# Constructing Vulnerability and Victimhood at the EU Border

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## Key words: Vulnerability, Victimhood, Greece, Gender, Displacement

This intervention explores the ways in which gendered and racialised constructions of vulnerability and victimhood are politically contested and mobilised in asylum procedures and support. In the context of asylum and migration policy, the concepts of victimhood and vulnerability have been drawn upon by governments and international institutions to construct notions of who should and should not have access to reception support such as housing, food, and mental health care. They feed into narratives surrounding the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor, by using the language of “refugees” and “asylum seekers” pitted against “economic migrants”.[[1]](#footnote-1) They draw on racialised and gendered assumptions, often premised on heteronormative understandings of gender that marginalise and silence groups and individuals. They rely on an underlying assumption that frames “womenandchildren”[[2]](#footnote-2) as one homogenous group, standing in contrast to other less deserving groups not genuinely in need of international protection. This can leave under-supported groups such as LGBTQI+ individuals as well as young men travelling alone - who are routinely portrayed as able to game asylum systems - underserved by support organisations or on lengthy waiting lists.

Bringing an intersectional lens to bear on the construction of victimhood and vulnerability challenges some of the inherent assumptions present when groups or individuals are referred to in these terms. It also highlights the value of gender and feminist analysis to deepening our thinking of the harms that categorisation can do. In taking a more granular and intersectional approach it is possible to better understand why people find themselves in need of protection and support. I explore alternative approaches to thinking through questions of vulnerability and victimhood at the border, discussing one alternative conceptualisation that focuses on contexts[[3]](#footnote-3) and material situational conditions, rather than structural conceptions of vulnerability and victimhood.[[4]](#footnote-4) Such an approach has relevance to policy design as well as to the implementation of support.

This intervention is informed by empirical research on refugee support and activism on the Greek island of Samos. It relies on ongoing work carried out between 2018 and 2022 drawing on patchwork ethnographic methodologies[[5]](#footnote-5) including visits of different length ranging from a few days to ten weeks, alongside semi-structured interviews with displaced people, officials, NGOs, activists, and members of the local community. In making this intervention, I look to challenge gendered and racialised assumptions of vulnerability and victimhood recognising the harm caused when populations are segmented in such a way that some are designated vulnerable and others not[[6]](#footnote-6). This kind of harm is often felt by young men, who can find themselves presented through a lens of assumed masculinity with access to limited support.[[7]](#footnote-7)

By way of grounding this intervention, I share two stories from the now closed Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) on the island of Samos. The Vathy RIC was located next to the main town and closed in September 2021, replaced by a closed and controlled Multi-Purpose Reception and Identification Centre (MPRIC) in a remote part of the island called Zervou. The RIC originally had space to house 648 people but in the winter of 2019/2020 was “sheltering” closer to 8000. As such, most people lived outside of the fences and barbed wire of the main camp, not in containers with hygiene facilities but in tents and makeshift shelters exposed to the elements, to rats and snakes, to fire risks and to violence. The two stories below come from the Vathy RIC, but the lessons and arguments have relevance to shelter facilities in many different border locations, including the new Zervou MPRIC. After introducing these stories, I draw on them to present an alternative approach to conceptualising vulnerability and victimhood and suggest that approaching these concepts differently may enable a more nuanced and granular approach to support.

