Women Victims of Violence on a Scale of Vulnerability

Marriage Migrants and Successive Victims as Particularly Vulnerable Categories

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Abstract: This article takes its departure in Martha Fineman’s concepts of vulnerability and resilience and discusses how categorization and stigmatization can be avoided if and when the concept of the vulnerable subject is put to practical use. The article applies the concept of the vulnerable subject to empirical research data on two categories of women: Women who come to Denmark as marriage migrants and women who are successive victims of violence, that is, women of ethnic minority origin who experience violence from different perpetrators over time, often both in childhood and adulthood. The analysis demonstrates how stigmatization can be reduced if we construct our categories as inclusive and encompassing, and if we focus on the structural and (changing) social position of vulnerable subjects, not on their innate capacities or personal characteristics.

Keywords: Vulnerability, resilience, violence against women, domestic violence, ethnic minorities, marriage migrants, categorization, stigma, welfare state institutions, family

The shared human condition of vulnerability is a point of departure in Martha Albertson Fineman’s vulnerability approach. According to this approach, vulnerability organizes the relations between individuals and society in that it emphasizes state obligations to provide the resources and institutions that generate resilience towards the inevitable dependencies and misfortunes that define human life. Vulnerability as a shared condition is important in her work. It makes it possible to avoid singling out specific groups as the vulnerable groups. Fineman writes: “The use of the designation vulnerable to set aside some groups considered disadvantaged within the larger society often also results in their stigmatization. The term vulnerable population has an air of victimhood, deprivation, dependency, or pathology attached to it. By contrast, my

1 Fineman, 2008, 2010. Fineman’s vulnerability approach is developed in a specific context, that is, the United States, and addresses the problem of profound inequalities among American citizens. By contrast, the Nordic welfare states provide their citizens with an elaborate social safety net which also reduces the level of inequality.
work has developed the concept of vulnerable detached from specific subgroups, using it to define the very meaning of what it means to be human.\footnote{Fineman, 2010, p.266.}

We find Fineman’s ideas about vulnerability and the vulnerable subject relevant, not least for our own empirical work on violence against women, more specifically domestic violence in Denmark.\footnote{The research project entitled “Violence against women in ethnic minority families in Denmark” was financed by TrygFonden and carried out by Sofie Danneskiold-Samsøe, Yvonne Mørck and Bo Wagner Sørensen in 2009-2010.} At the same time we ask: How can categorization (setting aside groups) and potential stigmatization be avoided if and when the concept of the vulnerable subject is put to practical use, that is, when it is used for administrative interventions by the state and local authorities? We did not carry out our empirical work with the purpose of studying scales of vulnerability. In this article we revisit our interviews with women victims of violence from ethnic minorities with the purpose of analyzing and discussing categorization of women victims of violence on a scale of vulnerability.

All women are potentially subject to gender-based violence and thus potentially vulnerable.\footnote{Women are disproportionately the victims of gender violence. See McKie, 2005; Merry, 2009; Helweg-Larsen, 2012.} Some women, however, are more exposed and face more barriers in trying to break out of violent marriages or relationships. Like women differ on a scale of vulnerability they differ on a scale of resilience and neither is static, that is, women’s social positions may change and that may influence their vulnerability as well as resilience. Vulnerability, in our perspective, is not contrary to social agency or empowerment. In this article we apply the concept of the vulnerable subject to our own empirical research data on violence against women in ethnic minority families. We focus on vulnerable subjects in the form of two categories of women at Danish shelters: Women who come to Denmark as marriage migrants, and women who are successive victims of violence, that is, women of ethnic minority origin who experience violence from different perpetrators over time, often both in childhood and adulthood.

Women seeking protection and support at shelters are generally vulnerable because of their experiences with violence and perpetrators’ often continuing threats. The ex-
periences of ethnic minority women with a Middle Eastern and South Asian background are exacerbated because they often have to deal with multiple perpetrators and because family and people within the ethnic minority communities tend to support the perpetrators, disapprove of broken marriages and often condone or even approve of the violence. Native Danish women tend to get full support from family and friends once they have decided to leave a violent husband or partner.

First we outline our research project “Violence against women in ethnic minority families in Denmark” and try to rethink our material from a vulnerability perspective. Secondly, we present two categories of women – marriage migrants and successive victims of violence – the kinds of vulnerability that characterize them, and what support they need and get in order to generate resilience. Thirdly, we discuss the concept of resilience with reference to the two categories of vulnerable women. Finally, we present a recent Danish initiative to put vulnerability to practical use. Our aim is to provide empirically based descriptions of women’s vulnerability in order to discuss the concept of vulnerability and how this concept can be applied in practical work. In doing this we raise questions of potentials and possible limitations of Fineman’s notion of vulnerability.

