"Now I Must Go": Uncovering the Relationship Between Masculinity and Structural Vulnerability in Young African Men's Stories of Forced Migration

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Abstract

Drawing on personal narratives collected from Sub-Saharan African international protection holders and seekers in Sicily, this article aims to advance understanding of the gender-specific processes prompting young men to migrate toward Europe. Focusing on the diverse experiences of (or threat of) violence that prompted participants to migrate, I argue that masculinity can be seen as a mediating factor between the individual and structural levels, producing a set of structural vulnerabilities to male-on-male violence both in the public sphere and in private spaces like the familial context. Here, vulnerability should be understood as positionality, indicating participants' placement within context-specific masculine hierarchies along the lines of age, migration status, and race. Accordingly, this article interprets the Central Mediterranean migration route as a highly masculinized migration arena, where the social reproduction of vulnerable male mobilities stemming from the hierarchical organization of masculinities is located on a continuum across different migration phases.

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Introduction

Yaya is an 18-year-old Gambian international protection holder who left his home country at the age of 15 due to intra-familial tensions over land resources. During his interview, after recounting his journey along the Central Mediterranean route (CMR) connecting Sub-Saharan Africa to Sicily, Italy, via Libya, he suddenly broke down in tears. He explained that after all he had been through, his situation "hasn't got better" in Sicily. At the time of the interview, Yaya was still awaiting paperwork associated with his asylum claim and living in a refugee center, with no possibility of finding a job, enrolling in formal education, or finding permanent housing. In his words, we can see how the complex web of vulnerabilities that framed his life in Sicily connected with those that prompted him to leave The Gambia, indicating a protracted lack of educational opportunity and adequate living standards across different migration stages.

Yaya is one of the many young, unmarried men traveling alone who arrived in Sicily between 2014 and 2017 when sea arrivals from Libya reached an unprecedented level (Demarchi and Lenehan 2019). In 2016, 181,436 people landed in Italy, among whom more than seven in 10 were adult men, mainly under the age of 25 (UNODC 2018; Demarchi and Lenehan 2019). Focusing on minors, who represent 14 percent of these arrivals, it is notable that almost all of them were teenage boys (UNICEF and REACH 2017; UNODC 2018). The question of why so many young men and boys, mainly from West Africa, are migrating along the CMR is complex and implies considerations of migration drivers, dynamics, and governance along the Mediterranean routes (Gerard and Pickering 2014; McMahon and Sigona 2018; Demarchi and Lenehan 2019; Belloni 2020). The literature on the CMR shows a lack of safety, and experience of violence, death, and abuse in their place of origin (UNICEF and REACH 2017; Wittenberg 2017; McMahon and Sigona 2018; Crawley and Skleparis 2018) are among the primary motivations for people migrating along this route. Nevertheless, the critical assumption in policy and public discourse is that most of these asylum-seeking men are "bogus" or "fake" refugees in search of better "economic" opportunities (Griffiths 2015; Allsopp 2017; Scheibelhofer 2017; Crawley and Skleparis 2018).

In European migration debates, dominant policy and public discourses often shape essentialized understandings of vulnerability based on the female victim–male perpetrator dichotomy (Kreft and Agerberg 2023) to present refugee women as the most "vulnerable" group of refugees in the Mediterranean (Sözer 2019; Freedman 2019; Kofman 2019). Reproducing a gender-essentialist understanding of the migration-violence nexus (Bank, Fröhlich, and Schneiker 2017), these narratives tend to

neglect or simplify asylum-seeking men's vulnerabilities produced by the diverse political, social, and economic drivers of migration along the CMR (Wittenberg 2017). They also reinforce postcolonial views of racialized male asylum-seekers as a burden or threat to European societies (Scheibelhofer 2017). Not aligning with the humanitarian discursive construction of the "ideal" refugee as a "vulnerable" victim (Griffiths 2015), European public and policy discourses meet racialized men's asylum claims with suspicion (Allsopp 2017; Scheibelhofer 2017; Freedman 2019), questioning their "deservingness" of refugee protection (Griffiths 2015; Sözer 2020). At the same time, the small scholarship on refugee masculinities has primarily focused on how masculine identities are affected by their experiences in the humanitarian and resettlement contexts (Jaji 2009; Kleist 2010; Turner 2010; Lukunka 2012; Griffiths 2015; Suerbaum 2018; Demarchi and Lenehan 2019; Turner 2019; Çarpar and Göktuna 2021; Palillo 2022a). Less interest has been given to the dynamics of violence prompting refugee men's forced displacement and mobility — particularly when men's experience of violence does not explicitly relate to armed conflict and military violence (Carpenter 2006; El-Bushra and Gardner 2016; Myrttinen, Khattab, and Naujoks 2017). Moreover, the literature on refugee masculinities in the Mediterranean has primarily focused on Syrian and Middle Eastern refugee men (Suerbaum 2018; Turner 2019; Çarpar and Göktuna 2021). For this reason, there is a significant research gap with respect to the experiences of Sub–Saharan African asylum-seeking men, a group that represented the largest share of sea arrivals in Italy in 2016–2017 (UNODC 2018).

