"*I feel like I am less than other people*": Health-related vulnerabilities of male migrants travelling alone on their journey to Europe

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ABSTRACT

During 2015 and 2016, an unprecedented flow of approximately 800,000 migrants coming from Turkey towards Western Europe crossed the Balkans. Male migrants are perceived as being less vulnerable compared to other migrants and they are not given priority in service and support provision. This qualitative study examines the self-perceived vulnerabilities of male migrants travelling alone along the Balkan route to Europe. Twenty-four individual in-depth interviews, two group interviews and participant observation were conducted with male migrants in Belgrade, Serbia in 2017. Data was coded manually, and analysed thematically.

Male migrants traveling alone face the cumulative vulnerability of various traumatic events and migration-related contextual circumstances. Three main themes emerged: the ongoing desperate journey, the better treatment of 'traditionally' well recognised vulnerable sub-groups and the impact of the continuous stress on mental health. Deterrence measures imposed for border control purposes in the form of push-backs, expulsions, detention and degrading, inhumane treatment amplify the psychological distress of male migrants. Feelings of hopelessness, desperation, lack of self-value and self-esteem were reported. 'Traditionally vulnerable' populations were said to have had better treatment throughout the journey from smugglers, border state authorities, governmental officials, civil society and international organizations.

The devastating experiences of male migrants, as well as the better treatment offered to other groups of migrants like women and children, results in a perceived neglect of the needs of men in humanitarian response, rendering them vulnerable and exposing them to further health and protection risks. In a context where needs are unmet and people's dignity and health are at risk, specific strategies should be developed to include men in the assistance and protection offered, particularly in relation to exposure to violence.

1. Introduction

During the course of 2015 and early 2016, an unprecedented flow of approximately 800,000 migrants crossed the western Balkans from Turkey towards Austria and Germany (UNHCR, 2016a). Migrants were often forced to live and travel in hiding until a decision was taken by northern European countries in October 2015 to 'publicly' welcome them. At this point, Croatia, Serbia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia adopted an approach that facilitated a swift flow of people through their borders (IOM, 2017). This situation changed when, in November 2015, the EU imposed restrictions on movements based on nationality. This "slowed down the flow" and migrant movements almost came to a complete halt following the EU-Turkey deal in mid-March 2016 (EU, 2016). According to this agreement, every individual arriving irregularly on the Greek islands, including asylum-seekers, should be returned to Turkey. In exchange, Turkey would

receive six billion euros to assist refugees in the country, Turkish nationals would be granted visa-free travel to Europe and a humanitarian scheme to transfer Syrians from Turkey to other European countries would be activated (EU, 2016). However, the main premise of the deal that Turkey is a safe third country was untrue, and in many instances Greece's asylum appeals committees ruled that Turkey does not provide adequate protection for refugees (AI, 2017). The deal had devastating consequences on the lives and health of the thousands of refugees and migrants trapped on the Greek islands and in the Balkans, where they were – and continue to be – caught in limbo (MSF, 2017).

Since 2014, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has been involved in providing care to migrants in Serbia as part of its humanitarian response to the influx of people passing along the Balkan route. A recent study by MSF showed that male migrants are more likely to be subjected to violence from state authorities including the police and the military, smugglers and vigilante groups (Arsenijević et al., 2017). They are also more likely to be detained during their journey and be repeatedly 'pushed back', expelled and deported (HRW, 2016). Expulsion is an act by a public authority to remove a person against his or her will from the territory of that state, whereas a successful expulsion of a person by a country is referred to as deportation (Perruchoud and Redpath-Cross, 2011). 'Push-back' is a term used for the apprehension of a person trying to cross a border irregularly and then involuntary deported to the country from which the person came. Traumatic events experienced during the migration route are cumulative as migrants are continuously exposed to repressive policies and practices which neglect, marginalize and exclude them (MSF, 2013).

Gender roles are deeply shaped by the social and cultural backgrounds of the individual (Rzehak, 2011). Self-esteem and how male migrants travelling alone feel about themselves pushes them into a state of hopelessness and anxiety, rendering them vulnerable and exposing them to further health and protection risks (MSF, 2013). In contrast, the general population in Europe perceives male migrants traveling alone to be less physically and emotionally vulnerable when compared to other migrant groups such as women and children (ISSOP, 2018; Plener et al., 2017; Shortall et al., 2017; Trovato et al., 2016). Some governments have even imposed restrictive policies towards male migrants travelling alone and have categorized them according to simplistic gender stereotypes, marginalizing them further (Charsley and Wray, 2015). For example, the Hungarian government has separate transit zone border crossing lists for families, unaccompanied minors and 'single men'. People on the first two lists are prioritised and only one man traveling alone per week is allowed to express their intention to seek asylum (HHC, 2017). Being perceived as undesirable, threatening and dangerous increases the challenges these men face in accessing protection along their journey.