1 Material and methodology

For many years Danish shelters have witnessed an influx of ethnic minority women who flee their violent husbands or families. According to recent figures, 46 percent of women in Danish shelters were born outside Denmark, while even more defined themselves as ethnic minorities. Women born in Denmark may define themselves as ethnic minorities even though they were born in Denmark and even though they may also define themselves as ‘Danish’. Immigrants total 7.9 percent of the entire population in Denmark, with the proportion from non-Western countries being 4.7 percent. Whether this overrepresentation is a reflection of a higher prevalence of domestic violence in ethnic minority families in general is not absolutely clear. Recent figures

5 See Wikan (2003, p.21) who talks about an applauding audience, ‘et bifaldende publikum’ in Danish. See also Sen, 2005; Gill, 2009; Thiara, 2010; Dansenskild-Samsøe, Mørck and Sørensen, 2011; Mørck, Sørensen, Dansenskild-Samsøe and Højberg, 2011.
6 Study by Sørensen, cf. note 3. The notion of ‘native Danish women’ refers to ethnic majority women who define themselves as Danes in contrast to for example migrant or refugee women who define themselves as ethnic others or use hyphenated identities. See also Mørck, 1998. We do not use the otherwise widespread notion of ‘ethnic Danes’ in this article because it may cause confusion.
7 Barlach and Stenager, 2012, p.28, p.94.
9 Danmarks Statistik, 2012, p.11.
from a Danish national prevalence study suggest, however, that men and women of ethnic minority origin are overrepresented as both perpetrators and victims of ‘intimate partner violence’.\(^{10}\) Another interpretation which many researchers and practitioners find less troubling is that ethnic minority women who suffer domestic violence and abuse have nowhere to go except for the shelters.\(^{11}\) Whatever the explanation is for this overrepresentation, ethnic minority women in shelters are a particularly vulnerable category of women. In addition to being victims of violence, they are often burdened by language barriers, lack of social networks, lack of knowledge and awareness of social and legal rights, and lack of employment and education. These are barriers that ethnic minority women are up against when they try to make an autonomous life without violence.

Induced by this overrepresentation and the many difficulties of ethnic minority women, Danner, one of the biggest and oldest shelters in Denmark, and TrygFonden, a private foundation, initiated the research project on violence in ethnic minority families in Denmark. The purpose of the research project was to gain more knowledge about violence against ethnic minority women, to describe and assess the shelters’ experiences of supporting ethnic minority women, and to put forward suggestions about how to support the women in establishing a life without violence. The research project was carried out in the period 2009-2010.

The project was based on interviews with 42 women, who agreed to share their stories of violence. Forty of the women had left their abusive husband or family, and almost all had received support from a shelter. Although they had broken with their husband or family, many of them were still threatened by the very same husband or family. The women described the violence they (and sometimes their children) had experienced, the context in which the violence took place, and the perpetrators and bystanders of violence. They also described how they fled the violence, their experiences of shelters and the support they got, and how family and others responded to their flight and stay at a shelter. The interviews were supplemented by interviews with staff and volunteers in 25 out of 38 shelters organized under LOKK, the Danish National Organization of Shelters.\(^{12}\)

Of the 42 women, 40 had an ethnic minority background, while the other two were Danish women who were married to ethnic minority men. The study did not include ethnic minority women married to or cohabiting with Danish men.\(^{13}\) 18 of the women were born or raised in Denmark, while 24 had come to Denmark as

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11 Römkens and Lalah, 2011, p.84.
12 We also carried out interviews with researchers, practitioners and activists in Denmark, Sweden, England, Germany and Turkey.
13 The empirical material was produced as commissioned work. Ethnic minority women married to or cohabiting with native Danish men were not part of the commission.
adults, of whom 15 came as marriage migrants. The women came from villages, towns and cities and had diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. The women were between 20 and 55 years old and originated from 17 different countries. The majority, 32 women, originated from the Middle East and South Asia, 10 from Iraq, 8 from Turkey, 6 from Pakistan, as the main groups, while women who originated from Eastern Europe and West Africa constituted two smaller categories. At least 16 of the women were successive victims of violence of whom 14 had experienced violence in their childhood in Denmark.

