The Demonisation of Migrant Masculinities in British Politics

https://www.e-ir.info/2021/04/20/the-demonisation-of-migrant-masculinities-in-british-politics/

LIZZIE HOBBS, APR 20 2021

On the 24th March 2021 the UK Home Secretary, Priti Patel, took to the floor of the House of Commons and hailed her 'New Plan for Immigration,' designed in her words to tackle, 'the challenge of illegal migration head-on' (HC Deb 2021). She then preceded to outline what she called, 'the most significant overhaul of our asylum system in decades' (*ibid.*). Her plans have been met with widespread criticism and anger from activists, migrant organisations and opposition MPs. The plan explicitly punishes asylum seekers based on their route of entry and would extend precarious status to asylum seekers who come via 'irregular routes' resulting in a two-tier asylum system. Many have criticised the plan for going against the 1951 UN Convention and 1967 protocol and in response, UNHCR released a statement reaffirming that, 'anyone seeking asylum should be able to claim in their intended destination or another safe country' and emphasising that the convention does not, 'oblige asylum seekers to apply in the first safe country they encounter' (Grierson & Marsh 2021).

Although an alarming announcement, in many ways it is a continuation of the securitisation and intensification of bordering which has occurred across the last thirty years (de Noronha 2021; Jones 2016) whereby, 'everyday/everywhere borders' have suffused through UK political life (Yuval-Davis *et al.* 2018). Under the 'Hostile Environment' – a raft of legislation described by the former Home Secretary, Theresa May, as designed to, 'create a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants' (Travis 2013) – the UK has increasingly allocated resources to immigration enforcement and the targeting of 'illegal immigrants' (de Noronha 2019). Internal borders have proliferated as immigration checks suffused every part of the UK bureaucratic system (O'Neill *et al.* 2019) with doctors, nurses, employers and landlords forced to play the role of *de facto* border guards (Hiam *et al.* 2018). There are myriad reasons to critique the latest proposals, their basis in legality for a start, and much of the criticism has been framed around the Home Secretary's disregard for the UN Convention and an avocation for the recognition of the rights of asylum seekers.

Yet I fear that this framing of resistance serves to reify a distinction between legitimate/illegitimate migrants rather than focusing on the border itself as the root cause of violence. Rather than trying to debate the content of the proposals, I want to focus upon the gendered narratives embedded within them and how these are situated within broader discourses on migration and perceptions of 'need,' 'legitimacy' and vulnerability. In her address, the Home Secretary draws upon the spectre of the migrant male in contrast to the vulnerabilised woman. These underlying logics, rooted in constructions of threats and securitised framings, do nothing to further the wellbeing of migrant women but rather construct a false dichotomy between those deemed worthy of protection – the 'legitimate' versus 'illegitimate' – and serves to delegitimise not only migrant men, but rather extend securitised responses onto all migrant bodies. Throughout the rest of this paper, I use the term 'migrant' to refer to all individuals be that refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, as I contend that the bureaucratisation of the 'refugee' designation is an avenue for oppression and exclusion (Zetter 2019, 27). This decision is not intended to elide the specificity of those seeking asylum but to highlight the arbitrary ways in which distinctions are drawn between 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration and the problematic ways in which the current asylum process operates.

Heather Johnson (2011) charts the feminisation, racialisation and victimisation of refugee visual imagery, whereby the socially acceptable face of displacement became a depoliticised, victimised female (1050). In this lens,

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'legitimate' refugees are depicted as vulnerablised 'womenandchildren' (Enloe 1993) in the Global South which is then used to reaffirm a binary narrative of, 'aid over there, rather than asylum here' (Johnson 2011, 1033). These (feminised) 'almost madonnalike figure[s]' (Malkki 1995) exude powerlessness, allowing a sub-group of migrants to be deemed worthy of protection– set in contrast to masculinised bodies and the perceived 'threat' entailed. The juxtaposition of migrant masculinities against devalorised femininities depoliticises the causes of displacement, obscures the violence enacted by the border and sets up a hierarchy of migrants deemed worthy of protection. This is explicitly evoked in the Home Secretary's statement where she refers to the proportionally high percentage of young men who have attempted to cross the channel in small boats and asks, 'where are the vulnerable women and children that this system should exist to protect?' (HC Deb 2021). Not only does this evocation of the perennial 'womenandchildren' paradigm (Enloe 1993; Carpenter 2003) try and position the proposals as a morality play of protection rather than an attempt to further precaritise the position of migrants, but it also contributes to a universally disempowering narrative of female victimisation and the converse assertion that migrant men can never be envisioned as vulnerable. It is the presence of the border – and the lack of safe routes available – which causes migrants to attempt precarious and insecure journeys. Therefore, the border – both within and beyond – is at the root of migrant precarity and vulnerability. Vulnerability stems from the circumstances, insecurity and the threats an individual face (Turner 2016), therefore all individuals can be rendered highly vulnerable at the spectacle of the border, albeit in distinctively gendered ways.

