



The Evolution of Vulnerability in Norwegian Refugee Debates: Semantic and Political Changes over Four Decades

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ABSTRACT

This study traces how vulnerability emerged as a key concept in Norwegian refugee policy from the 1980s to the 2020s. Using Koselleck's conceptual history framework, it analyzes seven major legislative and policy debates. The findings show a shift from systemic understandings of displacement to individualized assessments of risk, reinforcing hierarchies of deservingness. Vulnerability liberalized asylum procedures but also legitimized restrictive policies, favouring resettled refugees over asylum seekers. The study highlights how this concept operates as both a moral and a political tool, shaping refugee priorities while narrowing political responsibility for global displacement.

KEYWORDS

refugee policy; vulnerability; migration governance; political rhetoric

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude suit la trace de la manière dont la vulnérabilité est venue à être un concept clé au sein de la politique norvégienne sur les réfugiés depuis les années 1980 jusqu'aux années 2020. Au moyen de l'histoire des concepts de Koselleck, elle analyse sept débats législatifs et politiques majeurs. Les résultats illustrent un changement de l'approche systémique au déplacement à une méthode d'évaluation des risques qui renforce ainsi une hiérarchie du mérite. La vulnérabilité a libéralisé des procédures de demande d'asile, mais a également légitimé des politiques restrictives qui favorisent ainsi les réfugiés réinstallés plutôt que les demandeurs et demanduses d'asile. L'étude souligne la manière dont ce concept agit comme outil politique autant qu'outil moral et définit donc les priorités en matière de réfugiés tout en réduisant la responsabilité politique en matière de déplacements mondiaux.

Vulnerability has become a globally mobile concept in refugee governance, appearing in new policy fields and possibly having a transformative effect on protection aims and processes (Jacobsen & Karlsen, 2023). From UN resettlement programs to national asylum policies, the term is increasingly used to define moral and political priorities in contexts of scarce resources and high stakes. Yet, vulnerability remains an ambiguous policy concept with multiple, often vaguely defined meanings, and its connection to actual policy change is poorly understood.

While its rhetorical prominence in global refugee governance is well documented, less is known about how the concept evolves and shapes decision-making within national legislative debates.

This article addresses this gap by examining how the concept of vulnerability has evolved in Norwegian parliamentary debates on refugee protection from the 1980s to the 2020s. Using Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual history framework (Richter & Richter, 2006), I trace the semantic and political uses of the term over these decades and explore their

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implications for refugee policy. The analysis is based on key proposals for refugee and migration policy or legislation, as well as parliamentary deliberations on these proposals. By applying Koselleck's approach, this article uncovers not only shifts in the meaning of vulnerability within these debates but also how these shifts reflect broader political and social transformations in Norway's refugee policies. Norway presents a compelling case study because its combination of a self-proclaimed role as a humanitarian actor and increasingly restrictive immigration policies creates a political space where the concept of vulnerability is both contested and instrumentalized in refugee governance. At the same time, Norway—along with the other Nordic states—has long paired strong commitments to international co-operation in refugee governance with extensive national investments in refugee inclusion through universal and targeted welfare services. This dual orientation both increases the likelihood of external influences on national debates and makes refugee protection domestically contentious, thereby heightening the potential for strategic adaptations of political discourse.

My findings show that **vulnerability** entered Norwegian refugee policy debates in the 2000s, with significant impact in two key ways. First, it was incorporated into the 2008 revision of the Immigration Act, where it lowered the threshold for risk assessments in individual asylum cases, thereby liberalizing access to protection. Second, it became a rhetorical marker of deservingness, central to political prioritization. Politicians frequently invoked vulnerability to promote expansive protection policies, while alternative linguistic framings were employed to question or downplay the vulnerability of refugees in support of restrictive policies. Through these strategic uses, vulnerability became positively associated with groups such as

children and UNHCR resettlement refugees while being negatively linked to asylum seekers. These findings illuminate how vulnerability, as a policy concept, performs the moral work of prioritizing among millions of displaced persons while simultaneously reflecting broader tensions in Norwegian and global migration governance.

I start this article by reviewing the literature on the introduction of the vulnerability concept in migration governance. Next follows a brief on the Norwegian context for refugee governance in the period covered, and then an outline of my methodological approach. The findings are presented in four sections: first, I give a timeline of when **vulnerability** emerges and how; second, I examine how the vulnerability concept is incorporated into Norwegian immigration law and to what effect; third, I present the rhetorical uses of the vulnerability concept in political contestation; and finally, I discuss how categorical associations between vulnerability and certain groups form new narratives on deservingness in Norwegian refugee policy. In the final section, I consider the broader implications of these semantic changes for refugee policy-making and prioritization.

VULNERABILITY, ITS MEANINGS, AND ITS USES

Theoretically, vulnerability presents a paradox: It is both universal and deeply particular. According to Martha Fineman, vulnerability is integral to the human condition, as we are all, in some capacity, at risk of different types of harm throughout our lives (Fineman & Grear, 2016). Yet vulnerability is shaped by individual experiences and circumstances and is linked to inequality. This duality highlights the complexity of conceptualizing vulnerability within legal and social frameworks.

When such a complex concept is introduced into the realm of policy-making, simplifications occur. The last two decades have seen increasing attention to and categorization of **vulnerability** in migration governance, particularly refugee governance. There, stakeholders and politicians may employ it for purposes of political labelling (Zetter, 1991) and bureaucratic categorization to direct attention and policy interventions toward persons deemed deserving of political action. In this context, **deservingness** refers to the perceived legitimacy of a group or a person's claim to aid or protection, as determined by legal criteria, refugee policy, and societal norms (Welfens, 2023). As policy-makers attend to what Fineman has called "the vulnerable subject" (Fineman & Grear, 2016, p. 27) in the field of migration, how do they conceptualize vulnerability, and how does that shape refugee policy? So far, the literature has shown ambiguity (Karlsen, 2024) in the conceptualization of vulnerability in migration governance and questioned its impact on policy change.