More women may be victims of successive violence, but we do not know. In the interviews we asked the women to tell their stories of violence and some responded by providing detailed accounts of how they were severely abused as children and adolescents, while others did not mention their childhood. Only one marriage migrant told of violence in childhood, while only three of the women who grew up in Denmark did not tell about violence in childhood. The categories of marriage migrants and victims of successive violence did not precede our empirical work and we therefore did not ask specifically for experiences of successive violence. It is possible that more marriage migrants have experienced violence in childhood, but did not consider it relevant and thus did not mention it. It may be that they have experienced violence in their country of origin of a less serious nature, but common and socially accepted.14 And it may be that experiences of violence in their country of origin seem distant and irrelevant to the actual violence from husband and/or family-in-law in Denmark.15

As mentioned, we did not have Fineman’s notion of vulnerability in mind when we conducted the interviews. Subsequently, we reread the interviews and analyzed them through critical hermeneutic methodology with a focus on possible vulnerable positions. The categories emerged from this analysis of the empirical material.

2 Marriage migrants

Marriage migrants constitute a particularly vulnerable category because they have left their family and social network behind and basically live at the mercy of a husband and in-laws. Because of their dependant and therefore insecure legal status they are at risk being returned to their country of origin at any time and at risk of husband and in-laws taking advantage of their insecure legal status and their distant social net-

14 Some women talked about ‘everyday violence’ as normal and commonly accepted. As long as the women and/or their children were not suffering severe beatings they did not use the term violence.
15 The one marriage migrant who did talk about violence in her childhood and youth was beaten by her uncles until she accepted getting married with a relative living in Denmark. Thus, there is a direct line between former and current violence in her case.
The husbands and in-laws with Danish citizenships are usually very conscious about the power they have over a wife who comes to Denmark as a marriage migrant. They may use the Danish immigration law and her insecure legal status as a constant threat to make her subservient and not complain, or they may merely dump her.17

Residence permit in Denmark is dependent on cohabitation with the husband who moreover assumes full responsibility for supporting his wife.18 In case a marriage migrant woman is subjected to domestic violence and flees her marriage, the legal grounds on which her residence permit was granted no longer apply. Usually the husband will notify the authorities, that is, the Danish Immigration Service, that his wife has left, not least to reclaim the sum of 50,800 Danish kroner he has posted in collateral in the form of a bank guarantee.19

It appears from our interview material that the men are aware of the vulnerable legal position of their wives and that they use it to their own advantage. Some of the marriage migrant interviewees have been reminded constantly by their husbands that they have no rights and can be expelled from Denmark any time. Sometimes not just the man but the in-laws take part in the abuse, and some of the interviewees have been kept as household servants. The following story is a case in point.

When 18-year old Adile came from Turkey as a marriage migrant she moved in with her husband and her in-laws and became part of an extended family where she was kept as a maid. She was allowed monitored phone calls to her parents twice a year. Among her many chores was personal care of her in-laws who were neither old nor ill, but thought of it as their right as they had managed to bring her to Denmark. Thus she was expected to assist her in-laws undress for the night and put them to bed and even cut their finger and toe nails. She ate in isolation in the kitchen, while the rest of the family had their meals together. During her five years of marriage she only left the house a few times in the company of her in-laws who also kept her passport to prevent her escape. She never went out shopping, had no money or any idea of Danish currency, and her in-laws bought her clothes. Her in-laws did not want her to get a job because they feared she would learn too much about life in Denmark and perhaps

16 Menjívar and Salcido, 2002; Raj and Silverman, 2002; Amanor-Boadu et al., 2012; Danneskiold-Samsøe, Sørensen and Mørck, 2013.
17 On the use and abuse of the Danish immigration law, see also Danneskiold-Samsøe, Mørck and Sørensen, 2011, p.119-23. On dumping, see ibid., p.74-77.
18 See the official portal for foreigners and integration: http://www.nyidanmark.dk/en-us/coming_to_dk/familyreunification/spouses/spouses.htm
19 DKK 50,800 (2013 level). This guarantee is designed to cover any future public assistance paid to the marriage migrant, that is, the person who has been subject to so-called family reunification, by the municipality under the terms of the Active Social Policy Act (lov om aktiv socialpolitik) or the Integration Act (integrationsloven) after she/he relocates to Denmark. See the “collateral requirement”: http://www.nyidanmark.dk/en-us/coming_to_dk/familyreunification/spouses/collateral-requirement/collateral_requirement.htm.
learn about her rights. For the same reasons they did not want her to learn Danish either, because “then I would become someone else and be no longer the person they wanted me to be. They wanted me to be both blind and deaf”.

