Street-Level Workers and Unaccompanied Minors: Between Vulnerability and Suspicion

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Abstract: Focusing on practices and representations mobilized by street-level workers in the management of North African unaccompanied minor migrants (UAMs) in Geneva, I take a closer look at the everyday assessment and production of UAMs' deservingness in the context of humanitarianism. I show the importance of doubt and of perceived vulnerability in the informal evaluation process of UAMs' right for protection. I further demonstrate how the social construction of childhood, race, and gender influence street-level workers' perceptions.

Keywords: Migration, street-level workers, humanitarianism, race, gender

"Street-level workers" et migrant·es mineur·es non-accompagné·es : entre vulnérabilité et suspicion

Résumé : Dans cet article j'étudie les pratiques et les représentations mobilisées par les «street-level workers» dans la gestion des migrant·es mineur·es non-accompagné·es (MNA) maghrébin·es à Genève. Dans le contexte de l'humanitarisme, j'explore la production quotidienne de la légitimité des MNA. Je montre l'importance du doute et de la vulnérabilité dans le processus informel d'évaluation du droit à la protection des MNA, et je révèle l'impact de la construction sociale de l'enfance, de la race et du genre sur les perceptions de ces professionel·les.

Mots-clés : Migration, street-level workers, humanitarisme, race, genre

"Street-Level Workers" und unbegleitete Minderjährige: Zwischen Verwundbarkeit und Verdächtigung

Zusammenfassung: Der vorliegende Artikel untersucht die Praktiken und Repräsentationen die von "street-level workers" bei der Betreuung von unbegleiteten maghrebinischen Minderjährigen (MNAs) in Genf mobilisiert werden. Ich werfe einen Blick auf die humanitaristische Herstellung der Legitimität von MNAs und erörtere die Bedeutung von Verdächtigung und Verwundbarkeit im informellen Beurteilungsprozess des Rechts auf Schutz. Ausserdem zeige ich, wie die soziale Konstruktion von Kindheit, Ethnizität und Geschlecht die Wahrnehmungen der Berufstätigen beeinflusst.

Schlüsselwörter: Migration, Street-level workers, Humanitarismus, Ethnizität, Geschlecht

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1   Introduction[1]

In managing migration, contemporary states are Janus-faced, showcasing humanitarian values and protecting vulnerable migrants from oppression, while simultaneously "abusing their power to clearly distinguish between those who they deem deserving and undeserving" (Trasciani and Borrelli 2019, 410). An emblematic case of this ambivalence is the North African children and adolescents migrating alone who have become a policy and media issue in Geneva in the last few years. Citizens of countries deemed "safe" by the Swiss Department of International Affairs have only little chance of being granted asylum. Aware of this, youths from North Africa only rarely seek asylum. They hold no residency permits and are thus only tolerated in Switzerland by virtue of their status as minors, which according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), requires the state to look after them until they are 18 and "age out" of protection (Ruiz 2018, 93).

Since minor status is what establishes their deservingness in receiving protection and staying in the country, assessing their age becomes central. However, most youths do not carry identity documents, or have documents considered unreliable by state officials. At a time of limited budgets and increased migration control, street-level workers caring for these minors in state-funded associations and institutions face a double bind between unconditional welcoming and gate-keeping access to public services and state protection. At the heart of these issues, the category of "unaccompanied minor" (UAM) materializes the duality between two legal concepts: the child in need of protection and the undocumented alien who can be subjected to discriminatory treatment (Senovilla Hernández 2014).

This paper addresses several questions that emerge from these tensions: how do street-level workers assess young UAMs' deservingness? How is it evaluated in official and everyday practice in the absence of valid documents? More generally, what structural representations inform the (re)production of the UAM category, and what conflicts and negotiations occur in defining this category?

Although previous works studying evaluation practices affecting unaccompanied migrants in Europe (such as Bricaud 2006; Etiemble 2008; Cette France-là 2010 and Carayon et al. 2018) have focused on the issue of suspicion, in particular regarding UAMs' age, they rarely discuss the everyday processes by which street-level workers settle the protection needs of migrants officially recognized as UAMs. In contrast, my research shows that, when they are forced to prioritize needs to access limited resources allocated to migrant care while faced with an uncertain age, street-level workers in Geneva have decided that the criterion of *vulnerability* should govern the evaluation of UAMs. The practices and representations of street-level workers

are thus a productive vantage point for understanding the everyday production and denial of UAMs' deservingness.

In what follows, I explore practices and representations mobilized by street-level workers and their effects on the day-to-day evaluation of UAMs. I start by giving a brief presentation of the theoretical framework and describe UAMs' institutional "journey" in Geneva. Then, I describe the methods used during my investigation. In the second part of the article, I present the findings of this study in two sections. First, I explore the informal verification applied in a context of limited resources. I show that an informal "doubt policy" is pervasive in the management of unaccompanied minor migrants and that street-level workers rely on *visibility* to assess UAMs' age. As we will see, racialization has an impact on the process of age assessment. Second, I investigate the importance of conceptions of vulnerability in the perception and evaluation of UAMs' deservingness. In particular, I explore the impact of structures of race and gender in shaping informal hierarchies of vulnerability. Using these findings, I clarify the mundane processes by which these hierarchies come to play a part in the relationship between UAMs and the state actors providing access to public services and bring to light the everyday production and challenging of the UAM category.

