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EDITED AND REVIEWED BY
Marion Panizzon,
University of Bern, Switzerland

*CORRESPONDENCE
Paola Degani
paola.degani@unipd.it
Paolo De Stefani
paolo.destefani@unipd.it
Jane Freedman
jane.freedman@cnrs.fr

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Editorial: Mapping vulnerability amid mixed migration flows. The reality of severe labor exploitation from a human rights perspective

Paola Degani^{1*}, Paolo De Stefani^{1*} and Jane Freedman^{2*}

¹Department of Political Science, Law, and International Studies, University of Padua, Padua, Italy,
²Université Paris 8, CRESPPA-GTM CNRS, Saint-Denis, France

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Mapping vulnerability amid mixed migration flows. The reality of severe labor exploitation from a human rights perspective](#)

International migration has been changing in a plurality of ways during the last two decades. It has increased in volume and complexity. Migrant pathways and composition have both multiplied and diversified with new connections established in terms of routes and countries involved. New trends and characters are so relevant today to determine the reality of migration movement of people, regardless of their status. While the legal categories commonly classify migrants as either “forced/involuntary” or “voluntary,” the reality is much more articulated and nuanced. A combination of interrelated factors, including economic, political, social, religious, sexual, racial, or ethnic ones intervene regularly to determine the need to leave the country of origin and impact the migration journey and the experiences in the country of destination. As such, those classified as “forced” migrants and those called “voluntary” or “economic” migrants, often face the same risks, have similar needs along the journey, and travel along the same routes with the same smugglers. Migrants in mixed flows experience indebtedness, violence, forced labor and prostitution in countries of origin and transit, and dangerous and traumatic migration journeys. Legal and political restrictions on their status and rights limit their freedom of movement, reducing their individual social capital and resources at all stages of migration. In countries of destination migrants systematically face multiple challenges due to the lack of sensitive attention in terms of public policies on assistance, accommodation, economic tools and opportunities, and residence permits. As such their human rights are regularly neglected.

A diverse set of rights based on different law instruments are normally implemented based on the countries of origin of people on the move and the backgrounds of migration projects. Many receiving countries have implemented policy changes in recent years with regard to the geographic allocation of asylum seekers, status determination processes, language acquisition and skills, and access to health care and housing, among other changes. Vulnerability has become an increasingly used “buzzword” in international migration policy, but there are still no real frameworks in place for assessing forms of vulnerability that look like as fragmented and non-linear. While it seems to be very “common” among migrants the reality of exploitation is an experience that seems to happen “beyond” all differences and labels.

Research on migration has largely opposed to the rigid classification and rejected the idea that trafficking victims are a specific group of migrants making evident the transversal nature of severe exploitation. Labor exploitation in particular is emerging in the current period receiving attention not only in the public agenda but also in the institutional one. If the sexual exploitation of migrant women specifically has been widely researched, labor exploitation has not received the same attention, determining a gap in the analysis of the ways in which gender inequalities intersect with “insecurities” and isolation in the countries of destination, reproducing a sexual division of roles also in the conditions of exploitation. Perceiving vulnerability not as a permanent condition but rather in relation to specific circumstances that render migrants at “risk” of being exploited and subjugated, or as a structural factor because of the situation of legal disadvantage they experience in the country of destination, helps authors to combine the main research strands of this call, being mixed flows, vulnerability, and severe exploitation.

The lack of assistance and the important shortcomings in the integration mechanisms, together with the difficulties of obtaining legal residence status, continue to result in a lowering of standards, where exploitation and systematic violation of basic human rights create or increased vulnerability. Vulnerability may be intensified by restrictive migration laws and policies, lack of knowledge of rights in the host country, limited possibility of employment or income generating opportunities resulting in poverty and economic insecurity, poor housing and accommodation, and restricted access to social services and benefits.

All the contributions in this Research Topic analyze themes and topics connected to vulnerability as an entry point to the conceptual implications of migrant trajectories and highlight how the situations faced by women migrants are an important factor in (re)producing vulnerability and situations of severe exploitation. In this direction, the situational model for understanding vulnerability in the context of migration is becoming a very useful analytical tool.

The Research Topic comes to build on these different issues proposing an analytical framework on vulnerability seeking

both empirical and theoretical articles on labor exploitation, addressing public policy restrictions on migrant movements and their outcomes. Contributions to the Research Topic bring together different perspectives in examining vulnerability amid mixed migration flows, situations of severe labor exploitation and more generally a failure to fully respect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of migrants.

The first paper addressed in the Research Topic is that of [Giammarinaro](#). She analytically explains why a correct frame for severe exploitation requires a human rights and gender-sensitive intersectional approach. The essay discusses the notion of severe exploitation in relation to production and social reproduction from a gender perspective arguing that the existence of huge “edge populations” involved in severe exploitation, is a structural component of global economies, and thus requires a human rights and social justice response. An analysis of severe exploitation should be conducted according to a macro-social approach. In other words, as the author underlines, feminist scholars have constantly highlighted that the division between production and social reproduction is still shaping economic systems by constantly re-establishing a precise hierarchy between these two “spaces.” To understand severe exploitation, beyond the dimension of individual contractual relationships, it is necessary to consider the conditions of life reproduction. The hierarchy produced by the distinction between productive and reproductive labor provides an ideological justification for exploitation, but also produces a sort of “normalization” of women’s severe exploitation. Through an analysis of domestic work, agriculture, and the sex industry, [Giammarinaro](#) highlights that a combination of vulnerability and agency, and coercion and negotiation, exists in different degrees in most cases of severe exploitation. The study suggests that the notion of “gender intersectional exploitation” should be further explored.

