

Vulnerabilities in displacement: Can humanitarianism protect women?

Gloria Zuccarelli ^{1,*}, Pía Riggiozzi², David Owen ², and Natalia Cintra ²

¹Department of Humanities, University of Piemonte Orientale, Vercelli, 13100, Italy

²Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Southampton, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, UK

*Corresponding author: Department of Humanities, University of Piemonte Orientale, Via Galileo Ferraris 116, 13100, Vercelli, Italy. E-mail: gloria.zuccarelli@uniupo.it

Abstract

This article develops a conceptual and normative framework for addressing the question of the protection of female forced migrants. While the place of gender in international systems of protection has been a matter of discussion for the past thirty years and feminist (and other) scholars of forced migration have drawn attention to the problems and limitations of humanitarian protection of women, this discussion has lacked a philosophical framework within which to discriminate adequately between gender-blind, gender-sensitive, and gender-transformative approaches to the protection of women, to analyse the significance of the relationships between different stages of displacement for protection, and to specify the salience of different dimensions of autonomy for the gendering of protection. This is the task that this article takes up. We draw on both original fieldwork and on secondary materials to illustrate our theoretical claims, but the purpose of this argument is not to provide additional empirical data on this topic, rather it is to offer a framework within which to understand the normative significance of these data and to outline principles to guide institutional responses to it, and adapted to local realities.

Keywords: Vulnerability; Forced Displacement; Gender; Humanitarian protection.

1. Introduction

How should protection be conceived and practised if it is to protect forcibly displaced women as women (let alone as black women, queer women, etc)? This is a significant question in a world in which half of the more than 100 million forcibly displaced people are women and girls. The heightened risk of sexual violence and abuse faced by displaced women and girls has been widely recognized in migration scholarship with acknowledgement of gender based violence as grounding reasons for fleeing as well as recognizing vulnerability to such violence during the refugee journey (Phillimore et al. 2023), in refugee camps, and in refugee reception and detention centres (Rueda-Salazar, Channon, and Riggiozzi 2023). Our argument contributes to these concerns by developing a framework capable of addressing the conceptual and normative dimensions of this question, that is, how we should conceptualize the protection of female forced migrants and what norms should guide the practice of protection.

In this article, we probe the form and limits of humanitarian protection with respect to displaced women. We start by focusing on the ways in which forced displacement is gendered and on the ways in which the current practices of humanitarian protection are gender-blind and, as a consequence, generate and reproduce a set of gendered vulnerabilities in displacement that disadvantage women. Illustrating this argument through primary data gathered through engagement with displaced Venezuelan women as well as other secondary data in relation to other women, we aim to show the way in which gender-blind protection produces what Zuccarelli (2022), building on the work of Luna (2019) on interacting layers of vulnerability, calls ‘vulnerability loops’. That gender-blind protection is not adequate in respect of displaced women is not a novel conclusion, although we aim to give this argument greater theoretical specificity and precision than it has typically enjoyed,¹ and feminist scholars of forced migration have long advocated the need for regimes of protection to become gender sensitive. Hence, in the following sections we acknowledge the efforts of organizations of humanitarian protection such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to respond to these criticisms, highlighting the development of the view that women have gender-specific needs in protection and amount to an especially vulnerable population. Our critical focus then shifts from the observed practice of humanitarian protection to its proposed gender-sensitive form in order to argue that *humanitarian gender sensitivity* fails to protect women because, even as it addresses some of the immediate vulnerabilities of women in displacement, it reproduces the picture of womanhood and of the constitutively more vulnerable female body that is central to the structural production of gendered vulnerability.

We begin by outlining the core conceptual and normative features of this framework through a discussion of the philosophical (and especially feminist) literature on vulnerability and autonomy which we use to develop distinctions between gender-blind, gender-sensitive, and gender-transformative regimes of protection, before sketching out the context of humanitarian protection against which this enquiry proceeds. To flesh out and vindicate our framework, we then illustrate the character of each of these regimes drawing on both original fieldwork in Latin America and secondary research on South East Asia and Europe. Some of the interviews analysed in this article form part of a wider research project whose aim was to elucidate the particular vulnerabilities of women and girls in situations of displacement, including the specific sexual and reproductive health needs and gender-specific harms that they suffer. Some of the interviews analysed in this article are drawn from a broader project titled Redressing Gendered Health Inequalities of Displaced Women and Girls in Contexts of Protracted Crisis in Central and South America (ReGHID). As part of this project, 58 women (aged 20–49) and 17 adolescent girls (aged 15–19) were interviewed in Boa Vista and Manaus, Brazil, between 2021 and 2022. We also interviewed key informants from a range of humanitarian organizations, including the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the UNHCR. The research focused on the particular vulnerabilities of displaced women and girls, including their sexual and reproductive health needs and the gender-specific harms they face. Fieldwork initially took place online due to Covid-19 restrictions, resuming in person from May 2022. Interviewees were reached through local networks and migrant volunteers, who played a key role in building trust and supporting the process. Other contacts with local non-governmental organizations and health authorities facilitated access to shelters and healthcare units. Their support was vital for logistics, safeguarding, and securing informed consent. Safeguarding protocols, including access to psychological support, were central to the study’s ethical framework.

In Section 7, we conceptualize ‘gender-transformative’ practices of protection that move beyond the humanitarian focus on the suffering body to a politics of dignity that acknowledges women as biographical agents engaged in meaning-making practices within a context in which gender is a site for the reproduction of structural vulnerability. We argue that this

acknowledgment requires a focus on autonomy-promoting practices of protection and conclude by indicating some ways in which what we term ‘dignitary protection’ can promote the autonomy of women in displacement and challenge the continuing production of gender differentiated vulnerability. We conclude that while gender-blind and gender-sensitive regimes of protection can be developed within a humanitarian framework, a gender-transformative regime—which we identify with practices of protection that actively challenge structural gendered vulnerability and promote gender equality and autonomy—requires transcending the limitations of humanitarian reason.

2. Humanitarian reason, protection, and (unequal) power relations

Humanitarianism seen as a natural expression of an ethics of empathy and politics of compassion towards the suffering bodies of others affirms a form of global solidarity (Fassin 2011)—precisely the kind of moral solidarity towards our fellows as vulnerable natural creatures that is often called for in relation to refugees. Humanitarian action is concerned with responses to specific needs and vulnerabilities, rather than the particular legal status, of displaced populations (Hoaglan and Arias Cubas et al. 2024).

However, as Fassin also notes, this politics of compassion is also ‘a politics of inequality’ in which those who offer assistance stand in an unequal political relation to those to whom aid is offered and this ‘tension between inequality and solidarity, between a relation of domination and a relation of assistance, is constitutive of all humanitarian government.’ (2011: 3). Moreover, precisely because of the relations of equivalence that humanitarianism enacts:

Humanitarian reason pays more attention to the biological life of the destitute and unfortunate, the life in the name of which they are given aid, than to their biographical life, the life through which they could, independently, give a meaning to their own existence. (Fassin 2011: 254)

In contexts of forced displacement, the relationship of domination within the relationship of assistance between those who save and those who suffer finds expression in a particular picture of refugeehood:

These are the “neediest” of the needy such that ‘a refugee’s plight appears morally tantamount to that of a baby who has been left on one’s doorstep in the dead of winter.’ (Cherem 2016: 185)

On this view, the underlying obligation is a moral duty to prevent underserved suffering on the part of agents with the capacity to help that takes the form of providing a refuge within which basic needs can be secured and protected (as long as the costs of doing so are not unreasonably burdensome). Hence, the focus of international cooperation is on sharing the burdens of protecting refugees from serious harm, while the act of granting refuge (and of providing resources for refugee protection) is a communicative act that expresses moral solidarity with vulnerable strangers (Owen 2020).

