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Coming of Age in the Border Regime: The End of Vulnerability?

Laura Otto[1]

Abstract

International and national legal frameworks clearly define who an 'unaccompanied minor' or 'separated child' is in the context of forced migration: a young person under eighteen years of age without the presence of a legal guardian. The category of the 'unaccompanied minor' is inextricably linked with vulnerability, suggesting that young refugees are not vulnerable once they are legally considered to be adults. My ethnographic fieldwork in Malta reveals, however, that young refugees do not find themselves in positions in which they are either vulnerable or non-vulnerable, but that both—being considered as a minor and being considered an adult—entail different forms of vulnerability. I thus argue that vulnerability is not merely "inscribed" or "embodied", but that it is also the outcome of processes of vulnerabilization, whereby refugees are made vulnerable. These processes of vulnerabilization need to be understood as a result of individuals' (non-)action.

Keywords: *unaccompanied minors; vulnerability; categorization; refugees; coming of age.*

Introduction

"They [social workers] tell us that we are minors and that they help us. But that never happens. I never see the social worker. But always I have to ask her for permission. Can I do this, or that? But never I see her. So how I can ask?", Absimil, a young adolescent from Somalia who was classified as an 'Unaccompanied Minor'[2] ('UAM') in Malta, asked rhetorically. Absimil's expression reveals two distinguishing facets which arise in the care of young refugees: On the one hand, there exists the acknowledgement that as persons categorized as underaged minors ('UAMs') they are vulnerable because of their age and inexperience, and consequently there are social programs in place to address the needs of young refugees. On the other hand, however, looking beyond the structural forces in play and formulated public policy, there was a perception on Absimil's part that the (non-)action directed towards him and many of his fellow refugees had a concrete impact on whether his peers and he were *made* even *more* vulnerable.

This is the tension this article examines. Accordingly, this paper poses the following questions: How can vulnerability be conceptualized and analyzed if it is not merely a matter of inherent inscription and 'emobodiment'? And what role does individual's (non-)action play in the emergence

[1] Dr Laura Otto, post-doctoral researcher at the Institute for Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology at Goethe-University Frankfurt, Germany. E-mail: otto@em.uni-frankfurt.de.

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[2] I use quotation marks for both 'UAM' and 'unaccompanied minor' to highlight that these categories were first and foremost created by state institutions and specific asylum regulations as well as refugee protection laws, but are not necessarily the categories the persons categorized as such identify with.

of vulnerabilization processes? On the one hand, "vulnerability", as it is broadly conceived in legal frameworks (SCEP, 2012), offers an essentialist form which focuses on chronological age[3], gender, dis/abilities, and health. Subjects are often viewed as vulnerable, either because they are young, they are female, they have dis/abilities, or because they suffer from severe health problems. Moreover, these categories need not separately in an isolated fashion, but there may be overlaps leading to multiple forms and an interwoven nature of vulnerability. This perspective is contrasted with "vulnerabilization", which focuses on the process of how subjects are *made* vulnerable. In the infrequent cases that vulnerabilization has been invoked in the literature and scholarly debate, this has typically occurred in terms of structural vulnerability, which, in the context of forced migration, usually refers to political decisions and bureaucratic hurdles, such as strict residence regulations, detention of refugees, or the non-recognition of educational qualifications. Distinguishing this feature from other approaches which employ a predominantly structuralist understanding of vulnerabilization in both academic and activist contexts (Medico International, 2018; Lecadet, 2017; Sardadvar et al. 2012), I suggest that vulnerabilization also needs to be understood as a result of individuals' (non-)action. This implies that views on vulnerabilization which overlook how individuals make other individuals more vulnerable—both by acting in particular ways and by not acting—fail to recognize important insights as to what contributes to rendering others vulnerable. In the context of this article, I distance myself from a concept of vulnerability that merely relates vulnerability to fixed, embodied categories[4]. Rather, I agree with Robert Chambers' work (1989), who notes that vulnerability is not merely a question of a person's material and economic possibilities, but also has a political and a social dimension.