The evocation of migrant masculinities often comes in tandem with the figure of the 'economic' migrant. In this conceptualisation 'disingenuous' or 'bogus' asylum seekers are believed to be 'pulled' to certain countries by economic opportunism (Mayblin 2019). In her address, the Home Secretary states, 'the presence of economic migrants, which these illegal routes introduce, limit our ability to properly support others in genuine need of protection' and refers to, 'a system that is open to gaming by economic migrants' (HC Deb 2021). Given the reductive and racialised gender framings often utilised by UK politicians in reference to the Global South, the evocation of the 'economic migrant' is often equated with young men – despite the disproportionate amount of care labour carried out by migrant women.

As evidenced by the Conservative MP, Sir Edward Leigh, in his response to the Home Secretary's statement, 'our present asylum system is a complete joke. Every young man living in misery in a failed state knows that if he manages to reach our shores, the chances of his being deported are virtually zero' (*ibid*.) Besides obscuring the intense violence of the UK border and the aggressive pursuit of deportation within the 'Hostile Environment,' this rhetoric evokes the 'bogus' asylum seeker narrative – the young man trying his luck on the hope of economic reward with no 'genuine' need for protection. Or in the words of the Home Secretary, someone who is, 'gaming the system' (*ibid*.) This reifies a binary of (il)legitimate causes of displacement with economic survival not being considered one – on this note, the absence of poverty or climate change as criterion for protection under the UN Refugee Convention indicates the massive inadequacy of the current asylum architecture. The Home Secretary's statement ignores the complexity of displacement whereby, 'people can and do shift between and across categories both in their countries of origin and as they travel through space and time' (Crawley & Skleparis 2018, 59). It also overlooks the deep imbrication of forced migration with political economy which belies the murkiness of any demarcation between voluntary/involuntary migration. The MP's observation also obscures the deep connection between the UK's colonial (and neocolonial) legacies of empire and interventionism in the construction of so-called 'failed states' and the deep racism of neoliberal capitalism.

Age deception is another recurring motif mentioned throughout the debate. Conservative MP, Jonathan Gullis refers to, 'stories of fully grown adults coming to the UK but claiming asylum as children…a very serious safeguarding risk for our young people' (HC Deb 2021). The Home Secretary responded, 'we have seen too many cases of adults posing as children. That is unscrupulous behaviour' (*ibid*.) Age determination is often intertwined with perceptions of gendered 'threat' and masculinity. If a young asylum seeker does not have documentation to prove their age, the Home Office can conduct an initial 'assessment' based upon appearance and demeanour (Coram 2017; Refugee Council 2019). These determinations can be influenced by perceived masculinity – facial hair, tone of voice, mannerisms. A false age determination impacts the support given, hinders education access and how an application is processed. Rather than considering the narrow scope in which childhood is conceived and the difficulty and subjectivity of evaluating age – particularly given the different culturally meanings and measurements given to age

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across the globe and the traumatic journeys individuals have faced – the debate is framed around perceptions of 'threat.' The protection of 'our young people' (HC Deb 2021) is set as antithetical to the protection of migrants, rather than adopting an imperative to extend protection to all.

The figure of the 'threatening' racialised man is not new, it is deeply imbricated within neo/colonial justificatory narratives, the moralised 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak 1988). For example, Khalid (2017) has analysed the 'gendered orientalist logics,' embedded within justificatory narratives legitimising the Iraqi invasion, painting Iraqi men as the 'barbaric Other' from which Iraqi women needed saving. These orientalist discourses – cleaving a distinction between 'civilisation' and 'barbarity'; the 'West' equated to progressivism, the 'Orient' deemed archaic and prone to despotism (Ali 2018; Said 1977) – can particular attach themselves to male bodies and can be seen reoccurring in the hostile representations of migrant masculinities in UK discourse.

In line with Tudor (2018), I contend that the, 'nexus of racism and migration cannot be reflected on responsibly without taking into account Europe's colonial past and postcolonial legacy' (1066). This post-colonial reckoning is entirely absent within the government's discourse on migration; there is no problematisation of the causes of displacement, the reasons people embark on perilous journeys or the UK's direct imbrication with global structural oppression. The only way to stop the violence enacted on the border is through a collective politics which acknowledges the afterlife of coloniality and which is framed around, ⍰'questions of responsibility, guilt, restitution, repentance' (Danewid 2017, 1684) rather than hierarchising migrants based upon constructed categories of 'deservingness.' In this vein, activists and scholars have an explicit responsibility to talk about borders expansively and eschew narrow 'categorical fetishism' (⍰Crawley & Skleparis 2018) which hierarchies migrants depending on perceptions of vulnerability and reifies a binary between those deemed legitimate for protection. The deconstruction of demonising depictions of migrant masculinities needs to be central to any form of resistance against violent border regimes as these framings harm all migrants alike.

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About the author:

Lizzie Hobbs is a PhD student at the London School of Economics. Her research focuses on feminist readings of migration, masculinities and discourse.