The paper written by [De Stefani](#) analyzes the notion of “vulnerability” in the legal and political discourse of today’s Europe as a dual-mode dispositive that is categorical or situated. Vulnerability captures intersectionality by transcending the rigidity of human rights language. It articulates the relationship between the legal categories used to describe groups and their status, and a rapidly evolving social and ecological landscape. Through examples taken from the EU normative on irregular and mixed migrations, with a focus on refugee “screening” and identification and referral procedures for people who are victims of human trafficking, [De Stefani](#) shows that assigning an individual to a “vulnerable group” (categorical vulnerability) strengthens their protection but also accentuates some risks inherent in the human rights discourse, namely paternalism, and essentialism. On the other hand, situated vulnerability results in a proliferation of vulnerability tests, fragmentation of rights, complexification and bureaucratization of the protection procedures, and eventually discrimination and exclusion. In the draft reform of the EU legal framework concerning refugees and trafficked persons and in recent regulatory productions that seek to tackle mixed migration flows, the segmentation of

the inherently “vulnerable” group of migrants in subcategories of persons with “special needs” is itself a cause of legal and psychosocial fragility. The phenomenon is exacerbated by the combined effects of EU and state provisions, a source of vulnerability for the affected population. To summarize, despite its promise of providing a finely tuned system that is responsive to individual needs, vulnerability is a weak dispositive, because its operationalization in the examples provided largely depends on states and the EU. The dialectic of a shrinking welfare state due to the progressive reduction of state intervention in social reproduction.

The trajectory followed by [Fehr and Rijken](#) in their paper on child labor among Syrian refugees in Turkey is based on a survey conducted in late 2020, that contributes to a better understanding of the current situation of Syrian minors in Turkey. The quantitative results of the research data produced by the authors are compared with the Turkish national child labor survey. The comparison gives evidence of the differences and commonalities between Syrian and Turkish children working in the country and indicates the prevalence of child labor among the segment of the population who do not have permanent residence permits. The paper analyzes the restrictions on residence status and labor rights that the Syrian refugee population faces in the new residence country, along with the resulting vulnerabilities in the informal labor market. At present, there are various legal instruments in national and international law to combat child labor, but in Turkey in spite of this, the number of children working in exploitative and hazardous conditions is high and the general, situation seems to be worsening in many respects. Given the structural dimension of child labor in Turkey and in line with the ILO’s perspective, issues related to the prohibition of this work “*per se*” and obviously of the exploitation of minors, including the prescription of the worst forms of child labor, should be equally addressed among Syrian and Turkish children while taking into account the specific vulnerabilities of Syrian children that the article demonstrates.

In a different vein, the article by [Degani](#) analyzes the most recent public policy scenario in Italy regarding the domestic/care work sector. The Italian government, in May 2020, to relaunch a post-pandemic economy, released a Decree entitled “Emergence of employment relationships” to counteract undeclared migrant work. The available data shows evidence of widespread irregularity for foreign women employed in this sector, information which has to date only partially emerged. Currently, unprecedented attention as well as institutional interest have been given to severe exploitation in the labor market rather than to forced prostitution or other forms of heavy servitude to the detriment of foreigners (i.e., begging, forced criminal activities). The article analyzes the effects of the recent regularization of domestic/care work and the outcome on migrant women during the critical COVID-19 pandemic period produced by this policy from the perspective of the

human rights of women and the ongoing debate about their protection from severe exploitation in relation to discourses on trafficking. In Italy, the debate is of particular interest owing to its ostensible relevance in the political agenda and the impact of the anti-trafficking system on victim protection, even if it remains largely under-researched. The great visibility of male subjugation in many work sectors seems to implicitly support the emersion of women’s conditions in reproductive wage work and perhaps obfuscates forced prostitution. Coherently, in this scenario, recent investigations on trafficking cases of domestic/care women migrant workers also confirm this interest by the judiciary. The common theme of vulnerability in mixed migration flows and severe exploitation runs through the four articles of this Research Topic.

Moving from a legal perspective to embrace a more public policy-oriented approach, the authors highlight the “real” character of vulnerability as a result of structural and situational conditions as being evident, adopting a human rights and gender-sensitive intersectional approach, highlighted by [Giammarinaro](#), that does not consider vulnerability as a “natural” condition of women. The papers show the importance of reshaping laws, policies, discourses, and definitions of migrants, allowing legal formalism and instruments to incorporate “precarious subjects” that the traditional language of “rights” risks excluding while the intertwined and multifaceted phenomenon of mixed migration flows increases. Today the relevance of “labels” in relation to the “status” and the consequences that the residence permit and the type of permit can have in terms of access to services and resources contribute deeply to “reinforce” vulnerability and to multiply and exacerbate severe labor exploitation.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

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