Broadly, vulnerability is used politically in two different ways. Firstly, vulnerability has come to function as "an implicit or explicit access criterion for special protection or assistance" (Flegar, 2018, p. 375). The UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration have been actively lobbying for a vulnerability perspective to needs assessments and prioritization in the humanitarian field, making them central policy entrepreneurs in the vulnerability turn (Flegar, 2018). The concept has also been adopted into the European legal tradition by the European Court of Human Rights, where the idea of (particularly) vulnerable groups has gained ground in case law since the 2000s (Peroni & Timmer, 2013). However, while asylum seekers' vulnerability is increasingly acknowledged, this has little consistent impact on the court's ruling

(Yahyaoui Krivenko, 2022). Perhaps most influentially, the category of "vulnerable migrant" has been incorporated into the EU asylum framework and therefore national asylum legislation across the continent, although national implementation varies (La Spina, 2021a, 2021b; Leboeuf, 2022). Critics argue that responding to refugees' needs based on the logic of vulnerability rather than a rights-based approach may narrow state protection and restrict access to services, even when actors adopt this language to advocate for refugees' needs to be met (Smith & Waite, 2019; Sözer, 2020). Another concern is that while protection of "vulnerable groups" may amend the shortcomings of human rights laws and immigration legislation, the conceptualization of some groups as (particularly) vulnerable could also cause new issues by casting other groups or subjects as non-vulnerable (Peroni & Timmer, 2013; Yahyaoui Krivenko, 2022), such as adult men (Turner, 2017, 2019).

Secondly, vulnerability is used politically to ascribe deservingness in policy-making as a framing tool in political arguments (Flegar, 2018, p. 375). This is notable in recent international policy documents such as the 2018 **Global Compact for Migration** and the **Global Compact on Refugees**, permeated by the language of vulnerability (Atak et al., 2018; Jacobsen & Karlsen, 2023). Current-day migration policies at various policy levels seek to categorize and identify the vulnerability of migrants and/or refugees to such a degree that this has been described as a "vulnerability zeitgeist" (Brown, 2016, p. 1; Brown et al., 2017, p. 497) or "vulnerability turn" (Jacobsen & Karlsen, 2023, p. 4) in international governance of migrations. Some critics of this turn argue that the vulnerability label, like the other labels that circulate in migration governance, such as **forced migration**, **voluntary migration**, **refugees**,

and **migrants**, is at once a result of and a tool for political oversimplification of complex realities (Flegar, 2018, p. 374). Labels that oversimplify the complexities of migration can lead to stereotyping, foster biases, silence alternative narratives, and thus misinform public and political debate on migration governance (Flegar, 2018). Scholars have also suggested that the role of vulnerability in migration policy can serve regulatory functions and the interests of states and other actors as much as offering migrants social protection or assistance (Brown et al., 2017; Heidbrink, 2021). Because vulnerability is often invoked to direct attention toward the individual at risk, it also deflects attention away from structural causes and how migrant-receiving states may be complicit in producing vulnerability through their policies or inaction (Heidbrink, 2021).

How and whether the vulnerability turn corresponds with policy changes is under-explored. The change may be mostly linguistic, ascribing vulnerability based on established policy debates and narratives about deservingness (Brown, 2016, p. 146). The impact will be low if vulnerability becomes another label attached to the same social groups. However, vulnerability as a policy concept is “malleable and fussy across scalar levels” (Jacobsen & Karlsen, 2023, p. 4), so while it travels between international, national, and institutional policy levels, its meanings and applications may change, overlap, or contradict. Its meaning, use, and potential impact, therefore, require empirical examination in each specific context. In this article, the context is Norwegian national legislation and policy-making on refugee protection. Next, I summarize developments in this policy field over the past five decades.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF NORWEGIAN REFUGEE GOVERNANCE

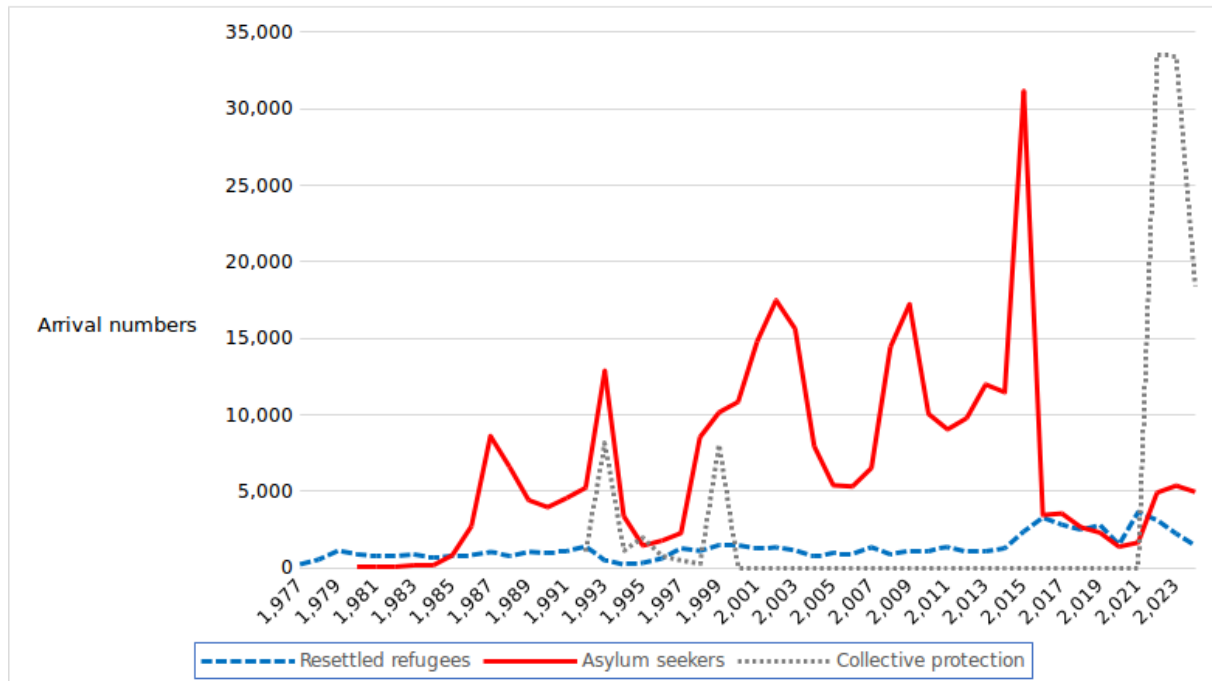
The foundations for Norway's current migration policy framework were established in the 1970s when, in line with broader European trends, Norway introduced a temporary halt on immigration (Eriksen, 2013). Like many other European countries, these restrictions were later made permanent (Eriksen, 2013). As exceptions to the general “ban,” the framework allows for three main legal pathways to residence: skills-based (labour migration, student visas, etc.), protection-based (asylum seeking, resettlement of refugees), and family reunification.

