

Vulnerability and vulneration: street population, an ethical issue

Marília Sotero

Abstract

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This article presents results of qualitative research done with street dwellers in the Federal District in Brazil, in 2009, linking their life conditions to the concept of vulnerability and vulneration, as conceived by bioethics. It describes aspects of this group's daily life, listing vulnerability's conditioning factors related to the precariousness of their existence such as hunger, lack of housing and infrastructure, difficulty in obtaining documents, in addition to accentuated susceptibility to violence by State agents, as well as by the population at large. It Concludes that constant exposure to such factors not only makes this group vulnerable, but, in fact, injured, reaffirming the relevance of this concept and encouraging public institutions' protective measures.

Key words: Vulnerability. Geography. Bioethics. Protection. Public policies



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Street population lives in permanent vulnerability status. They are vulnerable for not having personal documentation and certificates. They are vulnerable for not having a house, money or permanent job. They are vulnerable, finally, for not having access to education and for having difficulty even to get health care. These factors expand violence, hunger, and fear situations that this group lives daily.

Personal and social vulnerability to which this group is exposed is perceived as faults of public policies designed to promote equity and targeted to suppress historical distortions. The conflicts that appear in interrelations between street population and the other inhabitants of the city, as well as those endured between them and the constituted powers show that still strongly rooted the practice of individual culpability for the extreme poverty in which they are found. The difficulties experienced by this group, as

consequence, grows exponentially, because in addition to face the barrier imposed by their life history, they need to face also the prejudice, which does not only diminish their self-esteem but interferes in social interaction situations, becoming another hindrance in constructing their citizenship.

This article presents, in view of such conjuncture, the outcomes of survey carried out with the street population seeking to point out and to analyze this group's several vulnerability factors. It aims at associating these factors to bioethical concepts, such as vulnerability and vulneration, showing that street population's existence and its permanence in this situation is a moral and ethical issue and, thus, a burning topic for bioethical discussion.

One justifies that the problematic presented herein is a bioethical matter from de Anjos' reflection: *this anthropological angle of vulnerability as deficiency of the other, stresses the understanding of vulnerability as a call for help*¹. Therefore, the first objective of this work is amplify, in the academic environment, the studied group's voice in its outcry for help, which is noticed in its daily life, clearly manifested in speech.

Such call for bioethical reflection about this problematic reconciles the social bioethical proposal, which intends to enlarge the discipline's field of action to beyond purely health issues: *la dimension*

*social del sufrimiento se refiere a poblaciones sumidas en la miseria, en la marginación*². This is what the *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights* proposes, *which recognizes that individuals and groups especially vulnerable should be protected and these individuals' personal integrity should be respected*³. Therefore, one expects that this work may provide visibility to problems experienced by this group, as well as to stimulate the designing of public policies targeted to correct these distortions.

The vulnerability concept

Vulnerability is defined, usually, by its semantic meaning, which derives from Latin *vulnus*, whose meaning is *wound*. Thus, vulnerability refers to the possibility of been wounded, encompassing both the aspects related to the physical dimension and that relative to the social perspective.

Initially, it was considered vulnerability, in bioethics, only the susceptibility to the individual been wound, proper to some life styles, populations, and specific social classes. Neves establishes: *groups of unprotected people or institutionalized as orphans, inmates, elders and, later, jews and other ethical groups considered as inferior and even subhuman by the Nazi (...) These are, mostly, the groups that are classified as vulnerable, whom were joined also, later, and in broader contexts, other ethnical minorities, socially unfavorable groups, and women*⁴.

The expression vulnerability, as observed, was attributed to all those that did not fit in the dominant profile in Western societies: male, White, heterosexual, and young, which can still be considered now as the group with the highest socioeconomic status – which reflects in their higher salaries (even in the same activities of women), and leadership positions.

However, the vulnerability principle carries two different meanings: one generic, intending to correlate vulnerability to everyone and everything that is alive, understanding that death is inexorable to life; and other specific relating vulnerability to specific groups of women, children, and elders. Neves ⁵ synthesizes this double sense as follows: [vulnerability as] *attributive and qualifying function of some groups and individuals (...) [and] as substantive, describing common reality of man; of contingent and provisory feature [attributive function], becomes an universal and indelible condition [as substantive]; differentiation factor between populations and individuals [attributive], becomes an equality factor among everyone [as substantive]*⁵.

Schramm ⁶, reflecting on such semantic difference, deepens the conceptual distinction, starting to consider that everyone is susceptible to be wounded in some level, needing just to be alive for it. However, for the author, not all are susceptible in the same intensity, existing disparity in ways and levels of susceptibility. Thus, the distinction between

vulnerability and vulneration is established.