This characterization of humanitarian government coheres with feminist criticisms of, for example, UNHCR. As Freedman notes:

Relations of power which start off as highly unequal may be made even more so by the way in which aid is administered. In the context of management of refugee camps, for example, UNHCR and other aid agencies have been criticized for promoting unequal power relations between aid workers and refugees and for encouraging types of dependent behaviour on the part of refugees (Harrell-Bond 2002; Hyndman 2000). It is argued that the

nature of aid given out develops a patron–client relationship within which powerful and competent aid workers distribute aid to the ‘helpless’ refugees. (2010: 600)

It has been widely noted that this humanitarian form of moral reasoning and way of picturing refugees slips easily into a portrayal of refugees as *victims* that erased their standing as agents. Indeed, the emergence of the humanitarian picture of the refugee in the First World War was accompanied by the recognition of the cost of such a status by refugees themselves:

To be labelled a refugee had demeaning consequences, stripping away attributes of social distinction and class to leave oneself exposed to a sense of pure deprivation. The consequences of this silencing are eerily familiar to the modern reader. A Belgian refugee spoke from the heart when he summed up his feeling: ‘One was always a refugee—that’s the name one was given, a sort of nickname (sobriquet). One was left with nothing, ruined, and that’s how people carried on talking about “the refugee”. We weren’t real people anymore. (Gatrell 2013: 49–50).

This sentiment is echoed by [Arendt \(1994\)](#) in her essay ‘We, Refugees’: ‘In the first place, we don’t like to be called “refugees” [...] If we are saved, we feel humiliated, and if we are helped, we feel degraded’ (pp. 110–114). Contemporary refugees would too readily recognize their experience in this description. According to Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women ([GAATW 2019](#)), some NGOs perpetuate narratives and images of migrant women as victims, even infantilizing them by portraying migrant women as *inherently* vulnerable and in need of protection, all of which supports compassionate, clerical, and military types of humanitarianism, which essentialize victimhood and suffering in the bodies of displaced people such that ‘their rights remain dependent on highly arbitrary political and legal decisions as well as unreliable sentiments such as compassion’ ([Gundogdu 2015: 19](#)). As Samaddar comments:

In this situation, the notion of rights becomes subordinate to the power to protect, and care becomes a part of protection. Refugees are then less rights-bearing subjects, and more dispossessed victims to be protected and thus cared for. Care and protection in the form of a migration management mode form the dominant reality. (2020: 83).

These are conditions through which humanitarian actors create and reproduce social norms related to gender within the contexts they operate. In other words, humanitarian actors are not separate from gendered norms and roles but are actively engaged in shaping them. As actors and organizations are central to the distribution of aid, access to resources, and decision-making processes within protection operations, humanitarian agents can either reinforce or challenge existing gender inequalities and vulnerabilities in and through practices of protection.

3. On vulnerability

Vulnerability is a central concept in humanitarian discourse, yet its application often risks reducing displaced populations, particularly women, to mere victims of harm, overlooking the complexities of their agency and autonomy. Building on this feminist critique ([Titkin 2016](#); [Morgan 2020](#)) redirects the focus on the use of the concept of vulnerability that we develop to advance the argument we develop here. This is necessary for three reasons.

The first is that the concept of vulnerability can be used to refer to *vulnerable populations* in ways that, as Fineman claims, associate vulnerability with ‘victimhood, deprivation, dependency, or pathology’ (2008: 8 cited in [Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014: 6](#)). Indeed, we will argue that such a use is characteristic of humanitarian discourses and

practices. While theorists of vulnerability warned against, ‘the dangers attendant upon labelling particular subgroups or populations as vulnerable, arguing that this can lead to discrimination, stereotyping, and unwarranted and unjust paternalistic responses’ (Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014: 6), this danger draws attention to the importance of conceiving and addressing vulnerability not simply in terms of needs and harms but also agency.

The second is that some theorists of vulnerability—most notably, Fineman (2008)—construct an opposition between vulnerability and autonomy. While this opposition is justified if we limit consideration of autonomy to its non-relational conceptions, we concur with Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds’s (2014) argument that it is neither justified nor helpful if we conceive autonomy in relational terms. This will matter for our argument because empowering agency is not the same thing as increasing autonomy.² Agency concerns one’s power to do things; autonomy concerns one’s power to choose between different options, to act on the basis of one’s values and commitment, and to be the relevant normative authority with respect to the exercise of one’s agency. Indeed, as we will see, it is possible to engage and empower the agency of women in ways that reinforce the gender norms that limit and undermine their autonomy.

The third concerns the relationship between universal and contextual approaches to the normative use of the concept of vulnerability. The point that human beings are inherently vulnerable in virtue of their ontological being as finite corporeal beings who exist in relations of dependency with other human beings and their environment is an important truth. As Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds appositely remark:

By virtue of our embodiment, human beings have bodily and material needs; are exposed to physical illness, injury, disability, and death; and depend on the care of others for extended periods during our lives. As social and affective beings we are emotionally and psychologically vulnerable to others in myriad ways: to loss and grief; to neglect, abuse, and lack of care; to rejection, ostracism, and humiliation. As sociopolitical beings, we are vulnerable to exploitation, manipulation, oppression, political violence, and rights abuses. And we are vulnerable to the natural environment and to the impact on the environment of our own, individual and collective, actions and technologies. (2014: 1)

Vulnerability in this sense is a universal human condition. But to put this concept to work normatively in terms of responsibilities owed to particular groups such as forcibly displaced women, we need to have access to an account that can allow us to get a grip on the differential vulnerability of groups or individuals and the different kinds of vulnerability to which they may be exposed. One useful approach here is proposed by Luna’s articulation of a contextual view of vulnerability that allows for the operation of layers of vulnerability that can have a cumulative effect. She offers the following example:

A woman living in a country that does not recognize or is intolerant of reproductive rights acquires a layer of vulnerability (that a woman living in other countries that respect such rights does not necessarily have). In turn, an educated and resourceful woman in that same country can overcome some of the consequences of the intolerance of reproductive rights. Yet, a poor woman living in a country that is intolerant of reproductive rights acquires another layer of vulnerability (she may not have access, for example, to emergency contraceptives and hence will be more susceptible to unwanted pregnancies). Moreover, an illiterate poor woman in a country that is intolerant of reproductive rights acquires still another layer. And if she is a migrant and does not have her documents in order or if she belongs to the indigenous people, she will acquire increasingly more layers of vulnerabilities. She will suffer under these overlapping layers. This concept of vulnerability is a contextual one. I understand it in the sense that the person may no longer be

considered vulnerable if the situation changes. For example, a French working woman of reproductive age with middle-to-low income may not be vulnerable in a research protocol if she unwillingly gets pregnant (because in her country she has access to emergency contraception or an abortion at the public hospital if she wants). Whereas, if she is in El Salvador (where legal abortion is not allowed for any reason), that same French woman in that same protocol may acquire a layer of vulnerability. (Luna 2019: 88)

While valuable for our purposes (as will become apparent), a limitation of Luna's understanding is that because it does not link this contextual use of the concept to the ontological use of the concept of vulnerability, it fails to see and problematize the relation that contextual sources of vulnerability have with the grounding ontological source of vulnerability. A more promising approach in this respect is that developed by Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds who 'propose a taxonomy of three different sources of vulnerability (ie, inherent, situational, and pathogenic)' which 'acknowledges the ontological vulnerability that is inherent in the human condition while at the same time enabling the identification of context-specific forms of vulnerability' (2014: 7).

