

Vulnerability as lived experience: Marginalised women and girls in the UK

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Introduction

In a turbulent period for the welfare state in Europe and beyond, there has been a creeping normalisation and intensification of insecurity for the most vulnerable in society. In a welfare context such as the UK, characterised by weak social rights and little distribution of income, concerns about the conduct and behaviour of ‘problem’ groups are increasingly at the heart of social interventions, with rights to social welfare more tightly linked to personal responsibility in a ‘constrained’ welfare state (Dwyer 2016, 44). These developments have had a powerful effect on the most disadvantaged citizens. At the same time, the concept of vulnerability has spread into a multitude of policy arenas (Brown 2015). New models of service delivery, regimes of regulation and security, austerity measures, marketisation, and prioritising of services now form a backdrop against which marginalised people, especially women and girls, are surveilled, supported and controlled. Despite policy cases gesturing to a more caring or inclusive approach to vulnerable groups, underpinning this rhetoric are a range of practical measures which move us towards a more excluding society for these citizens (Harrison and Sanders 2014). In this context, vulnerability has become a frame through which disadvantage is understood, responded to and generated; a contemporary reworking of distinctions drawn between the deserving and undeserving in society (Brown 2015; Smith and Waite 2018). As vulnerability management approaches also often connect with the advancement of protection for minority groups (see Bartkowiak-Théron and Asquith 2012), they have particular relevance for women and girls.

This chapter draws together insights from empirical research in the UK, which explored vulnerability in relation to marginalised groups of women and girls. We draw on composite findings from co-authors’ empirical research to critically explore how vulnerability is framed in UK policy, and experienced by women and girls themselves. The studies included qualitative research studies with ‘vulnerable’ young people (Brown 2014, 2015, 2017) and

sexually exploited young people (Brown 2019), girls in secure accommodation (Ellis 2016, 2018) some of whom were sexually exploited (Ellis 2020) and women seeking asylum and refugees (Smith 2015, 2016, 2017). These studies were distinct from one another, but shared similar approaches in their use of qualitative methods to focus on the lived experiences of those seen as the most vulnerable. All of the studies were subject to a strict system of ethical review, focused on protecting participants as a central concern. In the chapter, girls and young women are people who self-identify as such. In this chapter, vulnerability is discussed in terms of two principal manifestations (see Brown 2017, 668). Firstly, to refer to a *policy or practice category* used officially or informally to describe or define situations which might involve people being subject to actual or potential insecurity or harm. Secondly, as a means of describing people's *lived experiences* of insecurity or harm, which are carved out by biological and bodily frailties, social inequalities and institutional forces, which persist over time, and which are shaped by the choices, views and experiences of individual social actors.

This chapter begins by providing a brief overview of vulnerability as a concept in contemporary UK welfare and disciplinary systems, using examples from research to highlight exemplars of vulnerability management in action. Secondly, we draw on our research findings to explore the dimensions of vulnerability as it is lived, highlighting structural factors. Following this, we move on to consider the different strategies used by women and girls to respond to difficult circumstances. Our findings raise questions of how contemporary interventions with 'the vulnerable' may actually increase vulnerability for some women and girls who are excluded and harmed in society. Our composite research findings highlight the ways in which these women and girls respond to structural conditions which create vulnerability, with varying strategies and resistances which enable them to get by as best they can in the circumstances they are faced with. We make the case that social policy needs to take account of this in order to respond to the lived realities of women and girls' vulnerability more effectively.

Vulnerability management in UK policy and practice

Discussions of vulnerability have been burgeoning within pockets of policy, practice and academic writing, both in the UK and internationally (see Brown 2017; Brown et al. 2017). There are longstanding debates about how far the welfare system is bound together with the social control of marginalised groups (see Fox Piven and Cloward 1972; Flint 2006, 2019), with gender often featuring in discussions of how and why welfare serves the control of

morality and behaviour (Hunt 1999). 'Protective' interventions are often propped up by the continuing spread of the psy-disciplines and social science understandings of human behaviour, ideas operating along with notions of the independent, economically active, male citizen, which together propel more intense surveillance and sanction of those who are seen as a problem (Wacquant 2009). Welfare scholars and criminologists have critically called these developments 'coercive welfare' (Phoenix 2008, 282), 'authoritarian therapeutism' (Wacquant 2013, 249) and 'new behaviourism' (Harrison with Hemingway 2014). In an era where social problems are increasingly constructed as individual failings (Harrison and Sanders 2014), concepts of vulnerability have taken root in ways that downplay structural emphasis which has important implications in terms of how the notion increasingly operates to (re)frame ideas about 'problem' groups of women and girls in particular. For example, in the UK, children can be imprisoned from the age of ten for breaking the law, yet little account is given of the circumstances in which they are entrenched before offending takes place.

