower use of the term 'vulnerable' as a designation of harm and oppression" (Cole 2016, 266).

In parallel to these developments, "vulnerability" has gained an ever-greater role within humanitarianism and its work with refugees (Sözer 2019b). Sözer argues that while, in the 1990s, "many humanitarian institutions did not agree on whether asylum seekers had a collective vulnerability or not," this collective status was increasingly accepted in the years that followed (Sözer 2019b, 5). Yet, by the 2010s, rather than continuing to focus on this collective "vulnerability," humanitarian actors were increasingly aiming to assess which populations were the "most vulnerable," and to focus their attention and resources on them (Sözer 2019b; see also Janmyr and Mourad 2018). As numerous scholars have demonstrated, and as will be discussed in more depth later on, refugee women and children have often been central to the imagined figure of the (most) "vulnerable" refugee (Baines 2004; Johnson 2011). In United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) documents on the Syria response in Jordan, the agency defines "vulnerability" as "the risk of exposure of Syrian refugee households to harm, primarily in relation to protection threats, inability to meet basic needs, limited access to basic services, and food insecurity, and the ability of the population to cope with the consequences of harm" (UNHCR n.d., 1). Within the schema outlined by Cole (2016), and in contrast to the aims of much of the feminist scholarship on the broader topic of "vulnerability," this humanitarian definition decidedly reflects the notion of "vulnerability-as-harm," rather than "vulnerability-as-interconnectivity."

"Vulnerability" has thereby become, as Sözer argues, a crucial "label classifying some forced migrants" (Sözer 2019b, 7; see also Freedman 2017), and can be understood within a longer context of the "labeling" of refugees, which Zetter (1991) brought into focus. In an interesting choice of words, Zetter notes the "extreme vulnerability of refugees to imposed labels" (Zetter 1991, 39). His work demonstrated the ways in which the labeling of refugees is non-participatory, how bureaucratic interests and procedures shape how labels are

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established, and how labels have material and political effects. In terms of the label of "vulnerability" specifically, it is difficult to overemphasize the material effects for many refugees. Whether one is recognized as part of the (most) "vulnerable" can be the factor that determines, for example, whether one receives food aid, whether one can access NGO programs, or whether one is eligible for resettlement (Janmyr and Mourad 2018; Turner 2016, 2017).

The rise of what is termed "resilience" or "resiliency" humanitarianism (Hilhorst 2018; Ilcan and Rygiel 2015) has only served to increase the prominence and importance of the concept of "vulnerability" in humanitarian work with refugees. In a context in which the three typical "durable solutions" for refugees—voluntary return, integration into the current host state, or resettlement to a third state—have become increasingly unavailable, and refugee situations increasingly protracted (Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018), humanitarian actors focus ever more on how to protect and assist refugees where they reside, but with a recognition that the so-called "care and maintenance" programs cannot continue indefinitely (Ilcan and Rygiel 2015). Humanitarians must identify those who are currently (most) "vulnerable," and work with/on those refugees to enable them to "cope" on their own. That is, humanitarians aim to turn "vulnerable" refugees into "resilient" ones (Methmann 2014). Therefore, as in some of the aforementioned scholarship (Fineman 2008), the contemporary humanitarian lexicon pairs "vulnerability" with "resilience." As scholars across multiple fields have recognized, this vision of "resilience," with its emphasis on populations adapting to, rather than resisting, the circumstances they find themselves in aims to create depoliticized (refugee) subjects (Ilcan and Rygiel 2015; Methmann 2014; Reid 2012).

In another parallel with the theoretical scholarship discussed above, humanitarian moves to foreground an axis of "vulnerability"/"resilience" are also part of attempts to move away from notions of "victimhood," and toward something with, it is argued, more emancipatory potential (Welsh 2014). Rather than seeing aid recipients as victims, they are seen as "survivors and first responders" who are "active and resilient" (Hilhorst 2018, 9). At the same time, however, there are contexts in which the "vulnerability" of refugees appears, in the vernacular language of humanitarian workers, to lack this specificity. As a UNHCR report on the "vulnerability" of Syrian refugees in Jordan notes, "'vulnerable' and 'vulnerability' are common terms in the humanitarian aid and development sectors, but their use can be vague, often being seen as substitutes for 'poor' and 'poverty'" (UNHCR 2015, 9).

