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**‘It Was the Photograph of the Little Boy’: Reflections on the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme in the UK**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the ‘Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme’ (SVPRP) as a specific British response to the ‘European refugee crisis’. Based on an analysis of media reporting (2014-17) and empirical evidence from agencies and volunteers tasked with implementing the programme, this essay reveals the ethical and political ambiguities at its heart. By focusing on the notion of ‘vulnerability’ I argue that the humanitarian configuration of a refugee worthy of care is implicated in two significant practices: exceptionalising a small group of Syrians as legitimate targets for compassion and constructing compassion itself as a rationed resource in a climate of anti-immigrant hostility, austerity and Brexit.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**

**KEYWORDS**

Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme, refugee crisis, Britain, vulnerability, compassion, volunteering

**Introduction**

This essay offers some reflections on the reception of Syrian refugees in the UK focussing on the ‘Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme’ (hereafter SVPRP) launched by the Conservative government in September 2015. As the British Prime Minister put it at the time, the programme was going ‘to show the world that this is a country of extraordinary compassion always standing up for our values and helping those in need’ (Cameron 2015). While this statement could be read as a politician’s rhetorical bravado, the appeal to compassion in politics is noteworthy, for it associates an emotive category with a national character, and expresses empathy with displaced Syrians at a time of growing European conflict over the so-called ‘refugee crisis’. Although resettlement programmes are marginal areas of immigration policy, they often involve feel-good declarations if not ‘cathartic’ (Betts

2017, 74) public effects. Few published evaluations of the SVPRP exist to date. Whereas they largely focus on reception and integration arrangements<sup>1</sup>, my concern is with the programme's articulated ethics of empathy. I argue that affective registers have not only been central to producing a public language about Syrian refugees and mobilising citizen involvement, but have also worked to exceptionalise the figure of the refugee worthy of care. Taking the programmatic notion of 'vulnerability' as a starting point, my broader aim is to explore the discursive and moral work that has been performed around the SVPRP. More specifically I examine how acts of care for vulnerable migrants became articulated as a double bind between a rightful form of moral agency and a scarce resource. The approach is grounded in empirical research conducted in non-urban environments of southern England. The main focus is on two discursive sites: media texts reflecting the highly publicized debate on Syrian refugees before and after the introduction of the SVPRP, and narratives of volunteers and agencies involved in support work for resettled Syrian families.

The motive for combining these two domains is two-fold: first, to evoke the climate of intensive news reporting on the 'refugee crisis', reaching a momentous peak in September 2015 when the image of a refugee child's washed-up body on a Turkish beach went viral. In what was already a heated debate the photograph of little Alan Kurdi quickly transformed into an iconic global symbol of the ongoing human tragedy and 'provoked a remarkable and transnationally articulated demand for responsibility' (Perl and Strasser 2018, 508). It yielded results. Not only did the UK government expand its resettlement scheme shortly after this news event, its emotional message also invigorated pro-refugee civil society activism. Without wishing to make a simplistic argument about the influence of news journalism it is nevertheless important to call to mind that what became dubbed as the 'European refugee crisis' turned into one of the most mass-mediated refugee flows in post war history. As media scholars put it, the significance of such 'crisis' reporting did not simply lie in the provision of information but in actively forming 'European publics as moral communities' (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017, 614). This brings me to the second motive for bringing media and volunteer voices together. It was striking how regularly respondents referred to the British press and TV media, not primarily as a source of information but as one of emotional stirring. As highlighted in this essay's title, many explained that the harrowing image of little Alan Kurdi was their tipping point for action. Few had volunteered in immigration contexts before and while they sometimes remarked that the political turmoil in Syria was impossible to understand cognitively, they felt predominantly called to the task as moral citizens.

As the 'refugee crisis' became an intense (if ephemeral) mediatized 'hegemonic event' (Berlant 2005, 49) in which attention to the suffering Syrian was recognised as a case for public moral concern and international justice, it became instrumental to the constitution of an affectively charged public sphere in which social and mass media, new volunteerisms and arguably the SVPRP itself, became participants and amplifiers. One might look at this case as an example of what Lauren Berlant calls the formation of 'publicness as a zone of collective intimacy' (2005, 49) where the participation in affectively charged and morally authorized political practices become expressions of social belonging and national membership. As shown below, the fact that the British media championed acts of care for vulnerable Syrians as a manifestation of 'Britishness' may support such a reading. While this

article cannot explore in depth the different domains of refugee reception it seeks to map the environment and politics of the SVPRP by selectively exploring media and volunteer voices as two distinct yet mutually resonant scenes of affective ‘publicness’, shaped through forming relations with a suffering other.