2   Theoretical Framework

Switzerland's relationship with migration has been characterized since the beginning of the 20th century by political discourses of *Überfremdung,* the fear of foreign over-population threatening national identity (Riaño and Wastl-Walter 2006). Riaño and Wastl-Walter (2006) note that race, class, and gender have been structuring elements of Swiss discourse on migrants since the First World War. In the 1990s, Switzerland adopted the "three-circles policy" (later reduced to two) – in which the world was divided according to the perceived "cultural proximity" of the citizens of those countries (Riaño and Wastl-Walter 2006). To this day, that "remains the foundation of a racialized migration man-agement model" (Ossipow et al. 2019, 3) and is the basis of a visa scheme producing what the sociologist Steve Garner would call a "*de facto* racialization" (Garner 2007, 63). More recently, Swiss politics have been marked by several openly racist "popular initiatives" targeting migrants and Muslims, mainly launched by the far-right populist SVP/UDC party.

Despite the entrenchment of racist tropes in immigration policies, it has proven difficult to produce a public discourse associating Swiss management of migration with institutional racism. Since the Second World War, race has been rejected in Europe as a pseudo-scientific concept rather than a political one imbedded in the constitution of European Modernity (Lentin 2008). Consequently, racism is now primarily perceived as an individual, almost pathological, attitude (Boulila 2019).

Recent scholarly literature has started to crack the myth of Swiss racial blindness, questioning the historical representation of Switzerland as a small neutral alpine nation, an outsider from the European colonial enterprise (Michel 2015). Scholars have presented accounts of the involvement of Swiss citizens, firms and, politics in European colonialism that challenge the myth of Swiss "colonial innocence" (Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015). But, as in most European countries, the importance of race and racism has been largely underestimated in migration studies (Grosfoguel et al. 2015; Erel et al. 2016). Such an absence in public discourse leaves social actors with no easy ways of addressing race-related categories, despite the centrality of racialized perceptions in their everyday experiences in Switzerland (Lavanchy 2014). To avoid reproducing this pitfall, I choose to use the concept of "race" instead of "ethnicity" in this article, because – as Peter Wade explains, "[t]here is no clear distinction between race and ethnicity. […] 'Ethnic' may be used to refer euphemistically to the classic categories familiar in racial discourse (black/African, white/European, etc.); it may invoke culture as engrained and heritable in ways that draw it close to racial ways of conceiving heredity in human nature (as both biological and cultural)" (Wade 2014, 593).

The contemporary racialization (Omi and Winant 2015) of migration interplays with neoliberal retrenchments of the welfare state and gives rise to a form of welfare chauvinism, in which those deserving access to social protection are "those who belong to the ethnically defined community and who have contributed to it" (Kitschelt 1997, 22, quoted in Guentner et al. 2016, 3). This thinking induces what Guentner et al. call "bordering practices": *measures taken by state institutions – whether at territorial frontiers or inside them – which demarcate categories of people so as to incorporate some and exclude others, in a specific social order*" (2016, 2, their italics). In that respect, in Switzerland, access to social assistance is *de facto* restricted to Swiss citizens. Residents with lower-level permits and undocumented ones are informally excluded, because access to and renewal of their visas is contingent upon their financial independence.

In the wake of contemporary transformations of the social protection system, benefits are distributed through case-by-case evaluations of individual situations and behaviors rather than by the administrative identification of a status (e.g. unemployed, disabled, etc.) (Dubois 2018). Street-level workers acquire an increased role in this increased competition for scarce resources, assessing requests and granting access to welfare benefits. Following Giorgia Trasciani and Lisa Marie Borelli, I use the term *street-level workers* for all the professionals, both in administrations ("street-level bureaucrats") and private NGOs or institutions executing state mandates (Trasciani and Borrelli 2019). In this article, I will mostly focus on social workers. As with Lipsky's street-level bureaucrats, street-level workers are public-facing individuals responsible for the delivery of public services and operating with a certain amount of discretionary power (Lipsky 2010). Everyday "bordering" practices are enacted

not only by street-level bureaucrats in migration offices, but also social workers in welfare administration, and even by those working in other fields such as NGOs or in hospitals, who have a role as gatekeepers providing access to the public welfare system (Misje 2020). Indeed, in the name of combating fraud, a growing body of professionals working with migrants are tasked by the state with monitoring migration status (Spire 2016).

Given scarce resources, street-level workers who might have the best intentions have to take difficult decisions to define who will have first priority to those resources. These choices are often made on the basis of perceptions and decisions about "deservingness". Accordingly, in contemporary migration regimes, the deservingness framework based on vulnerability has taken prime position (D'Halluin 2016). This is consistent with what Didier Fassin calls "humanitarian government", the increased importance of moral sentiments, centered on suffering and compassion towards suffering beings in politics (Fassin 2012, 1). In anthropology too, "the suffering subject […] has replaced the savage one as a privileged object of our attention" (Robbins 2013, 450). As Sébastien Chauvin and Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas observe, "in an era of increasing criminalization of migration, the good candidate for asylum has seemingly become the one who would have preferred not to migrate but has come or stayed due to exceptional circumstances associated with vulnerability" (2014, 426).