To summarize, therefore, the concept of "vulnerability" has experienced a phenomenal rise in prominence in both scholarship and humanitarianism. In both spheres, however, despite its centrality, the term is often poorly defined or undefined, and continues to be regularly deployed as a generalized designator of (liability to) harm. Similarly, in both scholarship and humanitarianism, there have been debates about the use and politics of the term, yet very little

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critical examination of the increased labeling of refugee men as "vulnerable," to which I now turn.

The "Vulnerability" of Refugee Men

The gendered lives and experiences of refugee men have rarely been the focus of research (Suerbaum 2018). This has slowly been changing, however, with increasing numbers of scholars and humanitarian actors focusing on refugee men and masculinities, including within the context of the Syria "crisis" and response (Krystalli, Hawkins, and Wilson 2017; Suerbaum 2018; UNHCR 2017). The growing volume of analysis about refugee men's circumstances has become intertwined with debates about "vulnerability." First, given the centrality of "vulnerability" to aid distribution, and the vision of refugee women as quintessentially "vulnerable," humanitarian attempts to change their work and relationships with refugee men have often been framed in terms of men's "vulnerability." Second, within scholarship, there has been an increase in the use of "vulnerability" as an analytical tool through which to understand refugee men's lives, in some cases in an attempt to simultaneously influence policy and practice. While not the focus of this article, it is noteworthy that other groups of refugees, such as LGBT* refugees, are similarly increasingly being labeled as "vulnerable" (Kivilcim 2017; Myrttinen, Khattab, and Maydaa 2017), demonstrating the wider relevance of the arguments presented here. In parallel, increasing discussions of men, masculinities and "vulnerabilities" are also found in other fields, such as critical and feminist military studies (Henry 2017; Myrttinen, Khattab, and Naujoks 2017).

To take the two aforementioned issues in turn, there has been a longstanding and widely shared assumption among humanitarian workers that refugee women and children are (the most) "vulnerable" (Hyndman and Giles 2011; Sözer 2019a), a judgment that is intertwined with racialized perceptions of refugee women in contexts of the "Global South" (Johnson 2011). Within humanitarian work, this assumption can be reinforced by the "group approach" to "vulnerability," whereby certain categories of persons are assumed to be "vulnerable" (Clark 2007). For example, according to one document produced by the UNHCR and International Relief and Development (n.d.), there are six "vulnerable" groups within a refugee population: women at risk, elderly/older person at risk, child at risk, single parent or caregiver, people with disabilities, and people with serious medical conditions. Similarly, in many contexts, women who are living with children but not with men—so called "female-headed households"—are assumed, by virtue of this family arrangement, to constitute a group that is particularly or especially "vulnerable."[3] As Jolly (2011, 24) has argued, this is a deeply heteronormative designation, ignoring "the possibility that [the household] could be female headed by choice," run by a lesbian couple, for example, or by a woman who prefers to live without a husband.

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The process of reforming assessments of "vulnerability" within the Syria response noted the extensive problems entailed by the "group approach": it generalizes, not everyone within a category is equally "vulnerable," it excludes those not typically thought of as "vulnerable," fails to recognize multidimensional disadvantages, does not explain why people are "vulnerable," and does not take account of the ways "vulnerability" changes across time and space (Khogali et al. 2014). Yet even when not officially working on the basis of this "group approach," for example in contexts where large-scale surveys are used to "calculate" refugees' "vulnerability" (Janmyr and Mourad 2018), the assumption of women's "vulnerability" remains (Janmyr and Mourad 2018; Sözer 2019a; Turner 2018). As Myrttinen et al. have argued, such an assumption about women's "vulnerability" "pushes [men] into the category of the 'perpetrator' and renders the notion of male vulnerability essentially unimaginable" (Myrttinen, Khattab, and Naujoks 2017, 110). Single men, in particular, can be found "at the bottom of the vulnerability priority list" (Clark 2007, 288).

