

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Lecture- 01

Social Vulnerability & Group Vulnerability

So, we move on now to discussing other components of vulnerability in this course on vulnerability studies. So, we looked at three concepts, vulnerability, precarity, the precariat class. We also looked at resilience being touted as a much necessary, much needed virtue among people and the fact that people are being increasingly told to be resilient. We now move on to a slightly larger category of social vulnerability or group vulnerability. For those of you who know their history, during the Holocaust, six million Jews were exterminated. In the Ukraine, just before around the same time, six million Ukrainians died of starvation, a starvation that was induced because of an artificial scarcity of food that stemmed from Stalin's policy.

Then you can add examples like the partition of the Indian subcontinent, genocides, the system of slavery in the United States, in the New World as it was called then and structural conditions whereby large people, populations of people are forced to migrate and things like that. Then you can think of categories such as the mentally ill, the physically ill, women and children and senior citizens. We are looking at collectives of people who are rendered into vulnerable groups. In the early lecture, I spoke about most vulnerable groups. This is something like that.

Vulnerability here is induced because you belong to a particular ethnic community. It could happen because of specific conditions like for example, how the elderly became more and more vulnerable with the pandemic's progress. It could be due to intrinsic conditions, whether it is mental health or physical health, because of unemployment, because of the fact that they are asylum seekers, etc. So shared and group vulnerability could arise from various factors.

For the United Nations, group vulnerability is important because several of these have origins in history. As in, their vulnerability stems from a certain kind of historical record of being treated badly, being oppressed, being deprived of their material resources such as their lands have been taken away and they were subject to the power and control of other groups. Remember in the early session, we spoke about how certain social groups can control others, that certain social groups become victims to the majority or the more

dominant, economically dominant groups. Vulnerable groups are usually groups of people who need state support for survival, who need state support for medical or health, education, protection for their women, etc. And one of the things that people, contemporary critical theory has noted about vulnerable groups is they usually are in a state of waiting.

They have to wait. They have to wait for food, they have to wait for medical services. They have to wait, of course, for employment. And those of you, like I said, who know history will remember that during the Great Depression era of the United States, there were pictures of long queues of people waiting for free food, waiting for jobs, waiting for a little bit of unemployment allowance. Think of people in prison.

The most notorious case from the 20th century would be prisons like Guantanamo Bay or Abu Ghraib where people suspected of being terrorists, please note they are suspected of being terrorists, have been imprisoned for years without trial. What do you mean without trial? They have been imprisoned without even being charged. These are people who are also endlessly waiting. They are what people say, waiting in a limbo. There is no definite end in sight.

In many places in the global south, in many places of great social and economic disparity, large segments of the population are in limbo. They wait for social support, state welfare and things like that. Many of these groups, like I said, are historically vulnerable. Think of slavery, where people of a certain race have been treated as slaves, owned as slaves for centuries, for multiple generations. That you are born into slavery, you live in slavery, you die in slavery and if you have had the misfortune to have children, your children are also placed into slavery.

Migrant workers, asylum seekers and other categories of people have been historically vulnerable by virtue of their ethnicities, by virtue of their complexion, by virtue of their racial stereotypes. In the 20th century, the United Nations as the apex organization for many of these activities put together several, a series of statutes and declarations and covenants about discrimination and inequalities and historical groups and they set about identifying the most vulnerable groups. Let me read out a quick list of these ones. And this is from the United Nations, all right, that I'm reading out and it's from their map called "Fight Racism: Vulnerable Groups". People of African descent, indigenous people, Roma, Sinti and travelers, persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, women, refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, people living in extreme poverty, migrants, LGBTQ people.

It's a large group. People of African descent, women, LGBTQ plus people, asylum

seekers, people living in extreme poverty have been identified by the United Nations as most vulnerable groups. Now why are they identified in this fashion? In many cases, these are people who have been historically oppressed. It's not a recent development that they have suddenly become vulnerable. But for example, like I told you, African American people arrive as slaves in the New World.

They live, work and die as slaves and the children are forced into slavery from the minute of their birth. So, the historical condition of slavery, the historical condition of discrimination against people of different skin color and things like that or against women render several groups of people historically vulnerable. I'm going to here read out a United Nations General Comment from the United Nations Economic and Social Council, July 2009. General comment number 20: "The principle of non-discrimination to specific rights relating to housing, food, education, health, water, author's rights, work and social security."

Alright? This is the general principle of non-discrimination on all these grounds, on all these fronts. Housing, food, education, health, water, author's rights, work and social security. What does the United Nations mean here? What the United Nations is doing is, it's looking at histories in which these subjects such as water or food, domains such as health have been denied to certain groups. So, its analysis and data collection of historically vulnerable groups looks at multiple domains in which their fundamental rights have been denied, rendering them vulnerable and open to injury. Let's take one example, the right to adequate food.

And these are the guidelines that I'm reading out from the United Nations treaty specific documents to be submitted and so on and so forth to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This is also dated March 2009. I quote, the guidelines from the United Nations asks country to "indicate the measures taken to promote equality of access by the disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups, including landless peasants, persons belonging to minorities, to food, land, credits, natural resources and technology for food production". It's asking member states, the various countries, to make sure that there is equality of access for both advantaged and disadvantaged people, but primarily for disadvantaged and marginalized people, individuals and groups. And the groups it lists are, let me read it again, landless peasants, persons belonging to minorities, these are the disadvantaged groups, and in which domains? Food, land, credit, which is bank credit for them to say do their farming or by farm implements, natural resources, water primarily and technology for food production, whether it is pipelines or tractors or whatever it might be.