**The relationality of vulnerability**

While a polysemous political, cultural and philosophical term, vulnerability is frequently associated with susceptibility to harmful actions of others or to social, political or economic forms of violence or injustice (Mackenzie et al 2014, 5-7).<sup>2</sup> In seeking to support ‘some of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees’ (PAC 2017, 3) the resettlement programme identifies and addresses a specific group at risk as well as an obligation to intervene on their behalf. In other words vulnerability here engages a relationship between differently placed actors – a state actor who accepts responsibility to protect those who suffer and refugee recipients who find themselves dependent on such help. As this brings into view a relationship between vulnerability and dependency as well as an asymmetry of ‘giving’ it evokes the fundamentally relational character of vulnerability as a condition expressing a self-other relation. This article is particularly concerned with the ways in which vulnerability becomes productive of crafting relations across boundaries of culture and power.

The ethos of the SVPRP placed vulnerability at the crossroads of politics and compassion. This coupling may evoke virtue as well as a range of complex questions. What is the work of compassion in this particular policy? What are its limits? Which political values or ideologies are attached to emotive registers of care for refugees? To explore these issues I start by taking some inspiration from feminist scholarship which has long emphasized the ‘fundamentally social or relational character of vulnerability’ (Mackenzie et al 2014, 6). While the larger debate cannot be examined here, I briefly and selectively touch upon the work of feminist scholars who engage the question of interpersonal and intercultural moral and political agency through notions of vulnerability and compassion, thus revealing some of the challenges surrounding the work of the ‘social emotions’ (Jurecic 2011, 11) in politically charged environments.

Generally feminist thinkers have not dismissed categories such as vulnerability, dependency, need or compassion as redundant to the modern subject but made them central to theories of subjectivity, ethics or justice (e.g. Gilson 2014; Kittay et al 2005; Nussbaum 2006; also Fineman 2013; Tronto 1993). Scholars have argued that the experience of vulnerability is neither avertable nor exceptional but inherent to being human and, hence, an important resource for ethics. Looking through a political lens, Judith Butler asserts that vulnerability is ontological, rooted in our embodied existence and the needs, desires and risks to injury emanating from it. However, as this very condition makes us dependent on others (consider infants, the elderly, the sick), we are always also vulnerable in socially and politically constituted ways (Butler 2006: 26-28). Or, as others have put it, vulnerability is both ontological and ‘situational’ (e.g. Gilson 2014, 37; Mackenzie et al 2014, 7). In a critique of post-9/11 US foreign policy, Butler argues that the US-led wars in the Middle East revealed this double-bind of vulnerability. Warfare not only exposed humans to

harm, but also to what she calls a politics of 'grievability'. In contrast to American casualties, Iraqi and Afghan victims of the 'war on terror' were 'ungrievable' and, hence, effectively dehumanized (2006, 33). Prevailing public rituals and media discourses acted as powerful interpretive 'framing' agents which supported the U.S. government's stance on war and produced racialised dispositions of emotional indifference to those targeted by its military (Butler 2010, 49-50; 64-65). As acts of violence lay bare the unequal distribution of vulnerability among human populations so they raise questions of moral and political responsiveness.

Although Butler sees value in an *ethics* of vulnerability founded on the embrace of human susceptibility to suffering as universally shared (2006, 64; 49), she steers clear of the term compassion to describe reactions to vulnerable others. Some feminist thinkers, however, have used compassion to theorize moral responses to suffering. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum calls compassion 'the basic social emotion', fundamental to linking individual and community. In rejecting the old philosophical distinction between reason and emotion she describes compassion as a cognitive concern for the wellbeing of others and an imaginary identification with the struggles of those who suffer (1996, 37; 50-51). In making a case for compassion she is aware of the potential power imbalance between those who suffer and those who witness that suffering, yet argues that compassion can cross boundaries of 'class, nationality, race, and gender' (ibid., 51) and be a 'bridge to justice' (ibid., 37). Others have contested the capacity of compassion to afford such identificatory acts in contexts of structural inequality. Drawing on the example of 19<sup>th</sup> century white U.S. suffragists who compared their predicament to that of slaves, philosopher Elizabeth Spelman speaks of a series of 'paradoxes' that arise when the powerful engage empathy and compassion with the dominated (1997, 113-132). As these women claimed to see their own experience in that of the slaves they challenged white supremacy yet also obscured their own complicity with slavery. Acts of empathy by the powerful, asserts Spelman, can essentially erase the other's plight or exploit it for selfish gratification. Literary scholar Lauren Berlant amplifies this scepticism about compassion as 'shared suffering' in her critique of 'compassionate conservatism' in the U.S. She states that in the encounter with politics compassion is not simply 'an organic emotion' (2004, 5) but must be read against the political and cultural grain within which it is championed. 'Sentiments of compassion are [not] ethically false (...) [but] derive from social training, emerge at historical moments (...) take place in scenes that are anxious, volatile, surprising and contradictory' (ibid., 7). This view of compassion as a political and social 'operation' reveals its association with privilege, messy corruptibility, and ineffectiveness in addressing inequality (ibid., 4-9; also Woodward 2004, 71).

