Reconceptualizing Vulnerability and Safeguarding in the Humanitarian and Development Sector

Abstract
Since 2018, ‘safeguarding’ has been hailed as the answer to abuse, exploitation, and harassment in the humanitarian and development sector. However, safeguarding as a concept relies on conceptions of vulnerability which are rarely critically interrogated. Bringing feminist, postcolonial, and critical disability studies to bear on what is conventionally viewed as an apolitical policy response, we argue that the need for safeguarding should be located within wider racialized, gendered, ableist, and geographic structures of power within which the sector is embedded. We conclude with theoretical reflections and directions for change centering intersectional and repoliticized conceptualizations of vulnerability and thus safeguarding.

Introduction
2018 brought harassment, abuse, and exploitation in the international humanitarian and development sector firmly into the spotlight in the United Kingdom (UK), when reports of sexual exploitation by senior male aid workers of women in Haiti and elsewhere and incidents of bullying and harassment in high-profile organizations came to light. While not the first time such abuses were reported, this nevertheless prompted greater attention to safeguarding following the Commons Select Committee for International Development (IDC)’s inquiry into sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector and Charity Commission inquiries into Oxfam and Save the Children (Charity Commission 2019, 2020; IDC 2018).1 In response, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) organized two summits on the topic, launched additional funding schemes, and issued guidelines for all organizations...
they fund (DFID 2018a). Read together, ‘safeguarding’ – understood as a set of policies and practices meant to anticipate, mitigate and protect against abuse, exploitation and harassment (Balch et al. 2020) – rapidly became the ‘buzzword’ in the UK humanitarian and development sector. However, the IDC’s (2019) follow-up report identified a lack of progress in key safeguarding areas, including responses to victims and survivors, echoing previous critiques of responses to abuse and exploitation by women activists (e.g. Aziz 2018a, 2018b; Bruce-Raeburn 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Donovan 2018; Kachingwe 2018; NGO Safe Space 2018).

A legal requirement in the UK, safeguarding has evolved from being mainly concerned with children (deemed universally and by definition vulnerable) to encompassing groups termed ‘vulnerable adults’ or ‘adults at risk’ (Keywood 2017; Orr et al. 2019). Since 2018, the definition of safeguarding in the humanitarian and development sector has broadened to encompass all people with whom organizations come into contact through their activities, as well as bullying and harassment of staff and volunteers. DFID (2018a, 2) states that organizations ‘have a safeguarding duty of care to beneficiaries, staff and volunteers, including… children and vulnerable adults in the community who are not direct beneficiaries but may be vulnerable to abuse’. Similarly, Bond (2020, para. 2), the UK network for international development organizations, refers to an organization’s responsibility to ensure ‘staff, operations, and programmes do no harm to children and adults at-risk nor expose them to abuse or exploitation’, as well as ‘protecting staff from harm and inappropriate behaviour such as bullying and harassment’. As safeguarding is supposed to apply to nearly everyone with whom humanitarian and development organizations come into contact, it is central to how they operate.

The emergence of safeguarding as a policy focus has occurred in the context of broader shifts in the humanitarian and development sector. It can be seen as an extension of
concerns with and approaches to accountability and legitimacy in the sector since the 1990s (Sandvik 2019a; Rubenstein 2015), and it follows more recent shifts towards a ‘global public morality’ regarding the conduct of humanitarian and development personnel and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse since the early 2000s (Sandvik 2019a, 3; also, Matti 2015). However, these efforts have rightly been critiqued, a tendency only intensified under the pressure of the global #MeToo and #AidToo movements’ spotlight on sexual violence (Costello 2018; Sandvik 2019a).

Despite the increasing importance of safeguarding for international intervention, the concept – and the understanding of vulnerability that underpins it – has not been theorized or interrogated in any depth.4 We focus our analysis on vulnerability because the concept and practice of safeguarding is premised upon and reliant on a number of assumptions about who is to be protected, why, and against what risks or harms. Thus, our theorization of safeguarding begins by (re)theorizing vulnerability: safeguarding cannot be interrogated and theorized without first unpacking the conceptions or understandings of vulnerability that precede and inform the development and implementation of safeguarding responses. We argue that dominant conceptions of vulnerability reflect narrow, individualized, depoliticized assumptions about its causes, generating safeguarding policies and practices focused primarily on individualized responses. These often fail to address – and thus reproduce – wider structures of power and inequality underpinning the violence that safeguarding is supposed to prevent.

It is not only in relation to safeguarding that the concept of vulnerability is important: it is central to definitions of violence and politics of humanitarianism and development more broadly. Identification of vulnerability is central to how the United Nations Secretary General defines sexual abuse, as ‘any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust’ (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA] 2004, 2, emphasis
added). Scholars have critically examined the increased use of the term ‘vulnerability’ within humanitarian practice more generally (e.g. Sözer 2019a, 2019b; Turner 2019), pointing to a shift in ‘neo-liberal humanitarianism’ away from a promise to reduce human suffering, to ‘increasing the resilience of those suffering’ through reducing vulnerabilities (Sözer 2019b, 10). Yet despite its increased importance as a concept in global politics, vulnerability is ‘chronically undertheorised’ (Scully 2014, 205) – often invoked, rarely interrogated.

Drawing on insights from feminist philosophy and postcolonial and critical disabilities studies, we here show the dangers of depoliticizing the concept of safeguarding by disconnecting it from wider structures of vulnerability such as sexism, racism, and ableism. That is, we aim to shed light on the ambiguity of vulnerability as ‘a concept that people use as if it doesn’t have consequences’ (Enloe 2019, cited in Turner 2019, 3). We show that safeguarding and the forms of violence it addresses must be explicitly centered within the power structures of global politics. This analysis contributes to the broader theorization of safeguarding and vulnerability, their interconnectedness, and their distinct place in the humanitarianism and development landscape, based on an intersectional conceptualization that sees vulnerability not in terms of categories of risk but as generated through structures and relations of power. Consequently, safeguarding should not just be a set of protective or responsive acts, but a practice designed to fundamentally challenge these structures of violence.