Drawing on qualitative interviews conducted with male Sub-Saharan asylum international protection holders/seekers in Sicily from September 2016 to May 2017, the article aims to use the concept of "structural vulnerability" as a proxy for "positionality"[1] to uncover how intersecting power relations and social positions shape different forms of violence that prompt young Sub–Saharan African men to flee along the CMR. Here, I argue that participants' marginal positions in context-specific masculine hierarchies mediate structural vulnerabilities along the lines of gender, age, race, and migration status. For this reason, I argue that we should understand forced migration as a multilayered gendered process that inhabits the divide between normative ideals of manhood and participants' structural realities of violence and insecurity. Moreover, I propose conceptualizing the CMR (from the migration inception phase in Sub-Saharan Africa to the refugee experience in Sicily) as a masculinized migration arena, where highly unequal intersecting power relations among men produce and reinforce vulnerable male mobilities.

After briefly describing theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and research design, this article focuses on five youth migration stories along the CMR.

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[1] According to Anthias, positionality identifies "the space at the intersection of structure (as social position/social effects) and agency (as social positioning/meaning and practice)" (Anthias 2002, 502).

Yonas is from Eritrea (a well-established refugee-producing country) and fled forced military conscription before the Gaddafi regime collapsed in 2010. The other four participants are from West Africa (The Gambia, Nigeria, and Guinea Conakry) and arrived in Italy around 2014 for reasons related to cultist violence, failure of the rule of law, lack of livelihood opportunities, and conflicts over land rights. The article does not engage with aspects related to participants' asylum determination procedures. Still, it recognises that these stories speak directly to participants' asylum claims due to their location in Sicily. The article's focus is on participants' narrative accounts of mobility experiences along the CMR (Zetter 2018) and the role of gender dynamics in framing their forced migration trajectories toward Europe. Thus, in this article, I use the terms "refugee" and "forced migrants" (Zetter 2018) interchangeably because all participants formally applied for international protection in Italy and claimed to have been coerced into fleeing their origin country. I also use the term "irregular migrants" to highlight participants' migration status in Libya.

Masculinity, Forced Migration, and Violence

Despite the growing relevance of gender in migration studies, an explicit focus on masculinity only emerged in recent years (Charsley and Wray 2015). Mainstream migration theory has traditionally conceived migrant men as representative of the entire migrant population; yet, this scholarship has predominantly understood their experiences as genderless (Brettell 2016). Since the 1990s, a small body of feminist and critical work has challenged this bias, uncovering how migrant men act as gendered actors in their mobility experiences (Charsley and Wray 2015; Brettell 2016). Primarily influenced by Connell's theory of masculinity (2005), this scholarship has focused on the ways migration compels men with opportunities to construct masculinity (Charsley and Wray 2015). Thus, transnational migration has been interpreted as an adaptive gendered strategy (Broughton 2008) and a rite of passage (Monsutti 2007) through which migrant men, especially young men (Osella and Osella 2000), can negotiate competent masculine identities as fathers and breadwinners.

In this work, scholars used Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) to identify the culturally salient normative models of admired masculinity and the patterns of social practice through which men negotiate gender power relations in a given setting. This theoretical approach includes recognizing both men's dominance over women as a critical dimension of the patriarchal gender order and the context-specific gender dynamics that lead to different power relationships among groups of men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In Connell's view, masculinities are plural, contradictory, and relational, and not all men possess the same material, cultural, and symbolic resources to engage, or align, with normative gender ideals (Connell 2005). Gender interacting with other social divisions, such as age, class, race, citizenship, and sexuality, produces positions of subordination and marginalization for non-hegemonic masculinities within

locally salient gender hierarchies (Connell 2005). With its focus on normative ideals, however, Connell's theory has been criticized for promoting a rigid conceptualization of masculinity and was reviewed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005). In reformulating the concept of hegemonic masculinity, they propose a more complex model of gender hierarchy and a stronger focus on shifting power dynamics among local, regional, and global levels (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Building on these theoretical orientations, the scholarship on migrant masculinities has explored how migration processes challenge and reshape transnational masculinities, with migrant men often experiencing changes in their masculine identities when they move transnationally (Osella and Osella 2000; Sinatti 2014; Howson 2014; Charsley and Wray 2015). In the case of refugee masculinities, a small body of scholarship has documented how refugee and asylum-seeking men experience gender challenges in humanitarian institutions, such as refugee camps, where dynamics of humanitarian assistance and intensified social control might prevent them from fulfilling breadwinner roles and other key societal expectations around manhood (Jaji 2009; Turner 2010; Kleist 2010; Lukunka 2012). Young men are particularly affected by these dynamics of socioeconomic marginalization, so the permanence of refugee men in humanitarian spaces might impact their idealized masculine trajectories into adulthood (Turner 2010; Palillo 2022a). Another branch of literature has explored the role of socioeconomic marginalization, othering, and refugee labeling in shaping forced migration as a disempowering experience marked by a loss of masculinity (Griffiths 2015; Suerbaum 2018; Çarpar and Göktuna 2021; Wyss 2022). This scholarship has mainly focused on encampment/resettlement, diaspora, and the gendered responses to the refugee experience. At the same time, these studies often pay little attention to the role of gender-specific processes prompting refugee men to flee in the forced migration inception phase.