Norway became a destination for asylum seekers in the mid-1980s, reflecting a wider shift across Europe as more countries implemented asylum systems in response to growing numbers of spontaneous arrivals. Until then, Norway's refugee policies, much like those of other Nordic and western European states, had primarily focused on resettling refugees through organized international co-operation. This continues today through an annual refugee quota system in co-operation with the UNHCR. However, as in much of Europe, spontaneous asylum arrivals have outnumbered resettled refugees most years (Figure 1), making asylum policy the central concern of refugee policy-making since the 1980s. Norway has also, at times, followed broader European approaches in granting collective protection to refugees fleeing conflicts on the continent, as seen with refugees from former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and, more recently, from Ukraine after February 2022.

Norway has developed an increasingly selective immigration policy over the last 20 years, where the threshold for labour migration has been continuously lowered while policies on rights-based asylum and family immigration become increasingly stricter

Figure 1

Number of Resettled Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Collective Protection Permits, per Year, 1977–2024



Note. Data sourced from the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration annually published statistics and yearly reports.

(Staver, 2021). A recurring theme in immigration debates has been how Norwegian policies should be adjusted to restrictions elsewhere to avoid Norway “attracting” asylum seekers (Staver, 2021, p. 5). Norway has also chosen a policy of integration into a common European immigration control regime (Bø, 2019) by signing the Dublin Regulation (see “Protocol to the Agreement,” 2006) and joining the Schengen Agreement, although Norway remains outside the European Union (Olsen, 2018).

New and more restrictive refugee policies have often been introduced in response to significant increases in spontaneous arrivals of asylum seekers, as in 1987, 1993, 2004, 2008, 2015, and 2022. The 2015 crisis response marked a turn toward temporariness in protection policies (Eggebø & Staver, 2020). Still, Norwegian protection policies

are more aimed at future inclusion compared with Nordic hard-liner Denmark (Sandberg et al., 2025). Norwegian refugee policy is also strongly shaped by public perceptions of integration. Norway has since the mid-2000s pursued a Nordic approach to protection where refugees, once accepted, are enrolled in ambitious integration programs with free language training and additional courses to facilitate their entry into the labour market (Djuve et al., 2017). The flip side of this willingness to invest in integration is that refugee reception is considered a costly and risky public expenditure, thus reinforcing national economic interests in immigration control.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

As noted, vulnerability has become a central concept in refugee policy over the last two

decades, linked to ideas of deservingness and access to protection. However, the term is malleable and ambiguous, and its political impact should be explored empirically. To do this, I adopt several analytical tools from Reinhart Koselleck's approach called *Begriffsgeschichte*, or conceptual history (Richter & Richter, 2006), developed to study changes in society's "basic concepts" and their socio-political significance over time.

While alternative discourse analysis approaches ask how an issue is discursively framed (see, e.g., Wodak, 2015, 2021) or presented as a problem (Bacchi, 2012), conceptual history analysis starts with a concept—an idea and its expression in language—to explore how, within a certain context (like Norwegian refugee policy), its changing meaning and use reflects different social and political positions and strategies on that issue. All three approaches see these linguistic phenomena (frames, problem presentations, basic concepts) as potentially powerful because they contribute to our collective construction of "alternatives for action" (Richter & Richter, 2006, p. 348). With Wodak's or Bacchi's approach, the aim is to identify **broad** and (more or less) **durable** discursive phenomena: combinations of linguistic choices, argumentation patterns, and social meanings that carry particular political power. In Koselleck's approach, the unit of analytical interest is smaller, linguistically speaking, confined to what he terms "basic concepts." These are concepts that have become indispensable to political and social vocabulary (such as **state** or **crisis**), and they can be understood as building blocks of discursive patterns, like problem representations or frames. However, basic concepts are by nature ambiguous, indefinable, and contested, and their political power therefore lies in how their meaning is manipulated and how they are used—the opposite of durabil-

ity. Instead, their emergence, modification, and transformation in the history of political thought are at the heart of the analytical approach.

The conceptual history approach can therefore help us understand the vulnerability turn in refugee policy, in which the literature has already identified this concept as prevalent and influential, yet malleable, and hard to pin down in terms of its exact meaning (Brown et al., 2017; Flegar, 2018; Jacobsen & Karlsen, 2023). According to Koselleck (1982, pp. 415–416), this is the nature of the concepts worth exploring historically because they both **reflect** and **influence** societal or political changes. When their use and/or meaning change, this indicates a shift in political and social perspectives (Richter & Richter, 2006). By using the term in a new way or creating a new relationship between the popular term and other concepts, politicians can leverage or engineer such shifts, making new means of political action a legitimate choice.