Our analysis is based on a review of key safeguarding documents – guidelines, commitments, and policies – of UK-based organizations. These include publicly available documents published by regulatory and funding bodies governing the work of UK organizations (DFID, Charity Commission) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who prepared a joint statement following DFID’s 2018 safeguarding summit (ActionAidUK, CAFOD, Care International UK, Christian Aid, the International Rescue Committee UK,
Oxfam GB, Plan International UK and Save the Children UK). While these represent only a snapshot of organizations’ efforts and approaches and are not fully representative of all organizations’ views on safeguarding, they are the most public-facing elements of safeguarding frameworks and represent clear illustrations of commitments and orientations, providing a starting point for examining conceptualizations of vulnerability. Our analysis focuses primarily on relations between organizations and the communities in which they work, although we recognize similar structures and dynamics of violence affect relations between organization staff.

Critically interrogating safeguarding through its underpinning concepts is important for several reasons, and at multiple scales. First, as a set of policies and practices, safeguarding is meant to address deeply embodied and relational experiences of violence affecting the lives of individuals and communities. Yet the depoliticized nature of many safeguarding concepts and policies means it risks being treated as a problem with technical solutions, reflecting an incomplete understanding of dynamics and enablers of vulnerability and violence. Second, since 2018 there has been a rush to address the problem of exploitation, abuse, and harassment within the humanitarian and development sector, characterized by a largely reactive response to a long-standing problem, driven in part by political pressure and organizational fears over reputation and funding. As Angela Bruce-Raeburn (2018a, 2018b, 2019), Shaista Aziz (2018a, 2018b), and others have argued, attention should be dedicated to the concepts underpinning and informing responses in order to ensure effective preventive (and not simply reactive) efforts. Third, the concept of safeguarding highlights issues intrinsic to how organizations, and the sector, function more broadly. Exploitation, abuse, and harassment are not peripheral issues but long-standing and endemic ones, intimately connected to the gendered, racialized, and ableist global system, itself shaped by legacies of colonialism, within which humanitarian and development
organizations and staff are situated. Finally, the depoliticization of vulnerability and safeguarding reproduces and entrenches global structures of power that shape approaches to and experiences of domestic and international intervention. Safeguarding concepts and practices thus reproduce rather than challenges established power relations and inequalities.  

We begin by situating our argument within existing critiques of safeguarding in the humanitarian and development sector and explaining why the emphasis on vulnerability is necessary. Second, through an analysis of existing safeguarding policies and statements developed by UK-based organizations, we show how, with some exceptions, they broadly understand vulnerability as located in and stemming from individuals rather than structures of power. Third, we outline an alternative conception of vulnerability, emphasizing its embodied and relational nature. This enables us finally to situate humanitarian and development policy and practice within structures of sexism, racism, and colonial histories, and call for more explicit attention to these global structures of power in safeguarding policy. We conclude by offering some reflections on directions for change by moving away from conceptualizing safeguarding as a technical, disembodied, apolitical project through a recognition of the importance of naming, a decolonial approach to knowledge production, and challenging structures of power that create vulnerabilities.

Safeguarding in the Humanitarian and Development Sector

While academic and ‘grey’ literature has examined sexual abuse and exploitation within the humanitarian and development sector, the concept of safeguarding more broadly and specific sector responses since 2018 have not received substantial academic attention (for exceptions see Balch et al. 2020; Johnson and Sloth-Nielsen 2020; Orr et al. 2019; Sandvik 2019a). Relevant analysis and critiques have tended to come from inside the sector itself, often as part of responses to the #MeToo movement through #AidToo (Costello 2018). These
critiques point to how safeguarding responses replicate familiar policies within the humanitarian and development sector, the persistence of interconnected gendered, racialized, and geographical power structures, and the UK-centric nature of the concept of ‘safeguarding’ itself.

These critiques are not new, and have long been advanced by activists, primarily women of colour, whose knowledge and practice provide crucial insights into the theorization of safeguarding and vulnerability, given that academic debates on such topics often trail this work. Asmita Naik, for instance, has long drawn attention to sexual violence in the aid sector (Naik 2003). In relation to current responses, Naik (2020) calls for efforts to ‘[e]mpower vulnerable groups to know their rights’ alongside complaints mechanisms, independent investigations, and disciplinary action. Angela Bruce-Raeburn (2018a, 2018b, 2019), Nancy Kachingwe (2018), and Shaista Aziz (2018a, 2018b), among others, have repeatedly emphasized the need to examine power imbalances and systems of oppression (racism, sexism) and privilege structuring the aid system, and have pointed to the absence of ‘local’ (feminist) expertise in the development of safeguarding standards and policies. More broadly, activist-practitioners have long drawn attention to and worked to transform racialized and racist, gendered and sexist, and colonial and imperialist aid systems (e.g. Ali and Murphy 2020; Kachingwe 2018; Omakwu 2020). Our analysis and arguments explicitly draw upon and echo this past work, adding to these discussions by specifically exploring conceptualizations of vulnerability that underpin safeguarding.