Extensive research has shown how power dynamics between "hegemonic" and "non-hegemonic" masculinities shape the social reproduction of male-on-male violence in conflict/post-conflict and military settings (Myrttinen, Khattab, and Naujoks 2017). In sociocultural contexts where locally salient models of hegemonic masculinity legitimize physical aggression, men's subordinated position within local masculine hierarchies might render men vulnerable to different forms of violence, including sexual violence (Jones 2006), torture (Carpenter 2006), revenge and gender-selective killings (El-Bushra and Gardner 2016; Myrttinen, Khattab, and Naujoks 2017), and forced military conscription (Carpenter 2006). Less interest, however, has been given to how men and boys might be subjected to gender-specific forms of violence and existential threats in private domains such as the familial context, or when these acts of violence are not perpetrated by military personnel or armed groups (Carpenter 2006; Myrttinen, Khattab, and Naujoks 2017).

On this matter, feminist scholarship has documented how patriarchal structures and norms shape a continuum of gender-based violence against migrant women across public/private domains and different migration stages (Marchand 2008; Freedman 2012; Gerard and Pickering 2014; Krause 2015). Feminist analyses

particularly problematize forms of violence enacted in private spaces, such as the familial context, which are not explicitly covered by the 1951 Convention's focus on political violence perpetrated by the state (or state-like actors) and the public sphere dominated by men (Freedman 2010). In these analyses, however, men emerge mainly as perpetrators of violence (Myrttinen, Khattab, and Naujoks 2017). Moreover, migration studies have rarely extended the gendered violence continuum framework to refugee men's mobility experiences along the Mediterranean routes (Palillo 2022b). This research gap limits our capacity to fully explore the role of gender relations in the social reproduction of violence during displacement, transit, and relocation (Freedman 2012; Krause 2015). A focus on the role of masculinity in creating power hierarchies that might lead to violence is critical in migration contexts like the CMR, where men are the majority of intermediaries and smugglers (UNODC 2018) and where gender power dynamics are a crucial factor in determining different levels of vulnerability to violence and exploitation among men, women, and children (Freedman 2012; Gerard and Pickering 2014; Al-Dayel, Anfinson, and Anfinson 2023; Palillo 2022b).

Gender and Structural Vulnerability

Scholars have criticized the concept of vulnerability in the social sciences for its analytical/conceptual ambiguity and connotations of paternalism, essentialism, and stigmatization (Peroni and Timmer 2013). In the international refugee regime context, the term has been used to identify the perceived fixed characteristics of asylum applicants and their designated membership of specific groups deemed "vulnerable" (Turner 2021). Intending to address substantive equality for oppressed groups (Peroni and Timmer 2013), vulnerability has become a key policy criterion in prioritizing individuals and families for refugee determination procedures and reception/relocation services in European asylum systems (Freedman 2019; Kofman 2019). Influenced by feminist demands to acknowledge refugee women's experiences, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees has, over time, produced guidelines concerning the "vulnerabilities" of specific groups of refugees distinguished by gender, age, or disability to tackle their needs for added protection (Freedman 2019). The notion of group vulnerability has been increasingly incorporated into European Union (EU) asylum policies and used by member-states to organize different levels of reception and relocation services for specific groups of asylum-seekers and refugees during and after the so-called Mediterranean migration "crisis" (Kofman 2019; Freedman 2019).

A small body of literature has focused on the discriminatory ramifications of this labeling process (Zetter 2018) for those asylum-seeking men, women, and gender-diverse people who do not conform to dominant notions of vulnerability and might be excluded from or penalized when receiving humanitarian assistance (Clark 2007; Turner 2010; Kofman 2019; Sözer 2020). By casting women as homogenous groups of passive victims (Myrttinen 2017, 48) or "genuine" refugees

(Griffiths 2015), men's position in humanitarian and refugee governance emerges as particularly problematic (Turner 2019). Humanitarian institutions and workers often reproduce essentialist assumptions on gender and vulnerability, locating men at the bottom of humanitarian hierarchies (Clark 2007; Olivius 2016). As such, humanitarian discourse serves as a powerful ideology in making male vulnerability essentially unimaginable (El-Bushra, Naujoks, and Myrttinen 2016, 7) by framing refugee men as potential aggressors and an obstacle to gender equality (Turner 2010; Lukunka 2012; Olivius 2016; Myrttinen, Khattab, and Naujoks 2017). A small body of scholarship, however, has engaged with refugee men's vulnerabilities, predominantly in refugee and conflict-affected settings, as a way to illustrate that men, too, can be rendered "vulnerable" in these contexts (Carpenter 2006; El-Bushra and Gardner 2016; Myrttinen, Khattab, and Naujoks 2017). These theoretical conceptualizations see vulnerabilities as produced by contextual and relational factors enacting gender power dynamics under patriarchal structures (Clark 2007).

Leaving the concept of vulnerability poorly defined, however, this scholarship might reinforce the humanitarian usage of vulnerability, denoting a general liability to harm and calling for the expansion of humanitarian work toward another group of "vulnerable" refugees, namely refugee men (Turner 2021). Turner's critique of refugee men's position within humanitarianism highlights how "vulnerability" works as an exclusionary mechanism of labeling for resource allocation in humanitarian governance (Sözer 2020; Turner 2021). However, his analysis tends to limit refugee experience within humanitarian structures, overlooking that forced migration is a social process embedded in multilayered dynamics of violence and insecurities (Marchand 2008) that might fall outside the scope of humanitarian action. Influenced by Sözer's argument that "the most central source of vulnerability for migrants is the shared experience of forced migration" (2020, 2164), I argue that we need conceptual tools to document the broader web of insecurities framing forced migration experience across different stages and intersecting oppression structures (Hill Collins 2017).