**Story 1 -** **Shelter from the Cold**

Weather conditions on Samos can be extreme. In the summer, temperatures can reach 40 degrees and higher with sustained risks of forest fires. In the winter, torrential storms and extreme cold put people at risk of hyperthermia as tents and makeshift shelters built in and around the extended area of the RIC (referred to as “the jungle”) failed to provide the protection people needed to survive in these conditions. In the winter of 2020/2021, as the temperatures plummeted, NGOs entered negotiations with camp staff to be able to open their centres to offer emergency shelter on nights when temperatures were dangerously low.[[8]](#footnote-8) Once an agreement was reached, a limited number of spaces were available for people most at risk from the situation - often pregnant women, the elderly, and children. Due to limitations on resources, however, this still left other groups outside, sleeping in makeshift shelters, often alone, in freezing temperatures. This was particularly an issue for young men travelling alone who often had a limited support network on the island whilst also being presented through a lens of prescribed masculinity. This lens assumes that “men experiencing displacement can perform a vision of masculinity replete with agency and independence, obscuring refugee men’s actual and varied lived experiences and challenges”.[[9]](#footnote-9) As such, approaches to support tend “to disregard how susceptible men themselves are to risks, though perhaps in different ways”,[[10]](#footnote-10) especially in spaces of displacement and reception. The central issue in this situation was that state and international actors failed to adequately prepare for a situation that occurred annually, relying instead on NGOs to fill the gaps in provision, drawing on their limited space and resources to do so. This forced groups to segment the population along the lines of types of trauma, risk, and vulnerability which, “unbeknownst to those who promote it, [can] reinvent ‘good’ and ‘bad’ victims or at least a ranking of legitimacy among victims”.[[11]](#footnote-11) This can be seen on Samos, where the trauma young men experience both from the situation they are fleeing and their time facing camp conditions can vastly increase their risks. In addition to this, vulnerability assessments have often been criticised for “categorising certain groups as ‘naturally’ [or structurally] vulnerable”, and other groups as naturally not vulnerable.[[12]](#footnote-12) These essentialised categorisations, relying on assumptions linked to gender, race, disability, age, etc., often fail to consider complex realities created by the situations and contexts in which individuals find themselves, such as multiple winters in insecure shelter, feeling abandoned by the state and their asylum procedures.

**Story 2- Reporting Violence**

In July 2021 I met with a member of the Samos LGBTQI+ Group. The group was founded to meet a gap in support for LGBTQI+ displaced people and NGO volunteers on the island of Samos, which prior to the founding of this group was lacking, with LGBTQI+ specific risks often silenced and/or marginalised.[[13]](#footnote-13) As Hagen reminds us in relation to sex and gender based violence support, one reason for this can be that, “[a]t the NGO level, most funding for aid to survivors of SGBV continues to be based on an essentialist categorization… leaving male and many LGBTQ[I+] victims out of the equation”.[[14]](#footnote-14) This is not because other groups do not experience violence, especially in contexts such as RICs, but rather that in carrying out important work drawing attention to violence against women as a serious issue “a strategic decision may be taken to define women only in what was perceived as less threatening terms, namely as cisgender heterosexual women”.[[15]](#footnote-15) These assumptions also often feed into a binary that is perpetuated between those who are thought of as victims and those who are thought of as a threat.[[16]](#footnote-16) In drawing attention to, and looking to garner support for, survivors of gender based violence, authorities and sometimes support groups find themselves forced to focus on only those groups of individuals understood as “naturally” vulnerable to such violence.[[17]](#footnote-17) Often this limits focus to refugee “womenandchildren”.[[18]](#footnote-18) As such, we see continued struggles “of LGBTQI+ asylum claimants to be recognised and rendered visible within otherwise heteronormative asylum systems”.[[19]](#footnote-19) Such rendering invisible is also reliant on specific constructions of victimhood in which, for example “lesbian asylum claimants racialised as Black often do not satisfy normative idealisations around (white) female victimhood”[[20]](#footnote-20), often framed in terms of innocence, dependency, and passivity,[[21]](#footnote-21) thus invisibilising and marginalising othered groups.

Interviewees also raised a second related issue, that of stigma attached to men reporting violence. I was told that there was a lack of safe spaces available in the camp for male survivors of violence, including gender-based violence, and that there were also issues of stigma surrounding the reporting of violence. Men were often condemned for reporting incidents as it was viewed as a sign of weakness,[[22]](#footnote-22) in that “seeking recognition of one’s victimization is deemed indicative of a deficient character”.[[23]](#footnote-23) This was on top of broader experiences of violence felt by LGBTQI+ individuals in their everyday lives in the camp, such as violence experienced waiting for food in the food line,[[24]](#footnote-24) a daily activity that at the height of overcrowding in the camp could take five hours for each meal.[[25]](#footnote-25) Systems put in place to support people in removing themselves from these queues were implemented not by camp officials but by NGOs who were able to offer alternative access to food outside of the camp. Within the context of the RIC, people who were constructed as being outside of the lens of “racialised idealisations around female victimhood”[[26]](#footnote-26) found themselves with even more limited support than groups understood to be vulnerable. Young men were, in fact, often assumed to be an element of the risk within the camp, rather than understood to be victims of it.[[27]](#footnote-27)