Safeguarding is part of longer-term efforts to operationalize the humanitarian ‘do no harm’ principle by seeking to prevent forms of abuse and exploitation (Sandvik 2019a) and does therefore not represent an entirely new project. As such, its mechanisms are familiar ones, replicating traditional relations of power when policies are developed in organizational headquarters in the ‘global North’ then dispatched to national and local offices in the ‘global
South’ (Bruce-Raeburn 2018a). This is connected to the lack of a deeper recognition of power hierarchies within which exploitation and abuse occur and a lack of analysis and recognition of gendered, racialized, and other global power differentials underpinning the international aid system (Aziz 2018a, 2018b; Bruce-Raeburn 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Kachingwe 2018; NGO Safe Space 2018). In this way, abstracting safeguarding from broader structures of power in which the sector is embedded is a key mechanism of depoliticization and contributes to the perpetuation of exploitation and abuse. Furthermore, the language of ‘vulnerability’ and representations of ‘passive’ or ‘vulnerable’ beneficiaries are commonly used to justify continued intervention and hollow reforms, reproducing a ‘grossly imbalanced global framework of power and relationships’ (Ali and Murphy 2020, 3).

That said, there have been references to ‘cultural change’ within humanitarian and development organizations. The IDC (2018, 6) states that, ‘safeguarding policies and procedures will be utterly meaningless without a root and branch transformation of organisational culture’, while DFID (2018b, 1) calls for ‘long term fundamental change to fundamentally rewrite the way the aid sector operates, from root to branch’. However, there has been little specific mention of what, precisely, should be changed, nor any real efforts made at identifying how change will be ensured and by which indicators of success or failure it will be judged. The IDC’s (2018) discussion focuses specifically on gendered power structures and imbalances as central to organizational culture, with familiar solutions: more women in leadership roles and improved gender parity within organizations.6 Beyond these rather unspecific calls, there is little discussion of how not only gendered but also racialized, geographic, and other structural relations of power that generate conditions of violence intersect and might be addressed. In the absence of attention to intersecting systems of power and exclusion, the sector falls back on familiar institutional responses: increasing training (without necessarily rethinking the content of training), hiring more safeguarding personnel
(without specific requirements for representation in authority or explicit responses to sexism, racism, and other structures), and rewriting policies (without adequate input from survivors or local partners) (Ayiera 2010; Code Blue 2019b; Daoust and Dyvik 2020). This ends up shielding organizations ‘from having to do the difficult work of deconstructing then dismantling the core structures of racism and sexism inherent in aid delivery systems’ (Bruce-Raeburn 2018a, 3). This ‘new’ focus on safeguarding is therefore in danger of following a long tradition of introducing new terms and policies with no meaningful systemic change (Bruce-Raeburn 2018a, 2018b).

Finally, safeguarding has not yet become a global humanitarian buzzword given that it remains ‘largely confined to … policy arenas in the Global North’ (Sandvik 2019a, 2), notably the UK. Despite representing supposedly ‘universal’ values, safeguarding concepts and standards – as with other international development ‘buzzwords’ – are by no means universal in either their meaning or acceptability across different social, political, and cultural contexts (Cornwall 2010). Humanitarian and development sector framings of safeguarding have drawn on UK-based definitions, and both the term (the word ‘safeguarding’) and wider concept (including underpinning ideas and assumptions about vulnerability, risk, and protection) may not be universally recognized. Important questions have been raised by others about the extent to which standards are developed or discussed by the people who live and work in the countries where abuses have occurred or those who have been directly affected by incidences of violence (Aziz 2018b; Bruce-Raeburn 2018, 2019; Code Blue 2019a; Donovan 2018; Kachingwe 2018).

Our analysis agrees with and is informed by these critiques. However, the concept of vulnerability and how it is understood within safeguarding – an important part of how safeguarding is conceptualized and implemented – has yet to be specifically or critically addressed. The core contributions of this article therefore lie is its theorization of
vulnerability, its demonstration of how this impacts the conceptualization and implementation of safeguarding in the humanitarian and development sector, and suggestions for ways forward.

Conceptions of Vulnerability in Safeguarding Policy

Safeguarding is enshrined in English Law through the 1989 and 2004 Children Acts, the 2017 Children and Social Work Act, and the 2014 Care Act, which provide the legal framework for safeguarding in England and inform the conceptualization of safeguarding for UK-based organizations. A person deemed ‘vulnerable’ is one who has ‘needs for care and support… is experiencing, or is at risk of, abuse or neglect, and… is unable to protect himself or herself against the abuse or neglect or the risk of it’ (Care Act 2014, 42/1). This conception of vulnerability is primarily defined by a kind of ‘lack’ on the part of those deemed vulnerable, with vulnerability assigned to a pre-defined group of people on the basis of their constitution or a set of inherent characteristics – the source of vulnerability is to be found within individuals themselves. This informs individualized safeguarding responses (e.g. removing ‘abusive’ or ‘vulnerable’ individuals from particular environments) rather than addressing causes of vulnerability, largely neglecting structural inequalities that contribute to harm and prevent individuals from seeking protection or justice (Keywood 2017; Lonbay and Brandon 2017).

As the UK-based international aid sector is governed by the Charity Commission and British law, it is unsurprising that this understanding of vulnerability is echoed in most safeguarding policies and statements. These identify categories of ‘vulnerable people’, ‘vulnerable groups’, ‘vulnerable communities’, or ‘children and vulnerable adults’ (ActionAid 2019b; ActionAidUK et al. 2018; Bond 2018; CAFOD 2019; CARE International 2017; Christian Aid 2018; DFID 2018a). Vulnerability is variably framed as being generated...
by individual characteristics such as gender, sexuality, age, disability, illness, ethnicity, or poverty. Bond’s (2018) safeguarding commitments, for example, refer specifically to ‘women, children and disabled people’ as ‘vulnerable groups’. Most safeguarding policies focus specifically or primarily on sexual violence (ActionAid 2019b; Bond 2018; CAFOD 2019; CARE International 2017; DFID 2018a; Oxfam 2019), with less or no attention to physical, economic or other forms of exploitation and abuse, which may inform and reinforce such categorizations of vulnerability.