Analyzing the language used in political debates through the perspective of conceptual history means conducting three exercises: firstly, an analysis of the articulation and meaning of the concept. One should examine the word's meaning(s) at a given point in time, and how the term's meaning is expressed, with or without this specific word being used. Secondly, to capture changes in the content and articulation of the concept, the analysis should alternate between a synchronic analysis of meaning and expressions at specific historical times, and a diachronic analysis of these findings, which compares the concept's content and meaning at different times. Thirdly and finally, the analysis should identify the use and role of the concept in its semantic landscape (here, the specialized vocabulary of refugee policy-making).

The aim of studying the conceptual history of **vulnerability** in this article is to understand the mutually constitutive relationship between semantic meaning-making and political change. Particularly, I aim to explore how, when the concept of vulnerability gains ground in debates on refugee protection, politicians relate to and use this concept to promote certain political priorities and actions in refugee policy. The analysis is therefore both semantic and political.

DATA AND METHODS

To enable a thorough semantic analysis, I have limited this study to seven key parliamentary debates on refugee policy since Norway established an official refugee policy in the late 1970s (for an overview of debates and documents included, see [Table 1](#)). My selection was guided by the goal of including legislative and policy proposals that were either highly influential or subject to significant contestation. This includes the two most comprehensive revisions of the Immigration Act (1987 and 2008) and two white papers on refugee policy (1994 and 2011), which represent the period before and after the “vulnerability turn” of the 2000s. From the post-turn period, I have selected three debates that capture Norway’s policy responses to major refugee crises: the 2015 migration crisis, the 2020 Moria fires, and the 2022 Ukraine crisis. This selection reflects both moments of broad political consensus, such as the 2022 Ukraine response, and instances of intense parliamentary contestation, exemplified by the 2020 Moria debate.

The data for the analysis consist of political documents that underpin and lay out the propositions for legislative or policy change (government white papers, legislative bills, and policy propositions), the official statements from the relevant parliamentary committees that discussed the proposition, and

transcripts from the parliamentary debates where the propositions were voted over (Direct quotations from the debate transcripts are referenced by year and transcript page number. Transcripts can be found online at <https://stortinget.no/>). While the first type of document conveys the political aims and ideas of those backing the proposal, the latter two also display the political contestation between the parties represented in Parliament and its working committees. Because the statements from the committees and the transcripts from parliamentary debates preserve the language and the arguments used for posterity, they are valuable sources of historical data that allow for comparison across actors and over time.

For feasibility, I have applied the insights from the reviewed literature and restricted my analysis of the texts to the following: firstly, when and how the word **vulnerable**¹ or **vulnerability** appears in the discourse, what it describes, to whom the concept is linked (as an identifier or as an antonym), and how this changes over time. I have also examined whether and how the meaning of vulnerability is expressed through different words, specifically other articulations of the quality of being at risk of harm. Secondly, I have analyzed how the changing articulation of vulnerability relates to changes in implicit or explicit criteria for protection or assistance and framings of deservingness in political arguments.

FINDINGS

An overview of my findings is presented in [Table 2](#). These results are detailed in the following sections, starting with when and where **vulnerability** appears in policy and legislation, and with which meaning. Then the discussion moves on to the concept’s

¹In Norwegian, **vulnerability** translates to *sårbarhet* or *ut-satthet*, and I include both terms.

Table 1*Overview of Debates and Documents Analyzed*

Year	Type	Topic	Documents
1987	Bill	The Immigration Act	St.meld. nr. 39 [1987–1988] , 1998), Om innvandringspolitikken [On the Immigration Policy]; Ot.prp. nr. 46 (1986–1987) Utlendingsloven [The Immigration Act]
1994	White paper	Refugee policy	St.meld. nr. 17 [1994–1995] , 1995), Om flyktningpolitikken [On the Refugee Policy]
2008	Bill	The Immigration Act	NOU 2004: 20 . Lovsak: utlendingsloven [Legislation: The Immigration Act]; Ot.prp. nr. 75 [2006–2007] , 2007); Innst. O. nr. 42 (2007–2008) ; beslutning. O. nr. 51 (2007–2008)
2010	White paper	Refugee and migration policy	Meld. St. 9 [2009–2010] (2010), Norsk flyktning- og migrasjonspolitik i et europeisk perspektiv [Norwegian Refugee and Migration Policy in a European Perspective]; Innst. 327 S (2009–2010)
2015	Draft resolution	Policy agreements on Syria and asylum	“The Syria Agreement,” June 2015, Dokument 8:135 S (2014–2015); “The Asylum Agreement” (Innst. 2 S [2015–2016]), jf. Meld. St. 1 [2015–2016] , Prop. 1 S [2015–2016] , Prop. 1 S Tillegg 1 [2015–2016] , og Prop. 1 S Tillegg 2 [2015–2016])
2020	Draft resolution	Policy proposal on relocation from Greece	Om å hjelpe/evakuere barn og sårbare flyktninger fra Hellas [On Helping/Evacuating Children and Vulnerable Refugees from Greece]. 2 representantforslag. Dok 8:86 S (2019–2020) og Dok 8:85 S (2019–2020)
2022	Address to Parliament	The Ukrainian refugee crisis	Address by the Minister of Justice and Public Security on the Ukraine Situation, Item 1, 10.03.22

role in political discourse, its social reach, and how its use reflects understandings of deservingness.

THE EMERGENCE OF VULNERABILITY

Semantically, the word **vulnerability** was hardly ever used in political debates on refugees and protection at the Norwegian Parliament until the 2000s. In the 1980s and 1990s, the language used to describe different groups of refugees was based on definitions from international law incorporated into

Norwegian legislation. The main distinctions made between different groups of refugees are between “convention refugees” and those “in a refugee-like condition” (who can be granted protection based on humanitarian needs), and between “refugees” and “asylum seekers.”