Nevertheless, there have been small but noticeable humanitarian attempts to challenge these ideas as they relate to refugee men. Some humanitarian articles and reports, for example, have explicitly noted the ways in which the "group approach" to "vulnerability," and accompanying sets of gendered assumptions, can exclude (at least some) men from receiving assistance and services (Khogali et al. 2014; Women's Refugee Commission 2014). According to a logic in which "vulnerability" denotes the need for humanitarian assistance, correcting this requires the "vulnerabilities" of refugee men to be documented and recognized, which is the next step some agencies have taken. For example, in 2016, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Lebanon released a "vulnerability" assessment of Syrian men in the country, and found that their "vulnerabilities" were extensive and often overlooked. According to this report, 88 percent of single Syrian men in Lebanon limited their movements in order to try and stay safe, especially from the police, fewer than 10 percent of refugee men had received assistance in the previous thirty days, and over 55 percent of those who did "described it as only 'somewhat useful'" (IRC 2016, 3). Men, especially single men, were disproportionately likely to not be registered with the UNHCR, and 30 percent of Syrian men surveyed believed that single men were automatically ineligible to register (IRC 2016, 5, 7). The report fills, it claims, a "significant" gap in knowledge about refugee men's lives, which is caused by, and in turn reinforces, "a misperception that they face no or minimal vulnerabilities, compared with other demographic cohorts" (IRC 2016, 3). Although not written as "vulnerability" assessments, reports that shed much-needed light on, respectively, men and boys who are survivors of sexual violence in the context of the Syria "crisis," and unaccompanied men and boys in refugee contexts, both use the framing of "vulnerability" extensively when highlighting the needs of refugee men and boys, and the shortcomings of current humanitarian service provision (CARE and Promundo 2017; UNHCR 2017).

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Academic research on refugee men is similarly relatively scarce but noticeably growing. Like the aforementioned humanitarian assessments, it is valuable, as it offers new and important perspectives on refugeehood and humanitarianism, and has the potential to contribute to changing a public discourse in which refugee men are often portrayed, in deeply gendered and racialized ways, as threatening (Pruitt, Berents, and Munro 2018). Like the aforementioned humanitarian reports, this scholarship typically uses the idea of refugee men's "vulnerability" or "vulnerabilities" extensively, in some cases, at least in part, to attempt to speak to and influence policy. To offer a few examples, Allsopp argues that men in the European "refugee crisis" "should be seen as at once vulnerable and agentic" (Allsopp 2017, 155). El-Bushra and Gardner offer their research findings on "male vulnerability" among Somali men, and note that "displaced/refugee men" are one of the groups consistently likely to be "particularly vulnerable" (El-Bushra and Gardner 2016, 451). Davis and Taylor argue, in the context of the Syria conflict, that "young men and men of fighting age as refugees," who often become refugees "in part due to fear of military conscription and recruitment into armed groups . . . should be considered an at-risk and vulnerable group" (Davis and Taylor 2013). Despite her extensive critiques of the deployment of the notion of vulnerability in humanitarian work, Sözer similarly argues that usually refugee men's "particular vulnerabilities do not count" (Sözer 2019a, 23). Researchers have also attempted to assess the "vulnerability" of Syrian refugee men to violent extremism and radicalization, with one report arguing that "[t]he most vulnerable groups are adolescent boys and young men" (Aubrey et al. 2016, 4; see also Eleftheriadou 2018). Shortly after finishing the fieldwork on which this article is in part based, I similarly chose to respond to what I perceived to be problematic and gendered assumptions about "vulnerability" among humanitarian workers by writing a piece explicitly framed in terms of refugee men's "vulnerability" (Turner 2016; see also Turner 2017). My mistake in doing so, I believe, was two-fold: taking the centrality of "vulnerability" for granted, and not considering all of the political effects of the labeling of refugee men as "vulnerable."

One of the potential outcomes, and indeed sometimes explicit aims, of feminist research on refugee men and "vulnerability," is a critique of an understanding of "vulnerability" as attached to particular groups, or kinds of bodies (El-Bushra and Gardner 2016; Myrttinen, Khattab, and Maydaa 2017; Turner 2016); it can resist the humanitarian use of "the vulnerables" as a noun (Clark 2007, 292). Such a designation, Clark argues, elides the context that creates "vulnerability," and ignores the key question of "vulnerability to what?" This question could generate "an analysis of power structures and hence greater understanding of root causes of, and appropriate responses to, vulnerability" (Clark 2007, 293). Such an analysis could potentially both bring more humanitarian attention to populations such as refugee men, and challenge anti-feminist and racialized depictions of refugee women as inherently (the most) "vulnerable" (Johnson 2011).

