Pandemic, Migrants and Vulnerability: the Case of sub-Saharan Migrants in Tunisia during the COVID-19 Lockdown Period (March-May 2020)

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Resume

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to light a number of weaknesses and vulnerabilities for the international community as a whole. It has become all the more observable that vulnerability is a condition shared by all humanity: almost no one is immune from the effects of Covid-19. This paper focuses on Sub-Saharan Africans in Tunisia and how the virus took a toll on them during the lockdown of March and April 2020. The pandemic has exacerbated their vulnerability and deepened the already existing inequalities.
The paper examines how the concept of vulnerability has been used and incorporated in legal and policy instruments addressing migration in Tunisia. Building on existing literature on sub-Saharan migrants during the lockdown and on conducting qualitative interviews with sub-Saharan migrants, local authorities and local NGOs, it seeks to problematize the concept from different perspectives.
Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, sub-Saharan Africans, vulnerability, immigration

Biography

Ida Saidani is Lecturer at the Department of English, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences University of Tunis, Tunisia. She is an Erasmus+ PhD student in Migration Studies in the Doctoral School in Humanities, Social Sciences and Law (EDHCSJ), University of Granada, Spain within the framework of the Project *Migrants* coordinated by the University of Palermo.

Introduction

There are a lot of examples from history on how pandemics led to the vilification of immigrants as carriers and transmitters of infections and diseases. To give but a few examples, in the 1800s, Irish immigrants were blamed for the spread of cholera to the United States, Italians for polio and Jews for tuberculosis. During the influenza pandemic of 1918–1919, Medical inspection of immigrants at Ellis Island was intended to protect the American population from harmful infectious diseases brought about by immigrants and, importantly, to exclude immigrants who because of illness or disability would be unable to support themselves (Kraut, 125). Immigrants and ethnic groups, especially blacks, were discriminated against because they were potential disease vectors, since they live in impoverished cramped unsanitary living conditions.

In the context of COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese people and people of Asian descent were insulted and accused of spreading the virus.[1] Violent attacks on Chinese people spiked in many countries. In Rome, some private stores began to exclude clients of Asian origin, barring 'all people coming from China' from entering. Similar incidents have been reported in countries like France, where there were cases of people refusing to be served by Asian persons in shops and restaurants, and in the United States racist acts against Asian Americans skyrocketed.

Certainly the Chinese were the first to blame for transmitting COVID-19, but now Corona virus has become a global phenomenon and, in the words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, "*none of us* will be safe until *everyone* is safe." Safety becomes "*everybody*'s concern and *everybody*'s duty."In the same vein, UN Migration agency (IOM) spokesperson Joel Millman stated that "societies are healthier if *everybody*'s healthier." This inclusionary approach highlights that all members of *any* society, irrespective of differences, should be included in pandemic response plans.

Seen from this perspective, migrants make part of Tunisia's social fabric and pandemic support and safety measures are supposed to include them. This paper seeks to answer the

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[1] Tavernise, S. & and Oppel, Richard A. Jr. (2020, Mar. 20). *Spit On, Yelled At, Attacked: Chinese-Americans Fear for Their Safety*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/chinese-coronavirus-racist-attacks.html

following question: How inclusive the Tunisian government and society were of sub-Saharan migrants during the COVID-19 lockdown of March-May 2020? What factors contributed to the vulnerability of sub-Saharan migrants? What factors contributed to the vulnerability of sub-Saharan women in particular?

For the sake of this research, the concept *vulnerability* is chosen for examination and the analysis involves tallying its presence in the reviewed literature on sub-Saharan migrants during the 2020 general lockdown (the literature includes reports, press releases, articles, NGO websites for example the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) etc). It also relied on data collected from semi-structured interviews with two NGO staff in Tunisia (AIHR[2] and Terre d'Asile Tunisie[3]), and two key informant interviews with researchers who are experts in the field of migration, particularly sub-Saharan migration.[4]

This qualitative study is also based on 10 in-depth individual interviews with female sub-Saharan migrants, and 2 interviews with representatives of the host communities in Mednine and Sfax. It is worthy of mention that I faced some challenges with interviewing female sub-Saharan migrants. Henceforth, I relied at this stage on preliminary results from previous researches that included surveys, notably from the FTDES studies and surveys. For future research, the interviews will represent a complementary and enriching part. As a result of the critical situation related to the pandemic, this research was hindered by the reluctance of sub-Saharan female migrants to share their experiences, especially the undocumented migrants or migrants in "irregular" situations, for example when trying to interview a female migrant from Ivory Coast, she shied away from taking part in the interview. She even denied her 'irregularity' by saying she is staying legally at her sister's place without even me asking her any question about her residence status. The woman was accompanied by her child. I was also incapable of moving to Mednine and Sfax in the Tunisian south to meet up with the officials in there due to lockdown and containment measures. The interviews could have been a valuable addition to this study, but it still gives an overview on the situation of sub-Saharans