From these debates on the relationality of vulnerability I draw two insights which underpin this discussion. First, scholars rightly challenge conventional definitions of vulnerability as 'reductively negative' (Gilson 2014, 5). Framing the concept merely in terms of a problem disregards vulnerability as an existential human condition which can mobilise an ethics of care and connection. Gilson further suggests that reducing vulnerability to a notion of deficit is rooted in a cultural bias towards the 'subjectivity privileged in capitalist socioeconomic systems (...) the (...) independent, invulnerable master subject' (2014, 76). In other words, vulnerability is culturally stigmatized and as such routinely complicit in

denouncing those constructed as vulnerable. Second, experiences of vulnerability are always grounded in political, economic and socio-cultural conditions which allow some individuals or groups more protection against injury than others. The political negotiation of vulnerability is interwoven with structures of inequality, where, as the discussion on compassion has shown, affective languages and practices can form uneasy alliances with a politics of injustice.<sup>3</sup>

Such ethical and political ambiguities raise questions about the framings of and responses to specific vulnerabilities in specific contexts, thus setting the tone for the remainder of this essay. Particularly since 2015, European refugee politics have offered a real-life stage for such ambiguity: an upsurge in public compassion generating nearly unprecedented pro-refugee activism in some quarters, and in others the desire to reject responsibility for the sufferers at their door. Returning next to the SVPRP, I argue that the programme does not eliminate such ambiguities but rather embodies them. As will be seen, it is part of a wider context where vulnerable subjects become politically configured, ethically exceptionalised and administratively managed.

### Exceptionalising vulnerability

A precursor to the current SVPRP was introduced in 2014.<sup>4</sup> Press reports suggested that only about ten to twenty people benefited from this initiative in the first year (McGuinness 2017, 10). By September 2015 the scheme was extended, now pledging to resettle '20,000 of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees by May 2020' (NAO 2016, 5). This followed a surge of national and international publicity on the Syrian conflict, pressure from high profile NGOs, the political opposition, liberal media, celebrities and grassroots activists, who blamed the government for turning its back on the growing number of displaced Syrians. By that time the UN had estimated a death toll of 250,000 since the beginning of the civil war in 2011, as well as a million injured, 12 million displaced, and a further 12 million in need of urgent humanitarian assistance within Syria.<sup>5</sup>

Prior to this point the British government insisted that it was providing generous humanitarian aid to Syria's neighbours and that people were better placed staying in the region rather than coming to Europe. The UK opted out of EU plans for a quota system arguing that it would '(...) simply move the problem around Europe' (CSJ 2017, 12) or create 'perverse incentives for people to make dangerous journeys to Europe' (McGuinness 2017, 12). The resettlement scheme was inaugurated as a specifically 'British' contribution 'to help address the migration crisis in Europe' (Cameron 2015). In its singular focus on Syrians the programme itself constituted a policy of ethnic exceptionalism. It was open to Syrian refugees registered in neighbouring countries who would be assessed according to UNHCR vulnerability criteria and directly transferred to Britain (McGuinness 2017, 19).<sup>6</sup>

The scheme relies on the availability of accommodation, mainly from private landlords, and the willingness of local authorities to take refugees. As a result, families have been widely dispersed across the country including to rural and remote regions. Local authorities receive government funding to provide education and other services, and often



engage with NGO subcontractors and voluntary organisations to support the resettlement process. Beneficiaries are awarded refugee status and five years 'leave to remain' after which they are eligible to apply for permanent residence.<sup>7</sup> Evidence from different organisations and my own research in a provincial region of southern England suggests that the success of refugee relocation has strongly relied on practical help offered by local citizens.

The programme's humanitarian credibility notwithstanding, its relative generosity and multi-level assistance structures make it exceptional. This is not simply an effect of numbers. Clearly the fact that millions of Syrians were rendered vulnerable through a catastrophic war makes the selective and highly controlled admission of 20,000 seem like a symbolic gesture, the proverbial drop in the ocean. However, to understand the tenets of exceptionality at play, it is vital to note that the SVPRP and its explicit focus on 'the most vulnerable' was established within a wider context of a closed-door immigration policy, impacting Syrians already present in Europe. In other words, its very exceptionality was formulated against the backdrop of restrictive state policies on immigration and an increasingly hostile anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric. Scholars have demonstrated the importance of understanding the recent European responses to immigrants and refugees in the wider context of political and economic transformation (e.g. Lucassen 2018). The association of immigration with a rhetoric of 'crisis' has brought this powerfully to the fore, resonating with what Dines et al. describe as a decade of 'declared 'crises'' (2018, 443) since the global financial meltdown in 2008. During the 2016 Brexit campaign in the UK, the notion of Europe being hit by a 'refugee crisis' became entangled with concerns about the retrenchment of the welfare state, the climate of austerity, or the alleged failures of the EU as an institution (see also *ibid.* 442). As I will show the politicisation of migration as 'crisis' eventually produced two seemingly opposing responses in discourse and policy: humanitarian inclusion and securitised closure.