Several studies in health research and medical anthropology have used the concept of "structural vulnerability" to explore how structures of social inequality produce different levels of exposure to risks and insecurities for oppressed groups (Seckinelgin, Bigirumwami, and Morris 2010; Holmes 2011; Quesada, Hart, and Bourgois 2011). In their work on the Burundian conflict, for example, Seckinelgin, Bigirumwami, and Morris (2010) show how the reconfiguration of gender relations and patriarchal structures during the conflict exacerbated women's structural vulnerabilities, creating the condition for their higher exposure to HIV risk. In particular, the breakdown of family structures impacted women's capacity to access material resources and patriarchal protection, rendering them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence. In his ethnographic study of a berry farm in the United States, Holmes (2011) explores how migrant berry pickers were rendered vulnerable to economic/physical hardship and health disparities by their position at the bottom of the farm labor hierarchy along the lines of ethnicity and migration

status. Structural vulnerability, in this sense, should be understood as a positionality that "imposes physical/emotional suffering on specific population groups and individuals" due to unequal social power hierarchies (Quesada, Hart, and Bourgois 2011, 340).

In migration studies, such a focus on structures of power and privilege allows us to explore the different ways forced migrant men, women, and gender-diverse people are situationally exposed to different forms of violence embedded in intersecting structures of patriarchal dominance and unequal gendered mobilities (Marchand 2008; Freedman 2012). Thus, I propose to use the concept of structural vulnerability to uncover the role of gender as a social structure (Connell 2005) determining forced migrants' suffering (Holmes 2011) via material or sociocultural processes that socially differentiate men, women, and gender-diverse people in terms of opportunities, structural constraints, and intersecting power relations (Hill Collins 2017).

Methodological Notes

This article is based on five personal narratives collected in Sicily as part of research with 36 male international protection holders and seekers in 2016/2017. During this period, I accessed 12 refugee centers across seven Sicilian towns and participated in the activities of a faith-based non-governmental organization as a volunteer. The choice of Sicily was dictated by its peculiar position in the so-called Mediterranean "refugee" crisis as one of the two main entry points into the EU during the highest peak of sea arrivals in 2015–2016 (D'Angelo 2019).

The sample for this study included 36 male Sub-Saharan African international protection holders/seekers in the age range of 18–40. Their age and nationalities reflected key socio-demographic characteristics of the Italian Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) beneficiaries' profiles that, in 2017, saw a vast majority of men in the 18–30 age range and from Sub-Saharan African nationalities (SPRAR 2018). The participants fled their homes as minors or young adults, and all shared similar migrant trajectories to reach Sicily. The focus on Sub-Saharan African men allowed the comparison of participants' migration trajectories along the CMR to identify shared experiences, mobility dynamics, and turning points, linking the exploration of vulnerable male mobilities to the structural landscapes of the CMR. The five cases analyzed here were thus selected because they offer an opportunity to provide qualitative insights into intersecting gendered and age-related migration patterns along the CMR (UNODC 2018; Demarchi and Lenehan 2019).

The interview method was oriented toward a life history approach (Seckinelgin, Bigirumwami, and Morris 2010) aimed at eliciting participants' narratives with an informal, unstructured, and cooperative approach. Interview questions developed around three key migration phases (life at home, the journey to the EU and life in Sicily). Participants were allowed to decide where to start their storytelling and to focus on the experiences of most significant importance to them in the context of their migration experiences. Three interviews were conducted in Italian, while the

other two were conducted in English. No interpreters were used in the interviews. Three interviews included a formal follow-up. Given the specificity of participants' status in Sicily, confidentiality/anonymity was ensured by removing, modifying, or omitting information that might lead to participants' identification.[2] All five participants signed informed consent forms.

In the data analysis, I combined thematic and dialogic-performative approaches to analyze participants' narratives regarding gender performance (Langellier and Peterson 2004). Far from suggesting a linear or static depiction of forced migrant trajectories (Schapendonk and Steel 2014), I used personal narratives to examine participants' gender performances in Sicily in relation to their previous mobility/immobility experiences along the CMR. Here, I followed how migrant subjects engage with hegemonic masculinity models across different transnational spaces and temporalities (Howson 2014), and in relation to multiple audiences, including the researcher. Narratives are always political and interrogate the narrator and interviewer's social location (Anthias 2002). As a white Sicilian man researching racialized forced migrant men in Sicily during the so-called Mediterranean "refugee" crisis, I reflexively engaged with my positionality in the field, including my biographical experiences and situated identities/privileges, to analyze interaction dynamics and the co-construction of personal narratives in the interview situation (Anthias 2002; Phillips and Earle 2010). In this sense, I used my positionality to critically examine the making of hierarchies and boundaries between Sicilians and refugees in the local communities of which I was a part. Race was particularly relevant in making insider/outsider positions within the asylum system, where staffers are predominantly white, and beneficiaries are predominantly racialized men (Palillo 2022a). My encounter with Yaya and his demand to go to school in the same region where I completed my secondary education indicates the relevance of seeing participants' narratives as embedded in locally salient structural power asymmetries inhabited by the researcher-researched relationship along the lines of race.