In Schramm's words: *the almost universal acceptability of the expression vulnerability by ethicists and bioethicist seems to indicate that the meaning of the vulnerability concept is something evident, which, in reality it is not. Actually, vulnerability is a sui generis category that can be applied to living being which, as such, can be 'wounded' (according to the meaning of the Latin word vulnus), but not necessarily he will be. That is, the mere potentiality inscribed in the expression vulnerability cannot logically be confused with what we call 'vulneration', according to a difference established already by Aristotle between potency and act* ⁷.

The understanding of the difference between potency and act is, thus, in core of reflection to understand vulnerability concepts (potential conditions) and vulneration (material conditions). Still, on vulneration and vulnerability, Kottow adds: *La vulnerabilidad es condición universal de amenaza, no existiendo la dicotomía vulnerable-no-vulnerable; no es un estado de daño sino de fragilidad. Si alguien deja de ser vulnerable es porque se ha vuelto vulnerado* ⁸.

Vulneration regards, according to Schramm, consubstantiated vulnerability: *Truly, if all are potentially (or virtually?) vulnerable as living beings, not all are concretely injured due to contingencies*

*such as the pertaining to a certain social class, to a certain ethnic, or to one of the genders or depending on life conditions, inclusively health status. In summary, it seems reasonable to consider as more correct to distinguish mere vulnerability from effective 'vulneration', seeing the first as potentiality and the second as real situation, as this has relevant consequences at decision-making instance*⁹.

On may understand that, in the case of street population who, generally, experience lack of schooling, medical care, employment, and money, the vulnerability inherent to human condition is intensified and materialized. Then, one starts to identify this group as *injured* and not as vulnerable anymore, in the generic and existential meaning extensive to the whole humanity. Some of their life style aspects will be detailed later in method and discussion topics, identifying factors that turns them injured, showing what constitutes a group in vulneration situation and, thus, deserve special protecting measures.

Method

The qualitative and descriptive nature of field research that originated this article's reflections was carried out with dwellers from public land squatters at the Pilot Plan's North Wing and Central zone, in Brasilia, Federal District, between July 2 and August 13, 2009. The study was undertaken with street population, individuals called by involving society as

"street dwellers". Fifteen (15) individuals were interviewed in four *camping sites*, located in areas of the Pilot Plan, Brasilia, Federal District.

At the initial stage, prior to leaving for the field, a bibliographic assessment was undertaken targeting to base the reflection on interviewees' imaginary, enabling both to contextualize their representation elements of origin and to provide criteria for grouping speeches in pertinent analytical categories.

Data were collected through two techniques. The first consisted in the application of structured interview script, with questions targeted to identify interviewees' profile by gender, age, living period in Brasilia, native state, schooling, and area of origin (urban or rural); the second, open interviews with all participants, recorded and integrally transcribed, as element for analysis and comparison of replies. Still, the objective reality of interviewees' dwelling sites was checked. Interviewees will be numbered, in this article, in the order that interviews were obtained, without any identification as to avoid them from exposure, also avoiding turning them, for this reason, into injured.

Results

Profile

The majority of interviewees is male,

working as recycling scavengers, in the age range of 30 years old, and coming from Northeast region's rural areas. Many children and women were also found at the camping site, revealing that, although provisional, these sites shelter and reproduce family and community life.

Many among the interviewees follow a same pattern: they migrated to the Federal District over twenty years ago. Only one among them was there for only three months but had migration background to other urban area: Sao Paulo. Many of them, inclusively, have legal dwellings in Goias, remaining, however, living or working at the Capital for relatively long periods - (weeks, months). Interviewees' schooling level, when they had one, is majorly basic education - for most part, incomplete. Only one of the interviewees informed to have incomplete high-school level.

Four among the interviewees reported been born in large cities and, eleven in small towns. Although they claim urban origin, all of them reported having worked in rural area, 'in the farm' or 'in the pickaxe', evidencing the origin or rural socialization pattern: "*Worked at the farm. Cropped edible beans, harvest edible beans, bate edible beans*" (Interviewee 4); "*Worked as labor hand, dealing with cattle, cropping*" (Interviewee 14). Even those who state living at a capital city, Belo Horizonte, reports that had spent most of his time working in the crops: "*We lived in Belo Horizonte, but we farmed and*

spent most of the time at the farm, there was any school nearby" (Interviewee 2).