These couplings between care and exclusion resonate with the work of anthropologists Didier Fassin (2005; 2012) and Miriam Ticktin (2011) who studied immigration politics in France within the changing context of neoliberal welfare reform. Ticktin's research of what she calls 'regimes of care' (2011, 3) – such as exception clauses for undocumented immigrants who can access residence rights on the basis of having suffered physical injury, severe illness or sexual violence – suggests that humanitarian exceptions have become vital in the state management of immigration. By granting exceptional protection primarily to those who can display medically verifiable forms of suffering, she argues that the 'biological body' moves centre stage in a state-ordained 'politics of care and compassion' (*ibid.*, 3) which legitimises some forms of suffering whilst dismissing others. Didier Fassin integrates such politics of compassion into a contemporary political culture of 'humanitarian government', a form of governance that mobilises moral sentiments and has come to shape the management of marginal and disadvantaged populations (2012, 2-3). Both authors interpret the politics of humanitarian exceptionalism as a withdrawal from that of social justice (Fassin 2012, 7-8; Ticktin 2011, 23).

Similarly, it is important to recognise the situational nature of the SVPRP at the crossroads of humanitarian intervention, UK immigration politics and European conflicts over refugee distribution. The programme promotes vulnerability as a selection principle for

the admission of immigrants who are exceptions in an otherwise restrictive system, simultaneously suggesting that vulnerability can be recognised and identified. UN agencies act for the British government, registering and selecting individuals who qualify for inclusion in the programme according to ‘vulnerability criteria’. These prioritise ‘women and girls at risk, survivors of violence and/or torture; refugees with medical needs or disabilities; children and adolescents at risk; persons at risk due to their sexual orientation or gender identity; and refugees with family links in resettlement countries’ (McGuinness 2017, 19).

Although little has been published to date about the administration of these policies in the region, Lewis Turner’s (2016) work on Jordanian refugee camps suggests that ‘vulnerability’ is a key principle through which aid agencies organize the distribution of their services. Mediated through criteria presuming that women and children are ‘the most vulnerable’, Turner contends that NGOs in the field systematically exclude men from the benefits of care, ignorant or dismissive of the fact that men are exposed to specific forms of gendered risk and violence. Turner’s research draws attention to the cultural and disciplinary effects of such ‘politics of care’ (Ticktin 2011, 4). Drawing on Butler one might say that vulnerability assessments become a process of ‘recognition’ in which specific subjects are validated as beneficiaries and others are not. Transposed to the European context this is echoed in what scholars have described as the distinction contemporary refugee regimes make between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ subjects (e.g. Holmes and Castaneda 2016) or in what Fassin called the ‘tension between compassion and repression in the management of immigrants’ (2005, 16).

The following sections examine two sets of discursive materials which highlight practices of recognition and moral framing by the press and citizen volunteers, bringing together voices of ‘affective publicness’ aligned with the SVPRP.

**The media: between care and exclusion**

British media reporting on Syrian refugees grew towards the end of 2014, accelerated in 2015, was strong in 2016 and has become more scattered since. I examined coverage on Syrian refugees and the resettlement scheme in four leading UK newspapers from January 2014 to December 2017, looking in particular at the Daily Telegraph and Daily Mail, both on the centre-right of the political spectrum, and the centre-left Guardian and Independent.<sup>8</sup> I applied a thematic analysis, identifying themes and patterns of reporting, focussing particularly on the relationship between Syrians and their British hosts and its moral and affective framing.

Within the wider context of media discourse on immigration, coverage on Syrian refugees is both different and similar. Studies on responses to the ‘migrant crisis’ in 2014-15 observe that the UK media represented the subject more negatively than its European counterparts and that the right wing press in particular was hostile towards immigrants (Berry et al. 2015). In 2015 trends of EU-wide reporting shifted from ‘careful tolerance’ to ‘ecstatic humanitarianism’ following the headlines about Alan Kurdi, to a discourse of ‘fear and securitisation’ after the Paris attacks (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2015).



These turning points in media debates shifting between humanitarian care at one end of the spectrum and securitised exclusion at the other, are clearly observable in the UK outlets I sampled. In 2016, the EU referendum year, the right-of-centre press also used the 'refugee crisis' to discuss Britain's relationship to the EU. As will be seen, the stances taken on either side of the political spectrum are considerably polarized.