As children, unaccompanied minors ought to fall within the scope of vulnerability-based deservingness. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989, is supported by social representations of children's particular vulnerability and innocence (Fassin 2012). However, negative representations of undocumented migrants may also be attached to UAMs. As Guentner et al. summarize: "[unaccompanied minors,] with their obvious vulnerability as children […] retain some degree of social solidarity, yet they are also tainted politically by prevailing hostility towards migrants and asylum seekers" (Guentner et al. 2016, 13).

In the remainder of this article, I look at the daily practices and discourses of the street-level workers and officials responsible for the care of UAMs in Geneva, analyzing how the practice of humanitarian values in a neoliberal context implies hard choices, and the impact of these choices on UAMs' effective access to rights.

3   UAMs' institutional journey in Geneva

Formally, the CRC and the Swiss constitution recognize that the rights of children should not involve discrimination on the basis of residence status. In practice these rights (representation, education, health care, housing) are not fully accessible to

North African[2] UAMs. As we will see later, they are mostly treated as undocumented adults.

At the time of my fieldwork (from winter 2019 to the end of spring 2020), UAMs were often identified by social workers in emergency centers for people in precarious situations and redirected to Geneva's cantonal child foster care service (SPMi). Social workers in these facilities were the first, in 2018, to alert the authorities to the presence of minors in shelters theoretically forbidden to them. To be registered by the SPMi, UAMs had to go through an official identification and evaluation process. This comprised an interview with an officer from the "asylum seeker section" of the cantonal police and another with an official from the SPMi, to verify their identity and age. During that period, UAMs were not registered by the cantonal migration office or by the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM). I was told that since most UAMs do not carry documents, the age they claimed was the one registered and used by official institutions, unless they were *obviously* adults. This initial age assessment has a fundamental impact on migrants' life in Switzerland, for it underpins recognition or denial of UAM status.

This identification process has been tightened since the time of my fieldwork. Police has reinforced cooperation with Interpol and the authorities of North African countries to authenticate UAMs' identities and ages. An accurate picture of the actual official procedure would require further research, but informants told me at the time of my fieldwork that the upcoming identification process would comprise additional hearings with the cantonal migration office and, if necessary, an X-ray of the wrist.[3] This tightening seems to have had a major impact. In a recent newspaper issue, we can read that the number of UAMs under curatorship dropped from a hundred in January 2021 to only a dozen since August 2021 (Dethurens 2021). Potential consequences are real: migrants identified as adults have been charged with benefit fraud for having received resources reserved for UAMs and sentenced to deportation (Di Stefano 2021). A social worker explained to me informally that even "real minors" do not trust this new process and as a result avoided being taken in charge by the state.

Contrary to UAM asylum seekers (UAMASs), housed in a dedicated home (in conditions also denounced by local NGOs), there were three different options for UAMs' accommodation: a dedicated center with 20 beds (which opened in

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2   The question remains regarding this focus on *North African* UAMs – compared to other origins – in discourses and policies. A possible answer, given by social workers and officials, is that UAMs from other origins may have access to larger and more organized community networks in Geneva, and thus remain invisible. In 2005, Vitté stated (at a time when most UAMs were of Latin American origin) that "around 80 % percent of the undocumented UAMs followed by the '[SPMi]' are taken in by relatives living in the canton, generally members of the extended family" (Vitté 2005, 14, my translation).

3   The use of X-rays for age assessment has been denounced by Swiss medical doctors as problematic and unscientific (see Eich and Schwitzgebel 2016), and is considered by the Federal Council as only representing a "weak clue" in age evaluation (Federal Council, 16.3598).

November 2019); hotels, with limited social support from a team of social workers having to care for dozens of UAMs; and homeless shelters, in which beds had been reserved for UAMs. A voluntary association was tasked with providing French and math courses and activities 3.5 hours per day for 15 registered UAMs. Apart from that, and a couple of individual UAMs who could attend secondary school, no education policy has been implemented. The SPMi also redirected UAMs towards associations offering basic services to precarious (adult) populations in Geneva. The SPMi must provide children with legal representation in the form of curatorship (Gaggero et al. 2018). However, this legal requirement has not been consistently enforced. As access to rights often relies on curators' requests, UAMs were not always provided with health insurance or access to education.

Overall, there were huge discrepancies between resources available in terms of housing, education, and social support, and the number of UAMs identified in Geneva at a given time. UAMs' precariousness further increased following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, as a lot of facilities reduced the services they offered to precarious populations. At the frontline of delivery of these resources, street-level workers in institutions and associations act as gatekeepers, guiding migrants through the network of social services and deciding which individual should be granted access to their facility. The general observation is that there is a limited access to rights – as noted by the Law Clinic at the University of Geneva (Law Clinic 2020) – thereby hinting at bordering practices at play in the everyday encounters between young migrants and street-level workers.

4   Methodology

This research is based on 20 semi-directive interviews with actors composing the panorama of UAM management in Geneva, and analysis of a corpus of written sources such as laws, newspaper articles, documentaries, and public reports. Interviewees included social workers and officials from state-funded associations and institutions directly in contact with UAMs; several experts on the issue of UAMs; an official of Geneva State Department of Public Instruction – the department which is responsible for Geneva's cantonal childcare service, and a judge of the Child and Adult Protection Court. Interviews were transcribed manually and coded, relying on the method developed by the proponents of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 2006) to inductively generate the analysis I present in subsequent sections.