To describe the difficulties that many refugees faced in their country of first asylum, the policy papers and politicians of the 1980s and 1990s spoke mainly of features associated with host countries in the Global South such as poverty, environmental overload, and

Table 2

Overview of Findings

Time period	Use of <i>vulnerability</i>	Changing meaning	Policy and political implications
1980s–1990s	Absent; differentiated risk exposure not articulated	Concept not introduced	No role in policy; refugee policies legitimized through humanitarian and macro-political perspectives
2000s	Emerging use; imported from global discourse, used in varied policy fields	Identified particularly vulnerable groups, linked to state obligations to improve their access to protection	Incorporated into Immigration Act, lowering asylum threshold for children and individuals “in vulnerable situations”
2010s–2020s	Central rhetorical term; used to ascribe deservingness and prioritize groups	Applied categorically, especially to children and “quota refugees,” with asylum seekers contrasted as less deserving	Key justification for expanded protection policies and resource allocation, also legitimizing hierarchies of deservingness

political unrest (*St.meld. nr. 17 [1994–1995], 1995*, p. 54; *St.meld. nr. 39 [1987–1988], 1998*, p. 35). Risks that pertained to the refugees or their situations at a more disaggregated or individual level were not articulated.

The 1988 white paper on immigration policy (*St.meld. nr. 39 [1987–1988], 1998*) did, however, argue that some groups of refugees received too little attention and/or may need more follow-up in the refugee reception and integration work in Norway. These were children, victims of torture, and people with disabilities. We thus see a recognition of differentiated needs among those targeted by refugee policies after they arrived in Norway, although the word **vulnerability** was not used, nor were their needs or risks articulated with other words that carry similar meanings. The needs of these groups were not framed as concerns for policies of protection but rather for policies of care and inclusion after they were settled.

The 1994 white paper on refugee policy described how, “depending on the nature and

duration of the refugee situation,” Norway may find it relevant “to resettle particularly exposed groups of refugees” (*St.meld. nr. 17 [1994–1995], 1995*, p. 56). The Norwegian term used, “særlig utsatte grupper,” can also be translated as “particularly vulnerable groups,” representing an early example of differentiated risks being articulated in protection policy. However, the intended meaning seems to differ somewhat from later articulations of vulnerability. The white paper did not specify who these groups were or what specific risks they faced. Elsewhere, it described resettlement as suitable “in the case of a more prolonged refugee situation and very difficult conditions in the nearby areas” (*St.meld. nr. 17 [1994–1995], 1995*, p. 61). This suggests a broad, macro-level view of how refugee populations were differentiated, based on the conflicts they were affected by and the regions they inhabited.

The term **vulnerability** (*sårbarhet* in Norwegian) began to emerge in political deliberations in the 2000s, marking a new way

of articulating differentiated exposure to risk. This is apparent in the Parliament's revision of the Immigration Act of 1988 into the act of 2008, which remains in force today. In the white paper (NOU 2004: 20, 2001) that preceded this key legislation, the word **vulnerability** appears across multiple semantic landscapes—that is, in different contexts of policy-making and with varying shades of meaning. It was employed to describe exposure to different types of risks at the national, group, and individual levels: the state's vulnerability to foreign influence, immigrants' heightened vulnerability to changes in the economic cycle, the vulnerability of traumatized assault survivors seeking refuge, and the vulnerable positions of victims of forced marriage within their families. This reflects a broadening linguistic application of the term and a growing attention to individual-level risks.

This attention to individual-level risks is even more pronounced in the subsequent Immigration Act bill (Ot.prp. nr. 75 [2006–2007], 2007), where the concept of vulnerability became central to discussions on evidence requirements and risk assessments in protection claims (asylum), as well as the protection of children's rights. During the 2008 parliamentary debate on the new bill, the term was primarily used to highlight the inherent vulnerability of children seeking asylum and to argue the humanitarian virtues of the law and its alignment with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Oppositional parties, meanwhile, invoked vulnerability in debates over the deservingness of irregular migrants, who were not offered the same protections. This foreshadows how vulnerability would soon be used politically to contest problem definitions and policy interventions, a point I expand on later.

In the 2010s, a slow mainstreaming of the vulnerability concept in global migration

governance appeared to influence Norwegian policy-making. At the beginning of the decade, the government presented a white paper on how Norwegian refugee and migration policy should be "Europeanized" to better align with policies across the continent (Meld. St. 9 [2009–2010], 2010). This white paper uses the term when quoting or paraphrasing external governance bodies or states such as the ILO, UNHCR, Finland, and the EU, demonstrating that the "vulnerability turn" had begun to take hold across international migration governance, trickling into Norwegian discourse. Among these mentions, the most notable may be the reference to the EU's development of the Common European Asylum System. The white paper notes the European Commission's goal to "include the gender perspective and the special needs of vulnerable groups" in the assessments of asylum claims (Meld. St. 9 [2009–2010], 2010, p. 69). However, the Norwegian legal incorporation of the vulnerability concept in the asylum procedure took a slightly different approach, as I will show below.

Taken together, the evolving use of the term **vulnerability** in Norwegian refugee and migration policy reflects a shift from broad, context-driven assessments of refugee needs in the late 20th century to more granular, individual-focused understandings of risk and exposure in the 21st century. This transformation aligns with broader trends in global migration governance, which increasingly emphasize differentiated protections based on individual characteristics and circumstances. Now, let's look more closely at how vulnerability has been incorporated into Norwegian legal framings and policy priorities since the 2000s.

EXPANDING LEGAL ACCESS TO PROTECTION

In the refugee debates of the 2000s, the concept of vulnerability gained policy influence as a way to highlight individual-level risks, grounded in social position and personal experiences rather than macro-structures. This concept played a particularly crucial role in the revision of the Immigration Act, where it was used to expand the scope of protection, shifting the state's attention toward the risks faced by vulnerable individuals in a variety of contexts.

