Episode 14 Transcript

Vulnerability as Layers: Vulnerability Part 6

Hosted By: Rebecca Richards

Guest: Professor Florenica Luna

Hello and welcome to another episode of 'Just Emergencies'. I'm Rebecca Richards and in today's episode, I'm joined by Professor Florencia Luna to discuss her layered conception of vulnerability.

Professor Florencia Luna is the Programme Director of Bioethics at FLACSO - the Latin American School of Social Science-, and a Principle Researcher for the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research. Her research interests include international research ethics, research in developing countries, gender, and of particular relevance to us: vulnerability.

She's an influential voice in vulnerability research and has written extensively on it, included a book entitled: Bioethics and Vulnerability: A Latin American View.

Please note that this episode was recorded before the new Argentinian abortion law passed in December 2020.

[Intro Music]

This is 'Just Emergencies', the podcast where we show that global health emergencies are anything but just. In each episode we explore an issue, question, or event that makes us think about global health emergencies, humanitarian crises, and how to best respond to them.

Without further ado, let's get into the episode!

Rebecca: Hi Florenica. Thank you so much for joining us today and welcome to the Just Emergencies podcast.

Prof. Luna: Hi Rebecca. How are you?

Rebecca: I'm good thank you. Very excited to be talking to you. As I've said, I've heard a lot about you and obviously throughout the project, we have a mutual research interest which is vulnerability.

So you've written some very influential work in this area. Could you explain to us please what your conception of vulnerability is?

Prof. Luna: I began being interested in vulnerability when I read an article of Carole Levine et al. and they were criticising this concept very strongly. They were taking the so-called 'traditional approach'.

And I still thought that it's a very relevant and important concept. So, what I tried to do, was to give a new conceptualisation to this concept in order to avoid stereotyping, that vagueness, and most of the problems they were thinking of.

One of the problems, I thought, was that they were thinking [in terms] of labels: old people vulnerable, pregnant women are vulnerable. And the issue is that [we need to think] in more than labels. I said, I will use the metaphor of layers. What I think is that we should think in the functioning of the concept. And this functioning is relational and dynamic. It interacts with the context and vulnerabilities may change the context. I think that instead of thinking in these categories that this traditional analysis supposes, we should think in layers.

Because I think that this traditional view does in a way, some essentialising in this kind of analysis. Supposing that these are the people that are vulnerable. What I try to show is that it's not something essential, it's not a

category... it varies with the concept. So, for example, I give the example that by being a woman per se, you are not vulnerable. But if you live in Argentina where your reproductive rights are not respected and if you have an unwanted pregnancy you cannot terminate your pregnancy, you acquire a layer of vulnerability. The more layers you have, the more vulnerable you are.

So that was my first and initial way of thinking about vulnerability. So what I began to do, is trying to think first is what we have to do is identify different layers. We have to see how harmful they are and how probable they are. How probable it is that they'll get to appear or really harm that person.

Also, I thought that what we needed was to evaluate those layers in order to then see how we can operate with that. And I began thinking in two concepts. One is that layers, for me, are dispositions. And one of the characteristics of dispositions is that they need something to be triggered. So when there are these trigger conditions, these stimulus conditions, the vulnerability will be triggered and the person will be harmed. I think this is very important. If we have stimulus conditions near, we are in a worse situation and we will have to find ways in which to avoid that or minimise that. So that's one key concept.

And the second one, which I take from the work of Wendy Rogers, Catriona McKenzie etc. is the idea of cascading. I think that some of these layers may have this cascade effect. I say that I take it from them because they use this idea and they call it 'pathogenic vulnerability'. In their view, there are sources or layers of vulnerability that may exacerbate existing vulnerabilities or generate new ones. A layer may bring in many other layers and may render the person more and more vulnerable.

I think that in practice what we can do then is identify layers of vulnerability; see if they are stimulus conditions that may trigger the vulnerability - we have to try to avoid that; and also see if some of these

vulnerabilities - these layers of vulnerabilities - have this cascading effect. Once you identify these characteristics, you can rank the different layers of vulnerabilities and in defence, you can set different obligations like avoid exacerbating vulnerabilities; eradicate them if you can - sometimes you cannot, so you'll have to minimise them; and very importantly, empower persons in order to be able to avoid, minimise, or eradicate those vulnerabilities.

Rebecca: You mentioned there identifying these layers would then give us an opportunity to potentially rank the vulnerabilities. Within those vulnerabilities, can some layers of vulnerability be 'thicker' or 'thinner'? So how do you compare between those layers to rank them?

Prof. Luna: Well, I like very much the work of, for example, Wendy Rogers and colleagues, but not [their use of] taxonomy. I don't think that we can set a taxonomy, really. I think that layers are flexible, they may change. So they might be 'thicker' as you were saying, in the sense that they're more harmful and more probable than others that are thinner because they might not be as problematic. I say, well we can rank in order to say: if I am a policy maker and I have to design or I want to solve the problem of old people, I need to rank which are the more important vulnerabilities and layers and the ones that are more probably to occur. In that sense, you need this kind of work.

But I'm not thinking in terms of something rigid. I think we have to stay in tune with the layers and allow ourselves to this dynamism. And I think this is very difficult: we like taxonomies, we like to think that things are put in order and that we can rank and they stay like that: orderly classified. Reality and vulnerability are not like that. We live in a flexible world with contexts that interacts. Different people receive the same stimulus in different ways. We have to accept these flexibilities. And you have to do the difficult work of thinking; thinking through each situation. That's my way of thinking.

I think that layers of vulnerability, the richness and the interesting thing is accepting that they are like that. For example, now with Covid, we have found - in many developing countries this is quite problematic - many health staff are also vulnerable to Covid. And you can say, 'well they've got a layer'. Because maybe they don't have the kind of 'thick' vulnerabilities you were referring to. This is one kind of layer - we can say these are people that are educated, for example. But we can see also that a stimulus condition might be not having the adequate protection in their jobs. If they don't have the proper equipment, haven't been taught on how to use them properly, and what the safety procedures are that they have to use, they will probably get Covid. So this is the stimulus conditions that once you identify them and see that they may trigger that vulnerability, you have to eradicate the problem.

Rebecca: I think something that is very important about your model, and you mentioned it there, is this idea that people are rendered vulnerable and that this is very much influenced by their circumstances. And I think particularly, as you mentioned, in the Covid-19 pandemic, because it's all across the world, we're seeing so many different circumstances that are rendering people vulnerable in different ways. So I think that's very important and I'm assuming that that's an important part of then trying to make policy decisions to try and 'un-render' people vulnerable and reverse those dispositional circumstances that they're in.

Prof. Luna: Yes. I think that if you can peel all those layers, you will be able to at least know what is going on and how to design, for example, different public policies for each of the layers. They might be different.

Rebecca: Fantastic, thank you so very much for - excuse the pun - multi-layered account of vulnerability. Thank you very much for taking the time and talking with us today.

Prof. Luna: It was a pleasure.

[Outro music]

That's it for today – we hope you enjoyed the today's episode.

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Be sure to check out and explore our website "Justice in Global Health Emergencies and Humanitarian Crises" for more great content, just go to https://www.ghe.law.ed.ac.uk/.

Thanks for listening and see you again for the next episode.

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