Notwithstanding his position within the Italian asylum system, Yaya did not have access to State-led formal education. To learn Italian, he attended a language course delivered by the faith-based organization where I was a voluntary teacher. My positionality in the faith-based organization, together with other factors such as my relatively young age (being in my late 20s helped me to divest from the role of the researcher), and my capacity to speak English (in a community where English proficiency is generally low) made the interview a conversational site where Yaya could finally politicize the shortcomings of the Italian asylum system in front of someone whom he perceived as a member of the Sicilian community. My "insiderness" in the "host" community and racial privilege also impacted how some experiences were recounted or silenced. For example, some participants struggled to discuss the issue of racism in Sicily openly. However, I read this form of relationality

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[2]All names are pseudonyms.

between the researcher and participants as a fundamental enabler of refugee storytelling in the locale (Palillo 2018). For this reason, far from imposing a fixed label on participants' experiences of forced migration, my use of vulnerability should be understood as a reflexivity-informed tool used strategically to uncover participants' neglected policy needs and demands in Sicily.

Masculinity, Forced Migration, and Social Becoming

Notwithstanding the diverse causes that prompted them to flee, all participants identified themselves as children or youngsters in the pre-migration phase, emerging as more experienced men due to their journey (Palillo 2022b). In Yonas' story, the journey marks a passage from childhood to adulthood associated with his migrant trajectory from Eritrea to Europe.

> [The journey] changed me very much on a personal level…[I] understood I need nobody. I don't have anybody. And I proved to myself that I can do many things. [The journey] made me realize this. (Yonas)

In his narrative, Yonas presents migration as a complex social becoming and identity formation process, entwining discourses of adulthood with hegemonic masculine ideals of independence, endurance, and breadwinning. At the same time, being a child emerged as a key narrative site where Yonas could articulate the dangers and difficulties associated with transnational mobility along the CMR. Talking about his challenging experience in Libya, he describes himself as a "young" boy who "knows nothing" and needed the protection of an older man he met in Sudan to complete the arduous journey to Sicily. In interaction with age, masculinity frames manhood as a sociocultural discourse signifying male social adulthood (Ungruhe and Esson 2017) and indicating a superior status to be progressively "accomplished" by Yonas through transnational mobility (Palillo 2022b). The capacity to protect/provide for his family is indicated by Yonas as a critical marker of manhood, differentiating adult and young males in terms of societal expectations and family obligations (Ratele 2008; Sinatti 2014). In the forced migration inception phase, thus, Yonas presents Eritrea's forced military conscription both as a driver of forced migration and an obstacle preventing young Eritrean men from fulfilling their provider-role responsibilities in the family.

> [T]he youngster [are those who are fleeing], because they look for a future…they try to be… a man that provides for [his]family (Yonas)

As a result of a protracted military crisis with Ethiopia, Eritrea has developed a system of indefinite national military service, which, each year, prompts thousands of young people to flee (Bader 2019). Young people are forcibly conscripted before they complete secondary school under the threat of severe forms of penalty, including the imprisonment, torture, and killing of deserters/draft evaders who are caught trying

to flee (Kibreab 2013; Belloni 2020). Young people on national service perform different types of work, including forced manual labor (Kibreab 2013). Even though state rhetoric presents conscription as a critical passage into adult citizenship (Kibreab 2013), its indeterminate duration shapes a condition of socioeconomic limbo for young Eritrean men, impinging on their capacity to become family providers (Belloni 2020). In addition, the meager salary often exposes conscripts' families to poverty (Dorman 2005; Hirt and Mohammad 2013 ;Kibreab 2013). According to Yonas, forced conscription deprived his family of male members, including his father, who died while serving his country as a soldier. Women and children were thus exposed to economic hardship and suffering without the male members' essential economic contribution. For this reason, Yonas started doing small jobs during adolescence to compensate for the lack of income providers in the house. By looking at the figures of missing fathers and uncles in his narrative, we can see how Yonas locates himself as a "boy" at a stage of his life when he expected to perform a transition into manhood in the complex structural landscape of Eritrea.

> Until I was young, I did not understand this situation, then slowly growing up, you understand these situations…because there are no males of [in] the house, there are not the men of the house…and the women struggled to raise us (Yonas)

At this juncture, Yonas realized that the future of soldiering was effectively a rigid masculine project imposed by the authoritarian-repressive Eritrean state based on a military-nationalistic warrior ideal (Weber 2011). Yonas saw this normative masculine project as incompatible with his culturally idealized trajectory toward reaching manhood associated with becoming a responsible father and a good provider for his female family members. That is why he asserted, "[in Eritrea], you cannot become [a man]… because you don't work… you don't study… So you cannot do anything."

