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THE VULNERABILITY AND AGENCY OF REFUGEE WOMEN*

A FEMINIST POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION'S BORDERSCAPES

Abstract

Vulnerability and agency are commonly treated as opposing concepts. Situated in a Eurocentric and patriarchal setting, refugee women* at the socio-spatial borderscapes of the EU therefore encounter a double discrimination: Being prone to gender and flight-specific violence, while being denied their subjectivity as agents. Aiming to overcome this binarity, the following paper consists of an explorative analysis of refugee women's* agency and vulnerability at the borderscapes of the EU from a feminist postcolonial perspective. Here, the joint qualitative content analysis of narrative and self-determined testimonials by refugee women* conducted with a refugee woman* situated in Germany epistemologically follows the concept: Study agency by practicing agency. The results of the analysis suggest the close entanglement of proneness to violence (vulnerability) and the will and power to act (agency) within the given power structures. In addition to the underlying dimension of being a refugee woman* in a Eurocentric and patriarchal power system, eight materialized and discursive dimensions of vulnerability are identified: Financial situation, companionship, ethnicity & nationality, religion & spirituality, pregnancy, language skills, health, and sexuality. Regarding agency, we recognize general expressions of the will and power to act together with the thematic agency over movement & settling, financial matters, sexual activities, and work. Our analysis implies multidimensional, fluid, and complex relationships between vulnerability and agency: Refugee women* at the EU borderscapes are vulnerable agents. While their vulnerability can lead to a decrease in agency, it can also increase agency in certain circumstances. However, this vulnerable agency does not substantially challenge or alter the existing power dynamics. Instead, the agency to resist against the given structures, can increase the women's* proneness to violence.

Forschungszusammenfassung

Vulnerabilität und Agency werden gemeinhin als gegensätzliche Konzepte behandelt. Einem eurozentrischen und patriarchalen Umfeld ausgesetzt, werden flüchtende Frauen* an den sozio-räumlichen Borderscapes der EU daher doppelt diskriminiert: Sie sind anfällig für geschlechts- und fluchtspezifische Gewalt, während ihnen gleichzeitig ihr Subjektsein abgesprochen wird. Das folgende Paper besteht aus einer explorativen Analyse der Agency und Vulnerabilität von geflüchteten Frauen* an den Borderscapes der EU aus einer feministischen postkolonialen Perspektive. Die qualitative Inhaltsanalyse von narrativen und selbstbestimmten Testimonials von geflüchteten Frauen* erfolgt in Kooperation mit einer in Deutschland situierten geflüchteten Frau* und basiert auf dem epistemologischen Konzept: Praktiziere Agency, um Agency zu untersuchen. Die Ergebnisse der Analyse verweisen auf die enge Verschränkung von Gewaltanfälligkeit (Vulnerabilität) und Handlungswillen und -macht (Agency) innerhalb der gegebenen Machtstrukturen. Neben der zugrundeliegenden Dimension, eine geflüchtete Frau* in einem eurozentrischen und patriarchalen Machtsystem zu sein, identifiziert die Analyse acht weitere materialisierte und diskursive Dimensionen der Vulnerabilität: Finanzielle Situation, Begleitung, Ethnizität & Nationalität, Religion & Spiritualität, Schwangerschaft, Sprachkenntnisse, Gesundheit und Sexualität. Als Dimensionen von Agency werden neben allgemeinen Aussagen über Handlungswille und -macht die thematischen Dimensionen der Handlungsfähigkeit über Bewegung & Sesshaftigkeit, finanzielle Angelegenheiten, sexuelle Aktivität und Arbeit analysiert. Die Analyse stellt dabei mehrdimensionale, fließende und komplexe Beziehungen zwischen Vulnerabilität und Agency fest: Geflüchtete Frauen* an den EU-Grenzen sind verletzliche Akteur*innen. Dabei kann ihre Vulnerabilität Agency sowohl behindern als auch fördern. Allerdings scheint diese vulnerable Agency existierende Machtdynamiken nicht wesentlich zu verändern. Stattdessen erhöht die Agency, sich gegen die gegebenen Strukturen zu wehren, unter bestimmten Umständen die Anfälligkeit der Frauen* für Gewalt.

1. Introduction

1.1 Problem Presentation

Flight is an inherently processual phenomenon. Surpassing traditional and positivist research that focuses on a static conceptualization of borders, critical migration research increasingly integrates so-called borderscapes (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007) as socio-spatial dimension. The notion focuses on the "spatial and conceptual complexity of the border as a space that is not static but fluid and shifting" (Brambilla, 2015, 19). Hereby, they highlight the inbetweenness of flight – the reality of refugees[1] living and moving in de facto extralegal and multidimensional (border) spaces (Chojnacki & Paping, 2016, p. 21). This is especially critical, since the situational inbetweenness experienced in these borderscapes leads to structural and direct forms of violence (Chojnacki & Paping, 2016, p. 20). While direct violence is expressed through physical, personal, and manifested violence committed by specific individuals or groups of people, structural violence follows a broader conception, including latent forms of violence like discrimination or unequal distribution of resources (Kailitz, 2007, p. 134).

Expressed already through the need to flee, flight is fundamentally violent. However, the borderscapes of the European Union (EU) have recently established negative – and rather cynical – records: The so-called Mediterranean-route (FRONTEX, 2020), has "acquired new fame as the world's deadliest sea crossing" (Amnesty International UK, 2020). Peaking in 2016 with more than

5100 deaths, in 2020 more than 1400 humans drowned while fleeing via the Mediterranean to the EU (Statista, 2021). The estimation that every woman* fleeing via Libya is experiencing sexualized violence, many of them rape (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, as cited in Medica Mondiale, 2019, p. 14), is an additional example of the grave violence that refugees face on their flight to the EU.

Moreover, the EU's borderscapes symbolize an additional layer of violence: Eurocentric and postcolonial marginalization and discrimination labeling refugees as the Other[2] and as subordinates to 'Western' society (Chojnacki & Paping, 2016, pp. 24–25). On the one hand, the concept of Eurocentrism focuses on the culturalism of framing the 'West' as universal norm superior to all other cultures (Amin, 1988, p. 8). On the other hand, postcolonialism describes the imperial dimension of current inequality and hegemony (cf. Rattansi, 1997, p. 481), whereby hegemony describes "the process through which the governing power produces affirmation by the governed" (Thomas, 2015, p. 71). Simplified, one can describe those borderscapes – "the social and political production of a border that ceases to be spatially limited" (Mitrović & Vilenica, 2019, p. 541) – as setting of hegemonial violence by the global North committed against the global South. Up to this day, the term 'refugee crisis' is popularly used to describe the flight processes to and within the EU during the last decade. Hereby, the rhetoric as crisis

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[1] This paper follows a critical definition of refugees and defines them as humans forcibly displaced "as a result of persecution, conflict, war, conquest, settler/colonialism, militarism, occupation, empire, and environmental and climate-related disasters, regardless of their legal status" (The Critical Refugee Studies Collective, 2021).

[2] Postcolonial scholars acknowledge the hegemonial establishment of binary identities based on dichotomous and normative distinctions (e.g., Hall, 1997, p. 243).

criminalizes migration and justifies violence against refugees (Brambilla & Jones, 2019, p. 9).

As an additional layer, critical migration research criticizes the "systematic tendency to ignore gender issues" (Gatt et al., 2016, p. 2) in migration contexts. Hence, feminist postcolonial scholars recognize a violence multidimensionality (cf. Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242): Refugee women*[3] at the EU's borderscapes do not only face gender-based violence and violence based on being a refugee in a Eurocentric setting but additional violence that arises out of the intersectionality of being a refugee woman*. Next to direct and structural violence, this contains epistemic violence – the existence of complex relationships of power, domination, and violence within knowledge and the production of knowledge (Brunner, 2016, p. 44).

While all humans possess agency (Ortner, 2006, p. 136), describing "the capacity to affect things" (Ortner, 2006, p. 137), women* in general, and Women* of Color (W*oC) more explicitly, are framed as objects without own agency that require the help of ('Western') men* (Spivak, 1993, p. 92) in dominant Eurocentric discourses. Hence, the women* are denied their subjectivity (cf. Castro Varela, M. D. M. & Dhawan, 2016, p. 16). Meanwhile, men* are seen as agents and therefore as subjects (Young, 2003, p. 19). Together with the clear differentiation of the dominant academic discourse between victims and agents (Esposito et al., 2019, p. 407) this leads to a messy problem: While the women* at the EU's borderscapes are vulnerable to experiencing gender-based violence that interacts with the situational

and processual dimensions of their inbetweenness, this vulnerability strengthens the hegemonial claim of the discourse (Castro Varela, M. D. M. & Dhawan, 2016, p. 14), portraying the refugee women* as static and objectified victims.

Countering this discriminatory discourse, feminist postcolonial migration research identifies the possibility to simultaneously be a victim and an agent (Castro Varela, M. D. M. & Dhawan, 2016, p. 14). Going one step further, agency can evolve through vulnerability: In some situations it can be the perception as harmless and vulnerable allowing possibilities of agency (cf. Levy, 2019, pp. 70–73). Hence, while a pure focus on vulnerability objectifies the women*, a sole emphasis on agency without the inclusion of vulnerability diminishes the harsh reality of gender-based discrimination. While vulnerability cannot be equated to the non-existence of agency, agency cannot be equated to the non-existence of vulnerability. Deriving from this, comprehensive research on refugee women* should not treat agency and vulnerability as dichotomous and separated entities. However, existing literature is scarce. While women* as specific subject of refugee research are already rare (Gatt et al., 2016, p. 2), agency and vulnerability are still widely treated as oppositions (Alhayek, 2015, p. 3). Here, the fluid and transitional relationship between the concepts is ignored, possible interactions have not been systematically studied. Feminist postcolonial explorations are even more limited, especially when focusing on the present borderscapes of the EU. The research that does exist, mainly identifies the objectifica-

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[3] This paper aims to include all persons, who self-identify (partially) as woman* or are read as woman* by others, including cis, as much as inter, non-binary, trans* and any other non-exclusionary gender dimensions. This definition aims to follow an inclusionary feminist approach, while recognizing certain forms of potential vulnerability that correlate with gender dimensions or perceived gender dimensions.

tion of refugee women* on an epistemological basis. However, active attempts to overcome epistemological violence are lacking.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Questions

The problem statement deduced from this research gap therefore expresses that from a feminist postcolonial perspective, *an unidentified relationship exists between the vulnerability and agency of refugee women* during their flight at the EU's borderscapes.* In order to overcome this denial of agency without ignoring the specific hardships of vulnerability that refugee women* face and that influence their actions, this paper – being situated in the critical migration research – answers the following research question: *What is the relationship between vulnerability and agency of refugee women* during their flight at the borderscapes of the EU from a feminist postcolonial perspective?* In order to gain comprehensive insights into the two separate concepts underlying this question, two additional operationalizing sub-questions focus on the specificities of vulnerability and agency. Hence, the first sub-question asks: *What constitutes refugee women's* vulnerability at the borderscapes of the EU from a feminist postcolonial perspective?* The second question completes the research interest by focusing on the following: *What constitutes refugee women's* agency at the borderscapes of the EU from a feminist postcolonial perspective?*

1.3 The Structure of the Paper

The next paragraphs offer a short introduction into the paper's underlying understandings and ethics. Then, the theoretical feminist postcolonial background of this paper follows. This is followed by a presentation of possible relationship variations between vulnerability and agency derived from existing theory. During the third chapter, the methodology of this paper is further specified.