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In this work, scholars discuss similar themes, and offer similar arguments, to those found in some of the aforementioned humanitarian assessments of "vulnerability." The IRC assessment, for example, argues that "generalizations about the vulnerability of women . . . can undermine genuine efforts to support and empower those groups" (IRC 2016, 3). The CARE UK and Promundo report on unaccompanied refugee men and boys claims that thinking of "vulnerability" in terms of both "external threats" and "coping capacity" can change who is understood to constitute a "vulnerable group" (CARE and Promundo 2017, 12). More broadly, the UNHCR's overarching "vulnerability" assessment of Syrian refugees in Jordan similarly notes that "vulnerability" needs "to be defined in terms of what it is that a population is vulnerable to" (UNHCR 2015, 9).

By using the same language and framings as the humanitarian sector, this scholarship has the potential to bring refugee men more firmly into the view of humanitarian actors who can offer protection and assistance, and who hold power over resource allocation, which is done according to understandings of "vulnerability." That this might happen, it is worth noting, is also a source of significant controversy within humanitarian work. Many gender specialists (among others), who have struggled for years and decades to ensure that refugee women's needs and circumstances are taken into account within humanitarian work (Baines 2004), fear that an increased focus on refugee men and "vulnerability" could be a conduit for reducing work with refugee women.[4] Furthermore, and as I experienced during my fieldwork, some humanitarian workers displayed a hostility toward a (refugee) women's rights agenda, and are supportive of a greater focus on refugee men and their "vulnerabilities" for anti-feminist reasons (Turner 2019).

Yet within the academic scholarship that attempts to foreground refugee men's "vulnerabilities," it is often not clear what "vulnerability" is understood to be, and how it relates to humanitarian understandings and deployments of "vulnerability." The different variants of the concept—"vulnerable," "vulnerability," "vulnerabilities"—often simply go undefined, even when they are central to the points being made by the authors (Davis and Taylor 2013; El-Bushra and Gardner 2016; multiple chapters in Freedman, Kivilcim, and Baklacioglu 2017a). Judging by the ways it is deployed and mobilized, however, it appears clear that the intended meaning of the term typically corresponds to the broad notion of "vulnerability-as-harm" discussed above, not "vulnerability-as-interconnectivity" (even though it is possible that the scholars writing this work have been influenced by the latter conceptualization). For example, there are discussions of "the vulnerability of young men to forced recruitment" (Freedman, Kivilcim, and Baklacioglu 2017b, 6), of young men being "an at-risk and vulnerable population" (Davis and Taylor 2013, 4), of the border being "a site of vulnerability" (Allsopp 2017, 161), and so on, often making it appear that "vulnerability" is meant to denote being liable, or susceptible, to harm. As Levine has argued, the "elastic" concept of

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"vulnerability" is capable of being "snapped back" from its expansive uses (Levine 2004, 398). In offering this (implicit) understanding of "vulnerability," the literature roughly accords with the aforementioned UNHCR definition in Jordan, which defines "vulnerability" as "the risk of exposure of Syrian refugee households to harm" (UNHCR n.d., 1). Yet at the same time, there sometimes appears to be an attempt to differentiate the idea of "vulnerability" from the humanitarian usage of the term, for example through the use of quotation marks to designate the latter. Freedman et al., for example, claim that there are circumstances that may "increase the vulnerability of these single men," but that they may still find it difficult to access services because they will be "behind those deemed more 'vulnerable' by the international organizations and aid agencies" (Freedman, Kivilcim, and Baklacioglu 2017b, 6).

If, therefore, the "vulnerability" under discussion is not (at least for some authors) the same as the humanitarian designation of "vulnerability" (even if the usages appear the same), and if the notion of "vulnerability" does not appear to be a vision of "vulnerability-as-interconnectivity," what exactly is it? Even if "vulnerability" is the result of the social relations and contexts in which people live, what, precisely, does it mean to say that a refugee man is "vulnerable" or has "vulnerabilities?" Because of the ways in which "vulnerability" is used within humanitarian practice, that is, the field that many scholars hope to influence, the question of what "vulnerability" is meant to signify takes on a central importance. Indeed, it is because of the importance of "vulnerability" within humanitarianism that I am drawn to question whether this somewhat amorphous understanding of refugee men's "vulnerability" has the positive potential that its authors appear to believe. What (else) does the labeling of refugee men as "vulnerable" do? Or, in other words, what are the politics of labeling refugee men as "vulnerable?"