The distinction between inherent and situational sources of vulnerability can be read as a distinction between condition-relative forms of vulnerability and context-relative forms of vulnerability. Thus, inherent sources of vulnerability arise from our general ontological make-up—'our neediness, our dependence on others, and our affective and social natures. We are all inherently vulnerable to hunger, thirst, sleep deprivation, physical harm, emotional hostility, social isolation, and so forth' (Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014: 7)—but can vary 'depending on a range of factors, such as age, gender, health status, and disability' (2014: 7). By contrast, situational vulnerability is context-relative; it 'may be caused or exacerbated by the personal, social, political, economic, or environmental situations of individuals or social groups' (2014: 7). A particular form of situational vulnerability salient for the concerns of our argument is what Mackenzie et al. call 'pathogenic' vulnerabilities:

These may be generated by a variety of sources, including morally dysfunctional or abusive interpersonal and social relationships and sociopolitical oppression or injustice. Pathogenic vulnerabilities may also arise when a response intended to ameliorate vulnerability has the paradoxical effect of exacerbating existing vulnerabilities or generating new ones. ... A key feature of pathogenic vulnerability is the way that it undermines autonomy or exacerbates the sense of powerlessness engendered by vulnerability in general. (2014: 9)

The importance of these distinctions is not only to bring the contextual use of the concept of vulnerability back into contact with the ontological use and so to ground the ethical force of the concept in the human condition as both corporeally embodied and socially embedded, but to enable us to introduce the concept of *structural vulnerability* conceived as a social condition marked by the systematic connection between inherent and situational vulnerability. Thus, we are inherently vulnerable to physical harm as human beings but the degree to which we are vulnerable may vary by gender [being female] as an inherent (condition-relative) feature in ways that are systematically caused or exacerbated by gender norms as a situational (context-relative) source of vulnerability. Indeed, it is a feature of the operation of power in structural vulnerability that what are context-specific situational manifestations of vulnerability are projected onto the gendered figure of woman as manifestations of an inherent (rather than situational) vulnerability. Furthermore, adopting this Mackenzie et al.'s approach is compatible with taking up Luna's focus on layers of vulnerability to enable us to give greater specificity to situational vulnerability and, following Zuccarelli's development of Luna's approach, to identify forms of pathogenic vulnerability

that are manifest in terms of the production of vulnerability loops, that is, where responses to gendered form of vulnerability act to reproduce gendered forms of vulnerability.

This conceptual reflection on vulnerability provides us with a way of understanding the relationship between vulnerability and (relational) autonomy that is central to the normative engagement with gender and protection. The reinforcement and creation of gender-specific forms of vulnerability in humanitarian settings is a significant issue, largely due to the inherent nature of humanitarian reasoning. This is the argument put forth by feminists (Titkin 2016; Morgan 2020), namely that humanitarianism victimizes women and therefore treats them as passive subjects, incapable of taking care of themselves. The aim is to supplement this framework with an enhanced emphasis on the concept of autonomy, as a means of achieving a genuinely transformative approach to protection which is grounded in and reflects a gender-transformative vision, with the centrality of women's voices being at the core of this process. However, it is important to distinguish three different dimensions of autonomy if we are to develop a sufficiently fine-grained analysis of the relationship between gender and the different types of vulnerability to which female forced migrants are exposed. These can be detailed as:

Self-determination concerns the degree to which one has 'the authority and power to exercise both de jure and de facto control over important domains of one's life' (2021: 381). Central to self-determination is being able to pursue securely the satisfaction of our basic interests in, for example, food, shelter, education, relationships, employment, etc. This requires social relationships that entitle and enable the capacity to exercise such control, for example, secure socio-legal statuses enabling accessible and enforceable claim rights.

Self-governance addresses the degree to which an individual is 'able to make and enact decisions that express or cohere with one's values, identity, and commitments' (2021: 382). This self-governance dimension of autonomy has two aspects. The first concerns the extent to which actions and choices express one's identity, rather than being shaped by others. It is hard, for example, for actions and choices to express our own values if we are bound to social relationships in which we are subject to high levels of dependency on others for our basic needs to be met or to decisions being made by others (when avenues of voice and effective feedback are closed). The second concerns the extent to which circumstances enable or restrict the compossible expression of values.

Self-authorization concerns the degree to which an individual can reasonably see themselves as 'having the normative authority to take ownership of, or responsibility for, one's values, one's decisions, and one's life overall.' (Mackenzie 2021: 382).

As we will show over the course of our argument, distinguishing these three dimensions of autonomy is critical both to understanding the limitations of gender-blind and gender-sensitive regimes of protection and to developing an account of the principles that should guide gender-transformative protection.

With this framework in place, we turn now to situate our enquiry in relation to discussion of humanitarian protection and the gendered character of forced migration, before developing our argument through analytical illustrations of the problems posed for the autonomy of forced migrant women by gender-blind and gender-sensitive regimes of protection.

4. Vulnerability in forced displacement

Forced displacement is a gendered process, at all stages of movement and settlement (Freedman 2007, 2016, 2019; Pickering 2011; Sertler 2018; Querton 2022; Cintra, Owen, and Riggirozzi 2023). Vulnerability to sexual abuse and other forms of gender-based violence is a constant feature of the experiences of forcibly displaced women (Freedman 2016,

2019) who, as [Arbel, Dauvergne, and Millbank \(2014\)](#) observe, suffer, and die more than men and are also more vulnerable to trafficking.

Globally, women flee their countries for reasons that are shaped or inflected by gender. Flight from violent conflict, for example, may be motivated both by generalized fear of death or injury but also by fears as women of vulnerability to sexual violence or fears as mothers caring for their children. Direct gendered harms and or gender-based persecution are also motives for fleeing. Or, again, women may be compelled to flight by the urgent need to secure minimally decent living conditions for themselves and their children, for example, healthcare and education opportunities. As women are often primary caregivers, in situations of extreme poverty or environmental disasters, there are often gendered social expectations that delegate the role of seeking new opportunities to support their families to them ([Zimmerman et al. 2009](#); [Cintra, Owen, and Riggiozzi 2023](#)).

Take the example of Grecia, a 35-year-old Venezuelan woman who fled to neighbouring Brazil. She has four children, aged 2, 6, 10 and 13, and is eight months pregnant and unemployed. Venezuela is facing intersecting crises and general shortage of food, and consequently she suffers malnutrition and other severe deprivations. This affects her caregiving roles, since she is a single mother with no other support and thus is forced to leave her kids to procure food. She also has had very limited access to contraceptives and became pregnant. At that time, the health system was in collapse and infant and maternal mortality in Venezuela had increased by 65% in 2015 ([Amnesty International 2018](#)) due to lack of medicines, medical tools, and equipment as well as the falling of the number of medical personnel. All these interacting layers of vulnerability contribute to her decision to leave to Brazil with her kids, by foot.

I spent five months thinking and thinking, my children were crying of hunger, they had no clothes, the oldest wanted to study but it was all impossible [...] On 1st September, at 3am, I took my children and started to walk [...] ... we came all the way by foot (Boa Vista, 28 September 2021). ([Cintra, Owen, and Riggiozzi 2023](#))

Similarly, Myrza recalls, 'I decided to migrate because the situation was extreme. I was unemployed, ... in a precarious situation, and was facing a lot of necessity and a lot of hunger' (interview, Manaus, 06/30/2021). She crossed the border of Venezuela and Brazil by foot with her three children, aged 11, 9 and 6. Olga, a Venezuelan woman in Brazil, who at the time of the interview had just had a caesarean birth in the border state of Roraima, claimed that 'My baby would have died if I had stayed [in Venezuela]. There was no food or medicine, no doctors' (Boa Vista, September 2021).

These are examples of ways in which gender shape the reasons for leaving, and we consider them as disclosing layers of gendered vulnerabilities that are created by the context-specific situations in which women are exposed to harms and risks of harms.