It would be essential in future research to include the perspective of the youths labelled "UAMs", while cautiously considering the power relationship this type of research would entail (Parini and Debonneville 2017). My own focus on the representations and practices of street-level workers has enabled a critical analysis of the UAM category, avoiding the reproduction of representations of normalized

difference promoted by the state migration apparatus (Dahinden 2016). However, researcher and research participants always "bring different amounts and kinds of social power (class, race, gender, ethnicity, urban or rural backgrounds, etc.) to the research situation" (Harding and Norberg 2005, 2012). As recommended in feminist methodologies, I have tried to reduce the impact of my position on the research situation by considering the power imbalances existing between me and the interviewees, while recognizing the inevitable limits of this endeavor (Harding and Norberg 2005, 2012).

Accessing the "field" has been relatively complicated, and yet, when studying the state, the question of access and its negotiation are "an integral part of our exercise" (Kalir et al. 2019, 12). For example, some institutions and associations hosting UAMs and other vulnerable populations denied access for observations because they host "vulnerable populations". This proved to be a useful insight into the importance of vulnerability and the cultural perceptions of childhood. Moreover, an additional challenge arose from the highly sensitive political nature of the issue. Being personally close to members of one of the political groups organizing for the rights of UAMs, I have chosen not to study social movements *per se* for it would have been complex in terms of positionality[4] and would depart from my perspective of "studying up" (Nader 1972), but our discussions were extremely useful in constructing my analysis, which I shared with them.

The consent of research participants regarding quotations was obtained before and after every interview. As the research topic was confined to Geneva, it was not possible to anonymize the city nor the main institutions (SPMi, Hospice Général). Small institutions were, however, anonymized, and no specific information that might help identify any interviewee is disclosed in the paper.

Finally, the Covid-19 outbreak obviously had a huge impact on my research. Serious measures began to be taken in March 2020 while I was conducting my interviews. Of the 20 interviews, 7 could be conducted face-to-face, usually in a café. The rest had to be conducted by telephone or video conference. Social institutions and associations had to set up emergency health procedures to comply with the instructions issued by the Federal Office of Public Health. These abrupt and drastic changes for all these institutions shut down any opportunities of carrying out ethnography in these places.

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4   The activists allowed me to observe their meetings and actions because the focus of my research was on the State, and they considered it could be of use to their political struggle. In that regard, I conducted participant observation for three weeks, when activists and young migrants occupied a cultural center in Geneva. This period of participant observation did not provide any substantial data on state agents' perspectives and their practices, but I was still able to gather relevant information on key actors and the functioning of the management and care of UAMs in Geneva.

5   Vulnerability under suspicion

My research shows that UAMs are mainly perceived through the prism of suspicion. Doubt is raised regarding all the elements that make up their specific status, predominantly about their minor status[5] and the narrative of their journey to/in Europe. While street-level workers often deal with this doubt through informal procedures to assess the migrants' age, status as a minor can also be conflated with vulnerability, which often leads to gender and racial bias. In the next two sections I delve into these two distinct but complementary processes: perceiving age and assessing vulnerability.

5.1   Perceiving age – everyday age assessment practices

Analyzing the situation of UAMs in several European countries, Senovilla Hernández stated "the quasi-systematic contestation of minors' declared age is a generalized practice in the European context" (2014, 24, my translation). As mentioned earlier, doubt is partly linked to the fact that young North African UAMs arriving in Geneva – as in many European countries – often do not carry identity papers,[6] which renders their official age and identity uncertain. While other European countries have implemented medical procedures to assess the age of UAMs as Senovilla Hernandez notes (2014), similar procedures have not been used in Geneva, except for penal cases.[7]

Social workers play no role in the official age assessment procedures conducted by bureaucrats from the SPMi. Still, doubt was pervasive among them. It must be conceded that several mentioned that after they had built trust with UAMs, some of the young people admitted they were in fact older than 18. However, most social workers rejected taking on the role of "age inspectors", stressing social work's ethics of unconditional hospitality. Nevertheless, scarce resources – the limited number of beds in the UAM center and the lack of social support in hotels – forced social workers to prioritize some individuals over others among the migrants recognized as UAMs. "Normative individual assessments of deservingness become particularly salient when welfare agents need to cope with austerity pressures that force them to prioritize some clients over others" (Thomann and Rapp 2018, 534). Fueled by the

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5   I also found that, but their unaccompanied status and, to a lesser extent, their nationality are also questioned.

6   A possible explanation for the absence of documents can be found in the study of the hrig (root *h-r-g* "to burn") phenomenon in the Maghreb, the act of illegally crossing the borders of Europe, when migrants *(harragas)* symbolically "burn" borders, legal procedures, and sometimes literally their identity papers (for more in-depth explanation regarding harragas, see Arab and Souvannavong 2009).

7   The analysis presented here is based on fieldwork conducted before the new assessment procedure (described in Section 3) was implemented. Subsequent research would be necessary to analyze the impact this has had on street-level workers' practices and representations.

widespread knowledge of the state's inability to certify UAMs' real age, doubts about age became an accessible way of legitimizing informal hierarchies of deservingness.