The fourth chapter focuses on the content analysis. This is followed by the fifth chapter, discussing the various results by re-contextualizing them to existing literature. Last, the concluding chapter summarizes the main outcomes of the paper.

1.4 Fundamental Understandings

This paper relies on a holistic and processual ontology that sees the world as consisting "of processes of being as becoming, of tendencies and countervailing tendencies, […] where such developments can be both intrinsic as well as extrinsic to a given system" (Lawson, 2003, p. 139). This means that we perceive the "basic structure of reality" (Lawson, 2003, p. 120) as interchanging multi-facetted flux. More concretely, flight is seen as socio-spatial process, in which vulnerability and agency exist as interacting, flexible, and multi-dimensional layers (cf. Brambilla, 2015; cf. Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). This ontology is epistemologically translated into a research practice that is characterized by connectivity and fluidity: The performative approach of this paper, "the collection, organisation and dissemination of research which moves beyond traditional modes" (Roberts, 2008, p. 2) reflects to overcome essentializing, static, and epistemological violent research practices. This is primarily characterized by the inclusion of women* affected by the research as acting and self-determined subjects (see Chapter 3).

Closely entangled to the ontological and epistemological understanding, the theoretical approach acknowledges the subjectivity and agency of refugee women* despite a dispositive (Foucault, 1978) of othering (Hall, 1997) based on patriarchal and postcolonial objectification (see Chapter 2.1). This allows to overcome the genderless or androcentric perspective on migration, while aiming to include matters of racism and Eurocentrism. Further, critical scholars identified

that not a certain collection of methods but the "research ethics" (Ackerly & True, 2010, p. 163) underlying a study shape feminist postcolonial methodology.

1.5 The Research Ethics

It has become clear that refugee women* face objectification through other actors during their flight as much as through researchers (Esposito et al., 2019, p. 407). The paper therefore follows two goals: First, to contribute to the knowledge production surrounding the vulnerability and agency of refugee women* during their flight to and within the EU. This objective follows a research perspective that aims "to transform, and not simply explain, the social order" (Ackerly & True, 2010, p. 2). Only by better understanding their lived reality, this knowledge can be actively used to support and empower the affected women*. This includes their misrepresentation in academia as much as their situation during the flight. The second aim of this research is closely connected to the former: The paper tries to overcome the epistemological violence that silences and objectifies these women* by including performative and processual feminist postcolonial methodology that treats the research subjects as agents and actively includes them in the study process as testimonees and co-researcher. This approach recognizes that it is only possible to analyze the agency of subjects on a theoretical level, when acknowledging their existence as subjects on a methodological level as well. Simplified, the paper follows the concept: Practice agency to study agency.

At the very basis, this approach requires "self-conscious reflections on the purpose of research, our [the researchers'] conceptual frameworks, our ethical responsibilities, method choices, and our assumptions about what it means to know rather than believe something" (Ackerly & True, 2010,

p. 6). Hence, a critical assessment of the research itself and its purpose are essential. Focusing on the aspect of epistemological violence in regard to this paper, a number of important considerations arise. Studying refugee women's* vulnerability demonstrates the pre-assumption of them being vulnerable. The research could be criticized as further contributing to the marginalization of an already marginalized group by contributing to harmful labeling and othering processes. Considering and embracing these important points of ethical guidance, this paper is based on achieving the exact opposite: By co-researching together with an affected woman* and using self-published testimonials as source for the analysis, the research aims at an inclusive approach that counters objectifying othering processes. Here, the research design intents to decrease generalizations or pre-assumptions that label refugee women* as essentially vulnerable by acknowledging the multitude of dimensions constituting vulnerability. It also allows for an open outcome that can include gender and/or flight unrelated dimensions of vulnerability.

At the same time, the existing literature does give the impression of existing vulnerabilities that stem from the intersecting situation of being perceived as refugee and as woman*. A realistic depiction of the situation and the possibility of empowerment therefore require the acknowledgement of vulnerability without equating this vulnerability with lack of agency. The literature assessment in the theory chapter of this paper clearly shows the gap in research regarding the relationship between agency and vulnerability in general and even more so during situations of flight (see Chapter 2.5). Remaining silent in the face of lacking knowledge on a topic that potentially causes harm to people – marginalized and in

situations of grave danger – would in turn contribute to epistemological violence on a different level. Still, the framing and design of such contributions matter greatly. The details of the paper's approach to overcome extractivist and objectifying research methods are therefore further introduced in the methodology section of this paper (see Chapter 3.1).

2. Theories

2.1 Vulnerability

2.1.1 Defining Vulnerability

In order to analyze the vulnerability of refugee women* at the EU's borderscapes, it is essential to define the term vulnerability first. In common interdisciplinary conceptualization, vulnerability is defined as a "state of susceptibility to harm from exposure to stresses […] and from the absence of capacity to adapt" (Adger, 2006, p. 268). However, this conceptualization of vulnerability is widely disputed among feminist postcolonial scholars, who criticize the relationship between the concept and hegemonial power structures (cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 68).

Recognizing this hegemonial construction of vulnerability (cf. Hall, 1997, p. 235) and the consequent relational character of the concept, feminist postcolonial research understands the conception of vulnerability as layers (Luna, 2009, p. 128), i.e., dimensions. Hereby, the dimensions of vulnerability are the result of the interaction between "particular circumstances and […] own characteristics " (Luna, 2009, p. 129) and can therefore change over time and overlap (Luna, 2009, p. 129), possibly creating new dimensions of vulnerability (cf. Crenshaw, 1991). These dimensions can be located on two different levels of vulnerability. First, the "discursive" (Lorenz, 2018, p. 82) level that includes the essentializing and binary identity construction as vulnerable (cf.

Lorenz, 2018, pp. 71–72) based on single characteristics (Luna, 2009, p. 129) and second, the factual, i.e., materialized level (cf. Butler, 2014, p. 8; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82), recognizing that humans are "embodied subjects" (Butler, 2014, p. 3) within given materialized conditions within which vulnerability can be manifested.

Concretizing the scope of vulnerability in addition to this described composition, a postcolonial definition of vulnerability includes the proneness to manifested and structural violence (cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82). Hence, combining the feminist and the postcolonial perspective, this paper defines vulnerability as combination of dimensions that substitute a person's proneness to structural and direct violence. Here, direct violence describes a narrow concept of violence, including the physical, personal, and manifested violence committed by someone against someone (cf. Imbusch, 2017, p. 29). Structural violence follows a broader conception and includes latent forms of violence (Kailitz, 2007, p. 134), occurring when there is a discrepancy between the situation that is and the situation that could be – the potential and the actual (Imbusch, 2017, p. 30). Despite different modes of expression, this paper considers structural and direct forms of violence as entangled rather than opposing concepts. Structural violence is seen as a system within which direct violence happens and that enables and/or legitimizes direct violence. Spanning across both – direct and structural violence – Gender Based Violence (GBV) describes gendered violence in the form of direct and sex-based acts of violence. Connected to this research, this can be interpreted as proneness to direct gender-based violence, including assaults by the partner (Heise et al., 2002, p. 6),

other (male*) asylum seekers (Chojnacki & Paping, 2016, p. 22), smugglers[4] (Çalışkan, 2018, p. 13) or border soldiers (Hauser & Mosbahi, 2018, p. 89). Additionally, GBV includes the gendered circumstances of violence. Women* become subjects of violence because of being classified as women* as part of a social category (Binder, 2001, pp. 167–168). Here, the violence can take place either structurally or directly, while the act of violence itself does not have to be sex-based.

Structuring these complex relations, the following paragraphs introduce the various levels and dimensions of vulnerability in connection to the research topic.

2.1.2 Vulnerability Dimensions of Refugee Women* at the EU's Borderscapes

Being perceived as woman* and as refugee are regarded as dimensions of vulnerability that all refugee women* at the EU's borderscapes share and that are extended by additional layers of vulnerability. Although theoretical insights on the subject are scarce, empirical critical migration research does mention additional categories that influence the women's* proneness to violence. Here, one can differentiate between a discursive-level vulnerability (cf. Hall, 1997, p. 243; Lorenz, 2018, p. 82) and a materialized-level vulnerability (cf. Butler, 2014, p. 8; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82).

As introduced earlier, this paper understands discursive vulnerability as dimensions of proneness to violence that are formed through the interaction between characteristics of the refugee women* and given power structures (cf. Luna, 2009, p. 129), leading to essentializing and othering identity constructions (cf. Hall, 1997, p. 243;

cf. Lorenz, 2018, pp. 71–72). Literature includes the dimensions of ethnicity & nationality (e.g. (Krystalli et al., 2018, p. 28) and religion (e.g. Krystalli et al., 2018). The materialized level of vulnerability focuses on factual dimensions of refugee women's* situation at the EU's borderscapes that substitute manifested layers of vulnerability in addition to – and possibly resulting from – the discursive dimensions of vulnerability (cf. Butler, 2014, p. 8; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82). Based on existing literature, materialized vulnerability can be further divided into the dimensions of companionship (cf. Çalışkan, 2018, p. 12) and financial situation (e.g. (Baird, 2014, p. 129).

2.2 Agency

2.2.1 Defining Agency

Following, the concept of agency as the second crucial concept of this paper is introduced. Coming back to the definition offered in the introduction of this paper, the term agency describes one's "capacity to act" (Williams, F., & Popay, J., 1999, p. 158). Following a feminist definition, this includes two different – yet closely interlinked – aspects. First, it depicts an intentionality of an action, including „all ways in which action is cognitively and emotionally pointed toward some purpose" (Ortner, 2006, p. 134). Second, it describes the actual possibility of action in the real world, "meaning agency is about power, about acting within relations of social inequality, asymmetry, and force" (Ortner, 2006, p. 139). While all humans have the intentionality aspect of agency in common (Ortner, 2006, p. 136), power relations impact the actual ability to act. Hence, acknowledging that all humans are inherently willing to act, the power to act needs to be related back to

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[4] While this paper defines smuggling of humans as "consensual transaction" (Bhabha, 2005, p. 3) regarding movement, human trafficking involves coercion

regarding movement by the human trafficker (Bhabha, 2005, p. 2).

the social position of the refugee women* within the bigger power structure of the borderscapes that enables or limits agency.

2.2.2 Agency Dimensions of Refugee Women* at the EU's Borderscapes

Although agency is often regarded in its entirety as wider concept, critical research offers empirical studies on various agency dimensions. Those dimensions identified as agency of refugee women* include the agency over movement (e.g. (Turan et al., 2016, p. 161), agency over contraception (Kiura, 2014, p. 159). and agency over clothing (Huisman & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2005). Although all three dimensions of agency acknowledge refugee women's will and power to act, the introduced critical literature also points out the need to understand agency in relation to the further context – the social structures and power relations.[5] Proceeding with this goal while focusing more specifically on the main research interest of this paper, the following paragraphs further introduce the relationship between vulnerability and agency.