The 2004 white paper (NOU 2004: 20) that prepared the new Immigration Act exemplifies the reasoning behind this shift, by using vulnerability to frame the state's responsibility toward new candidates for protective action, such as traumatized assault survivors and victims of forced marriage. These discussions reframed the state's responsibility in protecting individuals from oppression and persecution, extending it beyond the traditional model of the adult male victim, across genders and age groups, and into the private sphere. This focus on vulnerability also guided the revisions in the Immigration Act bill, amending the asylum procedure's evidence requirements and risk assessments, as well as enhancing protections for children's rights.

The 2006–2007 Immigration Act bill incorporated this focus on vulnerability into law, broadening the state's ability to grant refugee status not solely on objective risk assessments but also on an applicant's "intensified subjective fear" and their status as being in a "particularly vulnerable individual situation" (Ot.prp. nr. 75 [2006–2007], 2007, p. 86). By allowing asylum to be granted based on subjective fear and individualized vulnerability, the bill expanded the scope of protection to accommodate a more flexible and humanitarian approach. Specific groups,

such as "children, single women, and people with serious health problems," were identified as particularly vulnerable (p. 86).

Children's vulnerability was a pivotal concern in the bill. It recognized that children are often less able to substantiate their need for protection or articulate their personal circumstances. As such, the bill advocated for a child-sensitive application of refugee provisions, arguing for a lower threshold to establish a "well-founded fear of persecution" for children (Ot.prp. nr. 75 [2006–2007], 2007, p. 92). This was especially emphasized in return situations, where children may face heightened risks of abuse without adequate adult protection.

Thus, the introduction of vulnerability in these legislative reforms expanded access to protection by addressing both the state's freedom to protect at-risk individuals and its obligations to uphold the rights of vulnerable groups, particularly children. However, access to protection was still dependent on individual assessments of each case, meaning that this incorporation builds on understanding vulnerability as particular to one's life experience, shaped by the individual's circumstances and life conditions. As I will explore in the next two sections, the political uses of the term contrast with this incorporation by ascribing vulnerability much more categorically, with some contradictory results.

LEVERAGING VULNERABILITY IN POLICY DEBATES

In addition to its legislative impact, vulnerability has become a central rhetorical tool in Norwegian parliamentary debates on refugee protection during the last couple of decades. The selected debates included in this analysis exemplify how different political parties have used this term to support varying agendas. It is used most frequently when

politicians promote expansive protection policies, while other linguistic repertoires are used to silence or even question the vulnerability of refugees when politicians favour restrictive policies.

The mainstreaming of vulnerability in migration governance aligns with a hardening stance across Europe in the early 2010s, reflected in Norway's debates. In response to high numbers of asylum arrivals in 2008 and 2009, the political majority favoured increasingly restrictive policy proposals across the continent. In Norway, parliamentary debates mirrored this trend, focusing on the perceived risks associated with receiving refugees while largely silencing the vulnerabilities of those seeking asylum. Politicians appeared to deliberately avoid using the term **vulnerability** for groups targeted by restrictive asylum policies they endorse, downplaying their needs to sidestep moral or humanitarian obligations. In such debates, vulnerability was scarcely mentioned, as the emphasis was shifting toward managing risks associated with **admitting** refugees.

For instance, a Labour Party MP in 2010 asserted, "It is important to the preservation of the legitimacy of the asylum institute that those who are allowed to stay, really need protection" (S.tid [2009–2010], 2010, p. 3782). This sentiment underscores the rationale for restrictive measures: to reserve asylum for those "genuinely in need" and deter others. Another MP stated, "In our time there is no clear distinction between flight and migration," (p. 3793), framing asylum as threatened by blurred lines between refugees and migrants, thus justifying stricter controls.

The term **vulnerability** re-emerges in debates around Norway's responsibility toward refugees during and after the "summer of migration" in 2015. Along with a number of synonymous terms, it is frequently used

in contestation over Norway's responsibility toward refugees outside its borders and debates over how to intervene to aid their suffering. In 2015, Parliament debated a proposal to expand humanitarian aid and resettlement quotas in response to the deterioration of the situation in Syria and the "migration crisis" in southern Europe. The quota expansion was a rare example of liberalization of protection policy through a broad political compromise. The remaining political quarrel was disagreement over whether to resettle more refugees or redirect more funds toward humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees in countries neighbouring Syria. Each side appealed to the vulnerability of the groups they sought to prioritize, whether refugees in need of resettlement or refugees who would remain in the camps. For example, the Socialist Party emphasized the extreme vulnerability of certain groups in overcrowded refugee camps as a reason to resettle more in Norway (S.tid [2014–2015], 2015, p. 4681), while the Conservative Party used the general vulnerability of Syrian children to justify directing aid to the region instead of expanding resettlement (p. 4688).

Similarly, in a 2020 debate on relocating asylum seekers from Greece, parties in the opposition described the children and young people in the Greek camps as being acutely vulnerable (Dok. 85 S (2019–2020), 2020; Dok. 86 S (2019–2020), 2020). These politicians rhetorically linked the vulnerability of the children in Moria to looming external threats, in this case, the worsening of the situation on the Greek islands and the outbreak of the pandemic, as well as Norway's complicity in overloading the asylum system along Schengen's outer borders (S.tid [2019–2020], 2020, pp. 3857, 3859). These linkages allowed small parties in the opposition to pressure a conservative minority government that was reluctant to relocate. Several such

examples show how opposition parties have used the concept of vulnerability for issue formation, to challenge government policies, and to form alternative narratives. In contrast with the deliberations on restrictive asylum policies and the suspicion with which refugees are spoken of there, in attempts to expand protection, we see a willingness to acknowledge and name the refugees as vulnerable due to their displacement and deserving of intervention because of this. This use of vulnerability has helped politicians frame migration issues in humanitarian terms, attempting to build moral legitimacy for more liberal policies.