My research shows that doubts about UAMs' age were based on the discrepancy between the age youths claimed to be and perceptions of their "real" age. Various state officials explained that looking at some young migrants, one could reasonably have doubts about their under-age status, for many do not "look like" minors *(faire mineur)*. In the everyday processes of assessing unaccompanied minors, physical appearance is thus a central element (Carayon et al. 2018). A young person whose physical appearance does not correspond to the constructed image of a child will see his or her minor status questioned.[8]

Two opposing figures of young migrants often emerged in the interviews I conducted with social workers and officials: the "kid" and the "thirty-year-old". The "kid" *(minot)* is a UAM who is self-evidently under age because he/she "looks" like a child. In these cases, even if the child has no identity documents, his/her minor status will not be questioned:

> *Some of them look very young, that's for sure, some are actually minors, that's obvious, but I mean… –Researcher: Physically they look very young? –Yeah, they really look tiny, I mean they look like they're 15 […] It shows on their faces. It doesn't mean that we have their documents. But let's say that we can assert it with little chance of being wrong.* (Itw Z., official[9])

The other extreme figure was the "thirty-year-old" UAM. Several times, I was told stories of how some migrants were housed in the UAM center or in hotels with "real minors" whereas they seemed to be in their thirties. These two examples of extreme cases underlie the importance of the perception of age in the evaluation of protection demands. Both rely on the *visibility* of age; in both cases minor or non-minor status is presented as conspicuously indisputable. However, in most cases, the situation is less clear. It is more difficult to infer the minor status of young people between approximately 16 and 25 years of age,[10] as an official readily admitted: "For most of them it is very difficult to know if they are actually 17 or 21 years old. Well, as far as I'm concerned, I can't, no one can really establish it" (Itw Z., official). Age then becomes a datum which is grounded in perception, instinct, or feeling. Minor status becomes an objective category made of subjective criteria (Lavanchy 2014).

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8   The importance of visibility challenges Federal case-law regarding the age assessment of asylum seekers by the SEM, which indicates that an assessment of the applicant's physical appearance should be only considered a "very weak clue" (Federal Council, 16.3598). It hints at the likelihood that visibility permeates the evaluations of an applicant's discourse (considered a "strong clue") (Federal Council, 16.3598).

9   All interviews were conducted in French, quotes are my translation.

10   Especially because, as a social worker explained to me, UAMs sometimes try to avoid being taken in charge by a state institution in a given country if it is not their final destination. For example, he explained, some minors arriving in Spain pretend they are 18 to be given more freedom of movement and be able to leave the country.

UAMs' body appearance is not the only variable used to infer their age. Several times, their behavior was also mentioned by street-level bureaucrats and officials as an element that raises suspicion about their real ages, as the Federal Secretariat of State for Migration notes regarding UAMASs (Bertholds et al. 2018). Indeed, autonomy may be seen as a clue that some young people are in fact older than they claim, as an official of an institution hosting UAMs emphasized:

> *Given their behavior, one could imagine that they are, for many of them... Very, very close to coming of age. —Researcher: You are saying that they behave more like adults? —That's exactly what I was going to say. In general, they are young people who have their own rhythm of life, we haven't had any specific problem with them, they have own rhythm of life. So, for example, if we speak about the two young women [we hosted], […] there was no particular need, they actually demonstrated a relatively high degree of autonomy and independence.* (Itw I., official)

Social workers acknowledge that this autonomy may be a consequence of street life, as well as the hardship of migration, which can also prematurely age the face and body. But the literature has also shown that racialized perceptions play a role in age assessment. For example, the study by Goff et al. in the US shows that on average Black children suspected of felony are perceived to be 4.53 years older than they are (Goff et al. 2014). Similarly, as migrants and children of color, UAMs run the risk of being perceived as more adult-like than their white counterparts, of being *adultified* (Hlass 2020). Law Professor Laila Hlass describes adultification as the process by which "children of color are perceived as more adult-like and therefore less innocent than white peers" (Hlass 2020, 203), and thus treated in a similar manner to adults in migration laws and policies. In that regard we may postulate that in the context of racialization and criminalization of migration (Palidda 1999), racialization and adultification might influence the way that age is read from UAMs' bodies and behavior. As we will see next, the connection between perceived age and race is largely associated with the question of the assessment of vulnerability.

5.2 Assessing and Producing Vulnerability

With limited resources and unable to use age as an effective criterion, street-level workers have chosen to use vulnerability as a means to evaluate deservingness. My research shows that this concept was effectively used when it was necessary to decide which UAMs would have access to shelters, or when outreach social workers and nurses patrolling the streets by night would have to send UAMs either to a homeless shelter or a hotel.

The use of vulnerability as a criterion of deservingness belongs to the conceptual framework of humanitarianism, in which deservingness originates from a compassion for suffering bodies rather than the acknowledgment of a right to protection

(Fassin 2005). Vulnerability is a central concept in current migration debates and has been present in the European Asylum Law since the 2000s (D'Halluin 2016). According to Miriam Ticktin (2006), in the deservingness framework produced by humanitarianism, the suffering or sick body has replaced the threatened body as the legitimate figure for refugees. Recognition of the universal vulnerability of citizens to the arbitrary power of states has thus been replaced by a focus on the *individual* needs of vulnerable target groups (D'Halluin 2016). In sociological analysis, it has gradually replaced the idea of exclusion (Brodiez-Dolino 2016) and offers a wide range of possible interpretations (Garcia Delahaye et al. 2019). Vulnerability has a double meaning: it is a state, being vulnerable, and a process linked to a potentiality – a vulnerable person is one "who can be hurt" (Becquet 2012, 53, my translation). The open nature of this concept paves the way for an increasingly complex evaluation process of young migrants' vulnerability. This process thus relies all the more on the subjective assessment and discretionary power of street-level workers. In that context, a web of meanings linked with the social construction of childhood as well as with gender and racialized perceptions come into play and structure the perception of vulnerability.