The journey and border-crossing are also gendered experiences. According to [Pickering and Powell \(2017\)](#), women are more likely to die during the journey when are faced with hazardous conditions, such as when crossing the sea and harsh landscapes (e.g., deserts). Moreover, they are seriously exposed to the risk of SGBV, more likely to fall into hands of traffickers, and to experience transactional sex to pay smugglers for their journey and border-crossing ([Freedman 2016](#)). Both Grecia and Myrza, like many others, had documents, however,

because of the kids it was more difficult. My oldest daughter had a passport, but I did not have documents for the youngest two. It was super difficult for me. [crossing the border] in Pacaraima, it was hard because the military told me: 'get back to your country', the children can't enter illegally to Brazil. In one of those taxis I could hide the children and cross, illegally. (Myrza, Manaus, 06/30/2021)

More extremely, as reported by Amnesty International, Ramya, a 22-year-old woman, was repeatedly raped by traffickers in a camp in north-western Libya:

The guards would [...] come in and choose which women they wanted and take them outside. The women tried to refuse but when you have a gun pointed at your head, you don't really have a choice if you want to survive. I was raped twice by three men... I didn't want to lose my life ([Amnesty International 2016](#)).

Oumo, a young girl from a country in Sub-Saharan Africa at war, who decided to flee to reach Germany through Turkey and Greece, as reported UNHCR, UNFPA and the Commission of Refugee Women ([UNHCR et al. 2017](#)), was forced into prostitution twice, the first time to gain access to a fake passport and the second time to get a ride on a boat from Turkey.

The obstacles facing those in flight at borders and via border controls add additional gendered layers of vulnerability. Many displaced women shared with us their experiences of the gendered discrimination and violence they faced for crossing with children, for crossing pregnant, for crossing alone; being exposed to abuse, mistreatment, policy arbitrariness and prejudice; and their vulnerability being further heightened by having to use 'trocheros' or smugglers. The cases of Grecia, Gloria, and Myrza, Ramya, and Oumo, are not isolated cases, nor are simply horror cases, or cases that arise out of bad implementation of policies or faulty systems. These, like too many similar testimonies around the world, are manifestations of a set of policies and actions of individuals acting according to norms that have become morally acceptable or at least normalized.

In this context, the heightened vulnerability of forced migrant women is a structural vulnerability in that they bear a disproportionate share of the risks and costs of forced displacement, either directly or because of created conditions that made situations more dangerous for women on the move.

5. Gender-blindness in protection and vulnerability in reception and first refuge

Like many women, Myrza walks for days, and when she arrives at the border town of Pacaraima, she is escorted by the Brazilian army to the triage centre (like hundreds of Venezuelan migrants each day). The escorting is part of the Operation Welcome, a flagship humanitarian protection programme in Brazil ran by the Armed Forces, the IOM and UNHCR.³ Brazil's migration policies are widely known for its progressive reception of migrants without distinguishing between regular or irregular/undocumented, in principle, for the provision of protection and settlement rights ([Brumat and Freier 2020](#); [Zapata and Tapia Wenderoth 2022](#); [Hammoud-Gallego and Freier 2023](#)). At reception, Myrza and her children are, like all migrants, identified, profiled, they are given a federal identification card, receive information about her and her children's placement in a shelter, conditions for sheltering, and all necessary healthcare that, while provided by the National Health System (SUS) for free as part of the humanitarian programme, is mandatory for migrants. It is responsive but it is gender blind if considered that its delivery silenced voice and agency. For example, when Myrza had the preventive examination, 'they did a pregnancy test' despite informing the health authorities,

... "No, I can't give birth anymore, I said [because had an operation, a tubal sterilisation in Venezuela] ... "and they said that people may not know whether they can get pregnant, ... it does not matter, we will do the test anyway ... and I was "wow" ok, so I did it almost forced, but I did it, because these are rapid tests that they said they do ... so I collaborated"

Such border practices and controls are manifestations of humanitarian reason, premised on power relations and inequalities over information, decisions, and bodily autonomy. In some instances, women are given injected contraceptives after giving birth, ‘sometimes without any type of permission or authorization ... months later a [migrant] woman finds out about this (humanitarian officer from international organization, December 11, 2020). Similarly, McKnight, Goodwin, and Kenyon (2019) report that women face challenges in communication with healthcare providers in the context of maternity care, which in turn leads to presumed understanding and misinterpretation: ‘Many women experienced clinical decisions being made without their understanding’ (p. 18). For instance, ‘A midwife assumed, based on a woman’s asylum status, that she would want to terminate the pregnancy’ (ibid. p. 20).

Oumo, the young girl who had fled a war in a Sub-Saharan country, also reported that, once she arrived in Greece, she had to sleep for two nights in the open air, at the harbour, without any shelter, privacy, or information regarding the services available to her. She was not even allowed to register. She admitted that she was afraid of going insane and to experience (sexual and gender-based) violence again.

Grecia and her children were also placed in a shelter but as she declared, ‘I did not know that we had to leave in the morning, taking the luggage with us, to the streets. The shelter was only to sleep, overnight [...] once we had the documents, mine and of my children, they sent us to another shelter, for two weeks ... then to Boa Vista’. In these environments, there is no privacy, which is ‘particularly problematic for adolescent girls who feel deeply uncomfortable changing menstrual pads in communal bathrooms, or cleaning menstrual cups’ (UNHCR, May 2022), which also has significant hygienic and health-related consequences. An IOM officer reports that, in Brazil, the 2017 Migration Law includes the right to adequate housing and basic services for all migrants regardless of status, which, however, translates in single massive marquees, hundreds of beds side-by-side, open plan sectioned for women, men, and transgender migrants (without cots nor cribs ...) and that ‘in such spaces, everyone can hear everything, and there is a lot of shouting at women who can’t make their babies stop crying during the night’ (IOM officer, Pacaraima, 13 May 2022). Moreover, dark and crowded spaces, including bathroom, increase risk, fear, abuse. As stated by Gloria: ‘It is horrible. You can’t feel at ease, you can’t rest, the military come in every time there’s a problem and turn on the lights in your face ... I am afraid ...’ (Gloria, Manaus, 18 June 2021). She feels anxious because she has had very challenging experiences and because of the uncertainty on what will happen to her children, in a foreign country with no support, when the time to give birth will arrive. But also because she spends more than four weeks without receiving prenatal checks nor information on healthcare, and her pregnancy is coming to term. Furthermore, she does not have access to psychological and emotional support nor to appropriate information about her entitlement for some time.

Information matters significantly for autonomy. But this is not the reality for many. Nicole crossed to Pacaraima, Brazil, via an irregular point, so she missed information that is provided at checkpoint by Operation Welcome. She ‘didn’t know where to get help ... after walking more than 4,000 km in the forest [...] and didn’t get information about where to take shelter’ and therefore ‘[she] had to sleep in an abandoned parking lot or at a bus stop’ (Boa Vista, July 22, 2021).

These are examples of how gender-blindness of protection not only does not protect women from gender-based vulnerability, but rather reproduces vulnerabilities that these women suffered in the first place and during their journeys. Gender blind protection creates a new layer that gives rise to a looping effect of vulnerability, or vulnerability loop.⁴ A vulnerability loop occurs when a specific vulnerability, in this case caused as a consequence of how humanitarianism is conceived or enacted through (power) relations, has the potential

to lead to contingent vulnerabilities, which, in turn, can lead back to the first type or source of vulnerability.

In our examples, and many others, women fled their countries because of gender-specific fears of violence, abuse, and poverty (V₁). To cross a border where they feel safe, they are often forced to undertake journeys that are difficult, exhausting, and dangerous for different reasons: either because they involve illegal border-crossing, or because they comprise long journeys by foot and/or in the forest and through impervious roads, and also because often there is the need to rely on smugglers or ‘trocheros’ (V₂). This made them vulnerable to SGBV and/or deprivation again (V₁). Once they reach safe countries, immediate health-care and shelter are often inadequate, gender and age inadequate, and undermining of conditions that could support any autonomy and capacity for migrant women to make decisions for themselves (V₃), which expose them again to the risk of gender-based abuse, poverty, and violence (V₁), as presented in Fig. 1.