Discussion

Urban violence, to which every city dweller is exposed, has set in for these individuals much more explicitly. They have their private life in public places, and they are not protected by their houses' physical structure. The lack of walls or roof, delimiting individual and family's territory, implies in hardships such as insecurity in face of heat, cold, rain, insects, animals, and people's attacks, and the encumbrance of safeguarding personal goods or objects.

Another vulneration intensifying factor for this group is lack of information about these individuals. The first census and national survey of population in street situation only took place in 2009¹⁰. Such fact shows the lack of interest and scarcity of real data that government institutions have. All this lack of knowledge on street population by the State, by authorities that represent them and remaining city dwellers make these individuals even more unprotected. The problems that they face oscillate from invisibility and social repulsion.

The street population, in majority, is not safeguarded by citizenship's basic document, the General Registry (GR). Since there is not, in many cases, even evidencing registries of birth and, additionally they do not have formal jobs

or properties, they go by unnoticed by life, since in current society certificates are what formally insure individual's existence. These documents, added to property certificates, establish which individuals will be (or not) considered as citizens.

These beings exposed to climate and social events lack formal identity to the point of losing, therefore, their personal identify. Many of the interviewees do not have documentation and some of them report that they did not even remember their full name anymore. Deprived of social, economic and physical protection, set in agreement in the lack of information and knowledge in his regard, they are easily violated, disrespected, often, under the State's own tutorship, under the mask of charity and paternalism.

Government policies related to street population are basically targeted toward their elimination. Authorities that should help them intend, actually, to ban them from areas they occupy in the city or, at least, subtract them from citizens' sight. To that end, in public areas enforcement actions, their few belongings, children, document are taken away, their precarious shacks are dismantled, making their existence difficult and increasingly intensifying the vulnerability situation affecting them, making them increasingly and effectively injured. This vulnerability engendered by lack of safety in *being* and *having* and

identified next in topics related to food, housing, social and institutional relationships, concerning work and identity, as well as that they do not see themselves as injured

Injured by hunger

Food, for this group, is daily gotten, and rarely stocked. It is bought only when they are able to exchange enough recycling material or get some cash from some other work. Food is gotten from other city dwellers or, still, found in the trash cans, as it occurs in the majority of instances: *"We are not in all that bad situation because the trash can, it helps us a lot (...)because in the trash can I get many things: beans, rice. Many things we get from the trash can. Even meat. We don't eat meat. We eat loose folds of skin because there are meat shops, people who value us. They really do. They help"* (Interviewee 4).

Essentially, food is almost always comprised of remnants and incapable of nourishing duly the body. Bourges states in an entry about hunger and nutrition: *Asi como la buena alimentación y la buena nutrición son pilares de la salud, las desviaciones alimentarias o las alteraciones en el resto de sus determinantes pueden producir mala nutrición y, en consecuencia, diversas enfermedades. Es un hecho que muchos de los padecimientos que mas afligen hoy a la humanidad y que causan tasas de mortalidad elevadas, podrían evitarse o por lo menos retardarse mediante ciertos cuidados*

*alimentarios*¹¹. This nutritional deficiency generates debility in the body and mind, making him more vulnerable to diseases and, thus, it may be acknowledged as a vulnerability factor in this group, regarding corporeal dimension.

Vulneration in housing

As expected, all camping sites are very precarious, evidencing the transitional and instability mark. None of them count on minimal basic infrastructure, either water, power or sewer, in spite of the closeness to urbanized areas.

The interviewed individuals have public land as dwelling place. The canvas and cardboard “walls” separate the public and private, and they limit the appropriation of small land lots. Such dwellings are unstable and very fragile to climate elements – such as rain and Wind. They are also more affordable and susceptible to invasion by public agents or any passer-by.

Plastic *camping sites* are comprised by uncertain dwelling, built by dwellers themselves with the remnants that they gather from trash containers in the city: cardboards, pieces of Wood, plastic, and paper. There was much trash in the ground at these camping sites where children played: “*Do you see this adventure for us, here we sleep at wee hours, the kids play until midnight... Oh!, at daybreak we are killing rates, and so on. What is there for them [children]? An adventure, right? And for us*

as well” (Interviewee 6). Unhealthiness at dwelling places, trash, and the difficulty in keeping basic hygiene are other subjection factors for these people to diseases and another vulnerability factor.

Light, when it exists, is from the public lighting, and water is carried from other places in cans on top of the head or in wooden charts – the same used to transport gathered material for recycling. The shacks seem to be very small, like camping barracks, giving idea that they are used mainly as sleeping quarters. In each of them, usually, the father, mother, and children sleep together: “*Really, in this little shack, myself, she and our kids dwell*” (Interviewee 4); “*My bed is that one there, pieces of cardboard, plastic and a comforter*” (Interviewee 15).

