
The Impact on Vulnerable Populations

Vulnerability: A Discussion

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The majority of authors in this section came together to discuss synergies between their chapters and common themes arising in their research.

It was agreed that “vulnerability” is not a neutral world. It arises from intersecting structural inequalities and is a cross-cutting issue. The use of this particular term, the context in which it is used and by whom, as well as how it is framed, feeds into its politicisation and, indeed, its weaponisation. Covid-19 has turned populist narrative about who is vulnerable, on its head. It requires us to rethink who is vulnerable, in all sorts of ways. This is further underscored by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May. This entire area is rapidly evolving.

The discussants also noted that vulnerability is not accidental; it is constructed. It can be about choices, all of which requires structural, political analysis: how are long-standing issues of marginalisation redressed by governments and communities; who obtains access to healthcare; who is released from prison; how are asylum seekers dealt with? Covid-19 has simply amplified every aspect of pre-existing discrimination and disempowerment.

There is power in the designation of “vulnerable”; there is also a power for who is taking or avoiding responsibility for that vulnerability. Older people in care homes have been significantly affected; this must be considered in terms of the extent to which governments had made provision for care, but also how hospitals have navigated and cast to the side vulnerability by pushing persons back into care homes and exposing those locals to further infection risks. The power dynamic is about who is responsible for the vulnerable, and who is responsible for the fatal outcomes.

Another theme which arose during the discussion was the role of knowledge and knowing. There is an urgent need to educate the public about race in response to the recent protests against racism, but what is missing perhaps is a deeper understanding of how inequalities are created, maintained and accentuated, and to consider the tools to dismantle the structures in place which lead to such edifices. What are our responsibilities as educators, social workers, activists or lawyers?

Carter’s paper discusses the importance of “centering” as a conceptual process of bringing vulnerable people back in from the margins in policy discourses, a concept articulated by the theorist and activist bell hooks. This was understood as a crucial framing for understanding power dynamics and to recognise that by incorporating their lived experience and expertise from their situation of vulnerability, it is possible for theory and policy responses to become more complete and appropriate, in order to better reflect the needs of people caught up in vulnerability. The discussants canvassed the ways in which this principle of “centering” could also encompass or take into account the goals of empowerment – access to decision-making from the context of vulnerability, having their own unfiltered voices heard. In many ways, the pandemic has reduced those voices even

further than before. One needs to take care to consider whether the “we” who wish to bring people in situations of vulnerability in from the margins, includes those people themselves: they can still be marginalised in “the middle”.

The notion of positive obligations is another useful lens through which to assess necessary actions to take better account of structural vulnerabilities and seek to address them. There is a question whether Covid-19 requires the state to go beyond what they would normally be doing to address the extra layers of vulnerability and added risks facing affected persons. This may depend on the nature of the particular issues at stake. It may be that the laws work fine, but it is the resources to underpin them which have been lacking.

It is important to understand the role of social movements and other “soft” approaches to advance rights, particularly when the law is being undermined or unenforced. There are important political opportunities that can be used to ensure that the fleeting examples of solidarity are solidified. Just beneath the veneer of “we’re all in it together” is a veneer or populism and racism, that must be addressed systematically. There is a moment of potential transformation on which we must be ready to capitalize, but the transformation must occur through structural changes and activism, as opposed to simply wishful thinking.