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[2] The Arab Institute for Human Rights is an independent regional organization that works for the promotion of human rights in the Arab region (http://www.aihr-iadh.org/ar/)

[3] https://www.terre-asile-tunisie.org/
[4] Dr. Wafa Touihri from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Tunis who is specialized in the study of sub Saharan migrants in Tunisia, especially students and Dr. Riadh Ben Khlifafrom the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Tunis https://www.urmis.fr/riadh-ben-khalifa/

during the lockdown of March-April 2020. It also highlights aspects of vulnerability among these migrants.

II-Examining the Concept of Vulnerability

The term *vulnerability* comes to us by way of the Latin word *vulnus* or wound[5]. Vulnerability is an ambiguous and complex concept. The use of vulnerability often conveys a lack of capacity (that you cannot legally agree to contracts because of a permanent condition that affects your ability to make decisions) and it is synonymous of weakness as it often refers to a state of being weak. It also contributes to fostering the idea of victimization and stereotypes. Vulnerability is also linked to the idea of lack of agency (the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices). It often denotes a physical (or emotional) exposure to being undefended, unguarded, precarious, defenseless, etc. We often say, for example, that feelings like love or generosity leave us vulnerable to being hurt, or that a weak immune system makes a person vulnerable to particular diseases. People with Medical conditions like diabetes, hypertension (high blood pressure), etc are vulnerable to Coronavirus. Older people appear to be more vulnerable to becoming severely ill with the virus.

Being vulnerable is often conceived as a type of exposure, again, whether physical or emotional, to something that is potentially harmful. It might also refer to instabilities caused by social, environmental, or economic factors and may refer not just to individuals, but also to groups of people or even geographical areas. Thus, we might say that classes of people (e.g, women) are made vulnerable by a particular social arrangement (by having unequal status in a legal system, for example). Or, we might declare that a particular region is vulnerable to drought or flooding, etc.

One of the main scholars working on the concept of vulnerability has been feminist scholar Martha Fineman. She highlighted the universal approach to vulnerability trying to overcome the idea of **vulnerable and passive** versus **non-vulnerable and active** to undermine a sort of dichotomy between vulnerability as a passive concept related to a passive idea (to weakness) versus an idea of a person who is not vulnerable and for this reason are not weak. Fineman asserts that

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[5] https://www.encyclopedia.com/science-and-technology/computers-and-electrical-engineering/computers-and-computing/vulnerability

> The vulnerability approach I propose is an alternative to traditional equal protection analysis; it is a "post-identity" inquiry in that it is not focused only on discrimination against defined groups, but concerned with privilege and favor conferred on limited segments of the population by the state and broader society through their institutions. As such, vulnerability analysis concentrates on the structures our society has and will establish to manage our common vulnerabilities. This approach has the potential to move us beyond the stifling confines of current discrimination-based models toward a more substantive vision of equality.(p.1)

For Fineman then vulnerability is an inevitable aspect of the human condition. Supporters of universal vulnerability claim that vulnerability is an inherent part of being human. This view identifies several innate features of humanity which reveal our vulnerable nature. These include our corporal nature (our bodies are frail, naturally wear down and are 'profoundly leaky'); the importance of relationships to our identities and wellbeing; and our dependency on others for our physical and psychological wellbeing. Ultimately, as Jo Bridgeman puts it, '[h]umans are vulnerable … because we care, love, are intimately connected to others.

Fineman proposes that vulnerability is inherent to the human condition, and that governments therefore have a responsibility to respond in a positive way to that vulnerability by ensuring that *all* people have equal access to the societal institutions that distribute resources. The theory thus provides an alternative basis for defining the role of government and a justification for comprehensive and all-embracing social welfare policies.

Some scholars like Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds distinguish between **Inherent** and **situational vulnerability** that are not in opposition to each other, but they are complementary. Inherent vulnerabilities that are intrinsic to the human condition, (e.g. being a woman or disabled) while situational vulnerability stresses how vulnerability is used, fostered, exacerbated and produced by the interplay between different factors (including social, political, personal and environmental factors), (e.g, particular circumstances such as having less access to health care resources or basic necessities). It should be highlighted that attention should be paid to the interplay between different factors creating this situation of vulnerability.