Many of these shacks are grouped around community stoves, improvised with Stones, made in earth in common place, more or less equidistant from the dwellings. *Seja* Either community or individual, the place where these earth stove are placed reminds a kitchen, because in addition to the stove, other kitchen wares such as pan and plates are stacked on branches or wood, simulating a cabinet or stand. In these outside areas, paint tins or of other kind are used as chairs.

Notwithstanding, they consider the precarious shacks at the *camping sites* as house, remaining the dream of one day been able to have access and funds to get a

conventional dwelling: “*I really wanted to be dwelling an apartment or perhaps a house in the earth, but here in the Federal District, that I could work, taking recycling material to sell and have a worthy citizen’s life... But telling you the truth, it is not as we wanted, to speak the truth*” (Interviewee 4).

Fremont ¹², when dealing the relation man-inhabitant with inhabited space, makes relevant considerations on rooting and the importance of a house for humans. Even if it is a precarious sketch, without a lasting relationship with land, it creates the feeling of grouping, easiness, and shelter. Man’s intimate relation with the inhabited space is described by the same author as follows: *It is shelter and home (...)* *the house intimately participates in negation of time and death. It provides the safety and satisfaction of rooting.* Therefore, home, in addition to be protection against the natural and anthropic elements, promotes a symbolic safety as well, related to the pertaining issue, which eases and calms down.

Street population is subject, for not having this safety provided by a home, to a Constant state of vigilance and concern. The agglomerations of shacks are a certain way of minimizing aggressions and vulnerability situations. It is a way of sectioning public space from the private, occupied by them, delimiting the action of remaining inhabitants of the city. It is, in summary, an attempt to set physical

protection, even if fragile. The importance of a dwelling, of shelter is recognized even by animals that almost instinctively build them. The negation of this minimal condition for life is one more vulneration factor that particularizes this group.

Injured by the other inhabitants of the city

The unfavorable situation to which Brazilians living in the streets are submitted provides the appearance of constant conflicts and confrontations, both with the public power and the civil society. The mistrust in which they are perceive is the aura of danger involving them, for their filthy appearance, ill-dressed, for not having formal education, assets or economic resources strengthens a barrier of prejudice and discrimination that is difficult to overcome. At this regard, Anjos warns: *these power asymmetries are installed in society’s structuring and make difficult the vigor of ethical reflection, as they mean, in some way, legitimacy of inequalities* ¹³.

The adverse circumstance of their lives, added to discrimination and prejudice, turn them into easy target, making them susceptible to acts of violence. Consonant to statistics¹⁴ of mortality by gender and age range, indicating that male, blacks and youngsters are the most prone to instances of violence and premature death. A major portion of the interviewed reported to have lost adult sons, victims of murders: “*He came around two in the morning, He was asleep.*”

He opened the door, really stoned with drugs, and shot him. My children always die with a shot in the left side of their chest” (Interviewee 3); *“Nine, they were nine, but God took two”* (Interviewee 7).

If it were not enough such discriminatory circumstances they face in their daily lives, the public power itself, zealous of citizens’ rights who live in formal dwellings and pay taxes, incite intolerance against them by stimulating the population to denounce invasions as a way to insure public property, such as the one seen in the website of the Brasilia Real Estate Company (Terracap)¹⁵: “Denounce the invaders. Call 156. Your denouncing will be received by GDF’s Ombudsman and forwarded to the Enforcement and Invasion Fighting Commission. With your help, we shall end invasions”.

Even though such measure may be considered as fair and legitimate, particularly when is targeted to the several land squatters who parcel out with impunity highly praised areas in the Federal District, it also increases hostility against these public land invaders. The street population living in camp sites, on reverse of the large land squatters in the Federal District, do not have resources or guns to defend themselves, is in this situation due to absolute lack of option – and not by choice.

One of the interviewees described a conflicting situation with a formal

dweller, in which it becomes evident his feeling of been despised and disrespected due to his lack of schooling and been “a Savannah dweller”: *“That one in White shirt [dweller of a building in front of the camping site] stated that it had been me Who set fire, knowing of our intimate need we do it there, and some of the things that we find, we keep them there, so the ‘Basement’ [Sudesa] don’t take away. Do you think that someone who needs the shrubs will set fire on it?! It is the type of shack... I need the shack to sleep and would I set it on fire? There isn’t such a thing! The way that it [the burnt shrub] is here nothing can be hidden so anyone can see”*. [The fires quad and dwellers of the building] *he didn’t even believe that I lived in the Savannah because I spoke so well with him in that Day...I got to him [the dweller of the building who accused him to set the fire in the Savannah] and said: ‘I think that you are more ignorant, it seems that you never studied, never went to school to graduate. It seems that the conditions that you have were found in the garbage. And if you were, perhaps you wouldn’t look down on people so much as you do”* (Interviewee 4).