However, there is a tension in how vulnerability is understood within safeguarding statements and policies – which, taken together, reflect some uncertainty or inconsistency in its conceptualization. Slippage between treating a set of characteristics as generative of vulnerability and something inherent to individuals or groups, and contextual factors generating vulnerability for said individuals in relation to others, speaks to the difficulties with the concept itself. For example, Christian Aid’s (2018) safeguarding policy distinguishes between individual factors associated with vulnerability (e.g. age, disability, illness) and social or contextual factors that contribute to vulnerability through discrimination and marginalization, such as gender, ethnicity, class or caste, religious or political affiliation, social isolation, poverty, and environmental degradation. Similarly, Bond (2018, 5) refers to vulnerable groups ‘at risk by their identity or circumstance’. Others have expanded framings of vulnerability to consider effects of factors such as conflict, displacement, poverty, or marginalization (ActionAid 2019b; ActionAid UK et al. 2018; CAFOD 2019; CARE International 2017; Oxfam 2018a). While these point to a partial tendency to recognize contextual or relational factors as contributing to vulnerability, organizations largely frame vulnerability as ‘equated with susceptibility to harm’ and ‘as a character trait’ (Gilson 2016, 74). Vulnerability thus becomes inflexible, associated with certain groups (e.g. women,
children, persons with disabilities) who are deemed vulnerable while others are not. This conception of vulnerability is problematic for several reasons.

First, it centers the liberal subject through its suggestion that some people can be invulnerable, and idealizes this possibility (Gilson 2016, 77). Liberalism – which presumes that society is ‘constituted by self-interested individuals with the capacity to manipulate and manage their independently acquired and overlapping resources’ (Fineman 2008, 10) – sets certain people apart from ‘the rest of us’ by virtue of their invulnerability. Through a denial of the embodied nature of vulnerability we all share, it focuses instead on internal characteristics tied to binaries of capacity/incapacity and vulnerability/invulnerability – distinguishing between those who are vulnerable and those who are not, between those who ‘have capacity’ and those who do not (Clough 2017). This also risks assuming ‘fixed’ vulnerability, without acknowledging the possibility of changing needs and circumstances (Fineman 2008; Gilson 2016). This conceptualization of vulnerability can also leave uncontested and even reinforce notions of the invulnerable and capable subject as ‘male, white, Eurocentric, cisgendered, and able-bodied’ (Koivunen et al. 2018, 11).

Second, this conception of vulnerability can generate paternalistic and potentially disempowering responses to groups classified as ‘vulnerable’ (Clough 2017; Mackenzie et al. 2014). In the context of safeguarding, constructing a dichotomy where ‘the humanitarian worker is in a position of power while the intended beneficiary is vulnerable and lacks both power and agency’ (Matti 2015, 639) suggests that ‘beneficiaries’ are recipients of protection in the name of safeguarding provided by humanitarian and development interveners. While the humanitarian and development sector is of course characterized by clear power imbalances, there are complex and varied relations of power that shape interactions between the many different actors at local, national, and international scales involved in or affected by program delivery.
Third, this conception of vulnerability denies its *structural* and *relational* aspects and how people’s vulnerability is connected to the power that others have to take advantage of this. Because the humanitarian and development sector often finds it difficult to see itself as ‘participating in the social structures that create vulnerabilities’ (Gilson 2016, 77), there is also a reluctance to take responsibility for how vulnerability is generated through the negative effects of interdependence. Vulnerability is considered ‘as if it were an independent phenomenon’ rather than emerging through relational contexts (Ayiera 2010, 12), with a reluctance to recognize the broader social and political enablers of vulnerability and violence, and the sector’s own role within these. The unwillingness or inability to see oneself as participating in or benefiting from structures that *generate* vulnerability is part of the critiques posed by others (Aziz 2018a, 2018b; Bruce-Raeburn 2018a, 2019; Donovan 2018), who highlight how sexism and racism is embedded in humanitarian and development organizations and the need to address how the sector upholds these enablers of vulnerability, exploitation, and abuse through global relations *and* more localized encounters.

The mythologizing of the liberal subject negating the embodied and relational nature of vulnerability thus works to depoliticize the meaning and experience of vulnerability. This subsequently ends up depoliticizing safeguarding as a concept and practice. Before outlining directions for a *repoliticized* understanding of safeguarding, it is necessary to more fully interrogate and rethink the concept of vulnerability itself.

**Reconceptualizing Vulnerability as Embodied and Relational**

Vulnerability is most often framed as stemming from specific characteristics of a person or group, strongly associated with assumptions about weakness, helplessness, passivity, victimhood, humiliation, and openness to manipulation and exploitation (Scully 2014, 210). No wonder then that within feminist thought, vulnerability remains a ‘vexing
concept’ (Gilson 2016, 73). However, there are alternative – and (re)politicized – ways of conceptualizing vulnerability that are less defined by liberal ideas of the human subject and emphasize how the human condition is characterized by an embodied relationality. Much of this rethinking of vulnerability comes from feminist and queer thought (e.g. Ahmed 2004; Butler 2004; Gilson 2016; Koivunen et al. 2018; Mackenzie et al. 2014). These theorizations of vulnerability nevertheless invoke a tension between a kind of ‘ontological response’ which stresses our ‘common embodied humanity and equal susceptibility to suffering’, and approaches that focus more on individual’s inherent capacity for power, dependency and susceptibility to harm (Mackenzie et al. 2014, 6). In this section, we explore this tension and how an emphasis on relationality and embodiment might bring politics back into understandings of vulnerability and safeguarding.