Vulnerability is an important classifier in a number of policy and practice arenas, both in the UK and in international development, human rights law and global anti-poverty initiatives (see Brown 2015; Brown 2017). Although vulnerability governance mechanisms do not explicitly focus on gender, women and girls feature as a high priority in many initiatives that rely heavily on the concept. Judith Butler (2016, 2) explores feminist debates about the concept of vulnerability, arguing there is something both 'risky and true' in claiming that women and other socially disadvantaged groups are especially vulnerable. Lived experiences of vulnerability can otherwise be overlooked and marginalised, but telling accounts of vulnerability may also further a turn to paternalistic political and social institutions that intensify disempowerment and stifle collective political solutions, entrenching feminine oppression and masculine domination rather than resisting or subverting it (see also Phipps 2019).

Social policy illustrates tensions between care and control in the management of vulnerability. The concept of vulnerability plays a central role in the governance of child protection or safeguarding policy and practice in the UK (Brown 2015; Daniel 2010; Ellis 2018), including those related to child sexual exploitation (CSE). Critical accounts note how CSE policy is grounded in preoccupations with transgression of traditional ideals of

femininity (Melrose 2013). The language of exploitation establishes young people (usually girls) as always and inevitably passive, positioning them as either forced/coerced or irrational (Melrose 2013), meaning that normative ideas about vulnerability can result in an exclusion of those whose behaviours and coping mechanisms for dealing with adversity may not conform a victim typology (see Phoenix 2002; Brown 2019; Ellis 2019). The context for this vulnerability management though is a comparatively punitive response to young people who transgress. In contrast to much of Europe (where children are criminally accountable from around age 14) children in the UK are granted criminal responsibility from the age of ten (Hazel 2008). Secure accommodation (Ellis 2018) is a key tool in responding to the ‘most vulnerable’ young people, providing intensive therapeutic placements for children aged 10–16 who break the law (offending placements), and also for others who have not committed crime but are deemed to be vulnerable and therefore unsafe in a community setting (welfare placements). Tensions between the managerial responses to children caught between the state of responsibility and vulnerability become particularly prominent when considering provision offered by secure accommodation, with gendered implications. Although secure units often provide mixed gender accommodation, welfare placements are commonly awarded to girls (Ellis 2019), with efforts focussed on reforming behaviour rather than tackling social-structural causes of exploitation.

In UK refugee policy, women refugees are considered one of the most vulnerable groups of refugees (UNHCR 2019). Officials, such as the United Nations Refugee Agency, United Nations Population Fund and the Women’s Refugee Commission (2016), have outlined a detailed list of women and girls considered to be particularly at risk of gender-related persecution, both in countries of origin and also in flight. Categorising women as ‘the most vulnerable’ has become the moral justification for a model of care and control, with increasingly punitive regimes of immigration regulation and security, alongside stronger social control mechanisms for refugees. This is exemplified through the UK government’s high-profile Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme, which solidified a two-tier system in the UK. Making explicit divisions between people spontaneously seeking asylum (the less deserving) and those who are prioritised by the government, UK policy identifies the exceptionally vulnerable (deserving beneficiaries) for resettlement in the UK; most specifically: women, children, disabled, elderly affected by the conflict in Syria (see Smith

and Waite 2018). The concept of the vulnerable women refugee has important implications for those who fit and do not fit the template of vulnerability.

Such vulnerability management exemplars highlight the trend that Butler (2016) flags in her work; that contemporary understandings of vulnerability are frequently framed in ways that are disempowering for women and girls. Alongside growing recognition about the needs of minority groups, including women and girls, there have been progressive movements to recognise difference and diversity, prioritising and tailoring interventions for women and girls who are seen as in need. At the same time though, we see paternalistic power and social control mechanisms bolstered further, with special controls and obligations in operation for the most vulnerable, often in practice women and girls. We now move to explore how these dynamics play out in the lived experiences of girls and women defined as vulnerable.