The Guardian and Independent offered an empathetic voice of advocacy for Syrian refugees, employing several strategies: critical open letters to the government, pro-refugee campaigns and guidance for readers about 'how you can help'. Both presented the relationship to Syrian refugees as morally charged, often critiquing the government for failing its 'moral responsibility'. Before the SVPRP got established (and after the Kurdi case in 2015) commentators often described the moral character of the British people as superior to that of their government or the hostile media. Numerous British celebrities were quoted as feeling 'ashamed' about the UK government and sympathetic Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians appealed to Britain's 'moral duty'. Both papers regularly cited pro-refugee charities and humanitarian organisations to strengthen moral appeals for creating a 'safe haven' in the UK, using them as first hand witnesses to the refugees' vulnerability. In these contexts of critical reporting Syrians frequently assumed the position of disempowered subjects of care. In a 'Charities' Open Letter to David Cameron' the beneficiaries of resettlement were identified as 'torture victims, women who have survived sexual violence, sick children' (*Independent*, November 26, 2014), and when the first individuals finally arrived government spokespersons were quoted to stress the beneficiaries' vulnerability; for instance, taking refugees 'directly from camps' ensured that 'the most vulnerable' were reached, or that the scheme targeted 'Syrians who desperately need our assistance' (*Independent*, September 22, 2015). This emphasis on 'certified' vulnerability legitimising a humanitarian response also implied that the Syrians were 'genuine' refugees.

Similar messages were occasionally imparted through refugee voices. As if to highlight the Syrians' non-threatening nature, evidence was mostly taken from women, or from families with children who articulated harrowing experiences prior to their arrival in the UK, implored the UK government to accept more Syrians,<sup>9</sup> expressed thankfulness or the resolve to return (e.g. *Independent*, January 26, 2015). Throughout 2016 both newspapers continued to defend the moral standing of the resettlement scheme, contradicting a Brexit-informed climate that had turned against immigrants and in which Muslim men in particular were targets of suspicion in the wake of Islamist attacks in Brussels, Nice and Berlin. Both newspapers continued to criticise the figure of 20,000 as insufficient while frequently drawing attention to the sluggish response of various local authorities. While the volume of reporting on resettlement decreased towards 2017, both papers became more critical of aspects of the policy, highlighting the fact that vulnerable individuals had received reluctant or insufficient care (e.g. *Guardian*, May 9, 2017).

Both the Daily Mail and Daily Telegraph assumed a highly ambivalent if not critical stance. Throughout 2014-15 reporting was embedded in the scenario of a major 'migrant crisis' gripping Europe, in the face of which safeguarding borders and keeping control was described as both paramount and at risk of infringement. Militarist metaphors such as 'frontline' (*Telegraph*, June 29, 2015), 'battleground' (*ibid.*, August 22, 2015) or

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3 'encroachment' (*ibid.*, August 25, 2015) highlighted the image of a territorial onslaught by  
4 uncontrollable masses of migrants seeking to cross 'Europe's troubled borders' (*ibid.*,  
5 September 3, 2015). In contrast to the liberal discourse above, Britain is not framed as  
6 failing its moral duty to admit more Syrians but at risk of being duped into compromising its  
7 sovereignty by the European Union. Opinion columns and editorials in the *Daily Telegraph*,  
8 some of which were authored by Conservative politicians, frequently denounced moral or  
9 emotional responses to the 'crisis' as conflicting with 'policy', or counterproductive to  
10 'solutions'.  
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14 Where a moral responsibility to care for 'the most vulnerable' is invoked it is  
15 routinely linked, often in the same article, to concerns about the threat to security and the  
16 risk of terrorism. Both papers followed factual accounts of the first arrivals in the UK  
17 (contemporaneous with the Paris attacks) with reassurances from Government ministers  
18 about the screening process they had undergone to ensure the nation's security. While  
19 Syrians who benefited from the SVPRP were referred to as 'refugees', and hence 'credible',  
20 other images offset the notion of the deserving stranger. There were sensationalist  
21 headlines about terrorists posing as refugees to 'infiltrate' the UK, vox populi about  
22 immigrants as competitors for welfare, or doubts about adequate levels of gratefulness  
23 among the resettled. In 2017 the *Telegraph* published a rare story of a resettled and  
24 'thankful' family in Wales (September 3, 2016). Generally, though, refugees were largely  
25 absent as sources, as were pro-refugee charities or humanitarian organisations.  
26 Interestingly at both ends of the spectrum commentators identified humanitarianism and  
27 compassion for persecuted strangers as distinctly 'British' values. Syrians were typically  
28 inserted into a historical genealogy of beneficiaries, from the Huguenots to Karl Marx, the  
29 Jewish Kinder transport and Ugandan Asians. While the Independent drew on this motif to  
30 allege a wilful break with a famed British tradition, the *Telegraph* used it to separate  
31 'genuine' from fake refugees. The image of the genuinely afflicted and thus deserving Syrian  
32 was routinely juxtaposed to the 'economic migrant' who had abused British charity or, as  
33 one writer put it, 'blunted' 'instinctive [British] altruism' (*Telegraph*, January 30, 2014). The  
34 selection of individuals from 'camps' in the Middle East was generally linked to their moral  
35 integrity as 'genuine', whereas those who had crossed borders into Europe on their own  
36 initiative were doubtful in this respect.  
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39 As an 'emotion in operation', to cite Berlant (2004), compassion furnished different  
40 stances across the political divide. The liberal media engaged readers in an emphatic moral  
41 appeal for resettlement, inviting sympathy and fellow feeling for the Syrians. The  
42 conservative press, however, offered a more arbitrary message. While some concessions  
43 were made to the moral legitimacy for a resettlement programme, refugees were  
44 continuously constructed as suspect or economically and socially burdensome, implicitly  
45 questioning any moral obligations towards them. However, my reading also showed that  
46 newspapers across the political spectrum mobilised notions of exceptionalism which were  
47 effectively framed by established immigration discourses. *Vulnerability* moved Syrians into  
48 public and social recognition, legitimising care and compassion for them. While these  
49 media-powered framings produced what, in reference to Butler might be called the  
50 'protectability' of a select group, they were volatile and contested. As *humanitarian* subjects  
51 Syrians were not only a dependent, unthreatening and largely silenced party but also used  
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as conduits for upholding beliefs in Britishness as morally intact in the face of a massive humanitarian crisis.