"Add 'Vulnerable' Men and Stir?" Inciting Humanitarian Interventions

It is my contention that the politics of labeling refugee men as "vulnerable" are troubling, because the description functions as an internal critique of humanitarianism. It fails to challenge the underlying power structures of humanitarianism, and the mode of governance that is represented by determinations of "vulnerability." Indeed, it calls for *more* humanitarianism, for *more* interventions, but on a wider range of bodies. Furthermore, the use of "vulnerability" in this work does not derive from refugees' own understandings of their lives and circumstances, nor is it even a relevant term in many linguistic contexts. This approach, therefore, rather than challenging the power humanitarians exercise over refugees of all genders, risks constituting

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an attempt to "add 'vulnerable' men and stir." Humanitarianism becomes broader, more "inclusive" even, but no less oppressive.

I start from the premise that critical scholarship has clearly established the authoritarian nature of humanitarian work with refugees; as Michel Agier has argued with clarity: "there is no care without control" (Agier 2011, 4). Barbara Harrell-Bond identified the fundamental problems of, or lack of humanity in, humanitarian work with refugees in the fact that it does not represent a mission to enable refugees' rights, but rather is a form of charity, benevolence, or largesse. Humanitarianism, therefore, does not represent a relationship of equals, but a hierarchy, an asymmetrical relationship of power, that is reflective of broader power inequalities (Harrell-Bond 2002). It relies on so-called "global standards" and "global knowledge," which are valued over in-depth knowledge of the context in which operations are taking place, and over the knowledge of the "objects" of humanitarianism about their own lives and communities (Turner 2018). "Vulnerability" is a central mechanism in and through which these power relationships play out.

Given this relationship between humanitarian actors and the "vulnerable," the description of refugee men as "vulnerable" constitutes them as (possible) objects of humanitarian intervention. Indeed, as discussed above, the labeling often explicitly intends to achieve this, because it argues that refugee men's "vulnerabilities" are being overlooked. For example, the focus, within the academic literature and humanitarian reporting, on specific groups of men, such as male survivors of forms of sexual and gender-based violence, single men, and unaccompanied boys and youth, could enable more "groups" to be added to the existing "group" approaches to "vulnerability" (see also Sözer 2019b). Even outside of the "group" approach, however, the scholarship on refugee men as "vulnerable" is inviting a re-evaluation of humanitarian work with this demographic. The critique of humanitarianism that is contained within the idea of refugee men being "vulnerable" is, therefore, an internal critique. It is an argument that the principles of humanitarianism—prioritizing the (most) "vulnerable"—have been inconsistently applied. Put simply, it is a call for *more* humanitarianism. While such a call may be appealing to many, its potential appeal rests on a side lining or obscuring of the authoritarian nature of humanitarianism—of what it actually means for humanitarianism to be enacted and experienced (see also Sözer 2019a). Perhaps, in line with the broad designations of "vulnerability-as-harm" discussed above, one could even argue that the perceived "vulnerability" of refugee men renders them "vulnerable" to humanitarianism.

More candid humanitarian interviewees in Jordan would acknowledge that their work, and the priorities it reflected, were externally generated impositions onto refugee communities,[5] with one even arguing, in a discussion on camp governance, that "it's like we have a dolls' house or SIMS and you're trying to create a mini-world . . . it's like we're trying to fix things that are not just a result of the refugee crisis."[6] These hierarchies of intervention are clearly

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racialized, consisting of, as Linda Tabar has argued, "an active, superior Western self and an abject, inferior non-Western Other," whose voice and agency are denied (Tabar 2016, 17). This can clearly be seen in humanitarian attempts to "empower" the Syrian women whom humanitarians assume or determine are "vulnerable." Attempts to promote Syrian women's participation in the paid labor market outside of the home, despite the fact that a clear majority of Syrian women in Jordan would prefer the opportunity to conduct such work from home (REACH and UN Women 2016), often end up increasing women's burdens, because they regularly simultaneously maintain responsibilities for childcare and domestic work (Tobin and Campbell 2016). Alternatively, humanitarian efforts to promote Syrian women's work in sites and conditions that Syrian women find unacceptable can simply fail because of humanitarians' unwillingness to give priority to Syrian women's voices and plans, rather than their own (Lenner and Turner 2019).

