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Vulnerability

Vulnerability in humanitarian emergencies is the result of class, gender, age, ethnic, racial, able-bodied, and religious inequalities and hierarchies that prevent the individual from satisfying basic needs, accessing resources, and exercising their rights (Bankoff 2001). Humanitarian crises, such as armed conflicts or disasters, can either exacerbate pre-existing structural vulnerabilities (e.g. economic inequalities, social roles, and cultural stereotypes) or create new ones (e.g. injuries, diseases, losses, displacements, poverty, violence, and exclusion). For example, owing to unequal gender relations in a family and society, women may lose their social status because of the death of their husband, be subjected to sexual violence, have no access to basic hygiene during pregnancy, be burdened by carrying small children, have restrictions on clothing when fleeing, become victims of human trafficking, or have limited legal status and rights to claim benefits (Ní Aoláin 2011). People may also lack necessary survival skills during rescue operations, such as being able to read government announcements or swim during floods. In these circumstances, vulnerability becomes an obstacle for human agency, and this can reinforce conservative attitudes, as well as control of and discrimination against certain social groups.

The concept of vulnerability has received particular attention in the study of disasters. This has enabled understanding of “why disasters in the developing world [a]re so much worse than in the developed world” (Faas 2016: 15).

Disaster vulnerability is viewed as a result of a person's characteristics (e.g. a lack of an individual or group capacity to protect themselves), poor decision-making (e.g. social construction), an unequal socio-economic situation (e.g. a lack of resources and entitlements), geographical proximity to danger (i.e. exposure of places and populations), historical or distal causes (e.g. colonialism, inability to access land, clientelist politics), and the outcomes and frequency of the hazard itself (Faas 2016).

As the concept of vulnerability is primarily applied to those who are considered the most vulnerable groups, such as women, children, the elderly, or people living with disabilities, it can contribute to rendering victims passive, inevitably justifying humanitarian intervention (Bankoff 2001). This is particularly the case when the state fails to provide, or is reluctant to engage in providing, assistance to affected groups. In this case, humanitarian response runs a risk of undermining local capacities and knowledge in responding to emergencies, turning affected people into objects to be governed by external bodies and specialists, or even reinforcing harmful coping strategies. External experts can also ignore "the particular histories and power relations of a given place" (Faas 2016: 22) and instead "import their own stereotypes of cultural roles and powers" (Ní Aoláin 2011: 8).

However, people affected by humanitarian emergencies are not passive victims and can respond to vulnerability differently, either by recognizing and engaging with it or by denying and ignoring it (Faas 2016: 20). Survivors may recognize and engage with vulnerability if their understanding of it correlates with definitions used by national and international actors who do not restrict survivors' agency. On the contrary, affected people may ignore and deny vulnerability as it is applied to them by institutions if the concept prevents them from accessing resources and limits their agency. Thus, vulnerability becomes a bargaining chip in accessing humanitarian aid and turns into an opportunity for human agency. As such, vulnerability can positively change social behaviors, invite more openness, and permit access to the public sphere for marginalized groups during humanitarian emergencies, especially when an affected population is organizing collectively to rebuild their community. Here, vulnerability is understood as a condition of inevitable human interdependency, relational existence, ties to others, and common humanity (Gilson 2014). It represents a critique of the liberal notion of autonomous subjects responsible for their own lives. At the same time, the vulnerability of people affected by humanitarian emergencies is closely tied to the vulnerability of those who come to their rescue (Cavarero 2009). On the one hand, representatives of aid organizations are vulnerable to resisting the structures of neoliberal governance, colonial history, racism, and social injustices. On the other hand, they are also

vulnerable to a poor knowledge of local culture and language, a lack of infrastructure and necessary equipment to perform their tasks, and violent attacks such as kidnapping and rape. In this way, vulnerability combines both humanitarian violence and care.

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Water

Access to water, human welfare, and economic development are indisputably and fundamentally linked. Access to fresh clean water is critical to human life; it preserves health, enables food production and security, and ensures equality, education, and economic development. It is also crucially related to gender roles and human dignity (UN Water 2015). There is an intensifying competition for water supplies between water “uses” and water “users” (UN Water 2015), with the most vulnerable and marginalized groups usually being those who lose out and cannot claim or ensure a safe and sustainable access to water. Thus, there is a close relation between access to water and social inequality. People around the world suffer from floods, droughts, and contamination from pollution caused by industries, mining, and urban sewers, the privatization of water and sanitation services, and displacement by dam projects (Perreault, Boelens, and Vos 2018). The ongoing impact of climate change has intensified droughts and other natural phenomena, reducing the availability of fresh