If a marriage migrant whose residence permit depends on cohabitation with her husband leaves her violent marriage she will have to apply to the Immigration Service to have her permit extended on some other legal grounds such as domestic violence. If the woman has stayed in Denmark for two years or more she has a good chance to have her permit extended; if she has stayed for less than two years her chances are reduced. In any case, the burden of proof lies with her, and she must be able to prove that domestic violence, not just disagreement, was the reason why she left the marriage. If she delays her leaving the violent husband it may put her case at risk as she may be perceived as untrustworthy. The woman’s own story of violence also has to be substantiated by specialist statements issued by authorities such as the police, medical doctors, and shelters. Besides, the woman is subjected to the legal “attachment requirement” which means that she has to document a certain degree of attachment to Denmark.\(^{20}\) If she has a child with her (ex)husband, for instance, her chances greatly improve. Her reasons for not being able to return to her country of origin will also be taken into consideration. The attachment requirement, however, can be difficult to meet for a woman who, as part of the violence, has been locked up and kept in total isolation without any chances of learning Danish or learning about life in Denmark in general.

Another way for husbands and in-laws to get rid of a wife or daughter-in-law is dumping. This means that women are forced or tricked to go with their husband or in-laws to another country, usually the country of origin, and then left alone without passport and money. If the woman tries to break out of the marriage or if her husband and in-laws are simply tired of her, they may consider displacing her. The purpose is to prevent the woman from staying in Denmark where she will be able to flaunt the broken marriage and her husband’s and in-laws’ lack of success in controlling her.\(^{21}\) She must, consequently, be removed from the social map. If the woman has children this is a way for husbands and in-laws to deprive her of her children as it can be difficult for her to obtain custody in her country of origin.

Some women are aware of the danger of being dumped and they assess the risk when they travel to their country of origin on holidays. And it is not a fictional or hypothetical threat. Out of the 15 marriage migrants, four have been dumped. All succeeded in returning to Denmark, in most cases by applying to a Danish embassy or a

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20 The attachment requirement is too comprehensive to be spelled out here. For further information, see: http://www.nyidanmark.dk/en-us/coming_to_dk/familyreunification/spouses/-attachment-requirement/attachment_requirement.htm.

21 Mørck, Sørensen, Danneskiold-Samsøe and Højberg, 2011, p.284; Danneskiold-Samsøe, Mørck and Sørensen, 2011, p.111-112.

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Danish consulate. Dumping is a particularly malicious strategy when a woman has married in spite of her family’s will. For such a woman dumping may be fatal. Marriage migrants who are not dumped are also affected by the risk of dumping. The threat of dumping is used by husbands and in-laws as a disciplinary instrument in order to make wives and daughters-in-law accept their situation.

3 Victims of successive violence

Some of the women we interviewed told stories of violence that began in early childhood or in their early teens and continued in violent marriages and relationships. Like many of the marriage migrants in our study they have been subjected to multiple perpetrators of violence, but in addition they have been subjected to successive violence, that is, violence from different perpetrators over time.22 In general, these women’s lives are unstable in relation to housing, work and social relations. Usually they have dropped out of school and never had a formal education. They have a strained relationship with their close family and often have no or few close friends because of their nomadic lives. Some of them are constantly on the run from fathers and other male relatives and/or other men they have met by chance on the internet. One interviewee has been in and out of seven different shelters. The women sometimes think of the internet acquaintances as a solution to their problems but the men tend to take advantage of the women’s vulnerability. The women come across as rootless in many respects.23

Asli is a case in point. She is of Turkish descent, in her twenties and has been married to a Turkish man in Denmark. She married him to get away from home, is now divorced and has no children. Asli has been subjected to systematic control, abuse and violence from her early childhood, including sexual abuse perpetrated by her father. On top of that she has had a short violent marriage with an abusive husband after which she moved back to her parents because she was not allowed to live on her own as a single woman. When her father tried to marry her off to a distant family member living in Turkey, she fled her family to go to a shelter in another part of the country. At the time of the interview Asli had moved out of the shelter but still lived in the same suburban area where she got a tiny rented apartment. She had a secret address because she was still threatened by her family, that is, her father and two brothers,

22 We use the term ‘successive violence’ instead of ‘repeated violence’ because the latter usually refers to repeated violence by the same perpetrator.
23 See also the work of psychologist Inge Loua on young ethnic minority women under 18 years of age who run away from home (Loua, 2012), and the work of psychologist Corinna Ter-Nedden from Papatya, a shelter for young ethnic minority women in Berlin (Ter-Nedden, 2010).
who could not accept that she was living on her own. She lived a very isolated life which stood in sharp contrast to the close family life she was used to. During the interview she mentioned just one friend, a Danish woman whom she met during her stay in the shelter. Asli had too much time on her hand and did a lot of cleaning in the tiny apartment when she was not on the internet. While she had been working for wages and contributed to the family economy since her early teens, first as a cleaner and later as a health care worker, she was presently not able to work because of her frail mental condition. She was on welfare and did not know when she would be strong enough to manage a job. It seemed that the many years of abuse were beginning to take their toll.