### **Volunteering: controlled compassion**

Between 2016 and 2017 a colleague and I conducted research among agencies and citizen volunteers in southern England who were involved in supporting some of the 20 or so Syrian families resettled in different villages and small towns across the region. This involved 25 narrative interviews with a range of actors including a senior local government official, the director of an NGO, two case workers and volunteers drawn from faith groups and civil society. The interviews focussed mainly on the management of the programme and the experience of volunteering and supporting refugees in environments outside the hubs and resources of big cities. The majority of volunteers were white, middle class, female and ranged in age from about 40 to 80. Some identified as Christians with strong commitments to charitable work but no specific interest in politics, others formulated politically liberal or leftist stances.

The mediated emotional tonalities described above flickered through our conversations. Many respondents articulated 'shame' about the sluggish government response and 'anger' about hostile news reporting on immigration; others recalled strong emotional reactions to TV images of bombings in Syria; some expressed anxieties and insecurities about the 'Muslim' identity of Syrians; all felt reassured by the 'genuine' refugeeeness of SVPRP beneficiaries. However, the ambiguities between 'care and control' described above also resonated in these narratives. To address this I will now look at the ways in which vulnerability became an enabling as well as constraining category on the ground.

Many volunteers set their practical help with specific needs (e.g. home furnishings, clothing, transport, English lessons) in the wider political context of an anti-immigrant cultural atmosphere, a climate of austerity and national tensions over Brexit. As one put it:

'It felt quite difficult when there was the London Bridge attack<sup>10</sup> but we [volunteer and refugee] both bottled that, we didn't talk about that and I think the country, Brexit was a very damaging debate (...) you want to put an arm around them, "Don't read that paper!"'

It was, as if by expressing compassion for the Syrians and helping them settle, volunteers were consciously distancing themselves from a public opinion largely hostile to migrants.

'I periodically apologise to them on behalf of the country'.

One of the local authorities in this study made a point of choosing the most vulnerable families for resettlement. The officer tasked with co-ordinating the authority's response to the SVPRP explained that they took the most needy cases they could cope with, citing the example of a family with a paraplegic son:

'We don't always go for the easy ones, we go for the difficult ones.'

What sounded straightforward to him was shown to be more complex at the level of volunteering. Volunteers were very conscious of the fact that they formed relationships with refugees across the boundaries of culture and language, often working in situations where translators were unavailable and opportunities for mutual understanding hampered. Only some of our participants had access to training from a sub-contracted NGO, others 'just got on with' befriending people in ways they considered possible or opportune. At this level vulnerability often became a category of insecurity and speculation, yet also created opportunities for as well as obstacles to bonding. Although volunteers frequently referred to the refugees' vulnerability, some seemed unsure about its nature. The befriender of a family housed in an affluent village remarked:

'When they were escaping Syria they were probably high risk but they don't seem vulnerable now.'

Perhaps ironically, he felt that resettling the family in a village with no other Muslims was itself a cause of vulnerability:

'Putting them in A. was an extra issue for them to deal with because they're just surrounded by Brits so I felt they were vulnerable in that sense.'

This awareness of 'situational' instances of vulnerability was echoed by others who felt that Syrians were a potential target for racism in predominantly white areas. The head of an NGO contracted to provide support told us that settlement in remote areas could increase a family's vulnerability because 'every problem is amplified by distance and remoteness'. Many volunteers related to this by recalling their own previous experiences of being outsiders in a country where they could not speak the language or saying they could picture that situation:

'Imagine yourself going and living and somebody's put you in a house in the middle of Syria and you walk out and you're the only one that's not wearing a hijab. How would you feel? You would just feel terribly vulnerable.'

Such forms of identification with Syrians, often expressed as 'this could have been my child' or 'this could have been my family,' were common. There was a clear sense that compassionate acts created forms of bonding that could transcend linguistic and cultural barriers. Others recalled their own refugee or immigrant experience in Britain:

'Having come from another country [myself] I feel safer with them, I feel more at home.'