Gendered dimensions of vulnerability

The backdrop for debates about vulnerability is one of wider social change and disciplinary developments in welfare, through which individuals are controlled and disciplined, which can have a disproportionate effect on marginalised groups, including women and girls. Decades of feminist research has shown how abuse, violence and exploitation are informed by patriarchal structural forces (Herman 1981; Saphira 1981), with gender of central importance to how vulnerability is lived. In recent decades in the UK, social policy has increasingly intensified the burden of vulnerability falling on women and girls. The conditions of economic liberalism bears down on some populations more than others (Flint 2019; Harrison and Sanders 2014), with gendered implications. As one example, the privatisation of asylum support has had a devastating social and material effect on women seeking asylum and their children (Grayson 2017; Smith and Lockwood forthcoming). Similarly, the crucial role of many social work services are now outsourced to private companies in the UK, leading to a deterioration of services for the public that threaten the safety and wellbeing of those believed to be the most vulnerable (Jones 2018). Following the 2009 global financial crisis, austerity measures in the UK are widely shown to have a disproportionate effect on those who are intersectionally disadvantaged, including women and girls, and women and girls of colour in particular (Women's Budget Group and Runnymede Trust 2017; Cooper and Whyte 2017).

Whilst gender is an important structuring dimension of vulnerability, this intersects with other axes of social disadvantage, such as race and ethnicity, social class, age, sexuality and disability. For example, Brown (2019) and Ellis (2020) show that when researching child sexual exploitation, there were hints of social class being important in how young women's experiences were understood by the professional working with them. Ellis (2019) found that girls were judged by the clothes that they wore, with care workers making judgements about their perceived (lack of) innocence:

“She thinks that I'm a bit of a slapper ... I can tell by the way she talks to me and she'll always make comments about the way I dress ... They said that if they'd been sexually exploited that they wouldn't be wearing clothes that would attract men.” (Lola, age 13)

Girls in Brown's study (2015) indicated that they were aware of how attention to their vulnerability could subject them to a scrutiny that was gendered in nature. Alicia, who had been in care and used heroin with an older boyfriend commented:

“I don't think I've ever heard of someone saying 'he's a vulnerable lad' ever, but I've heard loads and loads of people say 'oh, she's a vulnerable girl' and all this”. (Alicia, aged 16)

Similarly, research shows how the asylum-seeking application process requires applicants to tell “a coherent, consistent and plausible account of past and present experiences” (Rogers et al. 2015, 2), with women who provide evidence of their violations and bodily damage more likely to be seen as 'legitimate' in deserving protection (Kea and Robert-Holmes 2013).

Those women and girls who do not conform to vulnerability expectations may experience further exclusion and/or discipline as a result. For example, one young woman described being 'manipulative' as a teen: “you've got to go out and do that. It's how you fight” (Phoenix, aged 23), but she described how this led her to be judged as 'unstable'. She described an interaction with a male therapist:

“I threatened him and I told him, 'You ask me the same question again, I'll pick the chair up, launch it at you and then I'll throw it outside. I really don't mind'. I was escorted off the premises. Yes, I was mentally unstable apparently, not the fact that I had PTSD.” (Phoenix, aged 23)

This quote illustrates a 'double suffering' (Frost and Hoggett 2008, 449) for some women and girls, where exploitation and abuse results in coping strategies which are out of step with expectations attached to how they should behave as vulnerable people, which they are in turn judged and disciplined.

Resisting the label: Responses to being labelled as vulnerable

Presented with a narrow framework within which to make sense of their lives, marginalised women and girls are consistently directed to see themselves as vulnerable. For example, it may be unsurprising that in Smith's (2015, 2016, 2017) research, women refugees spoke of their vulnerabilities. Shimmar, who had been trafficked in to the UK for an early/forced marriage described herself as a child in order to talk about the vulnerability she experienced and reinforce claims of gender-related persecution:

"I was very small girl, very small girl... Baby girl honestly.... I don't speak English... my picture from my marriage, I cried 'cos I little I am really small girl, really small girl... I don't know nothin' about marriage, nothin; about the sex." (Shimmar)

In Brown's CSE research (2019), some young women were receptive to the concept of vulnerability as a means of clearly delineating their victimisation. Phoenix talked about grooming by older men on the day of her father's funeral:

"They can see how vulnerable you are. You don't need it tattooing on your head. You can pick it out pretty much straightaway." (Phoenix, aged 23)

For her, the concept clearly offered a means of making sense of the exploitation and abuse she had suffered.