In my research I observed that when asking my interviewees about their own definition of vulnerability, a number of elements regularly stood out, suggesting a form of shared implicit definition. These elements were age, health (both physical and mental), and isolation. It is interesting to note that although vulnerability was presented as a good criterion to replace age in the evaluation of UAMs' needs, age was simultaneously referred to as the main defining element of vulnerability. It then becomes evident that the perception of vulnerability and age is conflated. This has to do with the fact that, in the case of UAMs, the evaluation and perception of vulnerability is strongly influenced by the social construction of childhood. It implies that children whose appearance and/or behavior do not correspond to the main conception of what a child is "may not be accepted as being children at all" (Crawley 2011, 1172). As mentioned above, UAMs' autonomous behaviors are sometimes identified as a sign of adulthood. As such, if innocence is "a space of freedom from desire, will or agency" (Ticktin 2017, 579), it seems that to be considered innocent – and vulnerable – one must prove that one cannot exercise agency. In her article "Immigrants or children?", Olivia Ruiz (2018) provides an illustration of the relationship between agency and childhood. She explains that young Central American migrants were expelled from two California towns because they were perceived as "out of place" by inhabitants, because the notable agency they needed to accomplish their migration journey brought them closer to conceptions of adult agency (Ruiz 2018, 99). During my research, the question of agency was sometimes linked with UAMs' cultural background. Several social workers have described the migration process of UAMs as a form of "rite of passage" to adulthood. This idea – based on a form of cultural essentialism postulating that cultural influences are

predominant in the causes of migration – can be used to justify restricted access to resources for UAMs, because if they have passed through a rite of passage to adulthood they do not need to be treated as children (Carayon et al. 2018). Moreover, this vision implicitly puts UAMs on a lower level than UAMASs in the hierarchy of vulnerability, because the idea of rite of passage implies that those undertaking it are fully agents of their migration.

It should be stressed that some social workers raised criticisms of the criterion of vulnerability. Being on their own in the streets, all UAMs, they asserted, are vulnerable. Overall, feelings of injustice were strongly shared among street-level workers, claiming they were doing "their best" with the means at their disposal, and within the framework imposed by the law. Knowing that protection offered by UAM status would stop in any case on the day the migrant turned 18 was a major source of frustration. Street-level workers used the discretionary power at their disposal to address the precarious situations experienced by unaccompanied migrants living in the streets, even if that meant circumventing institutional rules in terms of maximum capacity or recipient age. They also provided special assistance exceeding their mandate to certain UAMs they considered more vulnerable. Social workers described their outrage when encountering "kids" sleeping among adults in emergency shelter, and the actions they undertook to find proper accommodation for them. This nuances the issue of vulnerability, as the concept was also mobilized to make sure that at least some UAMs would access their rights. In fine, street-level workers are complex actors, "neither 'doing good' nor only being repressive" (Nordling 2022, 96).

However, the perception of vulnerability has also been shown to be impacted by racialized and gendered meanings. Remember that "[r]ace is a form of seeing, or recognizing. It is a form of knowledge, but often knowledge in service of subordination" (Howarth 1997, 102), and that, as Judith Butler puts it: "[t]he visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful" (Butler 1993, 17). In fact, the UAM category is a gendered and racialized category in itself. Its gendered nature becomes salient whenever social actors mentioned UAMs who are young women. In interviews, they were named "UAM girls" *(filles UAM)*, revealing the masculine reference usually implicit in the UAM category. This may be related to the substantial quantitative difference between men and women migrants, as fewer young North African women migrate alone (Arab 2011). However, it might also have to do with the distinct position women and men occupy in the discursive field of vulnerability and suffering. The "UAM" is thus gendered as a male North African migrant.

In Geneva, whenever young women were identified by the SPMi, they would be immediately sheltered in centers for asylum seekers run by the Hospice Général – the cantonal institution mandated with hosting asylum seekers in Geneva – and

would not stay in hotels or emergency shelters with male UAMs.[11] As an official from the Hospice explained:

> *When, a few months ago, the SPMi asked if we could take in two girls, the answer was immediately clear, even though we were limited in terms of the number of beds. I would say that even if we may have had to exceed the quota of [UAMs hosted], I would not have refused, because it is clear that two 16-year-old girls who find themselves on the street are, will potentially be much more vulnerable than two young boys of the same age. This is a criterion of vulnerability.* (Itw I. official)

This quote shows the gendered nature of the construction of vulnerability, in which the vulnerability of young women is rarely questioned. Gender is hence a factor that greatly influences the UAMs' access to protection and resources. Gender representations lead to the interpretation of masculinity as linked to violence and danger, while femininity is associated with vulnerability (Hollander 2001). As Julien Bricaud explains, it is often more difficult for male UAMs to receive protection than it is for young women, who are "traditionally perceived as more vulnerable" (Bricaud 2006, 25, my translation). This next quote from the same official illustrates this point:

> *As far as we are concerned, it is clear that, when we are asked to host a young man who is 17 and a half years old, 1.80 m tall, 75 kilos, who has been coping on his own for 6 or 7 months in Geneva and all of a sudden arrives at our place, who has no health problems; or a 16-year-old young girl who is pregnant, well, it is clear that [the one on the side of] vulnerability will be the young girl of 16 who is pregnant. That's it. And I'm giving you this example because we've found ourselves faced with a situation that was similar to this one.* (Itw I. official)

As shown in the quote above, and mentioned earlier, the perception of age, and vulnerability, relies on a visual evaluation of bodily characteristics. These characteristics are gendered as typical to the masculine body, such as physical build, height, muscles, pubertal growth, or hairiness (Carayon et al. 2018).