This article examines the interplay of vulnerability and vulnerabilization in the context of young Somali refugees who arrived in Malta and were initially categorized as 'UAMs'. The distinction between these terms can best be understood when a transition occurs within the essentialist features ascribed towards young refugees. This occurred in a very pronounced manner with the young refugees' eighteenth birthday. All of a sudden, they were no longer viewed as vulnerable children, but rather as *in*vulnerable adults. This belief about vulnerability is also expressed in national and international legal frameworks, which typically stipulate 'children' as vulnerable. Once the age of legal adulthood is reached, however, it is assumed that the actors in question are no longer vulnerable (Sedmak et al., 2018). This case thereby promises to highlight how vulnerabilization is made efficacious within changing perspectives on vulnerability. Thereby, it is possible to move away from the idea that vulnerability is merely "inscribed" into a minor's body, insisting instead on its social and interpersonal production, demonstrating thereby that vulnerability is also space and time contingent.

It is not only legal frameworks, however, which apply a narrow, age-based understanding of childhood and adulthood in migration research: The scholarly literature on young refugees leads to the identification of "methodological ageism": Young refugees represented in research are usually either classified as underage and thus fall under the official understanding of being vulnerable, or they have already reached adulthood in legal terms. The transformation between the legal categories of minors and adults has not been sufficiently examined (see also Sirriyeh, 2013), leading to a

[3] Chronological age refers to a person's age counted in days, months and years from the day of birth.

[4] Tschakert and Machado (2015: 65) argue that the discursive portrayal of women as victims not only negates their agency, but above all simplifies complex gender-power relationships and thus vulnerabilises female subjects.

situation in which recognition of difficulties young refugees experience in a broader sense has been rejected (Grayson, 2017).

A biologistic, simply age-based perspective on vulnerability, child- and adulthood, which is broadly promoted, entails two major problems: 1) vulnerability is predominantly understood as being inscribed into the bodies of young people, thereby overlooking circumstances which render them vulnerable in the first place; and 2) only examining young refugees who are considered to be 'UAMs' in assessing vulnerability bears the risk of disregarding those who are already of legal age, but nevertheless find themselves in vulnerable positions. The significance of transition between being viewed as a minor and reaching adulthood in legal terms and thus becoming a so-called 'care-leaver' (Kohli/Mitchell, 2007) has largely escaped academic attention but is nevertheless necessary to better understand the young refugees' lived realities. The question this paper consequently addresses with respect to Malta is: What happens to these young refugees once they turn 18, once they have to leave the care system set up for 'UAMs', and once they are no longer considered to be vulnerable in legal terms?

The results presented here derive from ethnographic field research carried out in Malta between 2013 and 2018, for which a multi-method approach was applied. Throughout the research process, it was important to reflect on how to proceed as sensitively as possible in such a way that the young refugees were not further put at risk by their participation in research (Chase et al., 2019). Besides informal talks and field notes, I conducted narrative interviews with refugee[5] and non-refugee actors such as politicians and NGO workers. Further, I also considered discursive documents, for example newspaper articles and policy papers, to unpack the complexities of 'UAMs' turning 18 from multiple perspectives. As the young people's migratory trajectories and transitions from being classified 'UAMs' to formally being considered adults are characterized by temporalities, it was necessary to carry out research in one long-term field stint that helped to develop sustainable relationships, followed by three short-term revisits in 2015, 2016 and 2018 (Welz, 2013). This approach allowed me to accompany the young refugees during significant juridical and personal changes and to capture their varying narratives about age.

This article analyzes the narratives and experiences of young refugees who originated from Somalia. The reason young Somalis were chosen has to do primarily with the fact that it was Somalis who made up the vast majority of UAMs in Malta; this, in turn, allows for anonymization, enabling research partners' identities to remain private. Malta itself represents a special case in that while, like many other countries, it is part of the European Union and therefore part of the European border regime and is managed by regulations like EURODAC (European Dactyloscopy) and the Dublin Regulation, it is unlike other countries in that young refugees were first imprisoned and then accommodated exclusively with other refugees; they were never housed alongside Maltese youths who had been placed in the care of the state (Hilmy, 2014).