**Rethinking Vulnerability and Victimhood**

In sharing these stories, I hope to highlight the risks associated with relying on definitions of vulnerability and victimhood premised on a conception of “natural vulnerability”[[28]](#footnote-28) reliant on racialised and gendered assumptions. Particularly when “the often gendered vulnerable/ invulnerable binary produces rigid social hierarchies”[[29]](#footnote-29) that can be harmful in several ways. As Enloe reminds us, the notion of refugee “womenandchildren” affects women’s representation of themselves and their agency when they are portrayed as a homogenised group alongside the children they often have primary caring responsibilities for.[[30]](#footnote-30) What these stories also show is that this has a similar effect on other groups who may not traditionally be understood as idealised victims vulnerable in the context of an RIC, yet are also impacted by an approach grounded in heteronormative assumptions that often fail to recognise important racialised and gendered power dynamics that put individuals at risk. Such an approach creates “narrow categories of who is most vulnerable to violence owing to their gender”[[31]](#footnote-31) and fails to recognise the harm these assumptions cause to groups who are less likely to be thought of as vulnerable to, or victims of, violence. One young man shared with me the effect this had on how he believes he is represented. He said, “that’s how they demonise, they police, the Europeans think, that refugees are terrorists, they are rapists, they are criminals… and we are not. We are human beings… like you”.[[32]](#footnote-32) Such assumptions are more harmful when they also underpin humanitarian support and policymaking because, “vulnerability becomes a commodity [and] humanitarianism needs people’s suffering to sustain its operation politically and economically”.[[33]](#footnote-33) How, then, can we develop an alternative conceptualisation that is less likely to reinforce these hierarchies?

Judith Butler highlights the importance of thinking about precarity in constructing our understanding of vulnerability, and I extend this to also include victimhood. Butler states that “without shelter, we are vulnerable to weather, cold, heat, and disease, perhaps also to assault, hunger and violence… our material conditions dictate our levels of vulnerability”.[[34]](#footnote-34) This is not to suggest that gender does not play a role in understanding the reality of living under these conditions. Rather, Butler draws our attention to the conditions themselves and the central role they play in understanding lived experience. Focusing on material conditions establishes a framework for a more nuanced and intersectional understanding of vulnerability and victimhood one that focuses on “vulnerable contexts rather than vulnerable people”.[[35]](#footnote-35) Such an approach, according to Poopuu, relies on dialogue.[[36]](#footnote-36) This does not just apply to researchers but also policymakers and NGOs who, by focusing on dialogue and on the contexts the people they are working with are in, can better understand the effects of spaces and material conditions on displaced people’s lived reality.

An approach such as the one above, focused on material conditions, on contexts rather than individuals, could facilitate a more intersectional approach to refugee support which recognises the harm to all people forced to live in sub-zero temperatures in makeshift shelters. It also challenges states and the European Union to find long-term sustainable solutions, such as small-scale integrated housing, and not to rely on poorly constructed and under-resourced camp structures. Similarly, such an approach is able to recognise that witnessing and suffering from violence, including gender-based violence, can occur to anyone; that the context in which people find themselves, in a poorly resourced camp with very little security and lighting, with no access to safe spaces for young men, creates vulnerability to, and produces victims of, violence that cannot only be understood through a lens focused on binary understandings of masculinity and femininity. Such an approach recognises that young men arriving at Europe’s borders seeking asylum are not “terrorists”, “rapists” and “criminals”,[[37]](#footnote-37) but rather are individuals who are escaping material conditions and contexts that have victimised them and made them vulnerable. It acknowledges that the assumptions that were made about them when they arrived in Europe, along the lines of race and gender, inherent in constructions of victimhood that exclude them from support, make them more vulnerable. This happens every time they find themselves alone, queueing for food for five hours, in an endless asylum procedure, or under-supported by formal and informal structures.[[38]](#footnote-38) As one NGO told me, “single men always get ignored…they end up being the most vulnerable in the camp”[[39]](#footnote-39) and the reality is that they were also the largest demographic on the island, always the ones left behind when vulnerability assessments moved people onwards to the mainland or elsewhere in Europe.