Gendered representations conflate with racialized ones. While minors from any origin may formally be considered unaccompanied migrants, in the political and media construction of the "UAM issue", "UAM" has become a synonym for *young migrant men from North Africa*. Associated with this figure are a lot of negative connotations in the media, political discourse, and in my interviews. Deviant behavior such as aggressiveness, drug use, and offenses are typically attributed to UAMs. For example, Anne Emery-Torracinta, state councilor and head of the cantonal education department (to which the SPMi belongs), declared during her hearing before

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11   However, one might argue that being subject to greater control may sometimes be a disadvantage for young women in their migration project. Cf. *supra*, note 9.

the cantonal parliament's Human Rights' commission that "the majority of these youths pose a delinquency problem" (Grand Conseil 2019).

The discursive construction of UAMs appeals to stereotypes of violent "Muslim[12] masculinity" (Herz 2019). Racialized and gendered descriptions of UAMs as threatening have been made in Germany in the aftermath of the 2015 sexual harassment incident in Cologne (Herz 2019; Tudor 2018). They resonate in Switzerland with the way gender-related issues function as a metonymy for the incompatibility between Islam and "Swiss culture" (Parini et al. 2012). The construction of the "dangerous UAM" thus intertwines with the one of the "Arab boy". Sociologist Nacira Guénif-Souilamas defines this stereotypical figure as "a violent heterosexual", impulsive, "incapable of controlling his drives" and "uncivilizable" (Guénif-Souilamas 2006, 111, my translation). Elements of this figure can be found in street-level workers' frequent description of UAMs' "violent" or "unruly" behavior.

> *[Another social worker] told me that we are faced with young people who experience strong emotions, but who have no problem going crazy to the point of killing someone without it seeming… reprehensible to them. I mean, we are faced with a level of conception of things […] which is insane.*
> (Itw Z., social worker)

In his essay "Is racism an environmental threat?", anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2017) claims that the figure of Arab or Muslim men is increasingly entrenched with that of the wolf: "In the Western imaginary, the wolf is the ultimate representative of the threatening undomesticated other of nature" (Hage 2017, 33). In contrast, migrant women from North Africa represent what Chandra Mohanty (1988, 333, quoted in Ticktin 2017, 582) has called the "Third World Woman", a stereotypical figure of the suffering and oppressed victim, the person best positioned to "pass the innocence test", "insofar as women from the third world or Global South are often equated with passivity and apolitical corporeal existence. They are seen as without agency, docile, and in need of rescue" (Ticktin 2017, 582). Yet, as Chadia Arab (2011) shows, contrary to the vision of an essentially masculine migration, and of women's migration as being essentially directed, Moroccan *Harraga*[13] women migrating alone are active agents of their migration.

The emphasis on UAMs' hypermobility and hypermasculinity, violating Fortress Europe's external and internal borders multiple times, their description as moving mostly as a gang/a pack (*en bande*), together with the unpredictability of their behavior and their lack of emotional control, as shown in this next quote from a social worker, all these characteristics fit appropriately with Hage's idea of the *becoming-wolf* of Muslim populations (2017).

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12   In the post-colonial racialization of Islam in Europe, religion and nationality conflate in such a way that North African has become a synonym for Muslim (Tudor 2018).

13   Cf. *supra,* note 6.

They get emotional very quickly and they're not very sensitive, which means that they can get angry and that they don't realize that they can give blows which can be very violent, even with a weapon, with really an intention to hurt you. And that's the particularity of young people from North Africa: even if they have small builds, they are unpredictable, not all of them, but often. But this is one of the risks that we have as social workers when we work with these people, it is that they are very emotional and the sensitivity that they lack renders them unpredictable. (Itw W., social worker)

To contextualize this quote, when I asked him to define "who are the UAMs?", this social worker compared the UAMs with the "Zizous"[14], a reference to the nickname given by the media to "young delinquents" from North Africa in the end of the 2000s. A 2008 French newspaper article on issues of delinquency and insecurity in Geneva described the "Zizous" as follows:

Aged between 17 and 22, these boys are all or almost all from the same slum in Casablanca. Without documents, they claim to be Iraqi or Palestinian in order to avoid deportation. (Joahny 2008, April 20, my translation)

Interestingly, the "Zizous" were never considered in public discourses and policies as unaccompanied minors in need of protection. Though this newspaper explains that at least some of them were under 18 years old, they were solely perceived through the prism of criminalization. Once again, this perception is an essentializing one, it functions by ignoring the heterogeneity that exists among UAMs in terms of education, culture, desires or needs (Lachat Clerc 2007): "Despite their different backgrounds, class, religion and age, [UAMs] are collectively seen as a threat" (Herz 2019, 446). The idea that UAMs, or "Arab boys", are a threat excludes them from vulnerability. It is indeed more directly linked to the idea of deviance. As a matter of fact, a new police unit was created in July 2020, specializing in "street crimes". Its creation was explained by an increase in offenses attributed to the presence of UAMs and North African adult migrants in Geneva, revealing the "long-standing racialization of crime and violence in Swiss public discourse" (Boulila 2019, 1405).