Street population is in vulnerability situation because it is not accepted by the others city dwellers, who look down on them with repulsion or, in the best situation, ignore them. The lack of concern by the city dweller who pay taxes regarding street people life condition is intensified and perpetuate the group’s vulneration situation. They are injured because, alone, the become a group

without a voice toward the public power and authorities that could effectively change their life condition.

Injured by State agents

If for formal dwelling inhabitants, the situation of these people inspires fear or indifference, for the State it would imply the duty to protect them. But the absence of public policies targeted to citizenship's promotion and protection, particularly of those socially less endowed, transmutes public power's responsibility that end up by circumscribing its action by removing individuals in such situation from the location that they occupy to other places, far way from taxpayer's sight: *"It is so, invasion is like that, we leave one invasion, and we go to another, and another because there isn't a place for us to stay. Cruzeiro, I lived in Cruzeiro, behind the Ceasa, there at Parmalat..."* (Interviewee 9).

The interviewees, when asked about other camp sites, they talk among themselves, remember who still lives in certain camp sites, questioning one to another about relatives and friend who live in them, and they report about camping sites removed by the enforcement agents. The information on the location of several camping site was provided by the interviewees themselves: *"My entire family lives here [in camping sites]. There is one living at Vila Planalto (...) there is one that lives at Vila... No, two. Three living in Valparaiso, and there is one living in Brasilinha, and thus we go"* (Interviewee 6).

The news on camping sites removed by the government circulate fast among them, from one camping site to the other, which feeds fear and prevents even to go out to work, as many reported: *"But the fear of the 'Basement' to arrive and take everything... Here we work with fear, live with. Now, really frightened, but of the government* (Interviewee 4); *"I called in the past [to the family that he left in Bahia], but the contact that I had, the 'Basement' when it comes, takes everything. When it comes, we have to get this little cart and leave fast to hide so it does not see, otherwise it will take it. The recycling people were here twice already but didn't carry anything because I pleaded humbly"* (Interviewee 4).

The fear to have their few belonging taken away or destroyed seems justified, since, as they report, officers' inspections from the Land and Water Defense Undersecretariat (Sudesa) are not limited to remove them, but to take away their scarce belongings that they managed to gather: *"They take, take all it all. This week they took everything [even] my mother-in-law's mattress"* (Interviewee 9). This Indiscriminate violence makes access to citizenship condition even more difficult, since it is not rare that in these inspections personal documents, contact phone number, pictures, food, clothing, and even school uniforms, increasing the fear of losing everything they have: *"But how are we going to look for jobs if we live without document?"* (Interviewee 6).

Due to Sudesa officers' inspections, the instability in space occupation is intensified, making them to be constantly on the move, in spite of the majority of the interviewees live in the Federal District and surrounding for over 20 years. Actually, from their reports, their lives are similar to runaway nomad tribes seeking to escape from their hunters, going deeper into the Savannah: "*Here, in Brasilia I lived at SIA, at the 28, at the Embassies' Sector, at Cruzeiro, at invasion in Cruzeiro*" (Interviewee 9); "*Ah, my child... I lived in several corners: Santa Maria, Valparaiso, Recanto das Emas, Brasilinha, Sao Sebastiao...*" (Interviewee 7). The majority of interviewees reports living in at least three location, while many have lived in twice as many places. This constant change in dwelling makes difficult to keep children at school, making these families vulnerable inter-generationally due to lack of Access to school and information.

Since they work as recyclers, the most fortunate have a wooden cart, parked close to the shack. They use it for transportation of collected material, and it is dragged by themselves, since there is a ban by the Traffic Department (Detran) on wagons, these vehicles have been withdrawn: "*Look, sometime ago I had a wagon, sure. I worked a lot with this wagon, I made two trips during the day in order to not exhausting the horse, not mistreating it. But Arruda [former governor of the Federal District)*

himself raised a polemics of taking away the wagon and horse.. They took away my wagon, and I spent almost two months working to pay for it, straight work to pay for it... He took away my wagon and never returned it back" (Interviewee 4).

The frustration derived from this situation, the despise and humiliation that they are target, are perceived in the grief and bitterness in their speeches, which ends up remitted to the government that should zeal for them, insuring their citizenship's rights. "*And, seif he [the government] granted me permission to speak, without sending me to jail, I would speak. I would speak because if one speaks right to government's face that he is unworthy, one is arrested. He says right way: affront to the authority, but really he does not know that no one has the courage to speak the truth. Very few have this courage, few are brave to speak the truth, and many do not have it in the other hand"* (Interviewee 4).