This is under the right to adequate food. And what does it mean? It means that it's not

enough to say that people should have the right to food or adequate food. They should also have the right to make it possible to have that food. So, the farmer needs to be given protection to ensure that his or her land retains its fertility, there is adequate financial support to buy farm implements or seeds or fertilizer or whatever it might be, they must have access to proper advice, expert advice, and all the structural requirements of agricultural production. The right of equal access to these facilities, says the United Nations, must be guaranteed by a state, as in, must be guaranteed by the government.

What the United Nations is actually talking about when it speaks about the right to adequate food is the right to access to factors of food production, not just food in the final end product sense of the term, but to factors of food production. It means that marginalized groups, the disadvantaged groups have never had access to adequate food. They never had access to nutrition-based diets. Whatever was available, minimally speaking, whatever was given free to them as charity is all that they have had.

This is historical. Remember my earlier example of the famine in the Ukraine, it is called the Holodomor, where the then Russian head Stalin, Joseph Stalin, made sure that grains were simply not available to the Ukrainians. And the result was 6 million Ukrainians died of starvation, died of starvation. Okay? And this, the Ukrainians have been asking for this starvation, induced starvation to be declared a genocide. It is not yet come through, but they are battling for it. Critics and thinkers have argued that many sources of vulnerability exist and factors that determine it, age, for example, ethnic origins, gender, living and housing conditions and so on and so forth, which could be land or employment or things like that.

The group's vulnerability is often taken as an index of the state of affairs in any particular state, in any particular country. These are all potentially sources of vulnerability. Remember we began by talking about ontological vulnerability where vulnerability occurs or is imminent because we are biological beings, we have a body, you know, that is where our vulnerability begins. So, factors like age, which are directly about the body, gender, which is about the body, are also embedded in social systems. And questions of employment, questions of belonging, of citizenship, are all part of the factors that can likely produce vulnerability.

And several of these are factors that have existed in history, have come down to us over a period of time. All right? So, in the case of our most recent crisis, which is the pandemic, these group vulnerabilities became very prominent. So, if you keep in mind what I have been saying so far in this particular session about social and group vulnerability induced by certain factors, such as economic conditions, and which target certain groups because they belong to certain ethnicities or have certain identities and if you recall the big map I

was reading from the United Nations Most Vulnerable Group map, you can see it on your screen as part of the presentation itself, the system of slavery or patriarchy, which more or less determine the limits of rights for certain people.

During the pandemic, there were people who never received proper vaccine quotas. And the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, actually did a small YouTube video where the term used was “vaccine apartheid”. Vaccine apartheid, where the distribution of vaccines was socially uneven, unequal and determined by racial identity. Example two of group vulnerabilities from the factors that I have been talking about, you might recall that in some countries there was a problem where the government said older people need not be hospitalised because the resources, as in the medical resources have been stretched so thin that adding more old people to the medical services means the system will break down. In other words, what we are looking at is that one segment of the population, the old, the elderly are not being given adequate medical care because the system believes that they do not have the resources to take care of them as well as take care of the young.

So a certain hierarchy of victims was being introduced. A certain hierarchy within vulnerable groups was being introduced. The elderly and the young and the relatively younger received medical attention whereas the older they said “look we cannot afford to have them in hospitals”. What are we looking at here? We are looking at one form of vulnerability age compounded by another form of vulnerability, the pandemic. So, the elderly who are vulnerable because they are just old have their vulnerabilities amplified because of vaccine apartheid, racially speaking, or ageist apartheid in terms of age, that they will not get adequate medical help because the state believes that the older people cannot be put into hospitals.

Hospital services are not adequate to deal with them and we should reserve as much of the resources as possible for the younger and the relatively healthier who will have a better chance of survival. Now this becomes a human rights problem and people have written about it that it is a human rights question because are we then saying that the older people cannot afford to demand the same amount or greater amount of health rights or healthcare? Think of the nature of vulnerability here. You are already vulnerable because you are older, you are more fragile, your immunity is as it is low and in the midst of the pandemic along comes a policy that says we cannot afford to treat the old as much as we need to treat the young. We do not have the resources. In other words, the older people become what Zygmunt Bauman called disposable people, disposable lives.

Their lives matter less, their vulnerabilities matter less. So in what we have been talking about today, whether it is vaccine apartheid or the kind of ethnic nationalisms in the

USSR which produced the starvation deaths of 6 million Ukrainians, the Holocaust in which the Jews also about roughly 6 million, exterminated by Nazi Germany or contemporary times of the pandemic. Look at the range of examples we have been talking about. In all these cases, historically certain groups have been marginalized and their marginalization, healthcare vulnerabilities were amplified during periods of crisis such as the pandemic which by definition was global but it affected different races differently. And there have been studies and reports of how African Americans found it more difficult to get adequate healthcare, Native Americans on the reservations and secluded ghettos found it more difficult to get adequate healthcare and the distribution of death rates was therefore uneven across races, social classes and demographics which means to say historically vulnerable people, historically vulnerable groups continue to remain vulnerable in this day and age. Thank you. More next time.