Even though a young woman like Asli has something in common with other interviewees who have experienced domestic violence, they have had somewhat different lives. While violence has always been part of life for Asli, many other women’s experiences of violence are temporary and well-defined. Their prospects for the future may point in different directions, although we are hesitant to speculate about the outcome of concrete lives.

## 4 Vulnerable subjects on a scale of vulnerability

Women who have experienced violence differ according to their degree of vulnerability. Some of the women we have interviewed have had ‘only’ one experience of violence in connection with a violent marriage, which has been terminated after a shorter or longer period of time. Others have experienced violence most of their lives; from fathers or both parents during their childhood, and from husbands in their adult lives. Having experienced violence in just one relationship may be devastating, but the women sometimes manage to look back on the violent marriage or relationship as a disruptive parenthesis in their otherwise normal lives. There is a ‘before’ and ‘after’ violence. Women who have been exposed to violence most of their lives from early childhood do not operate with a before, but they may still wish for an after, that is, a life without violence. Even so, according to our empirical data the two categories of women differ on a scale of vulnerability because the former tend to have more resources in general, more resilience.

Other scholars have made useful contributions to the concept of vulnerability. Betsy Stanko and Emma Williams write about rape and rape allegations with a focus on the vulnerabilities of the victims who report to the police. The review of rape allegations in London found that the majority of complainants had vulnerabilities (and were thus more exposed to exploitation of rape) that fell in one of four categories: they

24 Stanko and Williams, 2009.
were either under 18 years old at the time of the attack; they had a noted mental health problem (in the police record); they were currently or previously intimate with the offender; or they had consumed alcohol or drugs just prior to the attack. As much as 87 percent of the allegations fell into at least one of the above categories; in only 13 percent of the rape allegations did victims not have one of the above vulnerabilities which exposed them to the rape. According to Stanko and Williams vulnerability means being exposed to attack or harm, physically or emotionally, and they define vulnerability as a form of ‘exposure to rape’. They also suggest that rapists may well be targeting that vulnerability in their conscious actions.

Stanko and Williams’ study shows that some vulnerabilities can be seen as shared, although primarily by women; women/girls made up 92 percent of those who alleged rape in April/May 2005 in London. The sharedness shows in that all adult women used to be girls, that is, under 18 years of age, they may be currently or previously intimate with a (potential) offender, and they may have consumed alcohol prior to a (potential) attack. Not all women, however, have a mental health problem or use drugs, although they might theoretically develop both a mental problem and a habit of using drugs. This suggests that not all vulnerabilities are shared and that women are not equally vulnerable. That women are not equally vulnerable is in line with Fineman’s point that people are individually positioned differently.

Fineman’s reluctance to single out vulnerable groups is understandable because of the implications which are likely to be some kind of stigmatization. The othering of violence is widespread and a common way of dealing with a discomforting phenomenon. Othering can take different forms. It can refer to ‘lower classes’, groups with disabilities, sub-cultures, cultures, ethnic groups and nationalities where violence is believed to be more prevalent. However, the fear of othering should not let us stop dealing with possible social and cultural differences regarding prevalence of violence and vulnerability. Silencing differences of importance serves the perpetrators of violence, not the victims.

Making use of an intersectionality perspective can be seen as another way of looking at women’s different experiences of domestic violence with the ultimate purpose of showing that some women face more barriers and are more disadvantaged, that is,

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25 Stanko and Williams, 2009, p.214. Their four categories of vulnerabilities are described in a way that cleverly avoids the risk of victim blaming.
26 Stanko and Williams, 2009, p.211.
29 Stanko and Williams, 2009, p.213.
32 Sørensen, Mørck and Danneskiold-Samsøe, 2012a, 2012b.