The remainder of this article is as follows: I first briefly discuss the importance of age as a bio-political instrument of power in the contemporary European border regime. This is followed by ethnographical insights into two important events—(1) moving to an open center, and (2) having to leave in an unprepared fashion—by means of which I approach the question whether legal adulthood implies reduced vulnerability. This is followed by concluding comments where I argue

[5] In total, 48 refugees categorized as 'UAMs' participated in my research, as well as further 17 refugees who were still young, but categorized as adults.

for reconsidering understandings of vulnerability in order to overcome simplistic, generic, and uncritical understandings of childhood and adulthood in the context of forced migration.

Age and bio-political categorization: 'UAMs' in Malta

The arrival of young refugees poses a challenge for EU member states: They have to find a balance between border control and guaranteeing children's rights, as stated for example in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Allsopp/Chase, 2017). Malta, Europe's smallest state, has been an EU member since 2004 and its government understands itself as being particularly confronted with this phenomenon (Hilmy, 2014). As an EU-member, Malta is obliged to enforce EU laws and rules; it thereby not only became an important port of arrival for refugees, but simultaneously became part of the EU border regime (Mainwaring, 2014; Klepp, 2011). Even though harmonization took place EU-wide (Klepp, 2011), the actual reception, asylum status procedure as well as age assessment remain the responsibility of single nation states (Kidane, 2011). Carrying out age assessment can be understood as a bio-political procedure that categorizes people within the border regime (Schikorra/Becker, 2009; Crawley, 2007). As Fassin (2011, 2013) points out, classification of young people and their bodies became increasingly important within the border regime over the past years.

After arrival in Malta, the Immigration Police took notes on the young refugees' gender, country of origin, health status as well as their age (Otto, 2016, 2019). This procedure was followed by mandatory detention (Hilmy, 2014). While detained, those who claimed to be minors or "looked very young", as Alfred, who managed the age assessment team in Malta, stated, had to go through age assessment comprising of a bone density test and/or psychosocial interviews carried out to measure their chronological age. Depending on whether young refugees were categorized as underage or not influenced their further treatment: Those classified as 'UAMs' were placed under a Care Order under the responsibility of the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity. They were housed in one out of two homes specialized in accommodating 'UAMs' which they had to leave once they turned eighteen. Moreover, they were assigned a legal guardian, and basic access to health care was provided. However, the status of being a 'UAM' is of temporary nature and after turning 18 years old, general refugee and child law no longer overlap. Refugees classified as minors thus find themselves in a temporally applicable category.

Coming of age – reaching a state of reduced vulnerability?

In the following section, I illustrate two events that were of significance to the young refugees I met during fieldwork. I was present when they reached adulthood in legal terms, and the following two examples illustrate the interplay of vulnerability and vulnerabilization affecting the young refugees when they reach adulthood: (1) having to move to an open centre and (2) having to move out of the 'UAM' care facility without support.

Moving to an open centre

When the young refugees reached legal adulthood, they had to leave the state care facility where they were initially accommodated. They had two options: they could either try to find their own apartment or a room in a shared flat, or they were allowed to move to an open centre, either run by the state or by the church. These centers were free of charge for up to a stay of a maximum of twelve months and the residents also received a per diem between 2,33 Euros and 4,66 Euros depending on their status (Caruana, 2016). The first option—one's own flat—was usually preferred, but finding people who were willing to rent apartments to young Black men and skyrocketing rental

prices made this endeavor challenging. The majority of my research participants thus initially moved to an open center, even though they were much disliked and described by Bilal as "bad places". He referred to these centers in this manner because he reported that the facilities were often dirty, that security staff repeatedly used racist expletives, and because the centers lacked good infrastructural connections. Even though all my research participants disliked these open centers, the majority of them managed to navigate these new living conditions; for those, however, who already suffered from physical disabilities, the situation deteriorated significantly compared to the state care facility for 'UAMs'. Yasir, who had badly injured one of his hands—to the extent of that it caused him constant pain and was rendered non-functional in its use—when he still lived in Somalia, experienced ignorance in the open centre. While he still lived in the state care facility for 'UAMs', other residents helped him to fulfill his cleaning duties, they supported him with cooking, and they were also of assistance for his household chores.