If we take the example of Hasina, a woman fleeing Myanmar to reach Bangladesh, she experienced SGBV and gendered persecution (V₁) by the hand of guards, which causes severe trauma (V₂). Given that she feared for her life, she found no option but to flee her country for safety (V₃). She is hosted in a camp, where, to survive, she needs to rely on informal actors (V₄). In particular, she trusts a person who offered her a job, who turned out to be a sexual trafficker. She is therefore forced into prostitution, exposing her to SGBV (V₁) and trauma (V₂) again, as we illustrate in Fig. 2.

In the case of Grecia, illustrated in Fig. 3, the fact that she was living in a context of multiple crises and food shortage (V₁) while being a single mother of four, unemployed, and pregnant as she had no access to contraceptives (V₂), leads to a risk of worsening her physical and psychological condition in crises and food shortages (V₁). She decided to leave while pregnant and with her children (V₃) due to the well-founded fear for the high maternal mortality rate that characterize Venezuela, and she needed to reach the border with Brazil by foot, which likely exposes her again to great physical and psychological fatigue (V₁) and, moreover, to SGBV (V₄). The fact that her kids did not have regular documents exposed all of them to mistreatment and violence by the hand of military (V₄) and forces them to cross the border between Venezuela and Brazil illegally through ‘trocheros’, which may expose them to harm again (V₄). When she reaches the first shelter, she is left again on the streets without support for her and her children, which means again physical and psychological fatigue (V₁) and risk of harm (V₄). Moreover, for weeks she is not given information regarding her rights to prenatal healthcare, which exposes her again to physical and psychological distress (V₁) and medical violence, which, as we have seen, is gender specific (V₄).

Gender-blind protection thus generates what Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds (2014) call *pathogenic vulnerability*.

By illustrating the case, we contribute to criticism directed at the governance of the forcibly displaced. For at least half a century, academics, lawyers, and activists have challenged refugee law and policy in order to mainstream gender-inclusivity and sensitivity. Calls for recognition of gender-related reasons for refugeehood, for instance, dominated debates in the 1990s (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Arbel, Dauvergne, and Millbank 2014), not least because the main international normative frameworks of protection for people forcibly on the move, namely the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Additional Protocol, were overtly gender-blind in how they conceptualized refugees. Such absence mainly left women

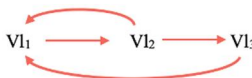


Figure 1. Vulnerability Loop 1.

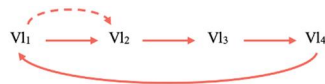


Figure 2. Vulnerability Loop 2.

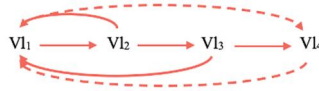


Figure 3. Vulnerability Loop 3.

and LGBTQ+ people out of post-war protection frameworks for refugees, notwithstanding specific gender- and sexuality-related types of violence and persecution that could potentially victimize them under the persecution framework of the 1951 Convention.

However, as we noted earlier, awareness of (some of) the limitations of gender-blind protection has long been highlighted by feminist theorists of migration and acknowledged, to some extent, by humanitarian agencies. Let us turn then to consider both why so little seems to have changed and the merits of gender-sensitive humanitarian practices.

6. Gender-sensitive protection and the reproduction of structural vulnerability

In 1991, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) issued its first guidelines on the protection of refugee women, an unprecedented move sparked by the growing demands for more gender- and women-inclusive normative frameworks for the forcibly displaced. Indeed, since then, specific issues concerning ‘refugee women’ have been identified as a policy priority by the UNHCR (Freedman 2010). Its ‘women focus’ was later updated to a ‘gender focus’, as the same agency issued the Guidelines on International Protection for Gender-Related Persecution in 2002, and altogether responded to some of the concerns raised by scholars and activists. Specifically, the 2002 guidelines highlighted gendered drivers of forced displacement, whereas the 1991 guidelines focused on ‘women’s special needs’ and how protection concerns should therefore be addressed through ‘assistance-related measures’ that emphasize and respond to those special needs. As international refugee law, international human rights law, as well as the humanitarian governance of those on the move developed, so did the approaches to gender in the international normative framework for forced migrants. Most notably, the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and Global Compact on Migration (GCM), as both have a few gender-specific concerns—even if some consider it to not be ‘gender-transformative’ enough (Hennebry and Petrozziello 2019).

It is therefore undoubtedly the case that efforts have been made to ensure gender is at the forefront of not only normative frameworks, but how organizations within the domain of humanitarian governance operate. Is the problem of a continuing gender-blindness, therefore, not solely an issue of implementation? Freedman (2010:589), for instance, argues that much of the current problem ‘lies in a failure of transmission of the goals of gender sensitivity through all the various bureaux and representatives of a large bureaucratic organization such as the UNHCR’; a claim supported by Baines (2004:1), who asserts ‘implementation continues to be slow and ad hoc’ when it comes to gender-sensitive policies in the governance of the forcibly displaced.

These issues can be particularly relevant in Latin America, a region known for its very liberal and progressive frameworks, which some claims are not fully applied, amounting to an implementation gap (Hammoud-Gallego and Freier 2023). As a region already known for a discrepancy between norm and praxis, one could create a similar parallel between existing gender-sensitive frameworks and guidelines and their (lack of) implementation.

One clear example would be, for instance, how in many countries throughout Latin America, despite the many positive frameworks concerning gender equality and labour rights to forced migrants, there still is considerable unequal access to labour markets and to financial independence. This is particularly the case for Venezuelan forced displaced women, whose rate of unemployment in Latin America is 47%, against the 38% rate of unemployment of displaced Venezuelan men, despite women having higher tertiary education (32% versus 27% of men) (ILO and R4V 2017). Those that are employed must rely on the highly informal economy throughout the region, which corresponds to 33.9% of the region's GDP on average (Chaves-González and Delgado 2023).

Although there is a high rate of labour informality, there is a notable disparity when considering nationals and non-nationals (particularly Venezuelans). In Colombia, for instance, while 46.8% of the Colombian population had informal employment, this rate increased to between 71.9%–89.6% for Venezuelans. As for Brazil, considering the 10% difference in unemployment rates between Brazilians (9%) and Venezuelans (19%), there is a clear nationality-based inequality at the labour market level in the region (*idem*). This was particularly the case when disaggregating data by gender. In Brazil, unemployment was higher in border areas, with 31% Venezuelans in the border state unemployed against only 18% of those who had been internally resettled to other states. However, these rates were much higher for relocated Venezuelan women, whose unemployment rates were at 30%, 12% higher than the average and 21% higher than men (R4V 2022).