2.3 The Relationship between Vulnerability and Agency

As has been mentioned in the introduction (see Chapter 1.1), conventional and hegemonial research describes the concepts of vulnerability and agency as dichotomous and mostly opposing concepts. By researchers as much as by their surroundings, individuals are either perceived as a vulnerable object or an acting subject. The concept of vulnerability is equated with the lack of agency (Alhayek, 2015, p. 3), while a scientific focus on agency often ignores the influence of vulnerability on the decision making power (Gill & Donaghue, 2013, p. 241). While Butler calls the undoing of the binarity of terms a "feminist task" (Butler, 2014, p. 16), Esposito et al. identify that "women strive to negotiate, manipulate, and resist disciplinary and regulatory mechanisms and normative power" (Esposito et al., 2019, p. 404). Hence, the agency of women* – acting as subjects at borderscapes – is recognized within the limits of a discriminating and othering system. Agency is presented as reality within the framework of vulnerability. Interestingly, hardly any research focuses on the other direction of the relationship – the influence of agency on vulnerability – although Butler suggests that "vulnerability can emerge within resistance" (Butler, 2014, p. 18) and therefore as a result of agency.

Including Archer's (1995) 'morphogenetic cycle' as a theoretical base allows to concretize the holistic and processual ontology of this paper by including this 'vice versa relationship'. The cycle consists of three phases: "1. Agents encounter structural conditions 2. Within these conditions, people pursue their interests 3. These actions result in the elaboration or modification of the original structural conditions" (Archer, 1995, as cited in Hunt, 2008, p. 282). At the same time, the cycle can be used to describe the interplay between the pre-existing power relations underlying different possibilities to act as an agent as described by Ortner (2006, p. 136) and the possibility to act within and change those circumstances, even when less powerful than others or othered by them. Hence, it allows to recognize refugee women* as both – as agents and as vulnerable – overcoming their

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[5] The deduced agency dimensions also suggest the materialized expression of agency (i.e., the actual clothing and contraception of the women*). However, due to the inseparable entanglement with the women's* own characteristics in all cases, i.e., their will to act, we abstained from a possible distinction between levels of discursive and materialized agency.

epistemological objectification and infantilization (cf. Turner, 2019, p. 601). This means that at the EU's borderscapes, refugee women* encounter existing conditions that influence their proneness to violence and their power of agency. It also implies that they act as agents within these conditions and that the conditions – and therefore their vulnerability – are being modified by those exact actions.

2.3.1 Operationalizing Archer's Cycle

2.3.1.1 Refugee Women* Encounter Vulnerability

The first step of Archer's cycle (1995) describes the encounter of the agent with the given structural conditions. These structures are pre-existing and considered "a 'structural inheritance', which leaves people involuntarily situated" (Archer, 1995, as cited in Hunt, 2008, p. 282). Translating this general theory into the specific context of this research, the different dimensions of othering and vulnerability that refugee women* face at the EU's borderscapes are considered to form the basis of the 'structural inheritance'.

2.3.1.2 Agency within Vulnerability

The second step focuses on the actions within the given structure (Archer, 1995, as cited in Hunt, 2008, p. 282) i.e., the women* act as agents within the given structures of vulnerability. It has been previously established that vulnerability and agency are no dichotomously opposing concepts and that refugee women* act as agents (e.g., Huisman & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2005; Turan et al., 2016, p. 161). Yet, another aspect is evident: Depending on the dimension of vulnerability that influence the pre-existing structure refugee women* find themselves in, one can expect differences in their scope of agency (Ortner, 2006, p. 139). Still, the influence of these layers, and therefore the vulnerability, and their relationship to agency are disputed. Some scholars suggest

that refugee women* who are more vulnerable are more limited in their agency than refugee women* who are less vulnerable. Still, researchers have identified an alternate possible relationship: That vulnerability enables agency (Levy, 2019, p. 2). Being perceived as vulnerable, especially following the 'womenandchildren' paradigm (Enloe, 1990), refugee women* at the EU's borderscapes strategically use their perception as helpless victim and object.

2.3.1.3 Consequences of Vulnerability and Agency

Describing step 3 of Archer's (1995) cycle, the "actions [described in step 2] result in the elaboration or modification of the original structural conditions" (Archer, 1995, as cited in Hunt, 2008, p. 282). For the case of this research and based on the varying insights and examples given by the literature, different outcomes for the structural conditions of the refugee women* seem possible. The conditions and position within the structure that refugee women* face is expected to improve in case where lower vulnerability leads to higher agency. However, there are scenarios, in which a modification of the original structure or the position within the structure is expected to stagnate or worsen. This is the case for vulnerable women* if higher vulnerability leads to less agency. It is also possible to imagine situations in which acts of agency result in a new proneness to violence, based on exactly this agency, and therefore create an additional dimension of vulnerability (cf. Butler, 2014, p. 18). Here, more vulnerable women* are expected to have limited power to change their position within the system and the system itself.

2.4 Summary of the Preliminary Insights

Taking all the information offered by existing literature into account, it is possible to formulate initial insights that serve as preliminary guidance

during the analysis and interpretation of the results and are reconnected to the final outcomes during the discussion chapter (see Chapter 5.4). First, it appears that vulnerability is constituted of different dimensions that result from the interaction with power structures (cf. Luna, 2009, pp. 128–129) and influence the women's* proneness to violence (cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82) on a discursive (cf. Hall, 1997, p. 243; Lorenz, 2018, p. 82) and a materialized level (cf. Butler, 2014, p. 8; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82). Second, it seems that the women * possess agency – the will and power to act (Ortner, 2006, pp. 136–139). Nevertheless, this agency appears to be influenced by the existing power structures (Ortner, 2006, p. 139), and is therefore closely connected to vulnerability and equally fluid and processual. Relating both aspects to Archer's 'morphogenetic cycle' (1995), a highly processual and multidimensional relationship between the women's* agency and their vulnerability at the EU's borderscapes is expected. Interlinked with the given power structures, their vulnerability appears to impact their agency, while their agency also seems to influence their vulnerability.

2.5 Reflections upon the Existing Literature

Critically reflecting upon the introduced literature, it has to be mentioned that feminist postcolonial scholars offer in-depth analyses of the concepts of agency and vulnerability, especially from a gendered perspective. However, these considerations appear to be rather theoretical and leave room for a systematic application in practice.

This research gap also applies to the conceptualization of refugee women's* agency at the EU's borderscapes: No further insights on the expressions of agency – regarding certain actions or dimensions of power – are given. As a result, the relationship between both concepts leaves much room for interpretation. Further complicating this lack of research, it is important to once again consider the dimension of epistemological violence. It is impossible to reconstruct the exact involvement of the affected women* in the knowledge production of the literature. Certainly, it appears that they were mostly involved as research 'objects' rather than as self-determined researchers.

3. Methodology

The following chapter focuses on the paper's methodology, consisting of the research design, the data material, and the content analysis and interpretation.

3.1 The Research Design

This research contributes to the knowledge production on the vulnerability and agency of refugee women* at the EU's borderscapes. This choice of research focus has been previously introduced based on the specific circumstances for refugee women* within these socio-spaces and the existing research gap (see Chapters 1 & 2). Following the research question, we chose an exploratory qualitative research design that considers existing literature while allowing for the recognition of abductive new explanations (Brüsemeister, 2008, p. 48). For this, the research is based on a qualitative summarizing content analysis (Mayring, 2015, pp. 70–90) of five narrative testimonials by refugee women* describing their flight at the EU's borderscapes.

The narrative testimonials operationalize the underlying processual and holistic ontology that understands flight as socio-spatial process, in which vulnerability and agency exist as flexible and multi-dimensional layers, and its epistemic translation in Archer's (1995) cycle. This choice of material is additionally motivated by the specific possibility to form deductive codes based on the categories of vulnerability and agency derivated

from existing literature (see Chapters 2.1.2 & 2.2.2), while simultaneously coding inductive categories of the narrative descriptions that enable the exploration of so far unknown categories. The specific research design is also closely related to the second important layer of the research: Next to the content-based knowledge production, the paper makes use of performative methods (cf. Roberts, 2008) that let refugee women* speak for themselves rather than speaking about them. In addition to the material, this performativity is found during the content analysis and interpretation process that was conducted in a co-researching process together with Suh Mary, a refugee woman* situated in Germany.

This paper regards triangulation as "strategy for justifying and underpinning knowledge by gaining additional knowledge", that allows for a consecutive knowledge production (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, as cited in Flick, 2004, p. 179) and aims to overcome epistemic othering processes and violence committed against the persons' affected by the paper. Hence, the "investigator triangulation" (Flick, 2004, pp. 178–179), which is the conduction of data interpretation in a group, increases the quality of data interpretation, especially in terms of violence reduction. Further, co-researching with Suh Mary allowed the inclusion of additional information into the process. While her narrative experiences are not directly included in the research as material for the content-based interpretation, her contributions strongly influenced the knowledge production and the research design. This "between-method triangulation" (Flick, 2004, pp. 180–181) includes the combination of different methods and steps in the data collection and analysis process – overcoming the binarity of data collection and content analysis – in order to grasp the structure of the problem as much as "its meaning to the affected" (Fielding & Fielding,

1986, as cited in Flick, 1991, p. 433). Hence, the conventional notion of research is disrupted, as it does not follow the "traditional, linear conception of collection, interpretation and dissemination" (Roberts, 2008, p. 7).

Operationalizing these methodological considerations, the research process followed the subsequent steps: The material choice and review, the data coding, the transferal of preliminary categories, the summary of the preliminary analysis, including the additional information provided by Suh Mary, and the relation back to the theoretical framework. During the fifth and last step of communicative validation (Mayring, 2018, p. 21), we finalized these interpretations and the wider implications for the paper.

3.2 The Data Material

The primary data of this paper is composed of five different narrative testimonials that were published by the International Women* Space (IWS). To further unveil the details of the interviews and the connection to the methodology of this paper, IWS and the interviews need further introduction.

3.2.1 The International Women* Space

The IWS is "a feminist, anti-racist political group in Berlin with migrant and refugee women and non-migrant women as members" (International Women* Space, 2021a) that became a registered association in 2017. The main work of IWS lies in "fight[ing] patriarchy and document[ing] everyday violence, racism, sexism and all kinds of discrimination" (International Women* Space, 2021a). The IWS states: "We are fed up with people speaking about us and not with us. Women's resistance is often oppressed, and Women's history hidden or ignored. We take on the responsibility to counteract this by documenting, making visible, and publicising our stories in our own words" (International Women* Space, 2021a).

Most noteworthy for this research, IWS published the books 'IN OUR OWN WORDS' (International Women* Space, 2015) and 'WE EXIST, WE ARE HERE' (International Women* Space, 2018).Both books publish the testimonials of refugee women* in Germany and document first-hand experiences (International Women* Space, 2015, p. 4). Hereby, they follow "the Latin American tradition of testimonial literature – looking to amplify the voices of communities that, all too often, go unheard" (International Women* Space, 2021b). This includes the signification of the testimonials as collective narrations (International Women* Space, 2018, p. 4) rather than purely autobiographical descriptions. The testimonials can thereby be described as "sociobiographic" (Brüsemeister, 2008, p. 103), generating information not only about the women* as individuals but as representatives of broader collectives and structures. For the paper, all testimonials were included that describe flights that started within the last 15 years. This generous time frame was chosen due to the processual nature of flight that often constitutes of different phases – sometimes taking years. As testimonials of flight, all contributions were included that offer a description of the process of movement to and within the EU. Five of the 18 testimonials fulfilled these criteria, all of which are shortly introduced in the appendix of this paper (see Appendix 1).