Promoting the idea that Syrian men are also "vulnerable" opens them up to similarly oppressive interventions. The idea that Syrian refugee men are "vulnerable" to violent extremism or "vulnerable" to recruitment into extremist groups has particularly concerning implications for Syrian refugee men themselves, especially in a context in which humanitarian donors are increasingly attempting to incorporate programs to "prevent" or "counter violent extremism" (P/CVE) into humanitarian work (Norwegian Refugee Council 2017). Research has demonstrated that existing "P/CVE" programs have clearly been influenced by doctrines of counterinsurgency, including the "intensive intelligence-gathering to build up detailed information on extremists and the wider Muslim population" that they involve (Kundnani 2014, 161; for the role of gender and race in counterinsurgency, see Khalili 2011). Existing work with Syrian refugees that aims to "engage" them as allies against forms of sexual and gender-based violence similarly bares the hallmarks of "post 9/11" constructions of race, religion, and gender (Turner 2018). As Bhattacharyya argues, the "War on Terror" has "seeped into the politics of 'race' … [f]amiliar racist mythologies are revamped to fit new fears" (Bhattacharyya 2013, 74; see also Pratt 2013). As a position paper from the Norwegian Refugee Council notes, many NGOs are willing, even keen, to incorporate "P/CVE" into their work (Norwegian Refugee Council 2017). If donors and implementing partners are ready and willing to do this work, what they require next is a "vulnerable" population on which to enact it. As Julian Reid so succinctly puts it: "vulnerability breeds its own violence" (Reid 2011, 778).

My argument is, therefore, that attempts to recognize refugee men as "vulnerable" risk constituting an approach that could be summed up as "add 'vulnerable' men and stir." This language consciously draws on long-standing critiques of liberal feminist proposals, in which the solution to inequalities and injustices is not to fundamentally rethink a system, but simply to add women to an existing system (Pratt 2013). As Erin Baines has argued, this

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approach was attempted with regard to refugee women in the 1970s and 1980s, and failed to either "critique, or provide alternatives to" the humanitarian system in which the debates were taking place (Baines 2004, 3). I am not suggesting that the circumstances of refugee women and refugee men, nor their relationships to these power structures, are either the same or completely analogous. But the analogy does hold, I suggest, in the sense that simply recognizing refugee men as (potentially) "vulnerable," while maintaining the current system of "vulnerability" in place, serves to expand a system which, at its heart, is disempowering for refugees of all genders.

Furthermore, the centrality of "vulnerability" in these processes is politically troubling not only because of the kinds of interventions it incites, but because of the frameworks it imposes in doing so. The very idea of "vulnerability" is firmly rooted within particular and partial epistemologies. Gregory Bankoff has argued, for example, that "the discourse of vulnerability ... belongs to a knowledge system formed from within a dominant Western liberal consciousness and so inevitably reflects the values and principles of that culture" (Bankoff 2001, 29). In her powerful critiques of humanitarian deployments of "vulnerability," Hande Sözer nonetheless argues that the "piercing problem is that we cannot recognize some existing vulnerability conditions," and that the solution is found in "avoiding imposing our analytical conceptualizations on the reality and by examining the real-life vulnerabilities with a fresh eye before attempting to generate vulnerability categories" (Sözer 2019a, 11). I would argue, however, that the assumption that "real-life vulnerabilities" are the relevant object of analysis is *itself* an imposition of an analytical and conceptual framework, and that in assuming that "real-life vulnerabilities" could generate vulnerability categories, if only they were accurately seen, this proposal does not represent the break with "vulnerability" as a mode of humanitarian governance that is required.

It has, after all, long been established that refugees' conceptualizations of their identities and circumstances are typically very different from the conceptualizations of those who have the power to label them (Zetter 1991). Yet the prevailing power structures strongly incentivize refugees to perform in accordance with humanitarian conceptualizations of refugees' situations. Scholarship from a range of contexts has demonstrated that such performances can include "demonstrat[ing] material destitution" (Wagner 2018, 43), publicly identifying with humanitarian labels (Clark 2007), and framing one's experiences within particular narratives to establish "credibility" in the eyes of humanitarians (Sandvik 2011). The centrality of "vulnerability" specifically to the distribution of aid encourages, or at times even necessitates, performances of powerlessness by refugees (Freedman 2010; Sözer 2019b). During Clark's research in Uganda, in a particularly relevant example for this article, her interlocutors would often self-identify as "vulnerable," "even if they do not believe themselves to be vulnerable or to fulfil 'vulnerables' criteria" (Clark 2007, 292).