Refutations of vulnerability and the associated categorisations pose risks to some women and girls. For example, girls in secure care were keen to point out that age is an inaccurate marker of vulnerability, and each professed that they could look after themselves:

“I know I ain’t vulnerable ... I know about me and nobody can tell me what I am, they don’t know me ... if anyone called me vulnerable I’d say ‘you don’t know me to call me vulnerable’.” (Lauren, aged 15).

Resistance to vulnerability classifications was also a major theme in Brown’s research (2019), raising questions about how age or other social factors might shape a person’s inclination to perform in line with dominant vulnerability classifications. Charlie, a young woman who had grown up in care said she would tell her workers to ‘shut up’ if she said she was vulnerable:

“I’m not vulnerable. They just chat a load of shit... I think I’m doing well for myself, and if [Social Worker] just said that I was vulnerable, then it’d make me feel like I’m doing loads of things I shouldn’t be.” (Charlie, aged 16)

Professionals working with girls in secure care reported that the girls’ experiences of child sexual exploitation had proved their vulnerability, however, the girls themselves argued that they had managed their own circumstances in ways that secured their safety (Ellis 2020). Young people’s ideas of safety were often different to those views held by professionals, and even after months of therapy, girls defended their choices, believing that they had made particular decisions in light of their circumstances at the time: “I mean there was crap going on but it wasn’t crap that I couldn’t stop going on” (Lola, aged 13).

In the secure unit, Lola and others felt that professional and policy depictions of age were an ineffective indicator of maturity (Ellis 2018). For those on welfare orders, absconding was cited as being the main contributing factor for secure placements and frequently those detained under welfare orders had been recorded as ‘missing’ more than 100 times in the 12 months prior to entry. Professionals acted to restrict the liberty of these girls due to concern about the risks that they were exposed to whilst absconding, and particularly around concerns about how they would secure basic amenities like food and shelter. Girls expressed frustration at being secured for absconding, and resented that their age was used to justify the severity of intervention received:

“This is her favourite saying ‘you’re only thirteen’ and I’m like ‘yeah and your point is?’ I hate it when people say that ‘you are only thirteen’ and then they don’t follow it up with anything, it’s like it’s just a statement and I’m like ‘thank you, but I did know my own age’ ... they mean, you shouldn’t be dressing like that, you shouldn’t be doing that, you shouldn’t be having boyfriends, you shouldn’t be smoking, you shouldn’t be drinking, you shouldn’t be going out to clubs, but that’s just an easy way of saying it.” (Lola, aged 13)

There are clearly traditional ideas about femininity as well as age at work here, which form a key part of Lola’s resistance to her worker. However, for girls in secure care, the linking of their actions with their age confirmed to them that their lifestyle choices would be legitimate once they were old enough to ‘decide for themselves’. As a consequence, participants reported that they longed to be 16 years of age so that they would not be targeted for interventions designed for vulnerable children (Ellis 2018).

Girls in secure accommodation were encased within a strict regime of behavioural regulation and therefore had limited space in which to challenge perceived vulnerabilities that were attached to them. While initially girls attempted to challenge pervasive understandings of vulnerability, and to explain the rationality of decisions that they had made, they almost all reported that this strategy was ineffective and that staff did not take their views seriously. Rather than challenge the predominant stereotypes of vulnerability, and hence risk further intervention, the girls instead explained how they incorporated a ‘display’ of vulnerability, in order to convince the unit that therapy had been effective, and they had been healed and reformed and therefore allowed to return to their previous lifestyles (Ellis 2016). As Lola explains: “I just nod and agree with them ... in a baby voice”. This raises significant questions about the long-term effects of interventions in terms of addressing the difficulties that young people may be experience, showing a deeply embedded resistance to their reforming nature on the part of some vulnerable girls.