This idea of situational vulnerability is strongly related to the Theory of intersectionality introduced by legal feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Intersectionality tries to highlight the structural and dynamic consequence of the interaction between multiple forms of

discrimination and subordination on the basis of race, class, gender, nationality, sexual orientation and other individual characteristics. All these need to be addressed altogether when we consider situational vulnerability of sub-Saharans in Tunisia, and more particularly women. We need to examine that from the perspective of intersectionality, which means everything "intersects" and "overlaps" with one another. Crenshaw (1991) states that "because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both" (p. 1244)

This study focuses in part on sub-Saharan female migrants during the COVID 19 pandemic in Tunisia. It aims to unveil how different factors intersect to deepen the sense of marginalization and vulnerability among them, not only by Tunisian males and females, but also by their countrymen, or by people from the same ethnic group.

III/ Sub Saharan Migrants in Tunisia

 If Tunisia has been essentially a country of emigration for decades, it has become, particularly since 2011, a country of transit, even of immigration for Sub-Saharans. The military intervention in Libya in 2011deeply destabilized the region, in particular by terms of migratory dynamics. In 2019, more than 8 years after the end of the war in Libya on October 23, 2011, the country was not yet stable, and this caused the influx of more and more sub-Saharan Africans into the Tunisian territories.

Hence, Sub-Saharan immigration in Tunisia has established itself since 2011 as a new social fact. While the socio-spatial forms of this immigration are multiple and concern both workers and students, it nonetheless remains confined to structural legal irregularity and silence on the part of the Tunisian government, and as this paper unfolds this would exacerbate their vulnerability during the lockdown of March-May 2020. Cassarini highlighted that despite their "invisibility", sub-Saharan migrants are nonetheless a workforce ready for all types of jobs, at wages about 30% lower than those of Tunisians. Thus, this immigration constitutes a considerable competitive lever for the Tunisian economy, turned towards export. As a result, the Tunisian state would have no interest in "recognizing" the phenomenon and in legislating on the issue. This is what justifies the fact that the state perseveres in considering immigration as a residual phenomenon which, in its irregular form, de facto suits all the actors concerned by its presence: entrepreneurs, public institutions, etc. (p51).

Additionally, and despite the quasi absence of the Tunisian state in responding to their state of vulnerability, national, regional and international organizations and the European Union collaborated with a set of humanitarian partners and associations that are active at the local level to provide help to this underprivileged category of the Tunisian society.

At the national level the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) plays a considerable role in providing both information on the sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia and the advocacy for granting these migrants rights that would protect them from being discriminated against, especially from pandemic-related confinement measures. According to a quantitative study on the situation of migrants in Tunisia carried out by the FTDES in 2019, most sub-Saharans live in Grand Tunis, Mednine, Sfax and Sousse. Migrants from Ivory Coast ranked first in the sample (32%). There are also migrants from Cameron, Congo and Sudan (FTDES, p.11)

VI/ Factors of Vulnerability among Sub-Saharan Migrants

1) Economic factors

During the lockdown of March-May 2020, many sub-Saharan migrants reported that they had been evicted from their homes and they reported their inability to pay the rent. Many were more susceptible to being victims of fraud by their employees, who refused to pay their salaries, which led to the deterioration of their financial situation during the lockdown. Award-winning collective blog Nawaat provided live testimonies from sub-Saharan immigrants on their experiences during the lockdown, and especially the fact that they were put into the streets because they were incapable of paying the rent. Some of their stories have circulated on social media alerting the public to the vulnerability of those unable to afford rent and meet their most basic needs.[6]

2) Political factors/Government Policies

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[6] Boukhayatia, R. Confinement: In Tunisia, Sub-Saharan migrants in distress. Retrieved from https://nawaat.org/2020/04/25/confinement-in-tunisia-sub-saharan-migrants-in-distress/

Another group of sub-Saharan Africans detained in El Ouardia Centre were either deported or lived under highly unsanitary conditions as well as mistreatment and starvation. The migrants were held without charge or further information on their rights.

3) Social factors/ Unsafe neighborhoods

Two neighborhoods: Dar Fadhal (La Soukra) and Bhar Lazreg (La Marsa)[7] are identified as particularly unsafe. Sometimes women live in groups in small apartments. Some of them fear eviction because they did not afford to pay the rent for the month of March. Whether they are residing legally or have no residency documents, the Tunisian authorities did not plan anything for them.

4) Gender, country of origin and other social factors

These factors are key in determining vulnerability. In terms of country of origin, Ivorian refugees and migrants are often reported as being particularly vulnerable and visible, while sub-Saharan women in general are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment.

V/ Factors of vulnerability among sub-Saharan Women

According to the results from the literature, sub-Saharan migrant women represent a labor force at very low prices, they work without contracts and, above all, not benefiting from social security coverage. This is the basis of vulnerability and precariousness of the vast majority of migrants of sub-Saharan origin in Tunisia. Migrant women experience advanced forms of socioprofessional exploitation.