> "**We are self-publishing as a feminist act.** *It is our collective way of meaning-making. It gives us the freedom to utilise our skills, to self-educate, to self-empower. It makes us independent from an outside editor's censorship, content manipulation and instrumentalisation. From transcription to translation, from editing to proofreading, from photography to illustration, from layouting to printing: this book is*

the work of women." (International Women Space, 2018, p. 5)*

3.2.2 Critical Reflection upon the Selection of Data Material

It must be considered that an English translation of the testimonials was used as text material. In addition to the limitations resulting from the singularity of information provided – besides semantic information no further details including gestures, tone pitch, pauses, volume, or other non-verbal reactions of the testimonees are included in the transcripts – it is possible that the translation process slightly changed the testimonials' meaning. Moreover, the exact commencement of the data collection cannot be traced back due to the publication of the testimonials as coherent narrative text. Hence, possible inquiries by the IWF, subsequent shortenings, or other forms of data alteration remain unknown. However and despites these limitations, including the testimonies as material for this research was motivated by the performative and feminist postcolonial character that underlies the data collection and distribution of the testimonials.

Integrating existing data that was collected and published in a self-determined fashion with a specific focus on giving the research subjects control over the content seemed the most appropriate possibility to recognise and practice agency. Next to administrative challenges based on the current pandemic, conducting interviews for this research would have in turn reinforced existing epistemological violence by extractivating information that has already been provided in a more emancipatory fashion (cf. Burman, 2018, p. 56). Also, using interviews conducted by other researchers – if it

had been an option[6] – hardly would have offered the same emancipatory baseline. Hence, by integrating IWS' publications, we hope to further promote their work and raise awareness for their struggle: To speak for themselves rather than solely being spoken about (International Women* Space, 2021a). This aspect, and the offered transparency regarding the data collection and publication process, is considered more important and even opposed to the limitations that come with the purely semantic focus of the testimonials and criticism that regard narrative interviews as prone to distorted information rather than objective facts (BenEzer & Zetter, 2015, p. 313). This is reinforced by the epistemological violence underlying such objectifying 'neutral' and generalizing mainstream research as described in the theory chapter of this paper (see Chapter 2.1.1).

3.3 The Qualitative Content Analysis and Interpretation

As the second important layer of operationalising the performative feminist postcolonial methodology, the content analysis and interpretation process consisted of a joined co-researching with a refugee woman* currently based in Germany, Suh Mary. This is based on the acknowledgment that those affected by oppression possess valuable knowledge regarding their own situation that should be included in the interpretation processes (Torre, M. E. & Fine, 2006, p. 458), specifically to reduce epistemic violence (cf. Brunner, 2016) and othering dispositives (cf. Foucault, 1978; cf. Hall, 1997). The active participation during the research process allows for strong collaboration and new research structures (Given, 2006, p. 58) that

shape and shift the academic discourse and knowledge production.

3.3.1 The Co-Researcher: Suh Mary

Introducing Suh Mary[7]

Suh Mary lived in Cameroon until she came to Germany in 2017. She was trafficked into Germany by plane and was forced into prostitution. After nine months – pregnant with her son – she escaped her trafficker. Currently, she is based in North Rhine-Westphalia. In the past, she has worked as mentor for other women*, who experienced human trafficking, "to remove the stress in them or [show] how to live on without the stress. To forget about everything that has passed and move on with the present life that we have right now" (Appendix 2, Pos. 35). Regarding her participation in this research, she describes her motivation as the following:

Figure 1. Suh Mary

Note. Copyright 2021 by Suh Mary (Private Photo).

> *"[T]alking to different people and telling people about my experience, it motivates me. It motivates me to keep going. Yeah, it's like, you have a burden and you say it to somebody, though the problem is not solved but it reduces the stress […] because you have somebody to talk to"* (Appendix 2, Pos. 25).

Additionally, she was enthusiastic to create awareness and "to learn more from elsewhere" (Appendix 2, Pos. 27). Although Suh Mary did not

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[6]We contacted multiple researchers, whose literature is included in the paper. However, none was able to share their data material with us.

[7] During the communicative validation, we decided to include this photo of her in order to subjectify her despite her anonymity (Appendix 5, Pos. 149-155).

experience the inbetweenness of flight that determined the data material and – as everyone else – is shaped by her own background and experiences, on many other levels her experience and background add a valuable addition to the research, including her engagement as mentor that gave her further insight into other women's* stories. Like the testimonials, her contribution can be regarded "sociobiographic" (Brüsemeister, 2008, p. 103), generating information about herself but also about broader collectives and structures.

3.3.2 The Process of Co-Researching

As mentioned earlier, the co-researching part of the research process contained various dimensions. The first dimension included the formation of categories to reduce and abstract the data material in order to produce a condensed picture of the material including all epistemologically relevant content (cf. Mayring, 2010, pp. 611–613). This systematic approach also allowed an inter-subjective understanding of the data interpretation to outsiders that limits the danger of 'free interpretation' (Mayring, P., & Fenzl, T., 2019, p. 636). Here, the smallest text component that could substitute a code was defined as word or phrase (cf. Mayring, 2015, p. 61), while the largest text component suitable as code was defined as whole paragraph (cf. Mayring, 2015, p. 61). Because most categories and corresponding definitions were not concisely worded in the data, we also analyzed latent meaning that exceeds the "manifested surface content" (Mayring, 2015, p. 32). The aspects of validity and reliability were hereby warranted through the intra code and the inter code congruence (Mayring, P., & Fenzl, T., 2019, pp. 636–637). Leaving the path of conventional applications of both approaches, the congruence was determined through a performative and "collaborative approach" (Given, 2006, p. 58).

Similarly, the paraphrasing, summarizing, and reduction of data that constitute important parts of the summarizing qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015, p. 70) were done verbally during the meetings.

Afterwards, the transcription followed content-semantic regulations (Dresing, T. & Pehl, T., 2018, pp. 21–22). The transcripts are therefore available in written form (cf. Mayring, 2015, p. 55) and included in the appendix of this paper (see Appendix 2 & 3). and was transferred the transcripts into the data analysis software MAXQDA and translated our verbal coding into the software. Next to minor adjustments in the coding, such as the correction of vaguely or misleadingly used terms, this also included the arrangement and sorting of categories, together with the preliminary definition of the inductively reached categories, and the choice of anchor examples. Moreover, this step included the re-review of the category system to the starting material (Mayring, 2015, p. 70) while taking the theoretical background into account. Deduced from this, we formulated overarching assumptions. In a last step, we came together for a communicative validation (Mayring, 2018, p. 21), discussing the preliminary results and finalizing the assumptions (see Appendix 4 & 5). Minor adjustments afterwards were discussed through written communication.

4. Analysis

4.1. The Category System of Vulnerability

Coding vulnerability, we followed the definition offered in the theory chapter (see Chapter 2.1.1). Therefore, we coded categories describing the different dimensions of proneness to violence of refugee women* at the EU's borderscapes, constituting of the deductive vulnerability dimensions introduced in the theory chapter (see Chapter 2.1.2) and inductively formed categories.

Here, characteristics of the refugee women* that, in interaction with others, led to violence in at least one instance, were assigned as dimension of the discursive level of vulnerability (cf. Hall, 1997, p. 243; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82). Factual manifestations that led to violence at least once were coded as dimension of the materialized level of vulnerability (cf. Butler, 2014, p. 8; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82). In this regard, we coded 82 descriptions of violence, differentiated as direct violence (65 segments)[8] and structural violence (17 segments).[9] Out of these 82 segments of violence, we coded 14 as gender-unspecific direct violence that were perpetrated against refugees of various genders, including – but not exclusively directed against – women* in group situations. The remaining 68 segments, hence a clear majority, were coded as GBV directed specifically against refugee women* in addition to the violence they experienced as refugees.[10]

Altogether and across all interviews, we coded 105 segments describing vulnerability. These include all codes of proneness to violence in direct relation to violence and/or in relation to agency. Table 1 introduces the coded level of vulnerability, the name of the category and, if applicable, of the sub-categories. Moreover, it includes the definition of each category, an anchoring example, and the frequency of the codes (cf. Behnke et al., p. 365). While the deductive dimensions closely relate to the literature introduced in the theory chapter (see Chapter 2.1.2), the formation of the specific sub-categories and the definitions are a result of our analysis in compliance with the theoretical background. Meanwhile, all components of the inductively formed categories stem from our analysis.

Table 1. Coding guide for the dimensions of vulnerability.

Name of Category	Sub-Categories	Level of Vulnerability	Definition	Anchoring Example	Frequency
Deductive					
Financial Situation		Materialized (cf. Butler, 2014, p. 8; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82)	Monetary capital (Baird, 2014, p. 129) as manifested dimension of proneness to violence.	"She said the only way I could pay back the €35,000 I owed her was to work as a prostitute" (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018, p. 73).	27 codings across 5 testimonials
Companionship	1. Partner[11] 2. Other Male* Refugees	Materialized (cf. Butler, 2014, p. 8; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82)	The companionship of others as manifested dimension of proneness to violence. This includes	"He [Maryam's partner] took me to the bedroom and told me that I was a bitch and that if I had any	24 codings across 3 testimonials

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[8] We further divided direct violence into the sub-dimensions of sexual, physical, psychological, and economic violence.

[9] We further divided structural violence into the sub-dimensions of infrastructure, work, and fear of violence.

[10] Due to the limited space of this paper, we could not include further in-depth analyses of the various dimensions of violence found during the coding process.

[11] The companionship of the refugee women's* own family (besides their partner) was not coded as proneness to violence and therefore excluded from the category.
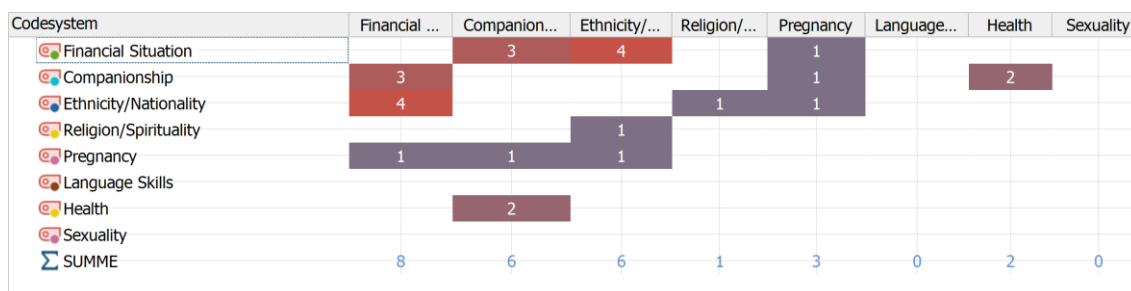
	3. Women*, Children & Families		the distinction between the partner (Heise et al., 2002, p. 6), other male* refugees, and other women*, children, and families (cf. Çalışkan, 2018, pp. 15–18).	honour left I should kill myself" (Testimonial 3: Maryam, 2018, p. 106).	
Ethnicity & Nationality	**1.** Legal Proof of Nationality **2.** (Non)Syrian **3.** (Non) W*oC)	**1.** Materialized (cf. Butler, 2014, p. 8; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82) **2. & 3.** Discursive (cf. Hall, 1997, p. 243; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82)	**1.** The legal proof of nationality, i.e., identification documents, as manifested dimension of proneness to violence (cf. Krystalli et al., 2018, p. 28). **2. & 3.** The interaction between the characteristic of (not) being Syrian (as cited in Krystalli et al., 2018, p. 28) and (not) being a W*oC (cf. Crenshaw, 2010; cf. Spivak, 1993) and given power structures as proneness to violence.	"[I]t is is not enough to have papers from the UNHCR in order to have protection from the police and from deportation" (Testimonial 3: Maryam, 2018, p. 104) "'I said 'No! No! No! Not prostitution!' She said: 'Yes, prostitution! There are no normal jobs for black girls to do in Italy!'" (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018, p. 73)	19 codings across 5 testimonials
Religion & Spirituality	**1.** Christianity **2.** Islam **3.** Voodoo	Discursive (cf. Hall, 1997, p. 243; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82)	The interaction between the characteristic of (not) belonging to or believing in Christianity (Krystalli et al., 2018, p. 32), Islam, or Voodoo and given power structures as proneness to violence.	"They showed us that they hate Muslims" (Testimonial 1: Anonymous, 2015, p. 184).	9 codings across 3 testimonials
Inductive					
Pregnancy		Discursive (cf. Hall, 1997, p. 243; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82)	The interaction between the characteristic of (not) being pregnant and given power structures as proneness to violence.	"He still said, 'Kill the bastard! My money's not complete.' […] He beat me up and I fell to the ground. He hit my stomach, over and over" (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018, p. 76).	13 codings across 2 testimonials
Language Skills	**1.** English **2.** Arabic	Discursive (cf. Hall, 1997, p. 243; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82)	The interaction between the characteristic of (not) having language	"The family treated me badly, very badly. […] I was just there like a	5 codings across 4 testimonials