The term ‘vulnerability’ derives from the Latin vulnus, meaning ‘wound’, and as such expresses the capacity to be wounded and to suffer (Koivunen et al. 2018, 4). This captures the physical and emotional nature of vulnerability and our shared capacity to be vulnerable to the physical world (for example, through common needs for shelter and food or exposure to environmental threats) and to one another through social and political inequalities. Approached this way, vulnerability is viewed not as generated by innate features of particular biological states belonging only to certain people (based on, for example, gender, age, ability, racialized status), but as a part of circumstances within which all people find themselves (Brown 2011, 317). Butler (2004, 31; also, Cole 2016) ties the ontological reality of human life to violence, ‘referring to a common human vulnerability, one that emerges with life itself’. As socially (and politically) constituted beings, we are attached to others and thus ‘subjected to violence, exposed to its possibility, if not its realization’ (Butler 2004, 20).

Vulnerability conceptualized in this way does not dispute the existence of differential vulnerabilities, but highlights that the proportion of these that are entirely independent of
social or environmental components are few (Scully 2014, 208). This echoes critical
disability perspectives examining how the meaning and experience of particular
‘impairments’ are shaped by structures of oppression and processes of identity formation
(Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009). Fundamentally, vulnerability approached this way means
accepting our human condition as defined by our embodied vulnerability through our
physical and emotional needs and interdependency with others (Mackenzie et al. 2014).

Embodiment as a term is premised on the impossibility of the Cartesian dualism of
mind and body, where the former is considered rational, privileged, and male, and the latter
considered emotional, subordinate, and female (Grosz 1994, 18). Embodiment calls us to
understand people as ‘embodied selves’ (Dyvik 2017) that are, in the words of Foucault,
‘directly involved in the political field’ (1991, 25; also, Dyvik 2016). Grounding vulnerability
in embodiment requires understanding it as part of the human condition, as ‘a shared,
universal ontological experience for all human beings, by virtue of our nature as
interdependent social beings’ (Clough 2017, 469).7 Vulnerability arises from the ‘ever-
present possibility of harm, injury, and misfortune… whether accidental, intentional, or
otherwise’ (Fineman 2008, 9).

In this sense, everyone is potentially vulnerable to structures and relations of power,
oppression, and violence. Vulnerabilities are manifested in unequal access to resources and
opportunities, norms that devalue particular identities or ways or being, and differential ways
in which bodies inhabit and move through (public) space (Ahmed 2004; Clough 2017;
Fineman 2008). Therefore, understanding vulnerability as embodied requires a second move
– a recognition of it as relational and interdependent, because our vulnerability to the world
always signifies our ‘need for one another’ (Mensch 2009, 5). It is useful to think of our
embodied vulnerability as radically relational in ways that can be both beneficial and harmful.
When vulnerability is approached this way, it makes little sense to designate certain people as
pre-determined vulnerable or ‘at risk’ without simultaneously seeking to understand the enablers of vulnerability and how these are connected to our own situatedness in the world.

However, this approach cannot lose sight of the unequal distribution of vulnerability and harm within global and local social, political, and historical relations. Overemphasizing the shared embodiment of vulnerability risks masking distinct realities of vulnerability and differences between those potentially ‘injurable’ and those already experiencing injury and harm (Cole 2016). Recognizing the common vulnerabilities we hold by nature of our embodied selves, the conditions that determine the impact of those vulnerabilities (i.e. to what extent we are made vulnerable) cannot be detached from pre-existing gendered, racialized, ableist, and other structures and institutions through which ‘people are subjected to or immunized from vulnerability in radically distinct, different and unequal ways’ (Cole 2016, 266). Butler (2004) refers to ‘the radically inequitable ways that… vulnerability is distributed globally’ (30), through particular sociopolitical conditions and structures ‘that make some populations more subject to… violence than others’ (xii). The reality of ‘ontological vulnerability’ therefore does not suggest it is equally distributed.

At the heart of rethinking vulnerability in relation to safeguarding is recognizing the exploitation of this vulnerability – individually by people and structurally by organizations and institutions – and not vulnerability itself as the primary concern (Gilson 2016). People are made vulnerable through relational structures of power such as patriarchy, sexism, heteronormativity, racism, ableism, and other dynamics that generate inequality, abuse, oppression, and violence – and that shape all social interactions and relationships, at multiple scales. Relational conceptions of vulnerability therefore recognize ‘the role of social and political structures in generating some kinds of vulnerability’ (Mackenzie 2014, 38). Some people ‘are especially vulnerable: they have a greater chance than others of being subject to harms’ (Scully 2014, 205) through relationships to others and within socio-political
environments. In this way, the operating logics shift: vulnerability does not result from sets of predefined identities (such as ‘women’, ‘ethnic minorities’, ‘children’, ‘disabled people’) but from intersecting systems of power, privilege and institutional practices that produce these identities, and associated advantages, disadvantages, and inequalities, in the first place (Fineman 2008). This fundamentally political understanding of vulnerability sees is as not an inherent characteristic but as political and social effect (Ahmed 2004).

Previous research highlights the need to examine structural reasons for vulnerability rather than relying on predefined categories, but notes that even approaches attending to intersecting structural dynamics of oppression risk reproducing essentialist, ‘self-evident’ categorizations of vulnerability (e.g. ‘women and children’) and obfuscating others (e.g. vulnerabilities of refugee men) (Sözer 2019a, 2019b; Turner 2019), based on categorizations and forms of subordination considered ‘universal’ (Oyèwùmí 1997). For safeguarding, preventive and responsive measures may address forms of risk and violence affecting those designated ‘properly vulnerable’ and not those deemed – based on particular gendered, racialized, ideological, and other assumptions – less vulnerable or invulnerable. Externally dominated definitions of risk, vulnerability, and harm reproduce ‘Global North/South’ hierarchies, echo colonial thinking, and limit understandings of forms of risk, vulnerability, and harm existing outside narrow ‘northern’ lenses (Renton and Vaughn 2020). For example, much political capital and energy has focused on developing an international ‘humanitarian passport’ system. While this might address some forms of abuse and exploitation, when most aid workers are local and often casual hires – situated in complex relations of power characterized by global and localized dimensions (discussed in the following section) – it is unlikely to make serious inroads (Naik 2019).