Forced military service in Eritrea is also extended to women, who are also persecuted and flee the country (Kibreab 2013; Bader 2019). According to Yonas, however, Eritrean women can be exonerated if they have children, and they often come to Europe through family reunification. The government expects young men to serve their country with no exceptions, so it is complicated for them to leave the country legally. Hence, he argued, "[among] young Eritreans, men always flee!" This narrative highlights how the hierarchical order of gender relations shaped by Eritrea's protracted military crisis mediates Yonas' position of vulnerability to forced conscription due to the ideological link between masculine identity, nationalism, and militarism (Carpenter 2006, 92). By fleeing in search of "another life! A better life," Yonas aims to negotiate an alternative masculine trajectory,[3]

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[3] Here, I am influenced by Howson (2014), who sees aspiration as socially and culturally determined and as a key to studying how migrant men engage with normative ideals of manhood and future-oriented identity goals across transnational spaces.

despite and beyond the rigid structure of gender relations imposed by the Eritrean regime on his male youth. Overall, Yonas' story illustrates how masculinity is a key mediating factor between political violence and socioeconomic migration drivers due to the crucial role of material life and economic responsibility in attaining manhood.

Structural Vulnerability, Interpersonal Violence, and Hierarchies of Masculinities

Compared to Eritreans who flee violence and persecution perpetrated by the Eritrean state, West Africans, like Gambians or Nigerians, face significantly lower asylum recognition rates (Ministero dell'Interno 2020), and they are recognised as fleeing their countries for lack of economic opportunity (Wittenberg 2017; Crawley and Skleparis 2018 Black et al. 2022). In West African participants' narratives, however, interpersonal violence perpetrated by non-state actors emerges as a critical driver of forced migration.

Bai was a 24-year-old Gambian who fled his country due to problems with contested land rights over his family's farm. After his father's death, the family became vulnerable in the eyes of the community until a powerful ''uncle'' with government connections reclaimed the farm for himself, despite it being Bai's family's only income source. The uncle tried unsuccessfully to marry the widow. When she refused, the uncle and his family members physically assaulted Bai and his brother and raped their sister. Moreover, the two male siblings were wrongfully incarcerated, thanks to the uncle's government connections. Similarly, Yaya, the protagonist of this article's opening vignette, fled his country because of intra-familial tensions (UNICEF and REACH 2017). In his case, the uncle married Yaya's mother and took control of the farm. The new head of the family decided that Yaya could not go to school, forcing him to work on the farm: "I faced a lot of difficulties! A lot! I worked like a donkey!… [M]y step daddy used to… overuse me!." Participants narratively reconstruct the violent events prompting the flight around the death of the fathers and their boyhood position in the story. This narrative positioning indicates a rigid configuration of patriarchal relations, which implies a hierarchy of dominance/subordination between adult males and young males in the family.

As a low-income country where farming constitutes the primary source of income for its rural population (Bensouda 2013; Monterroso, Enokenwa, and Paez-Valencia 2021), The Gambia has seen high levels of corruption, human rights abuse, arbitrary detention, and persecution of minorities under former President Yahya Jammeh's regime, which ended in 2017 (Amnesty International 2018). In rural areas where customary law and practice are prevalent, land ownership follows a patrilineal property system, and land is shared communally by a family (Bensouda 2013; Monterroso, Enokenwa, and Paez-Valencia 2021). Social and religious norms discriminate

against women, particularly widows and those in polygamous marriages (Monterroso, Enokenwa, and Paez-Valencia 2021). According to customary laws, in the case of the husband's death, the brothers/uncles take possession of the land and are responsible for the women (Gunnarsson 2011). In a context where patriarchal family relations are a fundamental organizing principle of farming activities and social life, older men exercise a high degree of control and authority over women and younger males in the family, determining their access to land and family resources (Cooper 1997; Barker and Ricardo 2005; Gunnarsson 2011; Bensouda 2013; Bellagamba 2013). For this reason, the superior status of Bai's father appears to have played a vital role in the family's welfare and protection. Bai described his father as a "big man,"[4] a strong farmer, respected by the entire community and kin. After his death, the narrator described the two young male siblings as too weak to fight against the uncle's clan. Here, Bai argued that if his father was still alive, nobody in his local community would have contested his right to the family's piece of land or jeopardized the safety of his family members, including his sister: "When my father was alive, nobody, nobody, among them, would have the courage to do this." By looking at the positions of the two young male siblings in the narrative, we can see how their structural marginal position as "boys" in local masculine and intergenerational hierarchies shapes their vulnerability to male interpersonal violence.[5]

Ultimately, the detention experience was the main trigger in Bai's decision to flee due to the severe abuses he experienced in this context. However, his narrative indicates how the violent events leading to forced migration affected Bai's capacity to access the material resources necessary to attain manhood in a community where access to land is a crucial resource to generating income and accessing marriage (Barker and Ricardo 2005). In this sense, Bai interprets the loss of his father's land as an event jeopardizing his masculine trajectory. Talking about the decision to cross the border to Senegal after escaping prison, Bai asserted: "Now I must go too. It is that now I have nothing, nothing, to do in here [The Gambia]." Much like Yonas, thus, Bai presented the violent events leading to displacement as interconnected with dynamics of gender norms and relations regulating youth transitions in his local community. Here, we should acknowledge how mobility is a widespread strategy for Gambian male youth to negotiate economic opportunities (Zanker and Altrogge 2017). From the beginning, participants' stories appear to be produced and sustained

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[4]He used the Italian word "gigante," which means giant. I translated it as "big man" since the term is consistent with the lexicon used in the literature on African masculinities (Barker and Ricardo 2005).