From his speech one realizes that they consider that the right to citizens is only for those that have financial resources and properties. Therefore, in some speeches one can realize that the interviewees feel that been in the city is an act of resistance against government negligence and inattention: "*Look, speaking the truth, from the government's will, they would take us and would send us back to our hometown. Let's put it like this I will not go into his brains because I do not have this power, but if I had, I am sure I would go in. But, by what I really think of*

government is that in the bottom, none cares for the poor” (Interviewee 4).

This interviewee reveals as totally disillusioned regarding public policies, and he adds: “Only here is not good. I think that the most difficult is housing, this is all I complain and in terms of housing, of the government opening its mouth to say that it helps everybody, but truly it lied in one part” (Interviewee 4).

Such disenchantment still appears in his appreciation regarding benefits targeted to income distribution: “I have registered already for many things... I never got anything. From that side they come here and state: Hi, give me your name, please? Then I say: What for do you want my name? Then, they say: Boy, it really is for the government to give you some benefit. I say: Boy, look, the government has my name several times, and I don't care. I believe that he never took the paper you carry for him to read. And, if he never got it to read, why, then, you come every time asking for my name? I gave my name in Sobradinho, I gave my name in Taguatinga, I gave my name here. And it was not just once or twice, or three times. It never worked” (Interviewee 4).

Since for those who do not have Access to information, government is an abstract entity, and they end up identifying in the governor the source for all evils that they experience: “The Arruda got the government position, he prohibited people to help because he thinks that many of the people who live in such shacks, only live in such shacks because they need provisions

Let's say clothing that people went by and gave... But not many... I agree that many only set their shacks in the site to get things. Except that we are different.” (Interviewee 4).

In spite of all these setbacks, the interviewees still reveal a trace of optimism, even if immersed, almost drowned in a sea of desperation, despair, discouragement: “I like it here, I don't have any complaints from Brasilia, no sir. I only complain of the government. I complain of the government because he is not totally human, no sir”(Interviewee 4).

Pereira ¹⁶, in a study on the relationship between the State and the street population in Brasilia, concludes that actually there never was priority from the Brazilian State in finishing or diminishing the problems related to poverty. Such assertive is evidenced from the fact that *the most striking features of the domestic poverty* still persist, even though Brazil is not a poor country. Still on poverty and all the evils related to it, such as the existence of increasingly number of people living in the streets, the same author states: (...) *because it is the unacceptable extreme of inequality, poverty may be faced just an academicians and politicians concern. But as a moral responsibility that any government should evade* ¹⁷.

Vulnerability materializes in this group's life conditions because it is not attended by serious public policies that seek to change their vulneration status instead of masking

it and intensifying even more. At this regard,, Kottow argues: *Cuando el discurso social o ético habla de individuos o colectivos vulnerables, esto soslayando que se trata de seres ya dañados y que requieren, por tanto, cuidados especiales en vista del desmedro específico en que están sumidos*¹⁸.

Vulneration at work and in identity

A feature that calls attention is that they all are characterized as *recyclers*. To name oneself as recycler is not just defining the name of own working activity but, mostly, is defining oneself while individual in society, as in current world, individuals are what they do. Therefore, the importance of the question: what do you do? People define themselves through their profession. Thus, to be a recycler is being something: *“No, employment like that I never had. My job since I got in Brasilia until now has been recycler. When I had a wagon, I picked up much debris for many people”* (Interviewee 4). To be a recycler is being unemployed, “vagabond”, “solicitor”, “indigent”, “beggar”. It means that the individual is inserted in the social scale, even if in a low position.

Additionally, the interviewees realize that the recycler identity has a positive side, increasingly valuated socially, since it is associated to waste transformation, of the discharged material, so abundant and problematic in a consumer’s society:

“This side of working for not been only waiting in the shack, it is possible to see what this becomes here: that is the recycling that attend more the people who have condition because, wanting or not, recycling is return” (Interviewee 4).

Recycler is not garbage collector, who Just transports waste. If not for the fact that the latter has a permanent job, with signed card, he would be below the first in social echelon, since, at least in imaginary dimension, the recycler helps changing waste into something useful. However, this function’s positive identity is restrict to a symbolic dimension, since in practice who performs it does not do it in a socially recognized or legalized fashion. Therefore, the social connotation of work that someone undertakes, as well as the condition in which activities are performed, interfere in the buildup of self-image and identity, since *la identidad es, como la vida, la integridad y la libertad, la salud y el bien estar, un valor humano trascendental*¹⁹.