What we are advocating then is not to abandon analyses of who is made vulnerable, how, and by whom, but to move beyond fixed, predetermined categorizations and examine
how aid sector systems and interactions create more and less visible or recognizable conditions of vulnerability within specific contexts and interactions (Sözer 2019a; also, Butler 2004). This requires foregrounding the concepts, experiences, and knowledges of communities rather than imposing categories of vulnerability – and considering the ‘modes of control and violence enabled and enacted through humanitarian uses of “vulnerability”’ (Turner 2019, 2). This highlights the need to critically consider the geopolitics of safeguarding knowledge production through widening its epistemological foundations based on the knowledges of survivors, victims, and communities targeted by intervention (Daoust and Dyvik 2020).

Repoliticizing Safeguarding

What might it mean to approach safeguarding and vulnerability as embodied and relational and see vulnerability as created through wider societal, political, and historical structures? Such a shift must recognize that humanitarian and development spaces and practices are sites of international politics, where relationships, responsibilities, and assumptions are reproduced, negotiated, and questioned (Smirl 2008). Relationships within the humanitarian and development sector – at global, national, and ‘local’ scales – are characterized by disparities in status, income, and other sets of privileges and disadvantages that generate vulnerability (Fechter, 2012; Reid, 2018; Smirl 2008). Relations and distribution of power, authority, and material resources, legitimacy, and influence between actors (e.g. between headquarters and field offices, country offices and ‘local’ partners, or individuals implementing and receiving assistance), shape vulnerabilities and implications for safeguarding responses.

Some safeguarding statements and policies do refer to such contextual factors that heighten vulnerability, including discrimination and marginalization along gendered, ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, or other lines, as well as conflict, displacement, and poverty
The 2018 joint NGO statement begins by acknowledging that vulnerability is driven by ‘power imbalances that sit at the heart of global poverty and injustice’ (ActionAidUK et al. 2018, 1). Recognizing that the exploitation of vulnerability is the true problem, some define sexual exploitation as an abuse of position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust – although this definition is the only point where this is acknowledged (ActionAid 2019b; CAFOD 2019; CARE International 2017; Oxfam 2018b; also, UNGA 2004). However, these stop short of naming the structures (sexism, homophobia, ableism, racism, capitalism, etc.) and institutional practices that produce or create vulnerability. While organizations may consider these structural or systemic dynamics elsewhere, explicit references are absent from official safeguarding statements and policies. Furthermore, these framings do not engage with vulnerability as a shared human experience, and do not connect these relations to broader structures of power. Even where there is no ‘formal’ hierarchy, relationships are shaped by gendered, raced, classed, and other axes of privilege and oppression. Below, we consider three that should inform conceptions of vulnerability and safeguarding (as both a concept and practice): gender/patriarchy, race/racism, and coloniality.

Gender alone is insufficient for understanding vulnerability and violence. As already discussed, it intersects with race, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, and other structures of oppression, following theorizations of intersectionality that understand vulnerabilities to violence as resulting from converging systems of discrimination, marginalization, and oppression (i.e. patriarchy and racism) (Crenshaw 1991; Davis 1984; Hill Collins and Bilge 2016). Understanding exploitation and abuse in humanitarianism and development, and developing responses to this, requires explicit attention to intersecting systems of patriarchy, sexism, and racism. Gender and race (along with other structures of power) need to be considered together rather than separately or in the absence of others.
Questions of gender and race in the context of international intervention are shaped by, and central to, colonial histories (Lugones 2007; Mama 1997; Nkenkana 2015; Oyèwùmí 1997). This is reflected in the mobilization of racialized and colonial discourses and categorizations to rationalize intervention and ‘development’ efforts; global, racialized material relations of power and accumulation; and assumptions about knowledge and expertise (Kothari 2006; Sabaratnam 2017; Wilson 2012). ‘Coloniality’ as a concept captures these economic and political relations, capitalist systems of exploitation, Eurocentric orders of knowledge, and racialized classifications and constructions of subjectivity, which ‘[permeate] all control of sexual access, collective authority, labor, subjectivity/intersubjectivity and the production of knowledge’ (Lugones 2007, 191). This means acknowledging the centrality of gendered constructions and classifications to colonial systems, which ‘justify’ political, economic, and epistemic hierarchies and oppression (Lugones 2007; Nkenkana 2015; Oyèwùmí 1997). These continue to shape humanitarian and development approaches and interactions, including assumptions about guiding concepts (e.g. vulnerability) and directions for intervention (e.g. safeguarding). Considering exploitation and abuse ‘within the historical trajectory of colonialism’ informs an understanding of this violence as ‘dependent not on the chaos of a “disaster zone” but on the massive imbalance of wealth and power in operation’ in the aid sector (Balani 2018, para. 4; also, Aziz 2018a).

Some safeguarding documents attempt to connect violence and vulnerability to wider relations of power and inequality. For example, the IDC’s report on sexual exploitation and abuse emphasizes that it is intrinsically a matter of power, ‘rooted in a power imbalance that is predominantly, although not exclusively, gendered’ (2018, 19; also, Bond 2018). It recognizes that ‘the aid sector is one of extreme power imbalance: those receiving aid in humanitarian crisis situations are some of the most vulnerable and disempowered people in the world’, and that power imbalances exist not only between perpetrators and
survivors/victims of abuse but also between communities providing and receiving aid (22). However, these dynamics are unevenly and inconsistently recognized as central to safeguarding practice, without explicit acknowledgment that specific power structures create (rather than simply ‘encounter’) vulnerability.