	3. Kurdish 4. Polish		skills and given power structures as proneness to violence. This includes the languages English, Arabic, Kurdish, and Polish.	slave. I didn't speak Arabic, but Emmanuel could – only God knows what he told them" (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018, p. 74).	
Health	1. Physical Health 2. Psychological Health 3. Reproductive Health	Discursive (cf. Hall, 1997, p. 243; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82)	The interaction between the characteristic of (not) being healthy and given power structures as proneness to violence. This includes psychological, physical, and reproductive health.	"I was under a lot of psychological pressure and began to cut myself with a razor in the same room" (Testimonial 3: Maryam, 2018, p. 106).	5 codings across 3 testimonials
Sexuality[12]		Discursive (cf. Hall, 1997, p. 243; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82)	The interaction between the characteristic of (not) being hetero sexual and given power structures as proneness to violence.	"We had worked so hard to organise the Pride parade, but we had been beaten with sticks and rubber bullets, attacked with water tanks and pepper spray" (Testimonial 5: Dania, 2018, p. 216).	3 codings across 1 testimonial

Table 1 shows that both levels of materialized (cf. Butler, 2014, p. 8; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82) and discursive vulnerability (cf. Hall, 1997, p. 243; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82) were coded across the four dimensions of vulnerability deduced from existing critical literature – financial situation, companionship, ethnicity & nationality, and religion & spirituality – and the four inductively coded dimension. Altogether, the dimensions belonging to the materialized level of vulnerability were coded most frequently.[13]

Table 2. Code relations between the dimensions of vulnerability.

Codesystem	Financial ...	Companion...	Ethnicity/...	Religion/...	Pregnancy	Language...	Health	Sexuality
Financial Situation		3	4		1			
Companionship	3				1		2	
Ethnicity/Nationality	4			1	1			
Religion/Spirituality			1					
Pregnancy	1	1	1					
Language Skills								
Health		2						
Sexuality								
∑ SUMME	8	6	6	1	3	0	2	0

Note. Representation of the Code-Relations-Browser analysing the intersection of codes within the same segment across all testimonials. Created with the analysis tool MAXQDA.

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[12] Despite the sole coding within one testimonial, we decided to keep the category since all codes of sexuality as vulnerability were found within the only testimonial describing a non-heterosexual relationship (cf. Behnke et al., p. 365).
[13] See chapter 4.4 for a critical evaluation of this result.

Across all testimonials, a multitude of relationships between the dimensions of vulnerability was described. Table 2 shows that all dimensions of vulnerability besides sexuality and language skills were overlapping in the coding at least once, whereas the intersection between financial situation and ethnicity & nationality was overlapping in the most cases (four times). However, it must be considered that any additional insights, such as possible causal relationships, require further assessment.

4.2. The Category System of Agency

Following the definition of agency as willingness and power to act (Ortner, 2006, pp. 134–139) as introduced in the theory chapter (see Chapter 2.2.1), we coded all descriptions of refugee women's* will and/or power to act self-determinedly, constituting of the deductive agency dimensions introduced in the theory chapter (see Chapter 2.2.2) and inductively formed categories. All in all, we found 96 descriptions of refugee women's* agency across all five testimonials. Here, we coded 12 expressions of generic agency without the focus on a specific topic. A prime example for this expression of unspecified (lack of) agency is: "I felt like a slave, I had no life, no freedom, no world of my own." (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018, p. 74). Additionally, we coded 84 descriptions of agency that could be thematically categorized. Table 3 offers the name, and if applicable the name of the sub-categories, and the definition of the categories. It also presents an anchoring example and the frequency of the coded descriptions across the five testimonials (cf. Behnke et al., p. 365). While the deductive dimensions relate to the literature (Esposito et al., 2019, p. 409; Kiura, 2014; Turan et al., 2016, p. 161) as described in the theory chapter (see Chapter 2.2.2), the formation of the specific sub-categories and the definitions are a result of our analysis in compliance with the theoretical background. Meanwhile, all components of the inductively formed categories stem from our analysis. The single inductive dimensions are set into relation to existing relation during the discussion of the paper (see Chapter 5.2.3).

Table 3. Coding guide for the dimensions of agency.

Name of Category	Sub-Categories	Definition	Anchoring Example	Frequency
Deductive				
Agency over Movement & Settling	Escape of Violence	The will and power (Ortner, 2006, pp. 134–139) to decide over movement or the settlement at a place, including the escape of violent situations (Turan et al., 2016, p. 161).	"I demanded to stay" (Testimonial 1: Anonymous, 2015, p. 184).	53 codings across 5 testimonials
Sexual Agency	**1**. Contraception **2**. Forced Prostitution	The will and power (Ortner, 2006, pp. 134–139) to decide over sexual activities. This includes contraception (Kiura, 2014, p.159) and forced prostitution.	"I had to sleep with many men, never with protection" (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018, p. 74).	13 codings across 2 testimonials
Inductive				

| Financial Agency | **1**. Financial Administration

2. Financial Gain | The will and power (Ortner, 2006, pp. 134–139) to decide over financial matters. This includes the administration of money and the gain of money besides paid labor. | "[A]ll economic responsibilities were mine from now on" (Testimonial 3: Maryam, 2018, p. 100). | 13 codings across 3 testimonials |
| **Work-Related Agency** | | The will and power (Ortner, 2006, pp. 134–139) to decide over paid labor. This does not include forced prostitution. | "After one month I said I wanted to look for a job. I could not stay at home like this, getting raped by this man who used me whenever he wants to have sex and beat me when I refuse. So I discussed it with him and he said, 'Okay'" (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018, p. 74). | 5 codings across 2 testimonials |

Table 3 shows that of the three categories offered by literature – movement, contraception, and clothing – we only coded the first two. Our reasoning to exclude clothing as dimension, although we coded one segment talking about the agency over clothing (Testimonial 3: Maryam, 2018, p. 104), is further explained during the discussion chapter (see Chapter 5.2.2). Across all coded agency dimension, the agency of movement & settling was coded most frequently and was the only agency dimension found across all five testimonials. Since agency over contraception was only coded in one instance, we decided to subsume the code (Behnke et al., p. 365) under the dimension and category of sexual agency.

Table 4. Code relations between the dimensions of agency.

Codesystem	General...	Movement...	Financial ...	Sexual ...	Work A...
General Expressions of Agency			2	2	
Movement Agency			3	3	
Financial Agency	2	3		3	
Sexual Agency	2	3	3		2
Work Agency				2	
∑ SUMME	4	6	8	10	2

Note. Representation of the Code-Relations-Browser presenting the intersection of codes within the same segment across all testimonials. Created with the analysis tool MAXQDA.

Similarly to the dimensions of vulnerability, the code-relation analysis of MAXQDA (Table 4) demonstrates the overlap of agency codings within segments. All dimensions of agency were coded as intersecting with at least one other dimension of agency. While this underlines the entanglement of layers, one must not deduce any further reasoning from this without additional analyses.

Lastly, we coded six instances, where agency led to violence or was expected to lead to violence.[14]

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[14] These results are further discussed in Chapter 5.3.3 in relation to a possible conceptualization of agency as dimension of vulnerability.

4.3. The Coded Relationship of Vulnerability and Agency

Coming to the coded relationship between agency and vulnerability, the analysis offers various insights. A first Code-Matrix analysis operationalized by MAXQDA gives a general introduction into the code distribution across the five testimonials (Table 5).

Table 5. The code-matrix across the five testimonials

Codesystem	Testimonial 1	Testimonial 2	Testimonial 3	Testimonial 4	Testimonial 5	SUM…
Financial Situation	11	9	4	1	2	27
Companionship	8	8	8			24
Ethnicity/Nationality	6	2	8	1	2	19
Religion/Spirituality	5	3	1			9
Pregnancy	7	6				13
Language Skills	1	2	1		1	5
Health		1	1		3	5
Sexuality					3	3
General Expressions of Agency	2	3	6		1	12
Movement Agency	18	11	12	2	10	53
Financial Agency	3	8	2			13
Sexual Agency		12	1			13
Work Agency		3	2			5
∑ SUMME	61	68	46	4	22	201

Note. Representation of the Code-Matrix-Browser presenting the quantity of codes per testimonial. Created with the analysis tool MAXQDA.

Table 5 shows that all five testimonials described instances of vulnerability and of agency. By further using the codes relations tool of MAXQDA, it became clear that certain dimensions of vulnerability are connected to specific forms of agency.[15]

Due to the limited space of the paper however, the further analysis focuses on the influence of different dimensions of vulnerability on the general concept of agency, constituting of the four of thematic agency dimensions and the 11 expressions generic agency. This is based on the compartmentalized connections between the single dimensions as much as the aim to include the thematically non-specific descriptions of agency into the limited space of the analysis. The 'vice versa relationship', the possible influence of agency on vulnerability is further discussed during the reconnection to the theoretical background (see Chapter 5.3.3).

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[15] The four relationships between single dimensions of vulnerability and agency overlapping within one code segment in more than three instances are: Financial situation and the agency of movement & settling (15 segments), ethnicity & nationality and the agency of movement & settling (13 segments), pregnancy and the agency of movement & settling (10 segments), financial situation and financial agency (six segments).

4.3.1. Refugee Women* and Agency

Altogether, we coded an influence of the various dimensions of vulnerability on the refugee women's* agency in 72 segments. Out of these, 32 instances were specifically linked to the women's* gender. In 19 segments, being a refugee woman* led to a decrease in agency, while in 13 segments it increased agency. Out of these 13 descriptions, the majority was linked to pregnancy (10 segments).[16] Additionally, three segments were linked to the treatment by institutions present at the EU's borderscapes.

4.3.2 Financial Situation and Agency

We coded 20 descriptions of a relationship between the testimonees' financial situation and their agency in all five testimonials. In all of them, a better financial situation increased the testimonees' agency, while a worse financial situation limited their agency.