[5]I use "marginalization" instead of "subordination" here to highlight the role of structural forces in pushing participants at the margins of the masculine hierarchy along the lines of age (see Connell 2005).

by a complex web of gender expectations reshaped by the violent events that led to forced migration.

Gendered Insecurities and Forced Migration Trajectories

Lyon left Southern Nigeria as a minor due to problems connected to gang-related violence. In his account, the main trigger was the death threats he received from a cult group; this event interacted with other "problems" preventing him from pursuing his aspirations regarding work and education. Cult groups are organized criminal gangs that operate in many parts of Nigeria, engaging in armed banditry and executing violent acts against enemies (Alumona and Amusan 2019). Gang-related violence in Nigeria is deeply connected to the growing socioeconomic inequalities, frustrated economic/education opportunities, and chronic youth unemployment depriving Nigerian youth of fulfilling their potential (Ibrahim 2017; Ezemenaka 2021). Lyon explained how cultist groups recruit young people by offering financial assistance and extrajudicial levels of protection. He also argued that most Nigerian "boys" arriving in Italy from Southern Nigeria were fleeing criminal groups, indicating how he perceived Nigerian male youth as particularly "vulnerable" to gang affiliation and criminal violence (Barker 2005; Iwilade 2020) due to the general state of impunity and lawlessness. Discussing the differences between Italy and Nigeria, Lyon particularly insisted on Nigerian law enforcement agencies' inability to protect citizens. Much like in Bai's story, the fragility of the state and the lack of the rule of law expose young men to criminal violence in their local communities. The lack of protection and support was another theme across all five narratives, illuminating how dynamics of interpersonal violence, at the structural level, directly speak to the theme of problematic youth transitions in contexts characterized by inefficient or corrupted government institutions, and high levels of socioeconomic precarity (Ungruhe and Esson 2017; Honwana 2019).[6] Adding to feminist literature on the migration-violence nexus (Marchand 2008; Freedman 2012), I argue that these structural insecurities leading young men to flee are gendered. Participants indeed interpret the interlocking experiences of violence and socioeconomic marginalization in the pre-migration phase as producing or exacerbating a problematic condition of social immobility (Honwana 2019) between childhood and manhood. For this reason, Lyon saw the structural barriers shaping his forced migration trajectory ("the hardship of life") as gendered challenges through which he could accomplish masculinity. Talking about a song he wrote on his journey, Lyon explained:

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[6]Here, I am influenced by Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence and its focus on the interaction between direct violence and social inequality in prompting people to flee (Bank, Fröhlich, and Schneiker 2017).

[F]or you to be a man, you just have to work hard! You must pass through stress! You must pass through difficulties! This makes you a man… You have to keep on going, keep on struggling, till you get to your destination… (Lyon)

Oumar's narrative presented a similar understanding of the link between masculine aspirations, structural constraints, and gendered opportunities associated with transnational mobility. He was an 18-year-old international protection holder who fled Guinea Conakry after his elder brother was killed in a protest against the government. This violent event created a significant breadwinning void in the family. Oumar's father was an older man, incapable of fulfilling his provider role. When he turned 16, he was the oldest of numerous brothers and felt responsible for searching for better economic opportunities. Initially, his parents did not support his decision to migrate due to his young age and the risks associated with the journey. At one point, the mother told him:

Oumar… you are still a child! But if you say it is compulsory that you must go, I cannot say you can't go, because you are a male! …Now you are also the oldest among my sons, among males [the oldest among my male offspring] … so you have responsibilities towards your brothers!

Oumar's masculine position in the family was critical in his decision to leave. Both at the individual and the household levels, the perceived risk associated with his permanence in his local community, namely being confined in a prolonged position of social immobility, appeared to be greater than facing the odds of transnational migration. In both Lyon and Oumar's narratives, the idealized trajectory of social becoming associated with the flight reveals how they interpreted the engagement with "difficulties" of the journey as part of a masculine identity "struggle" (Barker 2005). Like other participants, they saw transnational mobility as an arena where forced migrant men can negotiate financial independence, work, and access to marriage (Palillo 2022a).

Overall, in participants' stories, the decision to migrate should not be interpreted as a single moment of choice or coercion (Zetter 2018; Black et al. 2022), but rather as a multilayered gendered process inhabiting the divide between normative ideals of manhood and what young men can realistically achieve in their local communities. Here, we can read participants' forced migration trajectories as a movement out of gendered forms of violence and insecurity and an adaptive, culturally sanctioned youth trajectory towards reaching manhood in response to these gendered insecurities. The interplay of these two dimensions explains how the inception of forced migration operates within rigid structures of gender difference that shape and prompt vulnerable male mobilities along the CMR from the beginning of participants' forced migration experience.