UAMs are seen as posing a risk to each other, to social workers, and to institutions themselves. In turn, this perception affects the way institutions respond to the task of looking after UAMs. In the negotiation with cantonal authorities, the Hospice Général only agreed to host 10 UAMs provided that the youths hosted had never been convicted for violent behavior or drug use. In addition, suspicion was often raised by informants about UAMs' possible involvement in international criminal networks. In that context, "kids" were believed to be manipulated by older

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14 Zizou is the nickname of the famous French soccer player Zinédine Zidane. The media used it to name the young delinquents because of the technique (tackle) they reportedly used to pick pockets. As Zidane is of Algerian descent, we may suppose that nicknaming them Zizous is also a form of racializing designation.

UAMs or adults into committing crimes and destabilizing state institutions by their very presence. This statement is interesting from the point of view of agency and innocence. It shows the liminal status of UAMs, always trapped between victim-hood and guilt, between the image of delinquents and victims (Ruiz 2018; Wernesjö 2020). Moreover, this idea, and the overall narrative of the "welfare magnet" *(appel d'air),* fits into a narrative which portrays Europe as a citadel in permanent *état de siège* (Hage 2016), under threat of invasion by foreigners and refugees (resonating with Swiss fears of *Überfremdung*). References are often made to masses of young migrants elsewhere in Europe communicating with each other, directing flows to-wards countries with better conditions for UAMs.[15] As minors are formally entitled to protection, the decision to open only one dedicated center may thus be read as a way of avoiding creating "incentives" and discouraging migrants from coming to Geneva (Misje 2020).

Philosopher Tommy J. Curry gives a groundbreaking analysis concerning the connections between racialization, threat, and vulnerability. He explains that the gendered and racialized perception of Black men as "dangerous and in need of control and criminal sanction nullifies our ability to perceive them as victims of violence at the hands of other groups of men or even women" (Curry 2019, 288). Here, we should recall the «Zizous», whose vulnerability and minor status were never raised or problematized. Affected by a "racialized moral panic" (Herz 2019, 446), they were *adultified* as a group, and denied the protection which comes with the perception of children as innocent (Goff et al. 2014).

The use of vulnerability as the deciding criterion for settling the protection requests of UAMs operates by classifying young migrants on a scale of deserving-ness based on suffering and vulnerability. It is at the intersection of structures of race, gender, and age, that UAMs' vulnerability is assessed. "Because conceptions of childhood interact with racialized constructions, male immigrant youth of colour experience heightened risk of being framed as 'juveniles' and being viewed, like adults, through an immigration enforcement lens" (Galli 2018, 1656). Gender and race thus create a hierarchy of innocence and vulnerability, leading to an inequality of access to state resources and services between UAMs identified as more or less vulnerable. Male UAMs seem to be easily associated with the figure of the "wolf", or the "Arab boy". Considered either as "vulnerable and passive victims in need of care" (Wernesjö 2020, 392) or as a "symbol of crisis, deviance and threat" (Wernesjö 2020, 397), unaccompanied minors are always suspected of not being fully vulnerable.

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15   This idea of a Sisyphean burden also served to justify the insufficient resources allocated to the care of UAMs.

6   Conclusion

This article aims at contributing to a better understanding of street-level workers in a context of neoliberal welfare retrenchment and migration enforcement. It has shown how, through everyday practices and representations, street-level workers involuntarily participate in bordering practices (Guentner et al. 2016).

Two key points may be taken from this article. First, that UAMs are collectively perceived through the prism of suspicion. In their everyday encounters with state agents and social workers, UAMs see doubt being cast on their identity, country of origin, and above all their age. My research shows that, in the absence of identity documents, street-level workers rely on their perception of the *visible* age of young migrants to settle their doubts, which exposes UAMs to discretionary evaluation.

The second is the importance of the perception of vulnerability in the assessment of UAMs' deservingness. Vulnerability must be located within the conceptual framework of humanitarianism, in which the appreciation of deservingness arises from compassion for those most suffering and most vulnerable. As I have shown, the perception of vulnerability is influenced by patterns of representations related to gender, race, and the social construction of childhood. Therefore, UAMs who are perceived as young women or "kids" are directly taken in charge, because they are considered innocent and vulnerable victims. For adolescent males, however, vulnerability collides with representations of dangerous young migrants, "Arab boys", and "wolves". They become humanitarianism's hard cases, almost impossible to conceptualize since these racialized and gendered images impede their recognition as innocent and vulnerable.

Therefore, inverting the relationship between vulnerability and age, we could even argue that it is because young UAM men are never fully perceived as vulnerable that their perception as children becomes problematic and that doubt is cast on their real age. Thus, the use of the concept of vulnerability contributes to the actual *vulnerabilization* of the situation of migrant children in Geneva, as it becomes an obstacle to the recognition of a right to protection and state resources.

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