The state care facility only accommodated 30 young people, but when he moved to the open centre upon having turned eighteen, he was faced with several hundred co-residents. When he moved, people laughed about his disabled hand, and they were not willing to consider his need for support. He was, as he told me, assaulted when his cooking took longer and he therefore occupied the shared kitchen for extra time. Always when I met Yasir, he was beautifully dressed, always fashionable, and he told me that it was very important to him to look "professional". When he moved to the open centre, however, it was very difficult for him to keep his laundry clean. "It is very hot here in summer and you have to use the washing machine often. For me it's very difficult. Because you know my hand I cannot use it. In the [facility] we had one washing machine and always somebody of the boys help me. But here in [open centre] nobody help me." The move from the state care facility meant that he lost his support network.

This example illustrates the difference between vulnerability and vulnerabilization. Whilst it cannot be denied that Yasir is more vulnerable than others due to the impairment of his hand (i. e. vulnerability), it is also the case that individual action as a response to his injured hand also *made* him more vulnerable (i. e. vulnerabilization). In the state care facility, due to the support he received from his peers, this was not a facet he encountered; in the open centre, however, the pressure Yasir felt and the experiences he underwent due to his hand were more significant and efficacious for him than the injury as such. In other words, Yasir's example displays impressively that someone who is already more vulnerable than others due to an impairment can be made even more vulnerable by the encountered environment and others' actions.

Moreover, it should be pointed out that Yasir was considered vulnerable due to being viewed as a minor, *not* because of his disability. Therefore, the logic of essentialized understandings of *this* suggests that his vulnerability ended when he turned eighteen. That this is not the case and that his vulnerability as such was more complex and interwoven ought not come as a surprise. Nevertheless, these differing facets of vulnerability reveal that the binary, age-related assumption of being considered vulnerable or invulnerable are simplistic—even more so, when we acknowledge that the process of vulnerabilization interacts with fixed, conceived notions of vulnerability.

Having to leave the state care facility unprepared

It was the summer of 2013 when Ramaas, an adolescent man from Somalia, had to leave the state care facility for 'UAMs' a few weeks prior to his eighteenth birthday. Younger refugees had arrived, and his bed was needed as the Maltese government only provided very limited housing

possibilities for 'UAMs'. In the summer of 2013, they operated two of these facilities, with one housing 30 residents, and the other providing shelter for 16.

When I arrived at the state care facility one day in order to visit a local beach with the residents, I was surprised to see Ramaas in the common room: Next to him stood packed bags, and he was ironing two of his best shirts. When I asked him why he had packed up all his belongings and was using the iron, he first did not answer my question at first but just shrugged with his shoulders. He then replied to my question that he had just been informed that he had to leave the care facility, even though he was legally still a minor. He had been informed quite abruptly that he had to move out immediately because of the new arrivals of even younger refugees. The sort-term conveying of this information meant that he did not have any time to look elsewhere for a place to sleep.

He desperately wanted to avoid having to move to an open center, but with such short notice no shared room in a flat rented by other refugees was available. Ramaas thus moved to an open center run by the church, and I visited him there a few days after he had moved. Whilst I got to know him as a very positive, energetic, and cheerful person, I had the impression that he was really sad and somewhat disoriented when I visited him in his new living arrangements. He showed me around: I found myself in the middle of a rather old building—renovation was desperately needed––and people hung bed linens and old blankets from the walls and between their mattresses in order to gain some privacy; children were running around, people were cooking, it was noisy, and he told me that he did not know to whom he could turn to if he had problems or questions. Moreover, with the first days after the forced move having been a weekend, he was not able to receive the social welfare benefits to which he was entitled. Only because friends from the state care facility from which he had been forced to move smuggled food out for him was he able to eat proper food during the weekend. As a consequence, the first days at the church-run open centre were especially difficult for Ramaas and he found himself in a situation of uncertainty and financial precarity.