Disrupting well-established understandings of vulnerability or telling alternative account of vulnerability can further risk women and girls being seen as undeserving beneficiaries of protection and services. For example, Smith (2015) found that some women sought asylum based on their political activities that lead to persecution. Whilst we acknowledge that much

work has been done to ensure gender-related persecutions are not simply viewed as private or domestic acts but are in themselves political acts (Crawley 2000; Freedman 2009), political activities have been long synonymised with male refugees (Guine and Moreno Fuentes 2007). Women have remained largely absent from contemporary debates about the ways in which refugees are made vulnerable for their political activism (Cheung and Phillimore 2017). Yet women told of organising oppositional activities that led to their persecution:

“I love to fight for people” (Precious);

“...I was involved, especially with the woman’s rights” (Z);

“I joined human rights work...I believed this was now where I belonged” (Lucy).

Accounts of campaigning and organising demonstrations were not unusual, as well as other activities that may not always be recognised as overtly political. Lucy told of how she had hidden people who the authorities were looking for and moved around the rural villages easily in her role as a health worker, distributing campaigning information and passing political messages between groups and individuals. In many of these asylum cases, authorities deciding on asylum may not recognise these types of activities as political actions and identify the associated vulnerabilities and therefore vulnerabilities may be disregarded, trivialised and minimised (Crawley 2000; Muggeridge and Maman 2011).

For asylum-seeking women, being recognised as vulnerable as well as asserting political activities is fraught with risk. By identifying gender-based persecution and providing evidence of abuse and torture in intimate places on the female body, women risk being viewed as damaged and inevitably traumatised (Woodiwiss 2018). As such, women refugees may be dismissed as being *too* vulnerable and therefore unable to tell a coherent, credible account about their persecution (Herlihy et al. 2002; Herlihy and Turner 2007); women may actually find themselves disentitled to protection, rights and resources because of their vulnerability (Smith and Waite 2018). Whilst an individual’s asylum claim can strengthen the recognition of need for legal protection, the production and maintenance of a vulnerable status are central to the ways in which people are recognised as refugees, or not (Tyler 2006; Kea and Roberts-Holmes 2013; Turner 2017). A vulnerable status reinforces the notion that “states exist... to protect women and children” (Valji 2001, 31) and when women do not give accounts about their vulnerabilities, it may be deeply problematic not only for women seeking asylum but for how asylum decision makers (and services) understand vulnerability

and respond to women refugees. Indeed, the lived experiences of political activities, as highlighted in Smith's research, may mean that women risk being removed from the category of refugee altogether.

Concluding comments

The lives of marginalised women and girls are structured by politically, economically and culturally-rooted social divisions and material inequalities. Lived vulnerability is affected by the classification itself, which shapes how circumstances, needs and rights of women and girls are understood and responded to by policy-makers and service providers. They respond to such structural conditions and lived experiences in various ways, with varying strategies and resistances, which enable them to get by as best they can in difficult circumstances.

In this chapter, we have looked at the lived experience of vulnerable women and girls and suggested that although vulnerability is socially produced, contemporary understandings of vulnerability often fail to take into account the powerful social forces that exacerbate the difficulties of those living in the most difficult circumstances. Therefore, whilst some may make sense of their experiences through dominant understandings of vulnerability, in policy and practice there is an urgent need to move beyond essentialised understandings of vulnerability, to create a space where women and girls are able to draw on diverse experiences to make sense of their lives. We suggest that policy and practice need to make use of new understandings about what vulnerability is, which do not assume or simplistically categorise vulnerability and which recognise the "places we occupy on the many salient and changing axes of power that exist in any given time and place" (Williams 2018, 37).

In acknowledging that some marginalised women and girls do not give accounts of vulnerability, and even refute it, our concerns are not to deny structural gender inequalities and persecutions. We point instead to the risk of overlooking the lived experiences of women and girls who do not conform to rigid concepts of vulnerability, and therefore may be disempowered to protection, rights and resources. Research, policy and practice must seek to appreciate the different ways in which women and girls understand their lived experiences, which may be extremely hard to tell (and hear) whilst they continue to be confronted with a concept of vulnerability which constructs them as vulnerable, weak, passive and traumatised. In order to forge better understandings of vulnerability, rather than seeking a definitive

answer to what vulnerability is, we might contribute to a diversity of understandings of vulnerability. Whilst we have positioned lived experiences of vulnerability as of central importance, we would also argue that concepts of vulnerability should never be stripped from the socio-political context, or their material constitution. It is only through bringing together structural and personal dimensions of vulnerability with its more discursive or narrative dimensions that we can stand the best chance of understanding how vulnerability is lived and experienced in contemporary society.

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