VI/ Factory of vulnerability among migrant sub Saharan women

Migrant women face and endure multiple forms of daily violence (Moral (badly treated) and physical violence (beaten, assaulted) from public authorities, employers, ordinary citizens or even from their fellow citizens.

The findings from the examined literature reveal that the violence exerted by the public authorities is manifest in:

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[7] Mathieu Galtier (2020). « Tunisie : Bhar Lazreg, ce quartier maudit « dont il ne faut pas prononcer le nom ». Retrieved from https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/reportages/tunisie-bhar-lazreg-chomage-pauvrete-revolution-inegalites-marginalisation

- Inhuman and degrading treatment during arrests;

- Brutal arrests and refoulement (forcing migrants to return to their countries);

The migrant women reported several types of violations perpetrated by their employers. These are mainly migrant women who were victims of **trafficking.**

- Inadequate food and insufficient sleep;

- Confiscation of their identity documents

- Harassment, sexual abuse and threats of sexual assault from ordinary citizens or even from their fellow citizens

- Domestic servitude (they are enslaved by their employers who force them to work day and night without taking adequate breaks)

- Very limited access to health care

- Lack of social support

- Absence of a contract which defines the tasks and conditions of work and they have no opportunity to leave oppressive working conditions;

- Poorly paid, unable to manage their money (they can't transfer their money to the remaining family members in the country of origin);

- They were paid less than men;

- No payment of salary, postponement of payment, transfer to an account to which they do not have access to (in case of trafficking);

- Without mobility, they often do not know where the consular services of their countries or the competent services in case they wanted to complain.

Previous surveys also showed that there was no possibility for these women to leave the oppressive working conditions for fear of once again falling into the hands of traffickers especially since they are undocumented and know nothing about the country.

VII/ Communal and Institutional Response

The research findings show that sub Saharan migrants in Tunisia have remained out of state's interests for a relatively long period since the outbreak of the Coronavirus in Tunisia. As they were not included by the measures addressed to the vulnerable and marginalized groups. The first decision was made on April 7, 2020. Local, regional and international NGOs were allowed to contribute to informing migrants in Tunisia about pandemic-related measures, in addition to working on providing in-kind and other financial benefits and calling on property owners to postpone receiving the rent for the period of April-May 2020.

The Ministry of Human Rights and the Relationship with Constitutional Bodies established a crisis cell on April 8th to look into the situation of students, immigrants and foreign refugees in Tunisia and worked towards overcoming the difficulties they faced due to lockdown procedures.

Despite the importance of the above-stated decisions taken by the Tunisian authorities, they did not include irregular migrants in Tunisia, who represent more than 20% of the total arrivals from sub-Saharan Africa. Even when Coronavirus infection spread to one of them, it was likely that he or she would not adhere to the procedures set by the Ministries of Health and Interior, but would not even call an ambulance due to their lack of confidence in state institutions and their fear of deportation.

Moreover, a number of civil society organizations considered these measures insufficient in light of the continued opening of El Ouardia detention center and the deterioration of conditions in Choucha refugee camp, where dozens of individuals lived in cramped unhealthy places without taking into account the threat to life in light of the spread of the Corona pandemic.

Students and workers coming from sub-Saharan Africa were among the most prominent victims. The state did not announce practical measures to help these income-deprived immigrants. With this regard, large citizens' groups had begun to act in the interest of this community.

The Tunisian government, in seeking to reduce vulnerabilities, suspended penalties for overstaying visas from March 1, 2020 until the end of the pandemic crisis.

Civil society played a very important role in trying to reduce vulnerabilities among migrants, including sub Saharans, because there were large numbers of migrants did not dare to go outside without filling out forms. They had been forced in a way to keep their identities hidden for fear of being stopped and placed in detention centers.

This is why Tunisian civil society, under the leadership of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), was pressing the government to enable migrants, even temporarily, to obtain residency permits for all those illegally residing in Tunisia.

The same associations were also pressing the authorities to register migrants in the national food safety emergency response plan. A new structure known as: **The COVID-19 Solidarity**

Cell had been established. The latter proposed the regularization of undocumented Sub-Saharans, the cancellation of fines for those who overstayed their visas. They also called for the closure of detention centers where migrants in an irregular situation were held.

Conclusion

Pandemic-related vulnerability of migrants rendered them "invisible" from Tunisian government policies. They were dependent on others for survival, they lacked agency, and different factors intersected to worsen their vulnerabilities (be it social, economic, political). What needs to be asked here is what differences are there between the vulnerabilities of sub Saharan migrants and vulnerable Tunisians in times of pandemic-related lockdown? How vulnerable populations, regardless of their country of origin, could live through similar experiences?

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