This example illustrates that the ascribed vulnerability of being viewed as a minor is itself negotiable: Even though the state care facility was set up to accommodate young refugees, because of their non-adulthood and associated vulnerability, it was nevertheless the case that Ramaas was suddenly—even though he was still 17—no longer viewed as *sufficiently* vulnerable. This reveals that even fixed, acknowledged and broadly accepted vulnerabilities such as underage are not absolute. Moreover, there was a process of vulnerabilization that manifested itself in this process as well. With it being a weekend, the care staff who were officially charged with Ramaas' supervision still did not take the necessary steps to ensure that he was cared for and had sufficient financial means for food after his move. Thereby, this example also demonstrates that vulnerabilization—while often effected by individual action—can also be brought about by non-action. The interplay between vulnerability and vulnerabilization is again crystal clear: Ascribed and fixed vulnerabilities can be exacerbated by the (non-)action of others.

Concluding comments

This contribution demonstrated that changes and transitions are consequential once refugees formerly classified as 'UAMs' legally attain adulthood. 'UAMs' not only have to cope with migration in general, but also have to deal with the 'UAM'-category defining their juridical and social position. Formally achieving adulthood yet again changes their positioning. As public policy predominantly focuses on 'UAMs'—not on the transition into adulthood—'care leavers' frequently occupy a tenuous position.

These brief insights into young refugees' transitions in Malta display that reaching adulthood is perceived and experienced in different ways. Turning 18 frequently led to new problems, including new forms of (prolonged) vulnerabilization. While categorized as minors, they were officially still understood as the most vulnerable group of refugees, and vulnerability here is directly linked with being underage and does not seem to reflect other factors such as dis/abilities and the associated lack of personal capabilities. By formally attaining adulthood and leaving the category of the 'UAM' some young refugees, however, felt even more alone and helpless than before as formerly established support networks became unstable. Even though they experienced new freedoms such as being able to come home whenever they wanted, deciding what to cook or where to go, these 'rights' are juxtaposed over and against new processes of vulnerabilization which emerged. What results from this is that linking vulnerability exclusively to age is too short-sighted when we aim at exploring why people *are* vulnerable or are *made* vulnerable. Therefore, vulnerability does not become obsolete by reaching adulthood as definitions of the 'UAM' label might suggest.

The term 'vulnerability' was used here to describe essentialist forms, including but not limited to factors such as age, gender, dis/ability, health, most commonly found in legal documents and policy making guidelines. These realities of vulnerability are not in the least denied, for example by illustrating the difficulties that Yasir encountered with his impaired hand. They are, however, complemented by a focus on vulnerabilization which focuses on the process of vulnerability-making, generally resulting from individual (non-)action. This need not necessarily occur by people wielding control over them, but can also be take on more mundane forms, such as the non-solidarity Yasir encountered by fellow refugees in the open center. Both, Ramaas' and Yasir's experiences showed that vulnerability and vulnerabilization are time and space contingent. Thus, this contribution with its focus on (non-)action has advanced the debate on vulnerabilization processes in the context of forced migration and offered a new framework to reflect on vulnerability and vulnerabilization of refugees beyond the omnipresent 'embodiment' debate.

Neither vulnerability nor vulnerabilization provide a complete picture of the difficulties young refugees encounter. Of particular interest is the interplay between essentialist forms of vulnerability and processual forms of vulnerability-making within vulnerabilization. Only examining 'inscribed vulnerability' overlooks important processes rendering refugees more vulnerable. Looking at processes of vulnerabilization thus implies engaging with macro, meso and micro levels and their interaction. This article does not call for ignoring the needs of young refugees, but rather for reconsidering understandings of vulnerability: Instead of viewing young refugees as either vulnerable victims or invulnerable, resilient adults, it calls for not classifying them along either-or categories, but for needs-based support to address vulnerability and to reduce processes of vulnerabilization. For if we are to protect young persons better, I hope that this article contributes to an improved understanding of what renders young refugees vulnerable in the first place.

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