4.3.3 Companionship and Agency

Companionship was coded across three testimonials and in nine segments as related to agency. In five segments, the companionship was related to the limitation of agency. In both documents that mentioned the limitation of agency testimonials (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018; Testimonial 3: Maryam, 2018), the partners were the ones responsible for the limitation. Additionally, two testimonials described the enhancement of agency of movement & settling through companionship in four instances. Three of the descriptions were connected to the companionship of children (Testimonial 1: Anonymous, 2015, p. 185), while one description was linked to the companionship of a

Syrian family.in this case the dimension of ethnicity & nationality and companionship.

4.3.4 Ethnicity & Nationality and Agency

In 14 segments and across all five testimonials, we coded a relationship between ethnicity & nationality and agency. Here, in nine instances the ethnicity & nationality limited the testimonees' agency. As described above, eight of these segments were related to the agency of movement & settling. This relation comprises of the lack of legal proof of nationality (four times) but also racism expressed by local population that either hindered or motivated the continuous flight (four times) and the refusal of border police to let non-Syrians pass (one time). In one instance, racism led to the limitation of agency regarding work and sexuality (International Women* Space, 2018, p. 73). At the same time, ethnicity & nationality led to increased agency in five segments.

4.3.5 Religion & Spirituality and Agency

Altogether, we coded eight passages that described a relationship between religion & spirituality and agency. Here, a clear differentiation could be drawn between the different religions and spiritualities. Islam and voodoo were connected to all seven instances of reduced agency. (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018, pp. 73–75). Opposed to that, Christianity was linked to increased agency of movement in one instance (Testimonial 1: Anonymous, 2015, p. 184).

4.3.6 Pregnancy and Agency

Additionally, we found 11 descriptions of the relationship between agency and pregnancy in two testimonials, both of which were the only of the

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[16] Although the paper considers the gender dimension of being a woman* and pregnancy as not necessarily overlapping, this specific context focuses on vulnerability resulting from existing power structures. Here, it is assumed that pregnant individuals are read as women* by others and that the resulting vulnerability is based on this possibly misgendered perception.

five describing pregnancy altogether (Testimonial 1: Anonymous, 2015; Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018). In 10 of these instances, pregnancy enhanced the agency, nine of them – as earlier described – regarding the agency of movement & settling. At the same time, pregnancy was the only dimension of vulnerability relating to which we found two instances of agency's component of will to act: Mercy's will to escape the forced prostitution increased (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018, p. 76). In only one instance, the pregnancy limited agency in relation to movement & settling.

4.3.7 Language Skills and Agency

We also found five instances across four testimonials that described the relationship between language skills and agency. In all of them, the relationship had the same direction: Lacking language skills decreased agency.

4.3.8 Health and Agency

Health was coded three times in relation to agency, all of which were found in Dania's testimonial. In all segments, the relation concerned her decreased physical health based on a knee injury and the resulting decrease in agency of movement & settling (Testimonial 5: Dania, 2018, pp. 217–218).

4.3.9 Sexuality and Agency

As described earlier, we only found codes regarding sexuality within Dania's (2018) testimonial. Hence, both descriptions of the relationship between sexuality and agency were found in her testimonial. In both segments, she described the decrease of agency regarding movement & settling

through her sexual orientation: Due to her sexuality itself and activism in the LGBTQIA+ community, she had to leave Turkey in order to be safe (Testimonial 5: Dania, 2018, pp. 216–217).

4.4. Critical Evaluation of the Analysis

While considering the results of our research and before further interpreting them, some limits must be taken into consideration. As mentioned, the scope and space of this paper inhibits in-depth analyses of the single dimensions introduced.

Hence, the complexity and fluidity of vulnerability, agency, violence, and the relationship between them, is only represented at the very surface.[17] More generally, the coding and analysis depend completely on our interpretation of the written data material since it was not possible to get into personal contact and validate the results with the testimonees themselves. Despite the focus on inter-coder validation that was an essential part of our research process, the analysis lies therefore at risk of reproducing our perception of the testimonials rather than the experiences of the testimonees themselves. For example, this bias might explain the difference in the numbers of codings between direct (65 segments) and structural (17 segments) violence. While the results could suggest that direct violence is perpetrated more than structural violence, it could also be the case that the subtlety of structural violence restricted our analysis. While it seems likely that the testimonees' focused their testimonials on the direct violence committed against them by specific individuals, it does not mean that they did not also experience structural forms of violence that they

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[17] For example, we additionally coded the categories of protecting & caring for others, being deceived, environment, and personal network as influences on agency. Since they did not appear to be related to violence (hence, no vulnerability) or constitute separate dimensions of agency, they were excluded from further analyses.

either did not describe or that we did not recognize.

Similarly, the coding of materialized dimensions of vulnerability as most frequent dimensions could suggest the prevalence of manifested levels of vulnerability as much as our lacking recognition of all cases of discursive vulnerability. Likewise, the context of the testimonials could explain the comparably high frequency of agency of movement & settling (53 segments): Since the text fragments focus on the testimonees' flight, it seems reasonable to assume that they describe aspects of movement in more detail compared to other facets of the testimonees' lives. These examples demonstrate that the explorative approach and the formation of inductive categories require an especially careful consideration of possible re-interpretations (Mayring, 2015, p. 38) that influence the research's validity as much as its reliability. Hence, the following chapter focuses on countering possible "technical vagueness" (Mayring, 2015, p. 52) of the interpretation with "theoretical stringency" (Mayring, 2015, p. 52) in order to limit potential biases.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Vulnerability of Refugee Women* at the EU's Borderscapes

5.1.1 General Conclusions regarding the Vulnerability of Refugee Women* at the EU's Borderscapes

The analysis demonstrates the existence of refugee women's* vulnerability at the EU's borderscapes. The proneness to violence seems to be composed of materialized (cf. Butler, 2014, p. 8; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82) and discursive (cf. Hall, 1997, p. 243; cf. Lorenz, 2018, p. 82) dimensions that constitute the testimonees' vulnerability (Luna, 2009, p. 128) and that interact with each other. This aligns with the intersectional feminist understanding of discrimination, considering the intersection and entanglement of various forms of discrimination with each other (Crenshaw, 1991). With regard to our research, the primary interaction of vulnerability dimensions – being a refugee and a woman* – is underlined by the fact that 68 segments out of 82 codes of violence against refugees described by the testimonees were cases of GBV. Hence, while being a refugee itself is a dimension of vulnerability increasing the proneness to violence, as expected, the dimension clearly intersects with the dimension of gender.[18] In order to further answer the second operationalizing research sub-question: 'What constitutes refugee women's* vulnerability at the borderscapes of the EU?', the following paragraphs discuss the results of the different dimensions of vulnerability.

5.1.2 Discussing the Deductive Dimensions of Vulnerability

Confirming the findings from existing literature, all four dimensions of vulnerability deduced from other research, were found in the analysis. Further relating to the existing literature (cf. Baird, 2014, p. 129), in all seven instances of GBV linked to the financial situation of the testimonials, a worse financial situation increased the proneness to direct sexualized violence in the form of (forced) prostitution.

Further, our results regarding the vulnerability dimension of companionship appears similar to the

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[18] As stated in the analysis chapter (see Chapter 4.1), the limited space of this paper did not allow for further interpretation of the relationships between the single dimensions of vulnerability.

ones described in the literature. When traveling with others, the perception of security from GBV committed by 'outsiders' increased in four segments. In 13 others however, the companionship, including the companionship of men*, did not stop 'outside' GBV or lead to GBV perpetrated by the partner or other companions (cf. Çalışkan, 2018, p. 12; Heise et al., 2002, p. 6), including direct forms of sexualized, other physical, and psychological violence. Coming to the dimension of ethnicity & nationality, we faced similar difficulties as existing literature in differentiating both notions due to limited information offered in the data material. We therefore established a shared dimension (cf. Krystalli et al., 2018, p. 28) containing the level of materialized vulnerability as much as discursive vulnerability. Regarding the latter, three descriptions in the testimonials portrayed racism against refugees generally, while three descriptions focused on violence against W*oC, and two on violence against Syrians. Hence, it appears that at the EU's borderscapes, refugees are generally discursively discriminated against as the Other (Chojnacki & Paping, 2016, pp. 24–25) across all nationalities and ethnicities in addition to racism experienced by Syrians and People of Color. The label as refugee therefore seems like an overarching essentializing ethnicity or nationality that dichotomously opposes the 'non-refugees' (cf. Hall, 1997, p. 243). However, the only segments describing GBV related to ethnicity & nationality were directed against a W*oC (International Women* Space, 2018, p. 73), underlining further intersecting discursive discriminations faced by W*oC (cf. Crenshaw, 2010; cf. Spivak, 1993).

In regard to the last deductive category of religion & spirituality, our findings are in line with further research (Krystalli et al., 2018, p. 32). In one seg-

ment, being Christian reduced violence committed by "the mafia" (Testimonial 1: Anonymous, 2015, p. 185) at the borderscapes. Opposed to that but following the same line of thought, being Muslim and believing in or practicing voodoo increased the risk of violence. Here, the descriptions of Islam related to violence committed out of islamophobia (Testimonial 1: Anonymous, 2015, pp. 183–184) and therefore align with literature focusing on discursive othering processes and Eurocentrism (cf. Krystalli et al., 2018, p. 32). In regard to voodoo, the violence was committed by human traffickers, who initiated a voodoo ceremony in order to control Mercy and force her into prostitution (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018, pp. 72–73). Here, the violence results from the instrumentalization of spiritual practices by power structures against those believing in it (cf. Baarda, 2016), rather than hegemonial othering processes based on 'Western outside' perception of religion and spirituality.

5.1.3 Discussing the Inductive Dimensions of Vulnerability

All four inductively coded discursive categories of vulnerability followed the same single-directed relation to violence. Being pregnant, having health problems, lacking language skills, and identifying as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community all increased the proneness to violence. While literature acknowledges that refugees at the EU's borderscapes are "considered vulnerable because of their pregnancy" (Grotti et al., 2018, p. 10), our research adds to this by giving examples of pregnancy actually leading to violence. Similarly, while a lot of research focuses on the influence of other dimensions of migration related vulnerability on health (e.g., Carruth et al., 2021), our analysis enriches these aspects by focusing on health as di-

mension of vulnerability itself that increases violence. This includes psychological, physical, as much as reproductive health.

In regard to language, scholars acknowledge the importance of language skills of refugees especially concerning integrational processes (e.g., Esser, 2006). Our research therefore expands existing literature by demonstrating the impact of language skills already during the stage of inbetweenness before any potential integration in a certain 'host' culture or country. Lastly, the inductive category of sexuality can be seen as a continuation of the rather broad statement that "heterosexual constructions of family, can lead to the marginalisation of the needs of refugees seeking assistance or protection" (Krystalli et al., 2018, p. 19). The category of sexuality clearly demonstrates the vulnerability of women* who do not follow hetero-normative constructions of sexuality.

Reflecting upon all eight coded dimensions of vulnerability, the connection of vulnerability to the perception by and interaction with other actors is clearly visible. This underlines the theoretical assumption of vulnerability as relation (Luna, 2009, p. 129): It is the interaction with the given power structures that lead to a change of neutral categories into dimensions of vulnerability: The women* are made vulnerable rather than being vulnerable.