Reception and Identification Centres are vulnerable spaces. They are spaces of violence and suffering, where people find themselves “stuck” in an asylum process for many years. Failing to recognise the material conditions of these contexts, relying instead on essentialised categorisations to construct vulnerability and victimhood, increases vulnerability at Europe’s borders. Challenging this requires a new approach to understanding these concepts, one, as I have sketched above, that is able to establish a more granular and intersectional approach to support for displaced people; one that recognises material, situational conditions and contexts and references them as the starting point for support.

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3. Birgit Poopuu, “Dialogical Research Design: Practising Ethical, Useful and Safe(r) Research”. *Social Epistemology*, 34:1 (2020): 31-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Judith Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance*”.* In *Vulnerability in Resistance*, eds. Butler, J., Gambetti, Z., Sabsay, L. (USA: Duke University Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. Martha Albertson Fineman, “The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition”. *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism,* 20:1 (2008): 1-23 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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8. Anonymous author interview, June 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lewis Turner, “Syrian refugee men as objects of humanitarian care”, International Feminist Journal of Politics, 21:4 (2019): 595-816 at 597. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Patricia Zweig, “Exploring men’s vulnerability in the global south: Methodological reflections”, *Area*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12751> (2021):1-9 at 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Didier Fassin & Richard Recthman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), at 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Jane Freedman, “Immigration, Refugees and Response”*, JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13258> (2021): 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Anonymous author interview, July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Jamie J. Hagen, “Queering women, peace and security”*, International Affairs* 92:2 (2016): 313-332 at 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Fassin & Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Freedman, *Immigration, Refugees and Response*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Mengia Tschalaer, “Victimhood and femininities in Black lesbian asylum cases in Germany”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47:15: 3531-3548 at 3532. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Alyson M. Cole, *The Cult of True Victimhood : From the War on Welfare to the War on Terror.* (California: California University Press, 2007), for a discussion of the conception of ‘true victimhood’ and the role of gender and feminization. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Anonymous author interview, July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cole, *The Cult of True Victimhood,* 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
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25. Gemma Bird et al, “The ‘Badlands’ of the ‘Balkan Route’: Policy and Spatial Effects on Urban Refugee Housing”, *Global Policy* 12:2 (2021): 28-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Mengia Tschalaer, “Victimhood and femininities in Black lesbian asylum cases in Germany”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47:15: 3531-3548 at 3532. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For discussions of risk and masculinity, see: Harriet Gray & Anja K Franck, “Refugees as/ at risk: The gendered and racialized underpinnings of securitization in British media narratives”, *Security Dialogue*, 50:3 (2019): 275-291; and Patricia Zweig, “Exploring men’s vulnerability in the global south: Methodological reflections”, *Area*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12751> (2021):1-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Freedman, *Immigration, Refugees and Response*. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Alyson Cole, “All of Us Are Vulnerable, But Some Are More Vulnerable than Others: The Political Ambiguity of Vulnerability Studies, an Ambivalent Critique”, *Critical Horizons* 17:2: 260-277 at 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Hagen, *Queering women, peace and security*, 318. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Anonymous author interview, September 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Deanna Dadusc and Pierpaolo Mudu, “Care without Control: The Humanitarian Industrial Complex and the Criminalisation of Solidarity*”*, *Geopolitics* (2020): 11. See also Gemma Bird & Davide Schmid, “Humanitarianism and the Migration Fix: On the Implication of NGOs in Racial Capitalism and the Management of Surplus Populations”, *Geopolitics* <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.2008361> (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Butler, *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Poopuu, *Dialogical Research Design*, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Anonymous author interview, September 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Bird, *Changing vulnerabilities on Samos.* [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Anonymous author interview, June 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)