Brazil is an important case study because not only men and women are guaranteed equal rights, but migrants and non-migrants are also considered to have equal access to fundamental rights according to the country's 1988 Federal Constitution. Moreover, asylum seekers, refugees and temporary migrants alike have rights to access to the formal labour market. Considering this very positive framework of rights against the abovementioned circumstances, is the clear gender labour inequality for migrant women a case of an implementation gap? Let's consider the case of the internal resettlement policy, as the country's government, with the support of local and international NGOs and international agencies (such as UNHCR and IOM), relocate thousands of Venezuelans from the border state of Roraima, the poorest in the country, to other wealthier regions in the country on the basis of pre-arranged employment opportunities. Specifically, UN agencies and partner NGOs, as part of Operation Welcome, have created several programmes that are sensitive to the goal of reducing labour market inequality, boosting entrepreneurship amongst forced migrants, some with a specific gender focus. Most notably, the UNHCR, UN Women and Global Compact Network Brazil created a partnership programme called 'Empowering Refugees', with training programmes through partnerships with the private sector. As data demonstrates, throughout the 8 years of existence of the programme, 418 migrant women benefitted from the project throughout Brazil, many of whom were formally employed in a variety of services. Other relevant initiatives involved targeting migrant women to work in areas such as sewing, cooking or in care roles.⁵

The 'Empowering Refugees' programme undoubtedly aims to create employment. It is gender sensitive, yet not transformative. Despite having a specific gender focus, like many targeted employment programmes for migrants, it is limited in that reproduces women's place in traditionally gendered roles, such as in the care or garment industries, and more significantly, it disregards migrant women's employment desires, former training or prospects. As such, it had very limited success in redressing the numbers of unemployed women or in women in the informal economy which continue to rise.

Indeed, despite actually implementing gender as central in some employment-based programmes, humanitarian organizations fell short in tackling gender inequality which continued to grow (although this may not be surprising given their capacities) but, more saliently, these programmes aimed at empowering women by inserting them into specific gendered labour markets and social roles. Freedman (2010) argues that part of what she frames as

'implementation problems' is because the type of gender-related work humanitarian organizations, particularly the UNHCR, does, is of an 'integrative' and not 'transformative' nature, ie just adding 'gender' to the protection grammar while not actually and substantially changing understandings or representations of the forcibly displaced (such as the naturalized assumption of forcibly displaced women as an inherently 'more vulnerable' population). The problem to which Freedman (2010) is gesturing can be put more precisely by saying that gender-sensitive humanitarianism focuses on empowering women—e.g., via provision of employment options—but does so in ways that reproduce the gender norms (stereotypes and dominant relations) that generate the structural vulnerability of women and fail to promote autonomy.

Gender-sensitive representations of vulnerability as we noted also risk portraying migrant women as individuals with problems rather than with capabilities and independent judgement. In the experience of Swine (2017), a former aid worker, humanitarian actors tend to approach women 'in need' with an 'I know what is best for you' and 'how it is best done' outlook. A good example for this is that although women who reported rape and sexual abuse in the camps were aware of what made the camp unsafe, 'their knowledge was never sought out or considered relevant to the design and execution of the modes of response put in place by the peacekeepers' (Swine 2017: 207). According to the Forced Migration Research Network at the University of South Wales,

Women and girls are designated as either 'damsels in distress', or mothers/child-bearing machines. They are seen as unable to take control of their own lives and dependent on and subservient to men. This can result in paternalistic programs to protect the good women. Some programs and aid workers punish 'bad' women, single mothers, women who flee abusive relationships, shame raped women, and judge women who use survival sex as immoral prostitutes.⁶

Women also report being scolded by western midwives for what they considered inappropriate feeding equipment (McKnight, Goodwin, and Kenyon 2019). Thus, this is an example of the fact that even if gender-specific figures and attentions were provided, the power imbalance between those who help and those who receive help, constitutive of a humanitarian logic of protection, fails to promote the autonomy of displaced women.

It may be helpful here to recall the distinction between agency and autonomy and to spell out the importance of adopting a relational conception of autonomy. As MacKenzie *et al.* remarks:

... human persons are embodied, and socially, historically, and culturally embedded, and our identities are constituted in relation to these factors in complex ways. An adequate conception of autonomy must take account of this complex social and historical constitution of identity. ... autonomy is a socially constituted capacity, and its development and exercise need to be scaffolded by the right kinds of interpersonal and social environment. (2021: 375)

View from this perspective, gender oppression 'refers to an unjust system or pattern of hierarchically structured social relations, institutions, and practices of gender-based domination and subordination' (2021: 375) that are manifest in the structural vulnerability of women. One way of putting the problem with gender-sensitive humanitarianism is that it aims to empower women but does so in ways that reproduce gender oppression and, hence, structural vulnerability. Most notably, migrant women are hardly ever involved in decision-making concerning how they are to be protected or empowered.

As we argued, the loops of contingent situational vulnerability may be (partly) addressed by gender-sensitive humanitarianism but are done so in a way that reproduces the

structural vulnerability of women, that is, their vulnerability to vulnerability loops. Humanitarian programmes for training and work, and for healthcare are desirable, but the areas of training and work to which they are allocated—sewing, cooking, care roles—and the approach to healthcare provision rather than promoting autonomy reinforce stereotyped gender roles in way that reproduce their structural vulnerability.

That UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations have come to recognize that gender-blind protection policies typically fail to protect women from a range of gender-specific vulnerabilities and, indeed, may create vulnerabilities within protection is welcome. However, the attempt to develop a gender-sensitive humanitarian protection regime draws attention not only to a range of institutional and ideological obstacles concerning the implementation of gender-sensitive protection (Freedman 2010), but also—and more fundamentally—to the constitutive limits of humanitarianism with respect to the protection of women.

What we claim here is that the humanitarian outlook understands the relationship between the contingent vulnerabilities to which women are exposed in contexts of forced displacement and the fact of their being women as an inherent feature of the embodied character of their human condition, while eliding the ways in which layers and loops of vulnerability are produced through social, economic and political relations. Consequently, context-specific gendered vulnerabilities are treated as manifestations of vulnerability that is inherent to the condition of being a woman. As Parrs (2018) remarks, in humanitarian discourse, ‘vulnerability tends to be understood more like a condition than the result of political processes, which results not only in the essentialization of vulnerability as an intrinsic characteristic of refugee women, but also in the occulting of the political, economic and historical factors that have resulted in vulnerability’ (2018: 200). This view finds expression in the justification of gender-sensitive protection on the grounds that women are an inherently ‘more vulnerable’ group.

However, women are not born but are made ‘more vulnerable’ and displaced women are made ‘more vulnerable’ by practices of protection that are either gender-blind or those gender-sensitivity reproduces oppressive gender norms. The vulnerabilities that they suffer from are context-specific manifestations of a structural vulnerability that is rooted in ‘an unjust system or pattern of hierarchically structured social relations, institutions, and practices of gender-based domination and subordination’ (Mackenzie 2021: 375)

Section 7 of this article argues that what is needed is a gender-transformative approach to the protection of forcibly displaced women which acknowledges the ways in which these women are *made* ‘more vulnerable’ in order to address and challenge the structural dimensions of gendered vulnerability.

7. Towards a gender-transformative protection as autonomy promoting

Let’s consider the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which determine not only that signatory states’ responsibilities need to change legal frameworks and to punish human rights violations against women, but that in order to actually end all forms of gender-related discrimination, there needs to be a change in the ‘patterns of conduct’ that actually allow women to demeaned and structurally oppressed. Currently, as a displaced woman crosses a border and asks for international protection, a humanitarian response that seeks to be gender-sensitive according to the instructions of existing guidelines will actually pre-emptively assume *all migrant women* have special needs solely because they are women and are at risk of, in this case, violence, and will have the necessary services to address the consequences of violence, for instance, specific healthcare services, etc all of which are obviously essential and necessary. However, what CEDAW is *demanding* of state parties and all those organizations and institutions committed to gender equality is to move to a systematic and structural

transformation that actually prevents or impedes women from being made 'more vulnerable', going beyond the creation of systems that treat the symptoms rather the underlying condition.

To thinking about what this means, it will be helpful to take up Mackenzie's distinction between three different dimensions of autonomy to which we drew attention in our theoretical framework: self-determination, self-governance, and self-authorization (2021: 381–2). Patriarchal gender oppression affects all of these dimensions of autonomy but at its core is the denial that women should be seen as capable of, and entitled to, normative authority over their lives (a denial enforced by misogynistic practices and attitudes) that justifies subjecting women to paternalistic relations of dependency and limiting their control over important domains of their lives (for example, reproductive rights).