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more vulnerable, than others in several aspects. We applied this perspective in our previous work but realized its limitations in practical analytical work.33

5 Resilience

In exploring institutional responses to vulnerable subjects Fineman suggests directing attention to resilience as a counterpoint to vulnerability. She describes the resilience “... that comes from having some means with which to address or confront misfortune”.34 These means, resources or assets are essential when individuals or institutions address vulnerability. According to Fineman societal institutions do not provide resilience as such; they provide the assets that individual’s resilience comes from. Fineman identifies five kinds of assets: Physical, human, social, environmental and existential. Physical assets come from distribution of material goods and property, human capital may derive from health care, education and employment systems, social resources consist of networks of social relations such as family, labour unions and political organizations, environmental resources are conferred from the physical or natural environment, and existential resources are provided by systems of belief or aesthetics.35

Institutions provide the foundation for resilience, because individuals gain access to assets through institutions. Hence, individuals’ position in relation to and within institutions is essential for their access to assets. In order to explore opportunities for resilience, individuals’ positions and access to assets in institutions, and not people’s individual characteristics, may be identified. Both categories of women have loose ties to the institutions that may provide assets, and these women do not have the “range of assets”, which gives strong resilience. Assets like social and existential resources appear to be of particular importance.

Marriage migrants have often lost the social assets they possessed in their home country, because they left their social relations behind and because some cannot return. As migrants, their material goods and human capital are also limited, and in addition their husbands and in-laws have typically prevented them in obtaining new assets. They receive few of the assets offered by the state, and the assets they had when marrying get lost or invalid. In addition, but not least important, many women do not know of their legal rights as marriage migrants, and if they do, they may be prevented in using these rights.

33 Danneskiold-Samsøe, Mørck and Sørensen, 2011, p.33; Sørensen, Mørck and Danneskiold-Samsøe, 2012a, p.115. For a critique of ‘intersectionalism’ as a fashionable, dominant paradigm, see Bech and Necef, 2012.
34 Fineman, 2010, p.269.
Danish authorities have become more aware of marriage migrants’ vulnerability, and this has led to new administrative procedures in order to secure the rights of marriage migrants. It is now easier for marriage migrants to produce valid accounts of violence and obtain residence permits in Denmark on that basis. Meanwhile, Danish embassies and consulates abroad have become more aware of women who are dumped in their country of origin, and have developed procedures to assist these women. The authorities thus identify marriage migrants as a vulnerable category of women and have introduced new jurisprudence for the benefit of these vulnerable women. This has made women who have left their violent husbands and in-laws as well as women who have been dumped less vulnerable. Those marriage migrants who still live in abusive families, however, lack knowledge about their rights and opportunities, and husbands and in-laws may still exploit this lack of knowledge. A more comprehensive effort is needed in order to provide information to marriage migrants and to change mentalities and gender order in the ethnic minority communities.

Women subjected to successive violence also possess fragmented and limited assets. In addition, they seem to have difficulties acquiring new assets that could strengthen their resilience, as these women’s lives are unstable in relation to housing, work and social relations. And they may jump into a new marriage or romantic relationships without much consideration and preparation. Referring to Fineman’s notion of existential assets we ask if these young women lack a firm ground or ‘ontological security’ for the development of existential resources, because such foundation may never have been established during their upbringing. Interviews with young victims and shelter staff support this assumption. Shelter staff report on victims’ difficulties with navigating in unknown social terrains without a firm existential compass and parental guidance, and some staff may act as substitute parents.

Such difficulties raise questions about the limits to what shelters and other institutions can accomplish if existential resilience has not been established in the family. It is difficult and it may not be advisable to confer or impose existential resources to other people, because existential resources must be based on “an individual’s self-chosen mode of existence”. But it is possible to support women in maintaining their sense of being violated and thus confirming their perception of what is right and wrong. For both categories of women other people, including perpetrators, have questioned this, and some young women never had a foundation for judging what is right, fair and reasonable.

36 However, the law does not usually grant abused women who have stayed in Denmark for less than two years stay permit, and abused women must provide substantial evidence of the abuse.
37 We refer to Anthony Giddens’ (1991) concept of ontological security as a sense of order and continuity based on experiences of positive and stable emotions.

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When the family fails this task other social networks may substitute. Our research indicates that especially the construction of social networks is important for women, but social networks are also very difficult to establish and maintain for women in vulnerable situations. Voluntary organizations try to create new social relationships between women from ethnic minorities, who are victims of violence, and resourceful volunteers. Danish Red Cross organizes “women’s network” for adult women, many of whom are marriage migrants, and “Connect” for young women, many of whom are typically victims of successive violence. These are relatively new initiatives working to establish and retain relationships and create continuity.

The family is a major institution in society providing social resources, particularly for young people or others in need of care. For victims of successive violence as well as marriage migrants the family appears to have failed in providing assets for resilience. The welfare state provides women’s shelters, including after-care, giving women opportunities to acquire a number of assets, namely physical, human, social and existential resources, through the shelters’ activities or through contact with other welfare institutions to ensure residence basis, economic self-sufficiency, employment, and social networks. Welfare state institutions, and especially women’s shelters, can support the strengthening of women’s resilience in this regard.