'My great grandparents were refugees, so I have an inherent sympathy for people in that situation.'

However, the vulnerability of refugees was also perceived as complex, subduing instincts of compassion and desires for bonding. Volunteers recognised that their need for care and protection had to be set alongside that of other groups in the UK such as asylum seekers, the poor and the homeless who were competing for increasingly scarce state resources. In other words, there was a hierarchy of vulnerability with the Syrians placed somewhere

between British citizens at the top and asylum seekers at the bottom. The resettlement programme provided families with immediate rights to stay in the country, bank accounts, housing and social welfare support which, as some volunteers stated, was 'quite a privilege' in the larger landscape of neoliberal welfare reform and anti-immigrant legislation. Some suggested that the dispersal of Syrians into provincial and remote regions of the UK was a deliberate policy which aimed to avoid ethnic enclaves and keep the programme's charitability invisible to potentially hostile populations. Indeed, the senior local authority officer confirmed that the government's aim was to 'stop ghettoization, spread them out thinly so to better enable them to integrate'.

Most volunteers became aware of the politics of exceptionalism described above, or, of what Spelman has termed a 'political economy of suffering' (1997, 170), articulated through unequal forms of recognition of vulnerable groups and differential allocations of care by the state. These considerations also acted as barriers to volunteers' emotional and moral agency. Organisations contracted to support families played a key role in this respect. Appreciative of the (free) labour volunteers offered they wanted to introduce them to more 'professional' attitudes to care work. To alleviate the effects of the relational power imbalance between carer and cared for, agencies set boundaries on the friendship volunteers could offer, requiring safeguarding checks, strict rules of confidentiality and a curb on conversations about a family's history. All three contracted agents in our sample mentioned tensions resulting from the crossing of those boundaries, quoting examples of volunteers who visited a family 'too often' and 'unannounced', or who made possessive or overzealous claims to 'their family'.

Most volunteers accepted the organisations as agents of professionalism, expert brokers who knew how to deal with vulnerable people. Thus volunteers themselves became a 'to-be-managed' group whose contact with refugees was subject to training and regulation. While some struggled with these injunctions and the 'disciplining' of affect, they also conceded (to different degrees) that there was a politics of vulnerability of which they had (to) become part. The expressed concern was that refugees could become culturally misdirected if these caring citizens did not maintain boundaries towards them. Evocative of cultural clichés associated with welfare recipients more generally, it was suggested that refugees could seek to exploit their vulnerable condition. For instance, they could find comfort in and even cultivate a state of dependency; fail 'to integrate' or remain ignorant of their relative advantage compared with other vulnerable groups. Under the NGO's guidance volunteers were encouraged to see themselves as brokers in the refugees' cultural acquisition of 'independence'. The agencies usually associated this term with the ability to manage without their help, considering economic independence as a hallmark of 'integrated' citizenship. They often stressed, while admitting its improbability, that families should be able to manage independently after the first year. This injunction was possibly related to the fact that government funding decreased after the first year but in any case it sent a clear message that resettled refugees should become productive members of society as soon as possible. Volunteers on their part understood that 'independence' ran counter to desires for friendship, required emotional restraint and included the idea that compassion should not simply be offered freely but be subject to regulation, if not a disciplining of those in need:



‘You are not their friend, you are their enabler’;

‘You are not supposed to listen, the [NGO] really doesn’t want us to get involved in that. At the training they say well they [refugees] may want to share their experiences with you but it’s not something we would encourage.’

Or, in a more disciplining tone:

‘They [Syrians] are very fortunate because as we know there are lots of children in this country who would give their right arm to have tutors come to their house.’

‘You have got to be weary that they’re not seen as getting a lot of extras.’

‘I don’t want to make the two tier system<sup>11</sup> worse, I haven’t just wanted to lavish things on them.’

Whereas some expressed gratitude for such guidance from ‘professionals’, others struggled with these constraints and shared stories with us about the absurdity of ‘befriending without emotions’. Being expected to ‘train’ refugees in remote villages to rely on public transport (‘independence’) ran counter to the desire to offer them a lift to a hospital appointment (‘friendship’); advice to reject a refugee family’s hospitality on the basis that it might raise expectations of reciprocity often contradicted a volunteer’s sense of proper moral action, raising anxieties about causing offence. At the frontline of everyday human interaction volunteers were expected to see themselves as ‘givers’ who should wean recipients off ‘dependency’ en route to becoming invulnerable and self-sufficient citizens. While this accorded with the principles of ‘humanitarian’ management underwritten by the NGOs, it also produced confusion over the place of the ‘humanizing emotions’ (Berlant 2004, 5), and essentially stigmatized the very condition of vulnerability and dependency volunteers responded to.

