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Manufacturing vulnerability: sex work, migration, and trafficking on the southern borders of Europe

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Across Europe, including in the southern borderlands, vulnerability has become a governing language used by states, NGOs and policy-makers to justify surveillance or protection. Yet those labelled as vulnerable are rarely heard. This socio-legal thesis asks what happens when they are heard, and as a result, vulnerability is conceptualised based on their lived experience.

Starting with a critical analysis of policy and civil society constructions of vulnerability—across texts and visual materials—in the fields of migration, sex work, and trafficking in Europe, with particular attention to the Mediterranean frontier, this thesis deconstructs how vulnerability is defined, produced and governed within these frameworks. Then, focusing on Malta, a small island at Europe’s margins, via a constructivist grounded theory approach, it shifts perspective, re-conceptualising vulnerability, and relatedly, resistance to vulnerability, from the lived experiences of migrant sex workers.

Instead of applying theory to people’s experiences, this research operates from the ground up. It reveals vulnerability as relational and multi-layered yet deeply influenced by restrictive legal and policy frameworks and systems. While resistance to vulnerability exists, it depends on people’s resources and skills, and is constrained by criminalisation and stigma.

This work challenges assumptions about protection and raises two interrelated and pressing questions: who gets to define vulnerability and at what cost? Drawing from the findings of the empirical data, it calls for a vulnerability-reduction framework based on lived experiences of vulnerability.

This is a volume in the series of the Meijers Research Institute and Graduate School of the Leiden Law School of Leiden University. This study is part of the Law School’s research programme ‘Effective Protection of Fundamental Rights in a pluralist world’.

Manufacturing Vulnerability

*Sex Work, Migration, and Trafficking on
the Southern Borders of Europe*

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