However, providing assets does not in itself secure resilience. Research shows how responses to and intervention from third parties, including societal institutions, are decisive for women’s resilience and courses of action. Institution representatives like shelter staff, police officers and caseworkers provide women with the assets for resilience when they believe them, take them seriously and recognize them as violated legal subjects. Therefore it is imperative how women are received in shelters and in other welfare institutions. Being rooted in a feminist tradition Danish shelters usually stand firm on the basis that violence is unjustifiable, unlawful and may not be explained away. Conversely, a gender-neutral approach may counteract victims’ resilience.

39 Danneskiold-Samsøe, Mørck and Sørensen, 2011, p.307-308.
41 The welfare state’s provision of such range of assets to women in vulnerable situations is in line with Norwegian political scientist Helga Hernes’ (1987) concept of the woman friendly Scandinavian welfare state.
42 Research by Danneskiold-Samsøe, cf. note 3, confirms this. The research concerns Iraqi refugee women, some of them victims of husbands’ violence. For various reasons many of these women are reluctant to approach welfare institutions, in particular women’s shelters, and seek assistance. Although welfare state institutions make a range of assets available, women in vulnerable positions may not be able to reach and make use of them.
43 Klein, 2012.
44 Merry, 2003.
6 Vulnerability put to practical use

In Denmark there has been a recent initiative towards putting vulnerability to practical use within the field of domestic violence and providing the resources and institutions that generate resilience. However, the initiative itself did not use the concepts of vulnerability and resilience. We will present the initiative and subsequently comment on it as we relate it to our own research.

The report *Ud af familien vold*, that is, *Ways out of family violence (domestic violence)*, which was meant to form the basis of new directions for assisting victims of domestic violence, was developed by the independent think tank Mandag Morgen (Monday Morning) in cooperation with the private foundation TrygFonden.45 As the report was prepared with the explicit aim of influencing the political agenda it was launched at a conference in Copenhagen in 2011. The invited audience consisted of shelter staff, social workers, researchers and, not least, politicians. The basic message was that we need new thinking, a professionalization in the field and a targeted prevention directed at the groups where violence is more prevalent. Interestingly, these points are very close to the Danish government’s national strategy on ‘partner violence’.46 New thinking, according to the report, means that we have to break with the tendency so far to only think of women and not men as victims of violence.

The report also comments on the historic link between the women’s movement and the issue of violence against women with the twist that this link is seen as a likely hindrance to developing an evidence-based approach to violence, its prevalence and prevention. This leads to the following recommendation of a new approach: “Violence in close relationships should be treated to a larger degree as a social problem and less as a gender equality and gender politics issue. The gender equality perspective has been a major issue in the work [...] But the gender political rhetoric that characterizes the field can, to some extent, be a hindrance to developing and introducing light and shade into the work against violence. If violence in close relationships is regarded as a particular gender-political problem instead of a social problem, it curbs the possibilities for the exchange of knowledge and learning from other fields dealing with social and social health politics. There is a risk that the gender-political perspective hinders that the field gets expanded with new parties who could contribute to raise [the level of] the work – that the field closes in around itself. On top of that there is a risk that the gender political rhetoric leads to a debate without any nuances where it becomes a matter of ‘men against women’”.47

45 Mandag Morgen claims full responsibility for the text and thus the content of the report (Mandag Morgen and TrygFonden, 2011, p.7).
46 Regeringen, 2010.
47 Mandag Morgen and TrygFonden, 2011, p.14; our translation. The original quote in Danish: “Vold i nære relationer skal i højere grad behandles som et socialt problem og i mindre grad behandles som et gender-political problem”.

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According to Mandag Morgen, ‘partner violence’ is socially imbalanced as regards both perpetrators and victims of violence, and ethnic minority people are overrepresented in both categories. The report moreover recommends that victims of ‘partner violence’ are divided into so-called match groups inspired by the way in which unemployed people in Denmark are subdivided according to their ability to manage and hold on to a job.48 The subdivision of victims of violence should be based on their degree of traumatization and their social situation. Different match groups have different needs. Subsequently, they should receive different support and interventions. The more traumatized should be referred to not just shelters, but ‘super shelters’ with specialized, professional knowledge and expertise in different areas, whereas the less traumatized need not go to shelters at all. Mandag Morgen argues that match groups and this line of thinking would guarantee that limited resources are used in the best possible way.

