

Too vulnerable to count: Categorizations of vulnerability in resettlement to Norway

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The resettlement programme has often been described as a durable solution to the refugee crisis. However, the resettlement of quota refugees is not only a humanitarian response to improve “the lives of suffering others” (Fassin 2012), but also a means of control and regulating access to the nation state (Welfers and Bonjour 2021).

As resettlement – in contrast to asylum – is not codified in international law, admission states are relatively free in deciding whether, from where and whom to resettle (De Boer and Zieck 2020). Although such programmes officially claim to target particularly vulnerable refugees, admission states can and do formulate additional selection criteria in line with their security, economic, and cultural interests (Mourad and Norman 2020; Brekke et al 2021). Refugees are expected to be deserving of protection and simultaneously to demonstrate their willingness and ability to overcome their vulnerability and to become law-abiding and culturally malleable future members of their host societies (Welfers 2021).

Based on ethnographic fieldwork with Norwegian street-level bureaucrats who are tasked with selecting quota refugees for resettlement to Norway, this paper explores how street-level bureaucrats deal with dilemmas when faced with refugees. It enquires whom they deem thoroughly deserving of protection, but who, because of their utter vulnerability, are deemed ineligible for integration – in other words, which refugees are too vulnerable to be protected. Focusing on the selection categories Women at Risk, Vulnerable Children, and People with Disabilities, the paper strives to determine how the exclusion (or inclusion) of deserving but too vulnerable refugees is rationalized internally within the Norwegian immigration authorities and how the decisions are legitimized towards the UNHCR (and the refugees themselves).