The extract that follows reinforces the statement that social (and personal) identity is built up through work: *“But people come, accuse, say: Ah, you worth nothing, I don’t know what else...’ Others say: ‘No, at least you work, don’t just wait, just wait”* (Interviewee 4). In a patrimonial society in which identity is founded on professional activity, whoever does not work, is *worth nothing* (because does not earn anything), but if one works even though in a little recognized but

stable activity, becomes someone that can be respected: “Because, in the past, when I was someone, I could work, hold on to pickaxe handle, of the sickle, cropping everything, and today, I cannot, I am old, my arm is sick, but if I retire I will go away, man” (Interviewee 7).

The difficulties faced do not prevent the astonishment with the small conquests, either related to work or to the scarce assets, which insure the daily bread: “Here, look, my little cart, it is my cart this here. Do you know how much I make at most every two weeks?! Three hundred ‘contos’, in Bahia I make one hundred, fifty Real, at most... [There] the cost of living is difficult” (Interviewee 9).

It is clear, in the above extract, a feature related to the coexistence of two worlds that cohabit in the city almost as parallel universes: the polysemy attributed to some works, such as, for example, the idea of *cost of living*. While this expression, for formal housing dwellers, educated, and monetized, represents how much one spends to live or how much one has for consuming, for the street population the cost of living refers to the expenditure of efforts, energy, and work needed to be able to survive. These two perspectives reveal two different glance (and life status) from those that live and from those that only survive in society.

It is possible to realize from the interviews the importance of the idea of conquest that frequently appears in speeches: “*Yep, we*

spend here one week working to conquer fifty Real, sixty Real. [But] It doesn’t get not even to three hundred ‘contos’ monthly” (Interviewee 4). It suffices to mention, either when they refer to looking for food in the garbage, of material to recycle or place for the camping site, the use of this word denotes that their lives are a constant struggle, since the meaning of the word conquer relates to the success in obtaining something really difficult, such as winning a war. One interviewee, reinforcing this impression, stated: “*We are at war with the world, the world fighting with us”* (Interviewee 6).

In view of the manifest inequality in life conditions of this portion of the population, particularly related to identity and work, and considering, still, that in large measure such difficulties are caused by the public agents who should defend them, it is fit Nunes’s reflection: *Vulnerability manifests an asymmetric relationship between the weak and the strong. In this context, it is required an ethically adequate commitment that the most powerful protects the weaker (...)* vulnerability also is imperative of caring and responsibility and, in this sense, the basis of morality²⁰.

Injured for not perceiving themselves as injured

When questioned about the reasons that led them to settle in these plastic camping sites in public land, one realized that they always find reasons for blaming themselves. They migrate to the city, which has everything; therefore, the lack

of access to services and better life conditions is solely attributed to themselves: they are who failed. The fact of being marginalized both by the other city dwellers and by public power representatives – who avoid them, are scared or simulate indifference, corroborates this guilty feeling.

This feeling is exemplified by the extract that follows, of one interviewees' speech replying if the quality of life provided by urbanization and infrastructure was supplied to all inhabitants of the cities: *"It is! It is supplied to everyone. But there are many who don't want, but it is enough, it is. But there are those who don't take advantage. But there are people who prefer to drink liquor than work... Because here in Brasilia there are many people who help in education, in everything, there are those who don't want and stay out partying"* (Interviewee 6).

In spite of the evidences, they feed on the certainty that their individual effort will always be rewarded and if, truly, work hard they will have a promising future: *"Myself, now, who would say that someone would stop the car and say: 'hi, there is a backyard at my house to clean. Let's go there cut the grass?' I would go. 'There is a truck over there to be unloaded', I would go. And even without condition to carry much weight, like me, who have a surgery down in my belly"* (Interviewee 4). This belief in

personal effort as the sole condition to overcome social setback seems to be supported by the simple fact of the individual is able to work: *"Life is a bit difficult, but it does not forces me to become practically an outlaw"* (Interviewee 4).

Anjos explains that vulnerability is dissimulated and often replace by a fictitious autonomy and this illusion of autonomy collides with the formation of a critical awareness. Still dealing with the relationship between autonomy and vulnerability, establishes: *The hiding of vulnerability is equally perverse in hiding its social causes. Truly, vulnerability is expressed in wounds, that is, in victims and, for that very reason, it can be changed very fast in accusations of injustices in power use. The attempt of hiding the causes of vulnerability leads to turn autonomy into a discourse turning victims responsible for their own wounds. In a political scale, one sees this discourse on autonomy the delivery of social groups and entire nations to their own poverty conditions and been responsible for it.* ²¹.