We agree that (limited) resources should be directed towards the more vulnerable categories of women and that some women may just need counselling provided by shelters instead of moving in. It is not clear, though, what Mandag Morgen means by suggesting that women should be subdivided according to their degree of traumatization. It makes a big difference whether the word is used in a clinical or more popular sense. If women should be diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in order to go to a shelter and get full support, it would be a serious encroachment on their rights.49 The suggestion also points to an increasing medicalization of a gender equalities issue. Battered women with a PTSD diagnosis would be a good example of a vulnerable population that Fineman warns against.

We welcome a plurality of shelters provided they have fixed minimum standards.50 However, the picture presented by Mandag Morgen of Danish shelters being trapped...
in a time warp of dedicated ideology-driven amateurs is a caricature. There is no contradiction between a feminist approach in shelter work and professionalism. We also do not agree that violence against women is primarily a social problem and it is not clear what it means. Casting the problem as a social problem appears to be another way of othering a common societal problem. The literature on violence against women combined with our own studies strongly suggests that it is an equalities issue, a phenomenon of gender culture.51 The gender neutral way in which Mandag Morgen suggests that we put vulnerable subjects into administrative practice is problematic as it goes against the interests of the vulnerable women we are supposed to support.52 A gender neutral approach to a highly gendered problem is a contradiction in terms.53 It is not likely to be very efficient in preventing violence because it disregards the intimate relationship between gender violence, power and control. Consequently, it tends not to deal with the issue of entitlements,54 and may contribute to victim blaming.55

6 Conclusion

We began the article with Fineman’s quote about vulnerable groups and stigmatization asking how categorization and stigmatization can be avoided if and when the concept of the vulnerable subject is put to practical use. In spite of vulnerability being a shared human condition, it seems to us that the risk of stigmatization, and victim blaming, is ever present. However, the risk can be reduced by the way in which we construct our categories. Stanko and Williams, for example, cleverly emphasized the situations, special conditions or relationships that made some people more vulnerable, that is, in their case: exposed to rape. Their categories are inclusive and encompassing, potentially shared by many women/people.

In contrast, a traditional epidemiological approach would operate with ‘vulnerable populations’ and/or ‘risk groups’ such as female drug users, prostitutes, disabled women, young single mothers, women on welfare, etc. Or, according to Mandag Morgen, traumatized abused women of primarily ethnic minority origin. The terms refer to so-

51 Counts, Brown and Campbell 1999 [1992]; Lundgren 1993; Sørensen, 1994; Dobash and Dobash, 1998; Merry, 2009; Danneskiold-Samsøe, Mørck and Sørensen, 2011.
52 The gender neutral approach that characterizes Mandag Morgen and the Danish government’s national strategy on partner violence conflicts with the EU recommendations adopted by the member states. See Baumbach, 2012, p.177.
53 Several scholars describe this trend in different European countries. See Römkens and Lahlah, 2011; Sørensen, Mørck and Danneskiold-Samsøe, 2012a; Wright and Hearn, 2013.
54 Merry, 2009; Danneskiold-Samsøe, Mørck and Sørensen, 2011, p.29.
55 Danneskiold-Samsøe, Mørck and Sørensen, 2011, p.32.

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cial groups with increased relative risk or susceptibility to health-related problems.\textsuperscript{56} Such groups are often associated with negative characteristics whether they are innate or acquired; consequently the groups are believed to bring it on themselves with victim blaming as a likely outcome.

Based on empirical data we identified two categories of vulnerable subjects in this article. Our focus as social scientists is on the structural and (changing) social position of vulnerable subjects, not on their innate capacities, mental health or personal characteristics, in line with Fineman’s argument that we are individually positioned differently. Fineman states: “While society cannot eradicate our vulnerability, it can and does mediate, compensate, and lessen our vulnerability through programs, institutions, and structures. Therefore, a vulnerability analysis must consider both individual position and institutional relationships”.\textsuperscript{57} Being a marriage migrant means being potentially exposed to particular risks of abuse in addition to being in a particular position vis-à-vis the resilience providing state. A victim of successive violence, on the other hand, has cumulative experiences of violence in common with other such victims. The cumulative experiences tend to make her particularly vulnerable and exposed to abuse in general and, typically, she represents a complex case for shelter staff and social workers to handle. The two categories of women need different support – that is, different social resources or assets to compensate and lessen their vulnerabilities – from the state in certain respects in order to achieve resilience and become empowered. However, there are limits to what the (welfare) state can provide and accomplish. The perception of women and gender relations in some ethnic communities also needs to be challenged.

References


\textsuperscript{56} Fineman, 2010, p.266, note52.

\textsuperscript{57} Fineman, 2010, p.269.

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lence against Women and Ethnicity: Commonalities and Differences across Europe. Opladen, Barbara Budrich Publishers.