**Conclusion**

I have argued that the SVPRP must be understood as a humanitarian intervention implicit in, rather than separate from, larger policies of migration management. Based on the programmatic aim to benefit ‘the most vulnerable’ it underwrites principles of selective admission for some refugees whilst legitimising the exclusion of others. As a government-sponsored response to the ‘refugee crisis’ in September 2015 it was fostered by and in turn fostered what I called practices of ‘affective publicness’ which mobilised compassion and sympathy for Syrian refugees. These affective practices counteracted, during this particular historical moment, the established ‘moral economy of asylum’ (Fassin 2015, 9) which typically associates sentiments of mistrust with norms of law enforcement. The values and moral sentiments which crystallised around the SVPRP championed the figure of the Syrian crisis immigrant as genuinely victimised and therefore protectable. To draw out the tensions and contradictions that nevertheless surrounded this issue I focussed on voices of ‘affective publicness’ at two sites of involvement: the press media and contexts of volunteering.



As the British media conducted a debate about the country's response to the 'refugee crisis' and assumed polarised positions along the scale of permissible moral engagement, there was nevertheless a shared underlying message which determined that care for the vulnerable stranger is a scarce resource whose offering necessitates management and control. This included the careful honing of an image of the protectable Syrian: a figure of the 'camp'<sup>12</sup>, selected and 'vetted' by a western humanitarian organisation, under control of the UK government, part of a displaced 'family', preferably female or child, physically and mentally violated by the intersecting aggravations of war and culture. While the liberal media used the image of the refugee's 'bare humanity' (Malkki 1996, 387) to advocate resettlement, the conservative press routinely juxtaposed sympathetic references with images of the threatening or 'bogus' economic migrant. In their shared invocation of exceptionality as the moral legitimisation of resettlement the media succeeded in generating public attention to a humanitarian disaster but implicitly also licenced other affective practices, such as the emotional indifference to all those Syrian and non-Syrian refugees who were by definition excluded, or the moral appropriation of the other's plight for showcasing 'British' virtuousness.

Volunteers responded to intensive media-driven publicity by becoming humanitarian actors themselves. As relations to both, NGOs and Syrian families evolved, the ambiguities between care and control, empathy and detachment came to the fore as everyday cultural experience. In the social proximity of volunteering the refugees ceased to be an anonymous group marked by conditions of 'vulnerability' and became individuals of flesh and blood with different identities, needs and circumstances. While developing modalities of assistance volunteers became subject to social training themselves, realising that their compassion had to serve a moral economy of austerity and cultural ideals of 'independence'. In contradiction to the feminist rehabilitations of vulnerability and dependency addressed earlier in this article, these sites of engaging with the 'vulnerable' suggested that neither of these fundamentally human conditions was desirable. Irrespective of their traumatised pasts refugees should be 'enabled' to swiftly transform into productive citizens in a neoliberal economic order where vulnerability is largely seen as an unwelcome economic 'cost', and reliance on public assistance is construed as a moral failure.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> E.g., CSJ 2017; ICI 2018; IDC 2015; NAO 2016; PAC 2017; UNHCR 2017; Weir et al 2017.

<sup>2</sup> For a critique of this definition see Gilson 2014. 'Vulnerability' has become increasingly popular in a wide range of fields, including social policy, development and bioethics (see Brown 2011).

<sup>3</sup> See also Ahmed 2014; Cole 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Historically the UK has not provided major resettlement schemes. The 'Gateway Protection Programme' in operation since 2004 offers resettlement for 750 individuals each year. For resettlement of Syrians in international perspective see Ostrand 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Security Council 7504TH Meeting\* (PM) 17 August 2015. Alarmed by Continuing Syria Crisis, Security Council Affirms Its Support for Special Envoy's Approach in Moving Political

Solution Forward. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12008.doc.htm> [accessed 27 April 2018].

<sup>6</sup> In late 2017 non-Syrian nationals who had fled the Syrian conflict were included in the programme. They remain a small minority among beneficiaries so far (ICI 2018: 14; 45). As of March 2017 5,453 Syrians were resettled under the scheme (McGuinness 2017, 3). According to a government source the figure had risen to 10,538 by March 2018.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-october-to-december-2017/how-many-people-do-i-grant-asylum-or-protection-to#resettlement>

<sup>7</sup> Initially beneficiaries were awarded humanitarian protection; in 2018 this was replaced by refugee status.

<sup>8</sup> I conducted a keyword search ('Syrian refugees'; 'Syrian refugee resettlement') in *Nexis* and viewed a total of 255 news items. Visual representations were excluded. For an insightful discussion of 'refugee crisis' news images see Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017.

<sup>9</sup> This was particularly observable in 2014.

<sup>10</sup> June 2017.

<sup>11</sup> This refers to the legal hierarchy between asylum seekers and refugees.

<sup>12</sup> Despite dominant media references to 'camps', most resettled families lived outside camps prior to their departure, as do the majority of displaced Syrians (Turner 2015).

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