5.2. The Agency of Refugee Women* at the EU's Borderscapes

5.2.1 General Conclusions regarding the Agency of Refugee Women* at the EU's Borderscapes

Our analysis demonstrates the agency of refugee women* at the EU's borderscapes. Across all five testimonials, both dimensions of agency – the will to act as much as the power to act (Ortner, 2006, pp. 134–139) – were coded. The results therefore align with the theoretical background (see Chapter 2.4), acknowledging that the testimonees possess agency. Additionally, the results affirm that a close interaction exists between the women's* ability to act and existing power structures (cf. Ortner, 2006, p. 139). All descriptions of the women's* agency interacted with power distribution to some extent. While some related to other actors – including the women's* partners, other refugees, human traffickers and smugglers, local populations, and institutions (e.g., police, other state authorities, NGOs) – on a micro or meso level, others related to structural and discursive power dimensions, such as racism or sexism. An essential aspect of this includes the six instances, in which acts of agency led to violence against the acting refugee women*.[19] Together with the interaction between different dimensions of agency,[20] this entanglement demonstrates the fluidity of agency. In order to answer the second operationalizing research sub-question: 'What constitutes refugee women's* agency at the borderscapes of the EU?', the following paragraphs further discuss our results regarding different dimensions of agency.

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[19] For further interpretation of this relation see Chapter 5.3.2.

[20] As stated in the analysis chapter (see Chapter 4.2), the limited space of this paper did not allow for further interpretation of the relationships between the single dimensions of agency.

5.2.2 Discussing the Deductive Dimensions of Agency

As stated before (see Chapter 4.2), only two of the three deduced dimensions of agency were included in our analysis. While all five testimonees initiated their flight, the dimension of agency over movement & settling went beyond this aspect discussed by literature (cf. Esposito et al., 2019, p. 409; cf. Turan et al., 2016, p. 161). During the flight itself, the women* were agents over decisions regarding their movement as much as their decision to settle at a place. Altogether, this dimension of agency was most frequently coded and the only agency dimension present in all testimonials. Although this suggests an even more extensive presence of agency than deduced from existing literature, these results should not be misinterpreted as the dimension of movement & settling as most important dimension of agency. Since the analysis specifically focused on data material dealing with the inbetweenness of flight that inherently involves the dimension of movement, our reasoning is that the results simply suggest the presence of decision-making regarding movement as inherent – and highly present – part of a flight process. Similarly, the deduced category of sexual agency went further than the underlying literature. While agency over contraception (cf. Kiura, 2014) was mentioned in one segment, the description mentioned the lack of agency in this regard: "I had to sleep with many men, never with protection" (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018, p. 74). Furthermore, the quote already demonstrates the overlap of contraception with the more general dimension of sexual agency. We therefore expanded the given category.

As the last category, literature research suggested the agency of refugee women* over their clothes (cf. Huisman & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2005). The only description related to this dimension stems from Maryam: "I even started to wear the hijab when I left the house so that people would stop looking at me like I was a foreigner" (Testimonial 3: Maryam, 2018, p. 104). However, due to the lack of additional examples in other testimonials or the actual presence of agency – rather than the limitation of agency as experienced by Maryam –, we decided against the formation of an own dimension (cf. Behnke et al., p. 365). Still, it might be that agency over their clothes played a role for the testimonees but that they decided against including it in their testimonials, either out of lack of space or the consideration to focus on other aspects of their experiences.

5.2.3 Discussing the Inductive Dimensions of Agency

As first inductive dimension of agency, we coded the financial agency of refugee women* at the EU's borderscapes. Only two of the 13 codings seem to match literature that suggests that the financial agency of the women* might be influenced by patriarchal norms, following mostly men* are responsible for the finances and payments (Krystalli et al., 2018, pp. 25–26). Both of these references were found in the case of Mercy, whose financial agency is limited by her partner/trafficker: "He told the man that I was his wife, which gave him the right to my salary" (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018, p. 74). Although other instances also referred to the limits of financial agency based on the given circumstances and structures, some mentioned very clearly the power to make self-determined economic decision, e.g., "all economic responsibilities were mine from now on" (Testimonial 3: Maryam, 2018, p. 100), while all demonstrated the will to act. As second inductive dimension, we coded work-related agency. While existing literature explores the aspect of work in relation to refugee women's* agency of belonging in 'host' states

(e.g., Tomlinson, 2010), our analysis focused on the aspect of work-related agency as will and power to make decisions about work itself. While in a single coding Mercy described her power to take a job (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018, p. 74), the focus of the codings lied on the difficulties and limitations of acting upon the willingness to work that exists in all instances. Thus, while the agency dimension of willingness to act is present in all descriptions, the dimension of power to act appears to be mainly limited by existing power structures.

Despite our success in identifying these four thematic categorizations, the overstretching nature of agency made it impossible to categorize all descriptions of agency into specific dimensions. For example, Mercy's expression: "I felt like a slave, I had no life, no freedom, no world of my own" (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018, p. 74) gives powerful insight into her lack of agency but cannot be reduced into one specific thematic dimension – she described an emotion overarching her whole life. Hence, while we assessed an overlap and interaction of dimensions in vulnerability and in agency, we perceived the clear categorization of agency as greater challenge, mainly due its widespread nature. Based on the same reasoning, we should also be aware of the likeliness that many aspects and instances of agency were not included in our analysis. 'Invisible agency' that includes instances of willingness and power to act that were not specifically expressed as such in the testimonials are very likely to have shaped the testimonees and their experiences.

5.3 The Relationship of Vulnerability and Agency of Refugee Women* at the EU's Borderscapes

5.3.1 Refugee Women* Encounter Vulnerability

The analysis clearly shows that vulnerability and agency of refugee women* at the EU's borderscapes are interlinked dimensions rather than two opposing concepts. Using the information provided (see Chapter 5.1), the first step of Archer's cycle (1995) translates into the following: The women* enter the borderscapes of the EU as refugees. Here, they encounter pre-existing power structures that transform characteristics regarding their gender & flight, their ethnicity & nationality, their religion & spirituality, their pregnancy, their language skills, their health and their sexuality, and the material aspects of their financial situation, their companionship and their legal proof of nationality into intersecting dimensions of vulnerability that leave them "involuntarily situated" (Archer, 1995, as cited in Hunt, 2008, p. 282) within the structure and lead to violence.

5.3.2 Agency within Vulnerability

As part of the second step of the cycle, the women* act as agents within these structures (Archer, 1995, as cited in Hunt, 2008, p. 282). In regard to their movement & settling, their financial matters, sexual acts, and work, they have the willingness and power to make self-determined decisions. This agency also overstretches more general and less specific aspects of decision-making processes. However, this agency is closely entangled to the existing power structures, more concretely, the vulnerabilities resulting from the women's* situation within the system present at the EU's borderscapes.

The results of our analysis suggest that in many instances a higher vulnerability leads to a decrease in agency. As such, our results propose that

a worse financial situation leads to a decrease of the women's* agency, while a better financial situation increases their agency. This can be explained by the capitalist system that centers around the financial payment for goods and services. Moreover, the discursive framing of Muslims as the Other (Hall, 1997, p. 235) through Eurocentric structures, is seen as strategy decreasing their agency. Meanwhile, the decrease of agency resulting from voodoo is reasoned to stem from the power system that underlies the voodoo practices: The human traffickers operationalized voodoo to control and limit the agency of the affected women*. Still, "[t]his does not mean that trafficked women have no agency at all; they may define and manipulate voodoo in their own way, but from a vulnerable position in an increasingly unequal power relation with their traffickers" (Van Dijk et al., 2006, as cited in Baarda, 2016, p. 259). Similarly, a lack of language skills was described to decrease agency, while the possession of language skills increased agency. While this suggests the importance of language as tool to act, this relation could be philosophically interpreted as concrete layer of Spivak's analysis that the subaltern cannot speak (Spivak, 1993, p. 78) and that the "subaltern as woman cannot be heard" (Spivak, 1993, p. 104). Further, a bad health and a non-hetero sexuality led to a decrease in agency, suggesting the existence of ableist and hetero-normative power structures that form strategic discursive and dichotomous distinctions based on othering (cf. Hall, 1997, p. 235).

However, we analyzed a second direction regarding the relationship: In some cases increased vulnerability leads to increased agency, while decreased vulnerability leads to decreased agency. At the very basic, this concerns the overarching dimension of being a refugee woman*: While this dimension of vulnerability shared by all testimonials decreased agency in the majority of descriptions (19 segments), it was also linked to increased agency (13 segments). In these situations, it was primarily the preferential treatment by others that lead to the increase in agency. One explanation for these acts of favoritism could be the perception of women* as "victimized, agentless entity" (Pruitt, 2020, p. 200) in need of help. However, in two segments the agency resulted from structural violence committed against women* by institutions present at the EU's borderscapes. This could be based on the institutions' disregard of women* as actors that result in infrastructural structural violence. Excluded from the institutional system that perceives men* as 'normal' humans (cf. Beauvoir de, 1951) and that constructs male centred infrastructure, women* are violated as the Other and therefore non-existent in the infrastructural considerations. At the same time, this invisibility appears to seldomly allow more freedom within the ignorant system.

Regarding the case of companionship, the relationship is especially complex. While the companionship of men* was analyzed to decrease the vulnerability in regard to violence committed by other men*, the vulnerability to violence committed by these male* companions increased. Moreover, the companionship of men decreased the agency of the women*. The reason for this could be based in the existence of patriarchal power structures that regard men* as protectors of women* (against outside violence) but also as their hegemonial superior, leading to increased violence committed by the men* and limited agency of the women*. Meanwhile, travelling with children increased the women's* agency. One possible explanation could lie in the patriarchal 'womenandchildren' paradigm (Enloe, 1990)

that leads to a perception of the women* – especially with children – as needy of male* help (cf. Turner, 2019, p. 601). Regarding ethnicity & nationality, further differentiation is necessary. Travelling with Syrians and being perceived as Syrian increased the agency of movement. This suggests that existing literature accurately identifies a structural preferential treatment of Syrians (as cited in Krystalli et al., 2018, p. 28). One possible explanation for this could be the manifested dimension of migration politics and legal situation within the EU: Comparably many Syrians are granted asylum (cf. European Commission, 2019), which could motivate border police to promote Syrians' agency of movement in comparison to other refugees.

In the only segment describing an increase of a W*oC's agency in regard to her ethnicity & nationality, she got favored by smugglers because of the racism they expected her to suffer from. Hence, this can be interpreted as small act of kindness within the existing structure of discrimination against W*oC (cf. Crenshaw, 2010; cf. Spivak, 1993). Last and offering the clearest relationship between increased vulnerability and increased agency, pregnancy led to an increase of agency in ten segments compared to one description of limited agency. Following our analysis, this could be based on a recognition of pregnancy as vulnerability that triggers compassion and pity in most of those in power. Further, pregnancy was the only dimension of vulnerability that was coded increasing the willingness to act in addition to the power to act. It appeared that her pregnancy gave Mercy a final push – maybe in order to protect her baby – to escape forced prostitution (Testimonial 2: Mercy, 2018, p. 76).

All in all, the results suggest both: While vulnerability often decreases agency, the "existence of hierarchies of priority and assistance" (Krystalli et

al., 2018, p. 32) also lead to an increase in the power to act based on the dimensions of and interaction between companionship, ethnicity & nationality, religion & spirituality, and pregnancy. The latter also appears to increase the willingness to act. Hence, we can confirm that the relationship between the women's* agency and their vulnerability at the EU's borderscapes seems to be highly processual and multidimensional (see Chapter 2.4).

5.3.3. Consequences of Vulnerability and Agency

The last step of Archer's (1995) cycle, focuses on the results of acted agency that "result in the elaboration or modification of the original structural conditions" (Archer, 1995, as cited in Hunt, 2008, p. 282). Considering the predominant analysis that more vulnerability leads to less agency and that less vulnerability leads to more agency, it is suggested that less vulnerable women* are able to act as agents more freely and self-determinedly and therefore influence their position within the power system and the system itself.