However, the vulnerability rhetoric is contested. The right-wing Progress Party especially has resisted the vulnerability framing, particularly in contexts where it would justify more liberal refugee policies. In debates, the party countered attempts to portray groups such as undocumented immigrants or unaccompanied minors as vulnerable, often framing these individuals as “illegal immigrants” or migrants without a legitimate need for protection. By rejecting the vulnerability narrative, the Progress Party likely aims to support more restrictive policies, focusing on limiting access to protection and reinforcing the legitimacy of stricter border control. In the March 2022 discussion on Norway’s response to the quickly escalating Ukrainian refugee crisis, other parties labelled children, women, and sexual minorities fleeing Ukraine as particularly vulnerable to exploitation in the chaos, to focus the government’s response on these risks. Meanwhile, the Progress Party spoke only of the Ukrainian refugees’ cultural similarities and assumed resources, stressing that “these are Ukrainians who can thrive in Norwegian society” (S.tid [2021–2022], 2022, p. 2550), because their main proposal was to reduce

the scale of integration services that these refugees should receive in Norway.

In summary, the concept of vulnerability has been employed by political parties in ways that reflect their broader policy agendas and priorities. It can be invoked to justify protective and inclusive measures, such as expanding the resettlement quota, or strategically downplayed to support more restrictive policies, such as those aimed at deterring asylum seekers. Opposition parties can weaponize the concept to critique government decisions, while others reject it as a resistance strategy. This political use of the term appears to contrast with the legal incorporation discussed earlier. While the law consistently recognizes children as inherently vulnerable during forced displacement, for example, political actors’ willingness to speak of this vulnerability appears contingent on whether it aligns with their preferred policy outcomes. This instrumental use of vulnerability highlights its role as a malleable concept shaped by shifting political objectives.

NARRATIVE POWER AND HIERARCHIES OF DESERVINGNESS

These historical shifts in the use and meaning of **vulnerability** in Norwegian refugee governance reveal significant shifts in political and social perspectives on refugees and their claims to protection. This is particularly evident in the concept’s social reach—who it refers to and excludes—and its role in framing deservingness.

In the debates examined here, two groups frequently emerged at the top of narrative hierarchies of vulnerability among those seeking protection: children and “quota refugees.” Conversely, asylum seekers as a broader category were often excluded, positioned in contrast to these “deserving victims.” However, unaccompanied minor asylum seekers challenge this dichotomy, as

they are both asylum seekers and children. Over the past decade, the perceived deservingness of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers has become a point of contention, influencing how their vulnerability is acknowledged by different political factions. The following paragraphs explore these dynamics and provide illustrative examples.

Children

Articulations of vulnerability can create a hierarchy, where some groups are framed as more worthy recipients of assistance. Rhetorically, this can demonstrate and mobilize commitment to certain policy interventions. Highlighting children's vulnerability often legitimizes propositions for more liberal protection policies by invoking their perceived "deservingness." For example, in the 2020 debates on Moria, the Socialist Party explicitly ranked children there as "the very most vulnerable in the world right now," positioning them above others who might also merit political intervention, and thereby giving legitimacy to their demand that Norway offers them relocation (*S.tid* [2019–2020], 2020, p. 3862). Similarly, in the 2022 discussions on Ukraine, the government and supportive parties stressed the suffering of children exposed to war and forced displacement to endorse the temporary protection regime. The minister of justice highlighted "desperate mothers and vulnerable children" as particularly moving (*S.tid* [2021–2022], 2022, p. 2543), while the Socialist Party underscored the traumatic experiences of Ukrainian children arriving in Norway, who have faced rapid upheaval, separation from loved ones, and witnessed violence (p. 2550). Children's vulnerability is invoked to justify the collective protection regime and to underscore the need for tailored care in Norway's refugee reception system.

This pattern reflects a longer-standing parliamentary framing of children as inherently vulnerable—a framing that has repeatedly justified expanding protection measures.

Quota Refugees Versus Asylum Seekers

Another group that is categorically referred to as vulnerable is "quota refugees": those resettled to Norway at the request of UNHCR. Over the four decades studied here, Norwegian political parties, even including the right-wing Progress Party, have shown a clear preference for resettling quota refugees over receiving asylum seekers. However, the rationale for this preference has evolved over time. In the 1980s and 1990s, resettlement was linked to conditions in refugee-hosting countries. Refugees were seen collectively, and the focus was on supporting host countries and alleviating the strain on poorer nations with high refugee populations (*St.meld. nr. 17* [1994–1995], 1995; *St.meld. nr. 39* [1987–1988], 1998). By the 2010s, discourse shifted, with quota refugees increasingly described as "the most vulnerable" and lacking the resources to reach Europe independently. In contrast, asylum seekers were implicitly framed as less deserving because of their very ability to access territories where they could apply. Centre-right parties would often question the legitimacy of their claims, suggesting that some asylum seekers might not have a genuine need for protection.

Quota refugees have been described as more deserving because their numbers are controllable and their status has been verified by the UNHCR, in contrast to asylum seekers, who arrive with unverified protection claims. The Progress Party, for example, has referred to asylum seekers as having "an unclear and questionable need for protection" (*S.tid* [2019–2020], 2020, p. 3853),

while others in the political centre and right label them a mix of migrants and refugees. Resettlement through the UN system has been framed by all parties as ensuring moral justice, where the last will be first, and predictability, as those who are resettled will also be recognized as refugees and eligible for the rights and services afforded to this group. One white paper described the needs of quota refugees as “indisputable” (*Meld. St. 9 [2009–2010], 2010*, p. 24). The asylum system, in contrast, has been described as a troublesome necessity, a flawed system, and a source of unpredictability as the number of asylum seekers fluctuates beyond control.