Humanitarian assistance and support programs for migrants traditionally focus on women and children, who are generally perceived as being the most vulnerable groups in society (ISSOP, 2018; Plener et al., 2017). A greater emphasis on these two groups is often accompanied with relative neglect for the needs of men in humanitarian responses, and in some cases they can be excluded completely.

While some research studies have focused on the challenges faced by vulnerable groups of migrants such as women and children (Escobio et al., 2015; Pottie et al., 2015; Shawyer et al., 2014), there are no studies from the European context on the vulnerability of male migrants travelling alone (Afulani et al., 2016), nor the challenges they face in accessing protection and humane treatment.

Since the precarious situation of this neglected group is poorly recognised and often goes unacknowledged, we conducted a study to examine self-perceptions of vulnerabilities and challenges facing male migrants travelling alone along the Balkan route to Europe. We also examined their perceptions of how the journey affected their mental health and the coping strategies they used to overcome migration hardships.

1.1. Humanitarian aid and ethics in the context of European migration

In recent years anthropologists have shown a growing interest for humanitarian assistance which has developed into an anthropology of humanitarianism – a recognition and discussion of the collaboration between anthropology and humanitarian action has emerged (Abramowitz and Panter-Brick, 2015; Fassin and Pandolfi, 2010; Pool and Geissler, 2005; Redfield, 2005, 2006, 2012, 2013, 2015; Wagner, 2016). Following these debates, anthropology found itself in a moment of crisis and self-doubt leading the discipline to change its object of study by focusing on the "suffering subject" (Ticktin, 2014, 11). Humanitarianism is defined as "one way to do good" or improve aspects of the human condition by focusing on suffering and saving lives in times of crisis or emergency (Ticktin, 2014, XV). Nevertheless, although humanitarian aid is based on the principles of humanitarianism, human rights, social justice, impartiality and independence, humanitarian aid cannot exist if detached from these principles. Humanitarian action relies however on the political, economic and social context in which it is active, and which differs in every setting. Humanitarian aid was researched beyond an analysis of its moral and ideological grounds, with the significant contribution of the anthropology of humanitarianism and its critical reflection that humanitarian action is often but unintentionally politically shaped (Abramowitz and Panter-Brick, 2015; Fassin, 2011; Redfield, 2013). Willen argues that in many migration settings, decision makers declared unauthorised migrants to be categorically undeserving of care, concern and investment (Willen, 2012b). In recent years a similar sentiment can be observed in the European migration context, where political pressure and constraints surround the delivery of humanitarian aid.

De Genova depicts that the "European" borders and identity crises feed "nationalisms and racialized nativisms" and translates them into an anti-migrant rhetoric abusing certain events to oversimplify the portrayal of refugees as: "'illegal' migrants, smugglers, sexual deviants, religious fundamentalists, criminals, 'home-grown' and international terrorists, and 'foreign fighters'" (De Genova, 2016, 8). Balibar describes this phenomenon as "immigration complex" - "a transformation of every social 'problem' into a problem which is regarded as being posed by the fact of the presence of 'immigrants' or, at least, as being aggravated by their presence" (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991, 219). Male migrants are particularly exposed as being finger-pointing scapegoats and they are seen to represent the personification of an "immigration complex" in European identity crises, further fuelling nationalism, racism, xenophobia and islamophobia. Additionally, the aforementioned rhetoric influences general discussions and discourses related to judgemental decision making impacting the sense of deserving that male migrants have to care and humanitarian aid.

There is an inherent ambiguity and tension between a compassionate discourse and a regulative action in contemporary humanitarian action. Unwillingly, humanitarian policies, by focusing on the vulnerabilities of some and by victimizing others, create and reinforce existing distinctions between those who are deserving of care and humanitarian protection (such as families, women and children), and those who are not (male migrants traveling alone).

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

A qualitative study was conducted, in which individual in-depth interviews, group interviews and observation were used to obtain an emic perspective (Harris, 1976; Pope and Mays, 2006).

2.2. Study setting

Since late 2016 it is estimated that about 7000 migrants are present at any given time in the territory of Serbia (ECHO, 2017). This figure is