This perspective pointed out by Anjos emerges in speeches marked by notions of autonomy and freedom. Having the means to insure own support (even if precariously) is materialized in the recycling cart, which becomes the symbol of autonomy. The fact, for those who have also other activities, of not having boss and not render account to anyone, even if this implies in insecurity and in lack of labor

rights, reflects freedom. The statement that follows points to the importance that is conferred to these values, even though these notions of autonomy and freedom are, partially, fictitious and that effectiveness of these experiences are far from been achieved: “*Here, I work for nobody, no! I work on my own, I am a fisherman. I fished there, but I didn’t make the Money that I make here, no*” (Interviewee 12).

The same author ¹ dwells on the bioethical importance developed in the Latin American parameters for understanding social vulnerabilities and *their deepest causes* and, consequently, to build up a consistent autonomy. The lack on the dimension of their vulnerability among the interviewees turn them even more injured, since they are imprisoned by the fictitious idea that alone they will be able to free themselves from this vulneration status, which is not always true. Contributing to this idea: *The recognition of own vulnerability is the starting point for a bigger construction. It enables the constructive meeting with the other and the overcoming steps for their own fragileness* ¹.

Final considerations

The current work shows that street population is exposed to concrete circumstances of vulnerability. Such understanding departs from the premise that vulnerability is potentiality; an abstract situation that may or may not

become consolidated ⁷. The reports make clear, however, that this population, *in addition to the generic conditions of vulnerability, presents specific features of ‘vulneration’* ⁷. Vulnerability is not, therefore, the concept that is best adjusted to the factual risk situation lived by the studied group. This shows the importance of the *vulneration* concept, which seems to be the most indicated to identify the presented situation, contributing, inclusively, to establish priorities to solve them in terms of public policies.

The vulneration concept refers to material situations of vulnerability and it is, thus, the pertinent expression to qualify the existential situation of the group in issue, bearing in mind the outcomes of field survey showing that vulnerability in this group is real and not mere possibility. As shown, street population is injured for been concretely more subject to pain, hunger, cold, premature and violent death than other people in society, who are protected because of their houses, documentation and social identity legitimated by recognition of the others. Vulnerability in their lives is a possibility, fatality, and not daily certainty, as occurring with street population.

By saying that street population is in vulneration situation one invokes the moral and ethical obligation of protection for this group of individuals. Vulneration as recognition of embodied vulnerabilities

implies specific modes of planning and development of public policies. Each type of detected vulnerability demands special modes of action. The interviewees in this research are injured in all dimensions of their existence, therefore, legitimate addressees of State protection.

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Resumo Este artigo apresenta resultado de pesquisa qualitativa empreendida com moradores de rua no Distrito Federal, em 2009, relacionando suas condições de vida ao conceito de vulnerabilidade e vulneração tal como concebido pela bioética. Descreve aspectos do cotidiano desse grupo, elencando fatores condicionantes da vulnerabilidade relacionados a precariedade de sua existência, como fome, ausência de moradia e infraestrutura, dificuldade para obtenção de documentos, além da acentuada suscetibilidade a violência por parte dos agentes do Estado, bem como pela população em geral. Conclui que a exposição constante a tais fatores torna esse grupo não apenas vulnerável, mas, de fato, vulnerado, reafirmando a pertinência desse conceito e incitando medidas protetoras por parte das instituições públicas.

Palavras-chave: Vulnerabilidade. Geografia. Bioética. Proteção. Políticas públicas.

Resumen

Vulnerabilidad y vulneración: población de las calles, una cuestión ética

Este artículo presenta resultado de investigación cualitativa hecha con habitantes de las calles en el Distrito Federal en Brasil, en 2009, relacionando sus condiciones de vida al concepto de vulnerabilidad y vulneración, tal como concebido por la bioética. Describe aspectos de lo cotidiano de ese grupo, listando factores condicionantes de la vulnerabilidad relacionados a la precariedad de su existencia, como el hambre, la ausencia de vivienda e infraestructura, la dificultad para obtener documentos, además de la acentuada susceptibilidad a la violencia por parte de los agentes del estado, así como por parte de la población en general. Concluye que la exposición constante a tales factores torna este grupo no sólo vulnerable, sino, de hecho, vulnerado, reafirmando la pertinencia de este concepto e incitando medidas protectoras por parte de las instituciones públicas.

Palabras-clave: Vulnerabilidad. Geografía. Bioética. Protección. Políticas públicas.

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