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As some scholars have noted, strategic performances of "vulnerability" or powerlessness can represent an exercise of agency on the part of refugees (Clark 2007; Freedman 2017), as can refugees' explicit resistance to the depoliticizing labels to which they are subject (Salih 2013). Even in the former cases, however, it is important to also foreground the power dynamics which incentivize or render necessary performances of powerlessness, which are then "evaluated" by others. Refugees' (strategic and agential) identifications of themselves as "vulnerable" can be understood to form part of the "public transcripts" that so often characterize the "open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate" (Scott 1992, 2). Groups that are relatively powerless, as Scott has argued, have "a self-interest in conspiring to reinforce hegemonic appearances" (Scott 1992, xii).

The aforementioned use of the term "vulnerable" by refugees in Clark's research is facilitated by knowledge of the English language. In contexts where English is not widely spoken, however, the dynamics of the language of "vulnerability" are different. For example, in the Arabic-language context of the Syria refugee response in Jordan, in which relatively few Syrian refugees had a high proficiency in English, and even fewer "international" humanitarian workers had any meaningful proficiency in Arabic, vernacular discussions of "vulnerability" in Arabic were extremely rare. The UNHCR does attempt to use the idea of "vulnerable" in its Arabic documents, and translates it as *mustad'af* (UNHCR 2018), which can also be translated as weak, miserable, or oppressed (Wehr 1994, 633). Yet in my conversations and interviews with Syrian refugees in Jordan, the vast majority of which took place in Arabic, this language was simply absent. There were discussions of problems, challenges, circumstances, priorities, and needs, but not of "vulnerabilities." The only time I heard Arabic-language discussions of "vulnerability" was when the term was brought into the conversation by Jordanian humanitarian workers. It is therefore entirely unclear what the humanitarian notion of "vulnerability" means to refugees whom it is (ostensibly) "about," if indeed it has any meaning to them at all. That is before one even comes to a discussion of whether it is a concept or state of being with which they would identify. All of which reinforces that the increasing discussions surrounding refugee men's "vulnerability" are discussions that are ultimately taking place within humanitarian frameworks, whether the authors of scholarship on the subject intend it as such or not. As analysts and scholars, I argue, we have a responsibility to not (whether intentionally or otherwise) embed ourselves within the frameworks that are imposed upon refugees, and can oppress and disempower them.

Inspired by the work of scholars such as Rutazibwa and Sabaratnam on the need to decolonize (our study of) systems of intervention that ostensibly aim to "help" their "beneficiaries" (Rutazibwa 2019a; Sabaratnam 2017), the critique that is needed, I argue, is much more radical. Since "attempts to assist the vulnerable-as-vulnerable perpetuate rather than destabilize asymmetrical

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relations" (Cole 2016, 273), the conversation about the circumstances of refugee men, and refugees of all genders, should not be about under what circumstances humanitarians will deem them "vulnerable" enough to intervene upon. Rather, it needs to be a conversation about how the communities who are deemed to constitute objects of intervention can have more control over their own circumstances. As Sabaratnam asks, can we change the subjects (Sabaratnam 2011)? There is no space here to offer anything close to a comprehensive account of what the rising conversations about decolonization and decoloniality might mean for the practice and analysis of humanitarianism (Rutazibwa 2019b), nor am I necessarily the right person to offer such an account. I nevertheless believe that the arguments presented in this article demonstrate that "vulnerability" cannot take us in that direction, and thereby also help to indicate what might be able to do so.

As Rutazibwa argues, "a decolonial approach to humanitarianism challenges Eurocentric analysis, foregrounding the experiences and knowledges of the intended targets of humanitarian aid" (Rutazibwa 2019b, 66). I, therefore, argue that, unless and until demonstrated otherwise, the concept of "vulnerability" should be assumed to be an external imposition onto refugee communities. It is an imposition with its own politics, its own hierarchies, and its own violence. Working from different conceptual starting points that emanate from refugees themselves at least allows for the possibility of starting to build a different and better humanitarianism, with a different and better politics. As Frantz Fanon argued, for a system to work for the people whom it is ostensibly serving, those people's "structuring values have to be embraced without any complexes" (Fanon, quoted in Cherki 2006, 71–72).