Unaccompanied Minors

Parties opposed to more liberal refugee policies have often downplayed the vulnerability of specific groups to justify restrictive measures or resist expansive proposals. This creates paradoxical narratives, particularly concerning unaccompanied minors seeking asylum, who are simultaneously categorized as vulnerable children and potentially illegitimate asylum seekers. A striking example emerged in the 2020 debate over relocating minors from the Moria camp. The Progress Party and Conservative Party resisted the Left’s framing of unaccompanied minors as deserving relocation due to their vulnerability. Instead, they emphasized that many of these minors were older boys from Afghanistan or Pakistan who would receive only temporary protection in Norway until reaching adulthood. As the minister of justice argued: “After all, we shouldn’t trick people into traveling to Norway, so that they will experience being turned around when they get here” (*S.tid [2019–2020], 2020*, p. 3861). These parties appeared unwilling to describe these minors as vulnerable, even though the Norwegian immigration law’s recognition of

their vulnerability as minors would entitle them to temporary protection.

On the other hand, parties such as the Socialist Party consistently described the minors as vulnerable and as children, with statements such as the following: “A child on its own is not an undetermined asylum applicant. It is a child that needs help from Europe, and we are part of that Europe” (*S.tid [2019–2020], 2020*, p. 3862). Here, the term **child** became a sensitizing rhetorical tool closely tied to vulnerability, used strategically to advocate for the relocation of unaccompanied minors despite their uncertain legal status. Both sides of the debate can be said to have engaged with vulnerability in a way that simplifies rather than engages with the ethical complexities of meeting the minors’ protection needs.

Again, these examples demonstrate the malleable nature of the vulnerability concept. The political labelling of certain groups as vulnerable becomes a way of rhetorically positioning them as inside or outside the target group for the political instruments in question—whether that is relocation, resettlement, asylum, or temporary protection. The hierarchies of deservingness that develop over time do have a cost, however, in terms of delegitimizing those who are consistently left in the “other” category, particularly adult (and male) asylum seekers.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This analysis has traced the conceptual history of **vulnerability** in Norwegian refugee debates, illustrating its evolution from absence in the 1980s and 1990s to a central moral, legal, and political concept in the 2000s and beyond. In the Norwegian case, the timeline aligns with the semantic shift identified in international refugee governance, and indeed some of the early mentions appear in quotes from international

organizations. The vulnerability concept's integration into Norwegian immigration law also appears strongly influenced by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This strengthens the thesis that international organizations have been policy entrepreneurs in this shift (Flegar, 2018).

The number of displaced people has also grown exponentially in this period, an important context for political narratives and prioritizations. This may be part of the reason why, as the vulnerability turn occurs, we see a parallel shift in the political attention away from macro-features in refugee-hosting countries in the Global South, such as poverty and political instability. Since the 2000s, these have rarely been included in the problem definitions of protection policy, which increasingly focuses on the characteristics of the people seeking protection and the risks they might pose to countries, such as Norway, in the Global North. As migration policies become increasingly selective, and refugee policy becomes more about prioritization among the masses than about solving displacement, vulnerability rises as a useful concept that can legitimize interventions that differentiate between children and adults, women and men, and mobile and stationary refugees. This may also explain why when politicians favour restrictive policies, they favour other linguistic repertoires or directly question the vulnerability of refugees.

In the debates on refugee policy in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, the word **vulnerability** was not used to legitimize the protection of one group over another. As we have seen, however, the concept was quickly adopted as a moral denominator of deservingness when it entered the discourse on refugee policy in the 2010s. The epitomal victim—the resettled refugee—has increasingly been described in terms of vulnerability. Through these framings, the con-

cept has become one of two hegemonic denominators of deservingness, alongside protection needs. We have also seen that the positive association between the concept of vulnerability and refugees arriving through refugee resettlement has been paralleled by its openly negative association with asylum seekers. As problematized in earlier studies, this linguistic turn can have a negative impact on recognition of the right to seek asylum. It can also enable a rhetorical narrowing of which groups are understood as legitimate recipients of help and protection. Moreover, it contributes to the political oversimplification of complex realities that scholars like Flegar (2018, p. 374) warned of, even for those prioritized for protection. Politicians often label entire subpopulations of refugees as vulnerable, with little articulation of how refugees' vulnerability can be layered (Luna, 2009) and dynamic (Cardona et al., 2012) in ways that make individuals differentially exposed.

While vulnerability offers a new narrative framing of deservingness, this does not mean the resulting hierarchies are new. As I have shown, politicians have favoured quota refugees over asylum seekers since before the vulnerability turn. I also find that although displaced children's vulnerability is recognized in the law and often referred to in discourse, it is still disregarded or silenced if the politicians do not want to extend protection, as demonstrated in the case of the unaccompanied minors in Moria. As a rhetorical tool, vulnerability can serve both to expand and to restrict access to protection, depending on the political context, by legitimizing hierarchies that favour certain groups while casting others as less deserving. This moral work of vulnerability can thus contribute to the political prioritization of some refugee populations at the expense of others, reinforcing inequalities in access to protection.

While earlier debates in the 1980s and 1990s addressed systemic issues, such as the capacity of first-asylum countries and global displacement, the focus on vulnerability in the 2010s has narrowed the scope of political responsibility. This linguistic shift sidelines structural and macro-perspectives, framing the suffering of displaced persons as a humanitarian issue disconnected from the Global North except through aid. The dominant narratives after the “vulnerability turn” no longer draw political-economic connections between the responsibility of rich countries like Norway and the plight of the millions of displaced persons currently residing in host countries with far fewer resources. Europe has seen an intense politicization of immigration, especially the reception of refugees, over the past decades, and the act of migrating is at the centre of this attention, not global inequality in terms of resources and socio-economic structures. By shifting focus from macro-perspectives to individualized vulnerability, the vulnerability turn in Norwegian refugee debates has thus constrained the scope of political responsibility. Moving forward, a discourse that can challenge existing hierarchies and encourage policies that integrate structural analyses with humanitarian concerns may foster a more equitable and comprehensive response to global displacement.

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