However, this interpretation is dimmed by the recognition of multiple segments, in which acts of agency led to violence against the acting refugee women*. Based on an increased proneness to violence, it appears that agency itself becomes an additional dimension of vulnerability (cf. Butler, 2014, p. 18). Apparently, actions that challenged the existing power structure or the inferior position within the given power system – acts of resistance (cf. Butler, 2014, p. 17) – lead to a worsening of the own situation rather than a positive shift in the position within the structure or the system itself. Similarly, in those instances in which agency was enhanced through given vulnerability, the increase of power appeared to be based on either institutionalized discrimination or individual gestures of pity or kindness within the given

power system. While these gestures offered a short-term improvement of the own situation, this effect was not long-lasting and did not profoundly change the pre-existing structures of power and vulnerability in which the women* act (cf. Archer, 1995, as cited in Hunt, 2008, p. 282). In some cases, this might even lead to a reinforcement of existing structures. The perception as victim might lead to "strategic agency and power" (Krystalli et al., 2018, p. 21) that helps to better the "position within these systems" (Krystalli et al., 2018, p. 32). Nevertheless, the hegemonial perception of women* as objectified victims in need of help and without own agency (cf. Spivak, 1993, p. 92) seems to be reinforced – as identified and opposed by feminist postcolonial research (cf. Esposito et al., 2019, p. 407; MacLeod, 1992, p. 543).

The inability to profoundly change the power dynamics is likely additionally strengthened by the processuality inherent to the situation at the borderscapes. Instead of being able to position themselves within one given situation or system, which would maybe allow for a rearrangement of the system, the testimonees were constantly confronted with different actors and surroundings, dynamically shifting their vulnerability (cf. Luna, 2009, p. 129) and agency. While the various dimensions of the borderscapes' power system therefore appear to determine the women's* vulnerability and influence their agency, this vulnerability in turn hinders the women's* ability to profoundly change the power structure or their position within the system. The results agree with one of Butler's main conclusions regarding the relationship between agency and vulnerability: "[V]ulnerability is neither fully passive nor fully active, but operating in a middle region, a constituent feature of a human animal both affected and acting" (Butler, 2014, p. 17).

5.4 Summarized Assumptions

The previous paragraphs related the research results back to the existing literature. Shortly summarized, the outcome can be condensed into the following assumptions:

1: The vulnerability, i.e., the proneness to violence of refugee women* at the EU's borderscapes is composed of their shared underlying dimension of being a refugee woman* together with the specific discursive dimensions regarding their ethnicity & nationality, religion & spirituality, pregnancy, language skills, health, and sexuality, and the materialized dimensions regarding their financial situation, companionship, and proof of nationality.

2: Refugee women* at the EU's borderscapes possess agency, i.e., the will and power to act. In addition to fundamental agency, this includes the thematic dimensions of movement & settling, sexual activities, finances, and work. However, there is a close interaction between the women's* ability to act and existing power structures.

3: The vulnerability and agency of refugee women* at the borderscapes of the EU are interlinked in a highly processual and multidimensional relationship. Depending on the interplay of dimensions and the circumstances, their vulnerability either limits or enhances agency. At the same time, the women's* agency influences their proneness to violence. While the power structures within which the women* act hereby impact the women's* vulnerability, agency, and position within the system, the power system present at the EU's borderscapes seems unaffected by the women's* agency.

5.5 Setting the Research into Context: Limitations of the Paper

Minimalistically summarized, the results build upon and advance existing critical migration research. Refugee women* at the EU's borderscapes appear to be simultaneously vulnerable and agents. We therefore consider our discovery and analysis of the multitude of fluid and processual relations between the various dimensions involved as contribution to the "feminist task" (Butler, 2014, p. 16) of undoing the binary and discriminatory separation of both concepts. However and despite the congruence of the results of the research with other critical scholars, one must consider the various limitations of this paper.

In addition to the limitations introduced earlier (see Chapters 3.2.2, 3.3 & 4.4), the limited space of the paper and its explorative character inhibited further in-depth analyses of various kinds. Most prominently and despite the holistic ontology of this paper, it was necessary to establish dichotomous categories during the analysis in order to allow for first interpretations. Moreover, the analysis and interpretation of the established dimensions had to be reduced to the basics, excluding additional insights regarding the relationship between the various dimensions of vulnerability and agency. A more detailed approach could also set gender into further relation to other forms of vulnerability in order to overcome the two-folded restriction of our results.

A second important layer of limitations concerns the extraction of segments from the testimonials as data material as much as the underlying division of the testimonees' experiences into the arbitrary dimensions of 'before', 'during', and 'after' the flight that disrupts the processual ontology of the paper. One must also not forget the second focus of this research: Implementing a research

design and methodology that counter and overcome epistemic violence that the persons affected by this research experience. Although the details of the methodology have been discussed (see Chapter 3), the research process contained certain restraints that need further introduction. First, the full agency of refugee women* within the research process would have required their involvement in the shaping of the research question (Torre, M. E. & Fine, 2006, p. 458).

Additionally, the anonymity of the testimonials underlying the analysis made it impossible to include the testimonees in any further process of the analysis, although the performative inclusion of their own interpretation regarding their experiences, e.g., through a joint workshop or a theatric reprocessing, would have offered great potential for an additional self-determined knowledge production (cf. Bhimji, 2016). This further inclusion would have additionally decreased the danger of misinterpretation of content that results from our intersubjective evaluation of the written testimonials as identified in the critical evaluation of the analysis (see Chapter 4.4). Despite the enrichment achieved by the inclusion of Suh Mary – and the introduced differences in her biography compared to the primary focus of the research–, the co-research faced one challenge that could not be fully overcome: The structural inequality between us as researchers. While on a personal level we did overcome many aspects of inequality (see Chapter 3.3.3), unfortunately it is not possible to say the same about the wider structural differences that reinforce epistemic violence to a certain extent. In order to overcome the inequality, paper, the wider societal system - that forces women* into anonymity out of fear of negative consequences that the sharing of the own experience could result in – needs to change. As Suh Mary describes it: "Society really needs to

[change] because I have interviews anonymous, […] newspapers anonymous. I'm always anonymous" (Appendix 5, Pos. 136). While the inclusion of a pseudonym and her picture is a small attempt to subjectify her as agent (cf. Appendix 5, Pos. 149-155), an attempted reduction of violence cannot be equated with the absence of violence.

5.6 Outlook

The results of the research, but equally its limitations, suggest various next steps. Regarding the research focus, it would be advisable to continue with in-depth analyses of the relations between vulnerability and agency, as much as the power structure - e.g., institutions and actors - at the EU's borderscapes. Additionally, a widening of the research focus and the data material – considering the whole flight rather than fragments – would help to overcome arbitrary fragmentation and offer supplementary insights into the situation of refugee women* outside of the immediate borderscapes. This includes potential variations or continuing relations after the 'arrival' in a 'host state'.

Moreover, a verification of the established assumptions using other material is advisable. Here, it would also be desirable to include the further influencing factors on agency that we identified. Going further, the exploratively derived results of this paper can be translated into further research contexts and questions, allowing additional evaluation of the assumptions' validity. The research also suggests the difficulties of vulnerable agents to promote a profound alteration of the given hegemony. While these results suggest further theoretical examination of this interplay, we can also deduce practical consequences from this.

Regarding the methodological implementation of further research, it would be desirable to build upon strategies to overcome epistemic violence

that contributes to and reinforces structural inequality in academia. The full integration of persons affected by the research into the whole study process – the emphasis lying on an equal incorporation of them as experts rather than as 'study objects' – and other approaches to this goal require changes of the existing paradigm underlying the structure of mainstream knowledge production and societal interaction. Self-determined and activist epistemologies are still widely dismissed as unscientific and inferior compared to traditional practices of academia (Gergen & Gergen, 2010, p. 361).

The goal should therefore lie in creating structures that recognize alternate forms of epistemology, while actively promoting and including those marginalized and made vulnerable by existing power structures (cf. Luna, 2009, p. 129). While we oppose the implication that it is the responsibility of those affected by structural violence to change the hegemonial system, the recognition and safety of those who do contribute to a shift, has to be facilitated. Individuals like Suh Mary or the testimonees of this research share their experience with others to advance society and change power dynamics, claiming sovereignty through "concerted and corporeal form of exposure and resistance" (Butler, 2014, p. 18). However, these acts of resistance and alteration run the risk of additional vulnerability to hegemonial violence (cf. Butler, 2014, p. 18). The approach of reducing epistemic violence can therefore never be solely regarded as distinct from wider societal struggle or as responsibility of those suffering from it. Critical researchers need to stay alert – and counter – further violence resulting from hegemonial knowledge production and the resistance against these structures (cf. Brunner, 2016, pp. 43–44).

Here, the recognition of the 'bigger picture' is essential. For example, considering this research

and the societal and political consequences that can be deduced from it, one might primarily think of needed alteration of the EU's borderscapes in such way, that the various dimensions identified as vulnerability become mere, and rather neutral, aspects of a complex interplay of personal attributes in order to decrease violence and to enhance profound agency. Nevertheless, all of this excludes one of the most essential aspects of the whole topic: The women* only face the situation at the borderscapes because they have no legal possibility of flight (cf. Appendix 5, Pos. 98). Hence, the goal cannot lie in securitizing single aspects of the violent system. Instead, we need to aim at a paradigm change of the EU's migration politics that allows for legal and safe flight of refugees, enabling their sustainable and profound power to act – as we could establish, their will to act is already there.

6. Conclusion

This paper generates explorative insights into refugee women's* vulnerability and agency at the EU's borderscapes. Besides a concentration on the methodological implications of epistemological violence that influence vulnerability and agency, the research consists of a qualitative content analysis of self-determinedly published narrative testimonials conducted in cooperation with a co-researcher, who herself is a refugee woman* situated in the EU. In a nutshell, the research results build upon and affirm critical migration research by contributing the following insights: Refugee women* at the borderscapes of the EU are both vulnerable and agents, with a multidimensional and complex relationship between the concepts. More concretely, the women* are made

vulnerable by existing patriarchal and Eurocentric power structures based on being a refugee, a woman*, and additional dimensions of vulnerability across the levels of materialized and discursive vulnerability – their financial situation, their companionship, their ethnicity & nationality, their religion & spirituality, their pregnancy, their language skills, their health, and their sexuality – that we deductively and inductively coded. This means that the women's* proneness to violence depends on the compilation and interaction of these layers. At the same time, this vulnerability impacts the agency of the women* – not only their power to act but in some cases also their willingness to act. Here, agency consists of a fundamental dimension together with the thematic categories of movement & settling, financial matters, sexual activities, and work. The direction of this relationship depends on the specific dynamics between the various dimensions: While the vulnerability of the women* often appears to hinder their agency, there seem to be other constellations in which vulnerability can lead to agency. At the same time, and based on the processuality of the relationship, agency as resistance against the existing hegemonial structure can lead to an increased proneness to violence. Therefore, agency itself could be regarded as a dimension of vulnerability. Meanwhile, an increase of the women's* agency does not appear to profoundly ameliorate their situation within the given power system at the borderscapes or the socio-spatial power structure itself. Hence, further research as much as societal and political paradigm changes are essential to improve the situation of the affected: To decrease vulnerability and violence, while increasing agency.