One common theme across safeguarding documents is a focus on *gendered* power relations and inequalities. These are of course central to dynamics of exploitation and abuse, and crucial to safeguarding approaches. However, while gendered inequalities and power imbalances are named as ‘causes’ of vulnerability and violence, the broader generative structures within which these are located or political standpoints explicitly challenging them are not. Only ActionAid (2019a) specifically refers to *patriarchal* attitudes and unequal power dynamics that underpin exploitation and abuse, while Oxfam (2019, 15) refers to ‘grounding feminist principles as part of culture change efforts’. This language, however, is not embedded within safeguarding policies. This tendency not to be explicit about violent structures such as patriarchy or sexism echoes critiques of the depoliticization of gender in development amidst ‘a resounding silence around words such as feminism and feminist’ (Smyth 2010, 144). Policies therefore react to narrowly defined problems and hold little possibility for wider ‘root and branch’ change.

Gender *does* have an established place within safeguarding policies. In stark contrast, race and racism are hardly mentioned in official documents of humanitarian and development organizations and are largely absent from development scholarship (Pailey 2019; Patel 2020). Yet, constructions of racial difference – and, centrally, of whiteness – are central to humanitarian and development practice, and to the concept of development itself (Kothari 2006; Pailey 2019; White 2002). They incorporate ‘the whole complex of unequal material relationships and processes which structure engagement between the global South and the global North’ (Wilson 2012, 4). While the joint NGO statement emphasizes the need for
cultural change within organizations to ‘ensure no abuse of power is tolerated, addressing the
gender, race and other inequalities that drive these behaviours’ (ActionAid UK et al. 2018, 1),
only Oxfam’s (2018a, 1) safeguarding policy refers to race (alongside class, gender,
sexuality, and other factors) as potentially increasing vulnerability. This reflects what Pailey
(2019, 730) terms ‘the “absent presence” of race.

References to ‘culture, ‘ethnicity’, or ‘ethnic origin’ in some safeguarding documents
might reflect somewhat coded ways of referring to racialized identities (Bond 2018; CAFOD
2019; Care International 2017; Christian Aid 2018; Plan International 2017), but such coded
mentions fail to consider the historical and global dimensions of racialized violence and
oppression that structure the international aid system and how gendered and racialized
constructions operate together as part of the coloniality of power (Lugones 2007; Oyèwùmí
1997; also, Kothari 2006; White 2002; Wilson 2012). This echoes broader silences on racism
within humanitarianism and development, potentially reflecting the defensiveness and
reluctance on the part of the (largely white) actors who shape knowledge and policy to reflect
on their own positioning and the privileges of whiteness (Kachingwe 2018; Kothari 2006;
Bruce-Raeburn 2019; Pailey 2019). This silence on race and racism allows ‘western’
practitioners and policy makers ‘to avoid being accountable for the powers, privileges and
inequalities that continue to flow from whiteness’ (Kothari 2006, 2). Yet, as Bruce-Raeburn
(2018b, 2) states, ‘safeguarding cannot exist without coming to terms with how gender and
race intersect in the humanitarian space’.

Relatedly, safeguarding statements and policies do not mention the historical contexts
within which exploitation and abuse, and safeguarding responses, are situated. While this is
somewhat unsurprising (as policy documents focus on current and future practice), responses
cannot be abstracted from recent and longer-term histories of intervention and violence by
humanitarian and development actors. A refusal to engage with historical contexts (including
how these prop up structures of whiteness and oppression) perpetuates a silence and ignorance of aid actors’ positioning and participation in the very systems and structures that create vulnerabilities (Gilson 2016). Rare mentions of historical context are limited to very recent history and lack consideration of colonial legacies. For example, the IDC (2018, 29) acknowledges the failures of historical responses to sexual violence among multilateral organizations, NGOs, and DFID, noting that, ‘the international aid sector’s response… since 2002 has been reactive, patchy and sluggish’ with an overall impression ‘of complacency, verging on complicity’. Here, however, ‘history’ only dates back to 2002 and subsequent safeguarding discussions reflect a position described by a senior DFID official: ‘better now to look forwards than to look backwards, and to try to support the measures that are being taken to improve matters… than to continue to harangue the errors of the past’ (IDC 2018, 26). To deepen understandings of vulnerability and safeguarding, thus enabling better preventative efforts, these ‘errors of the past’ are precisely what must be considered, as they continue to shape conditions within which violence occurs and how communities (and victims and survivors of violence) perceive and engage with UK-driven safeguarding efforts.

The language of ‘vulnerability’ is often used to justify continued intervention that reproduces existing structures of power (Ali and Murphy 2020). At the same time, it can justify narrow, selective responses focusing only or primarily on those deemed ‘most vulnerable’. Repoliticizing the concept – centring its relational and structural dimensions and how people are made vulnerable – deepens understandings of how violence occurs and what is required to mitigate and prevent it. This requires not simply naming relational and structural dimensions of vulnerability but shifting how safeguarding is understood – not as an isolated ‘protective’ set of policies and practices, but as a holistic, long term practice of challenging and dismantling structures that enable violence to occur. This ‘furnishes a sense of political community’ by foregrounding ‘relational ties that have implications for theorizing
fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility’ (Butler 2004, 22). This requires recognizing those who have consistently drawn attention to these issues, ‘to bring back feminist movements’ politicised and post-colonial analysis of… sexual violence as part of a global system of reproduction of domination and inequality’ (Kachingwe 2018, 5).