Therefore, we do not need more studies of refugees' "vulnerabilities"; we need studies of refugees' lives that are grounded in their own concepts and understandings. We do not need more studies that ask how "vulnerability" criteria can be made more "inclusive"; we need studies of the violence that humanitarian "vulnerability" criteria enact. We do not need more studies that perpetuate structures that encourage performances of powerlessness; we need studies that center refugees' resistance to the modes of humanitarian governance they experience. That resistance is found wherever humanitarianism is in operation. In the context of the Syria refugee response in Jordan, it was ever present: in Syrians' defiance of humanitarian authorities running refugee camps (Sullivan and Tobin 2014); in their insistence that Syrians did not need Europeans to educate their children, but the chance to do it themselves;[7] in refugees' astonishment that the humanitarian sector continues to equate the concepts of "gender" and "women"; and in the suggestion that Syrians could educate humanitarians, rather than vice versa.[8] There is no reason to think that any of this is understood by Syrian refugees in terms of, or as a response to, their "vulnerability". Rather, it appears to be a political struggle to resist the passive subject position that humanitarians demand of them and to resist being reduced to an object of intervention; to resist the logic of "vulnerability."

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Conclusion

This article has argued that while the increasing focus on the "vulnerability" of refugee men is an understandable response to essentializing visions of gender and "vulnerability" that circulate within humanitarianism, it is an analytically and politically problematic response to the ways in which humanitarianism is structured and practiced. Scholarship on refugee men and "vulnerability" leaves the concept ill defined or undefined, and often effectively mirrors the humanitarian usage of the term, in which "vulnerability" is a general designation of (liability to) harm, and in which humanitarians (should) allocate resources according to "vulnerability" criteria. It is thereby unavoidably an internal critique of humanitarianism, which calls for its expansion, or at least its more consistent application. In critiquing both the humanitarian and scholarly literatures on refugees and "vulnerability," and in outlining paths to potential alternatives, this article has important implications for those who are analyzing "vulnerability" with reference not only to refugee men, but also to any group or demographic of refugees, and for scholars who are analyzing humanitarian governance of refugees more broadly.

One NGO Director explained to me that while it is typically thought that refugees need humanitarians, as the discourse on "vulnerability" would imply, in fact, the opposite is true. Comparing the context to a play, he claimed that humanitarians "need local people as the stage on which we can act."[9] Rather than seeking to expand the numbers upon whom humanitarians can perform their "benevolence," critical scholars and analysts should be tearing up the script. Calling for more focus on refugee men's "vulnerabilities" does not do this, and does not question the position of the "helpers," even if it questions their individual actions or policies. What is needed is not an expanded or more "inclusive" humanitarianism, where more refugees are recognized as "vulnerable." Rather, what is needed is an approach that questions the centrality of "vulnerability" as a mechanism for resource allocation and as a way of analyzing refugees' lives; that instead centers refugees' own concepts, understandings, and knowledges; and that thereby supports refugees' challenges to humanitarians' attempts to monopolize both knowledge about refugees' needs, and decisions about resource allocation in refugee communities. Claiming that refugee men are "vulnerable," just as women and children are, or even can be rendered "vulnerable" by social circumstances and context, just as women and children can be, leaves in place, indeed, further fuels, the domination and disempowerment that lie at the heart of humanitarian work with refugees.

Notes

Lewis Turner is a Senior Researcher at the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute in Freiburg, Germany. His research focuses on the humanitarian response for Syrian refugees in the Middle East, primarily in Jordan. It explores questions of gender

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(especially men and masculinities), race, work, labor markets, and encampment. He holds a PhD from SOAS University of London, and his work has appeared in a number of journals, including *Mediterranean Politics* and *Middle East Critique*. He is the winner of the 2019 Shirin M. Rai Dissertation Prize for International Relations, awarded by the Political Studies Association, and the 2019 Michael Nicholson Thesis Prize, awarded by the British International Studies Association.

1. In my transliteration of Arabic terms, I have followed the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, while omitting diacritic marks, and using single quotation marks for *ʿayn* and *hamza*.
2. Fieldnotes, Amman, June 4, 2016.
3. Author interviews with NGO program manager in Zaʻtari and Jared Kohler, photographer formerly contracted to UNHCR Jordan, March 26, and August 8, 2016; fieldnotes, Amman, October 6, 2015 and February 20, 2016.
4. Author interviews with sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) specialists, Amman, November 30, 2015 and July 4, 2016.
5. Author interview with sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) specialist, Amman, July 4, 2016.
6. Author interview with NGO worker, Amman, October 16, 2015.
7. Fieldnotes, Zaʻtari Refugee Camp, February 2, 2016.
8. Fieldnotes, Zaʻtari Refugee Camp, July 27, 2016.
9. Author interview with Curt Rhodes, International Director of Questscope, Amman, May 19, 2016.

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