If we consider the specific case of displaced women in contexts of protection, they find that they may have very little control over important domains of their lives such as safety, shelter and health; that the scope of their ability to express their practical identity in actions and choices is limited by relationships of dependency on agencies of (humanitarian) protection and services; and that their circumstances significantly restrict the compossible expression of values. To some extent, this is probably unavoidable given the practical issues of securing protection for displaced populations at least in the short-term in contexts of large and sudden movements of people, although much can be done to address the ways in which the organization of protection makes women 'more vulnerable'. The core problem raised by the humanitarian mode of protection, however, fundamentally concerns the second and the third dimensions of autonomy, self-governance and self-authorization, because it constructs a social environment that acts to undermine the ability of women to see themselves as having normative authority over their lives and as capable of shaping their own identity and values. It might be objected here that the power asymmetries of humanitarian governance apply equally to displaced men. But this objection both misses an important difference and elides a significant problem. The difference is that while displaced men may experience their subjection of humanitarian governance as a frustrating usurpation of their normative authority over their lives, it is also seen as an anomaly, a presumptively temporary interruption of the normal state of affairs. By contrast, for displaced women, it is the reaffirmation of the patriarchal norms that have shaped their lives and may have played significant roles (of diverse kinds) in their reason for flight. The problem that this objection elides is that men confronted by a loss of normative authority over their lives can compensate for this loss by asserting their normative authority over women and children, not least through the exercise of misogynistic agency in acts of sexual assault and expressions of sexual insult or other humiliations and harms.

Thus, we propose, the first and most fundamental normative principle for gender-transformative protection is *effective voice* conceived as the practically consequential engagement of displaced women in agenda-setting and decision-making concerning the ways in which their protection, settlement and integration is conducted. This proposal is intended to be comprehensive and flexible, allowing for adaptation to local contexts. It does not prescribe a singular definition of women's autonomy, which must be contextualized and adapted to different circumstances and local realities. Moreover, it is essential to recognize that women themselves possess a unique understanding of what autonomy practically entails. Consequently, further empirical research is required in order to gain insight into the most effective strategies for achieving 'autonomy' in different local contexts.

Now consider the example we provided earlier of gender-sensitive protection in which women are directed and supported into traditional gendered forms of employment or in relation to healthcare provision. Our objection was that gender-sensitive practices aimed at empowering women simply reinforced gendered stereotypes and hence reproduced the structural vulnerability of women. Now imagine instead that employment programmes are directed by the decisions of displaced women who do attend to the skills, prior employment

histories, aspirations etc, of their peers and decide, given the operative constraints, to support women into employment in just these traditional gendered areas of the labour market. This hardly disrupts the gendered labour stereotypes, but it does challenge oppressive gender norms because it is an expression of autonomy rather than an expression of acceptance of paternalism.

There are, of course, good epistemic reasons for agencies of protection to listen to women's voices but consultation and feedback mechanisms are only weakly transformative even if there is a clear demonstration of how they have changed the conduct of governance. This is what at best can be achieved by gender-sensitive humanitarian protection. Rather what are needed are genuine participatory practices that enable women to shape the governance to which they are subject, so that also the self-authorization and self-governance dimensions of autonomy can be fully promoted.

However, while practices of *effective voice* are fundamental, gender-transformative protection should not be limited to this dimension of protection. A second normative principle concerns self-governance and relations of dependency in contexts of protection as well as self-determination and control over important domains of their lives. To provide transformative responses is to treat the displaced as citizens, as people in society, to provide and create conditions for effective and stable livelihood opportunities, which will support them to effectively integrate, live independent and autonomous lives, and contribute to host communities. At an individual level, it might encompass the use of cash-payments to women rather than distributing goods to them. Such practices not only reduce dependency but increase women's control over important domains of the lives in contexts of protection. At a group-level, this would include practices supporting the self-organization of displaced women and training and delegation of resources for tasks integral to gendered dimensions of protection to these groups. These practices can range from group-based induction and peer-learning in which displaced women support each other in acquiring and exchanging information, for example, negotiating health systems, employment, and safety to building shared (even collective) structures for sourcing, cooking, and distributing food or for organizing sleeping arrangement, childcare, and mutual security. This goes beyond regularization and other legal entitlements and supports arrangements to increase investment in longer-term solutions in livelihoods and education—which also benefit host communities—as key to self-governance and rebuilding lives and communities.

Thus far, we have focus on the context in which humanitarian protection operates—for example, reception centres and refugee camps—and much more would need to be said in spelling out the implications of gender-transformative protection for states of refuge and, indeed, for the international protection system. Thus, for example, the differential impact of border externalization on women would become a central issue for such an approach to protection and highlight the importance of safe passage (via, for example, humanitarian visas or mobility passports, for them and their children or dependents) for addressing the structural vulnerability of women. But it is not our aim here to fully develop an account of the practices of gender-transformative protection, rather our aim has been to clarify the normative grammar of this approach and to demonstrate both the need for it and that taking up this demand requires that we move beyond the frame of humanitarian protection.

8. Conclusion

Our aim in this article has been to provide the conceptual and normative apparatus needed for a philosophically adequate analysis of the relationship of gender and protection in the realm of forced migration. Drawing on debates in feminist philosophy concerning vulnerability and autonomy, we develop a framework that is capable of analytically illuminating the problems of gender-blind and gender-sensitive protection and providing normative guidance on the development of gender-transformative protection, taking into account the

specific contexts and local realities involved. We have attempted to vindicate this claim by providing empirical illustrations of gender-blind and gender-sensitive regimes, demonstrating that humanitarianism in its gender-blind practice is a form of pathogenic vulnerability, a point illustrated by the vulnerability loops to which it gives rise, and in its gender-sensitive form acts to reproduce the conditions of structural vulnerability that make women ‘more vulnerable’ (specifically vulnerable to vulnerability loops). To avoid this fate, regimes of protection need to transcend a politics of compassion and embrace a politics of dignity that begins, in theory and in practice, from a recognition of displaced women as the normative authorities for their lives, within social relationships that entitle and enable the capacity to exercise such authority and voice, with respect to how their actions and choices are governed.

Acknowledgements

This article owes a great deal to the many scholars who have taken the time to read and discuss our work. In particular, we are grateful to Christine Strachle, the members of the PAIR Department at the University of Southampton, and the participants in the ‘MPC GLOBALCIT Conference—An interconnected world? Rethinking citizenship and migration’ at the European University Institute (Florence, 9–10 May 2024) for useful insights and comments. We thank Alessandra Facchi for her input and comments in early discussions of the theoretical considerations developed in this paper.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no conflicting interest.

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) [Grant number ES/T00441X/1].

Notes

1. As will become evident in subsequent sections of this article, we do so by incorporating the concept of autonomy into the discourse on vulnerability and humanitarian reason.
2. A point Foucault’s work made in the late 1970s and early 1980s, see his ‘What is Enlightenment’ essay for a clear statement.
3. Operation Welcome is a response from the Federal Government of Brazil to guarantee humanitarian care for migrants and refugees from Venezuela. It receives and hosts Venezuelan migrants and refugees who arrive in Brazil through the border with Roraima. The Armed Forces provide logistical support to the operation with actions in infrastructure, transportation, health, and administration. UN agencies and civil society entities also provide support within the operation.
4. Zuccarelli, G., “Forcibly Displaced Women and Intersectional Loops of Vulnerability”, unpublished/repository.
5. As seen on <https://www.acnur.org/portugues/empoderando-refugiadas/resultados/> <https://brasil.un.org/pt-br/146364-projeto-para-mulheres-migrantes-e-refugiadas-abre-caminho-na-ind%C3%BAstria-de-costura-do-rio-de-janeiro> <https://avozdacostura.com.br/projeto-costurando-a-renda-traz-oportunidades-para-mulheres-refugiadas-em-sao-paulo/> and <https://www.onumulheres.org.br/noticias/por-meio-de-capacitacoes-refugiadas-e-migrantes-em-roraima-se-preparam-para-o-mercado-de-trabalho/>
6. <https://www.unhcr.org/media/worlds-largest-minority-women-and-girls-global-compact-refugees-extended>.