Concluding Reflections

This analysis of safeguarding policies highlights the need for attention to the intersecting structures and relations of power that generate vulnerability and how they operate in the humanitarian and development sector. Adding to existing practitioner, feminist, postcolonial, and critical disability analyses, we call for an understanding of vulnerability as embodied and relational. We argue that embodied relations of vulnerability are themselves constituted by historical and contemporary structures of oppression operating at both local and global scales – reflecting a fundamentally political conceptualization of vulnerability. However, what generates vulnerability – gendered, racialized, colonial, economic, and other relations of power – is overlooked within much of safeguarding policy in favor of technical solutions to ‘safeguarding concerns’, masking the forms and relations of power that produce vulnerability in the first place. Our analysis positions vulnerability not only as central to safeguarding but also to the wider politics of humanitarianism and development. This informs an intersectional theorization of safeguarding underpinned by understanding vulnerability not in terms of categories of risk but as generated through structures and relations of power. Safeguarding is therefore understood as not just a set of protective acts addressing specific harms but as challenging the very structures that enable violence and exploitation of vulnerability to occur. Maintaining a focus on the concept of vulnerability, repoliticized through an intersectional framework, in practice then requires humanitarian and development organizations and representatives to question (and change) how they uphold structures and
practices that create conditions (and enable exploitation) of vulnerability and violence – including as part of ‘safeguarding’ efforts.

Safeguarding can be repoliticized as a concept and practice in three interconnected ways: changing how vulnerability is named, transforming knowledge production, and challenging structures of power within with humanitarian and development organizations are embedded and which they reproduce. First, structures of power and histories of colonialism should be explicitly recognized and named, to inform a more nuanced understanding of vulnerability and violence, and challenge ‘global North’ domination and imposition of policies, priorities, guidelines, and knowledge production. Similarly, sexism, heteronormativity, patriarchy, racism, and ableism should be explicitly recognized as global structural conditions within which the sector operates – as women activists have long called for. This involves not only naming intersecting power structures and inequalities but making visible their interconnections and ‘how they work structurally’ (Strid, Walby, and Armstrong 2013, 574), in specific contexts. This entails a shift from locating vulnerability within predetermined groups, based on ‘self-evident’ categorizations, to acknowledging how power structures create vulnerabilities, through focusing on systems of oppression that give meaning to social categorizations (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins and Bilge 2016). This opens a space to question the sector’s own role in perpetuating these power relations and their responsibility to address this within a global political context (see Ali and Murphy 2020; Aziz 2018a, 2018b; Bruce-Raeburn 2018a, 2019b, 2019; Kachingwe 2018; Omakwu 2020).

Rethinking vulnerability requires a decolonial politics of knowledge production, reconsidering the sources and spaces from which conceptual definitions and directions for action emerge (Daoust and Dyvik, 2020; Renton and Vaughn 2020; Rutazibwa 2019; also, Orr et al. 2019). This requires moving away from UK-centered knowledge production to centering ‘local’ knowledge – especially of survivors and victims – in conceptualizing
vulnerability and safeguarding and formulating ‘global’ standards and practices. Finally, reconceptualizing and repoliticizing vulnerability and rethinking knowledge production requires attention to – and challenging – structures of power and authority within organizations themselves. These echo and reproduce relations and circumstances that create vulnerability and enable violence, not only gender inequalities and imbalances but also racialized, geographical, ableist and other dimensions of representation and power.

These directions advance an understanding of safeguarding underpinned by a rethinking of where and with whom vulnerability exists, and of vulnerability as something that is not simply encountered but created. For humanitarian and development organizations, this requires openness to learning from the affective and embodied dimensions of safeguarding knowledge; admitting failings in prevention and response; and interrogating and altering how they define the core concepts and structures underpinning their work. This rethinking of vulnerability is crucial to challenging the structures that create vulnerability, and in turn, preventing exploitation and abuse. Reframing vulnerability as relational rather than individual and as structural rather than accidental in safeguarding policy, would enable a robust, open and holistic practice of challenging and dismantling structures that enable violence to occur. Doing so would not only better position safeguarding to respond to ongoing concerns, but crucially, to prevent them from being generated in the first place.
Notes

1 Sexual abuse and exploitation within the humanitarian, development and peacekeeping sectors has long been and remains endemic (e.g. Csáky 2008; Human Rights Watch 2014; Save the Children UK 2006; UNHCR and Save the Children UK 2002).

2 Safeguarding is a devolved matter in the UK, with each nation having its own safeguarding legislation.

3 This often encompasses a range of policies, stretching across ‘protection from sexual exploitation and abuse’, ‘child safeguarding’, and sometimes ‘child protection’, as well as codes of conduct. Some ‘international standards’ have become staples in safeguarding work (e.g. CHS Alliance 2014, Keeping Children Safe 2014).

4 Other humanitarian and development interventions are also underpinned by ideas of vulnerability (e.g. child protection, food and non-food distribution, cash transfers). Safeguarding differs in its focus on the conduct and actions of staff and other representatives of organizations, rather than wider risks and violence – although these are both shaped by gendered, racialized, classed, geographic, and other structures.

5 This is highlighted in recent critiques of ‘Prevent’, part of the UK’s counterterrorism strategy, which is framed as safeguarding while embedded in deeply unequal, racialized power relations between Muslim communities and state actors (Ali 2014; Heath-Kelly 2017).

6 Other statements also address gender inequality and gender balanced leadership as part of ‘changing organizational culture’ (ActionAid 2019a; IRC 2018).
While scholars have different interpretations of embodiment, the relationship between ‘the body’, emotions, and experience is increasingly important to analyses of conflict, security, and development (e.g. Åhäll and Gregory 2015; Parashar 2013; Porter 2018; Welland 2019).
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