References

Amnesty International (2016) ‘Refugees and Migrants Fleeing Sexual Violence, Abuse and Exploitation in Libya’, <https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/refugees-and-migrants-fleeing-sexual-violence-abuse-and-exploitation-in-libya/>, last accessed 30 Apr. 2024.

- Amnesty International, (2018) 'Fleeing the Country to Give Birth: The Exodus of Pregnant Venezuelan Women', <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/huir-para-ver-la-luz-el-exodo-de-las-embarazadas-venezolanas/>, last accessed 30 Apr. 2024.
- Arbel, E., Dauvergne, C. and Millbank, J. (2014) *Gender in Refugee Law*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Arendt, H. (1994) 'We Refugees', in Robinson, M. (ed.) *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*, pp. 11–119. London: Faber & Faber.
- Baines, E. K. (2004) *Vulnerable Bodies: Gender, the UN and the Global Refugee Crisis*. London: Routledge.
- Brumat, L. and Freier, F. (2020) 'South American de jure and de facto refugee protection: lessons from the South' (ASILE Project, Brussels, Belgium, Forum on the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum in light of the UN GCR) [online]. <https://www.asileproject.eu/south-american-de-jure-and-de-facto-refugee-protection/>, last accessed: 30 Apr. 2024.
- Chaves-González, D., and Delgado, N. (2023) *A Winding Path to Integration: Venezuelan Migrants' Regularization and Labor Market Prospects*. Panama City and Washington, DC: International Organization for Migration and Migration Policy Institute.
- Cherem, M. (2016) 'Refugee Rights: Against Expanding the Definition of a "Refugee" and Unilateral Protection Elsewhere', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, **24**: 183–205.
- Cintra, N., Owen, D. and Riggirozzi, P. (2023) *Displacement, Human Rights and Sexual and Reproductive Health. Conceptualizing Gender Protection Gaps in Latin America*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Fassin, D. (2011) *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Fineman, M. (2008) 'The Vulnerable Subject: anchoring Equality in the Human Condition', *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, **20**: 1–23.
- Freedman, J. (2019) 'The Uses and Abuses of "Vulnerability" in EU Asylum and Refugee Protection: Protecting Women or Reducing Autonomy?', *Papeles Del Ceic*, **2019**: 204–15.
- Freedman, J. (2016) 'Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Refugee Women: A Hidden Aspect of the Refugee "Crisis"', *Reproductive Health Matters*, **24**: 18–26.
- Freedman, J. (2010) 'Mainstreaming Gender in Refugee Protection', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, **23**: 589–607.
- Freedman, J. (2007) *Gendering the International Asylum and Refugee Debate*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- GAATW (2019) 'Reclaiming Migrant Women's Narratives: A Feminist Participatory Action Research project on 'Safe and Fair' Migration in Asia', <https://gaatw.org/resources/publications/1001-reclaiming-migrant-women-s-narratives-a-feminist-participatory-action-research-project-on-safe-and-fair-migration-in-asia>, last accessed: 30 Apr. 2024.
- Gatrell, P. (2013) *The Making of the Modern Refugee*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gundogdu, A. (2015) *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hammoud-Gallego, O. and Freier, L. (2023) 'Symbolic Refugee Protection: explaining Latin America's Liberal Refugee Laws', *American Political Science Review*, **117**: 454–73.
- Hennebry, J. L. and Petrozziello, A. J. (2019) 'Closing the Gap? Gender and the Global Compacts for Migration and Refugees', *International Migration*, **57**: 115–38.
- Hoagland, N. and Arias Cubas, M. (2024) 'Practice versus Perception: A Discussion of the Humanitarian Principle of Independence in the Context of Migration', *International Review of the Red Cross*, **106**: 223–41.
- ILO and R4V (2017) 'Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean. ILO response', pp. 1–6.
- Keck, M. E. and Sikkink, K. (1998) *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell.
- Luna, F. (2019) 'Identifying and Evaluating Layers of Vulnerability—a Way Forward', *Developing World Bioethics*, **19**: 86–95.
- Mackenzie, C. (2021) 'Relational Autonomy', in Kim Q. Hall, and Ásta (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Philosophy*, pp. 374–84. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mackenzie, C., Rogers, W. and Dodds, S. (2014) *Vulnerability. New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- McKnight, P., Goodwin, L. and Kenyon, S. (2019) 'A Systematic Review of Asylum-Seeking Women's Views and Experiences of UK Maternity Care', *Midwifery*, 77: 16–23.
- Morgan, M. (2020) *Care Ethics and the Refugee Crises: Emotions, Contestation, and Agency*, New York: Routledge.
- Owen, D. (2020) *What Do We Owe to Refugees?* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Parrs, A., (2018) 'The Vulnerable Refugee Women, from Damascus to Brussels' in C. Timmerman et al. (eds) *Migration and Gender*, pp.195–216. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Phillimore, J. et al. (2023) 'Forced Migration, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and Integration: Effects, Risks and Protective Factors', *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 24: 715–45.
- Pickering, S. (2011) *Women, Borders, and Violence*. New York: Springer.
- Pickering, S., and Powell, R. (2017) 'Death at Sea: Migration and the Gendered Dimensions of Border Insecurity', in J. Freedman, Z. Kivilcim, and N. O. Baklacioğlu (eds) *A Gendered Approach to Syrian Refugee Crisis*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Querton, C. (2022) 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? Interpreting 'Particular Social Groups' in the European Union', *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 71: 1–27.
- R4V (2022) 'Refugee and Migrant Needs Analysis', pp. 1–252.
- Rueda-Salazar, S., Channon, A. and Riggirozzi, P. (2023) 'Discrimination and Violence during Displacement. Preliminary Results: ReGHID Survey-Honduras. A Study of the Sexual and Reproductive Health of Returnee Migrant Women', Research reports University of Southampton, UK.
- Samaddar, R. (2020) *The Postcolonial Age of Migration*. London: Routledge India.
- Sertler, E. (2018) 'The Institution of Gender-Based Asylum and Epistemic Injustice: A Structural Limit', *Philosophy, Religion and Classics*, 4: 1–24.
- Swine, A. (2017) 'Enabling of Disabling Paternalism: (In)attention to Gender and Women's Knowledge, Capacity, and Authority in Humanitarian Context', in M. N. Barnett (ed.) *Paternalism beyond Borders*. pp. 185–223. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Titkin, M. (2016) 'Thinking beyond Humanitarian Borders', *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 83: 255–71.
- UNHCR et al. (2017) 'Initial Assessment Report: Protection Risks for Women and Girls in the European Refugee and Migrant Crisis', pp. 1–24, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/initial-assessment-report-protection-risks-women-and-girls-european-refugee-and-migrant>, last accessed 3 Dec. 2023.
- Zapata, G. and Tapia Wenderoth, V. (2022) 'Progressive Legislation but Lukewarm Policies: The Brazilian Response to Venezuelan Displacement', *International Migration*, 60: 132–51.
- Zimmerman, C. et al. (2009) Asylum-seeking women, violence & health: results from a pilot study in Scotland and Belgium, London: London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and Scottish Refugee Council (SRC).
- Zuccarelli, G. (2022) Asylum-seeking and Refugee Women: A Normative Framework, PhD Dissertation, University of Milan.