A Gendered Continuum of Violence and Vulnerabilities

By inspecting the participants' forced migration narratives, we can see how the length, and fragmentation of the journeys and the lack of legal pathways associated

with increasingly coercive migration regimes in the Euro-Mediterranean region (de Vries and Guild 2019) characterize mobility/immobility experiences along the CMR as a part of a continuum of violence, which, in participants' stories, appeared to be highly gendered (Palillo 2022b). Due to its proximity to Italy, Libya is a crucial transit point to negotiate passage into Europe via the sea. After the 2011 collapse of Gaddafi's regime and the subsequent spread of armed conflict among different factions, irregular migrants transiting through Libya are "trapped" in a cycle of violence, indefinite detention, and exploitation perpetrated by multiple actors, including smugglers and armed group members (Al-Dayel, Anfinson, and Anfinson 2023, 293). The transit phase through Libya is usually long, lasting for months or even years, as in the case of Bai. Participants recounted a continued exposure to male-to-male interpersonal violence, taking different forms, including forced labor, ransom abduction, robberies, assaults, torture, and arbitrary killings (Palillo 2022b). They also described a generalized state of impunity for crimes perpetrated against irregular migrants who cannot seek legal protection as they live in fear of being arrested and detained (Palillo 2022b); Al-Dayel, Anfinson, and Anfinson 2023). Black men become particularly vulnerable to violence perpetrated by armed groups and youth gang members due to the Libyan transit economy's highly differentiated gendered and racialized labor marker's incorporation patterns (Gerard and Pickering 2014; Palillo 2022b). For example, Oumar recounted how two Gambian men seeking job opportunities in agriculture were killed because "they don't want Black Africans in Libya." At one point, Bai acknowledged that when he walked down the street in Sicily, the first thing that came to his mind is, "If I were in Libya, I'd be gone."

These complex power dynamics shape different gendered experiences of smuggling, detention, and captivity not only between men and women (Gerard and Pickering 2014; Al-Dayel, Anfinson, and Anfinson 2023) but also among groups of male migrants (Palillo 2022b. For example, when talking about his experience in a Libyan detention center, Yaya recalled how a Libyan prison guard ("policeman") sympathized with Yaya's young age and health status. For this reason, he first provided food and medicines and then arbitrarily released him from detention. The prison guard asked Yaya: "Why did you come on this journey? You are too young!," implying a cultural interpretation of violence against migrants as related to adult male bodies' capacity to endure pain and suffering. This gender-essentialist framework aligns with participants' accounts of Libya as a migration arena for "men" (Palillo 2022b). Traveling alone, they recounted seeking protection/support from older male migrants while simultaneously needing to man up, facing the journey's difficulties.

> [The journey] changed me!…[L]ike to be a man!… because I see [saw] a lot of people, when they start[ed] [their] journey, they couldn't make it…so when I'm sitting and thinking about that [the journey]… I said no never give up![I never gave up!] (Yaya)

Overall, participants' narratives framed the CMR as a highly masculinized migration arena, where male-on-male violence "is shaped by and helps structure"

(Hill Collins 2017, 1461) intersecting power relations[7] between Libyan people, smugglers, and irregular migrants. Here, young refugee men's vulnerabilities stem from their placement at the bottom of locally salient masculine hierarchies due to their irregular migration status, age, and race (Palillo 2022b).

In Sicily, the problematic implementation of refugee policy reinforced participants' marginalized position in local hierarchies of gender and race (Palillo 2022a). Despite being theoretically a critical service provided by the SPRAR (2018), access to State-led education or training/job opportunities depended significantly on the local management of the center where participants reside. This lack of initiative toward social integration greatly impacted participants' capacity to negotiate job opportunities and social life, leading to a diffuse sense of social exclusion. Discussing his experience in a Sicilian refugee center, Yonas asserted: "I don't want to stay there [the refugee centre] 24 hours doing nothing!… For me, it was like prison!" He presented this enforced state of inactivity and dependency as incompatible with his masculine aspirations around work and study, hardly negotiated through the decision to flee Eritrea.

Outside the center, refugee men primarily accessed low-paid work, mostly in highly masculinized/racialized sectors, such as agriculture (Palillo 2022a). Participants also acknowledged being subjected to several episodes of racist abuse and harassment. During his time in the refugee center, Yonas found a job in the kitchen of a local café way. The job was illegal and poorly paid for the time commitment required. The Sicilian employer was exploitative and abusive. He would often use racist slurs against Yonas. However, Yonas saw this experience as a turning point in his refugee story. He could finally partly fulfill his obligation to send remittances home, breaking the cycle of apathy, poverty, and social isolation associated with his permanence in the reception facility. Those who, like Yaya, decided or were forced to leave the asylum reception structures without documents ended up in a situation of homelessness and precarious housing conditions (D'Angelo 2019). These experiences of racialization, social exclusion, and legal precarity speak directly to participants' experiences of intersecting oppressions in Libya. For this reason, as the opening vignette exemplifies, Yaya traced a linear continuity across different migration stages due to the protracted lack of access to educational opportunities and adequate living standards.

Such a continuous cycle of marginalization had different gender implications for participants. Talking about marriage, Bai asserted that if he were in The Gambia, this would be expected of him, given that now he was a "man," a "big man" like his father. Notwithstanding the original understanding of the journey as an arena for

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[7]Hill Collins (2017) sees violence as a critical site of intersectionality, where multiple systems of oppression (such as racism, heteropatriarchy, class exploitation, or colonialism) interconnect to organize social hierarchy and maintain the subordination of oppressed groups at the intersection of different axes of social divisions.

renegotiating youth transitions, Bai cannot fulfill this critical socially legitimized step toward manhood due to the lack of money and job opportunities in Sicily. In this sense, the experiences of disempowerment, social immobility, and economic marginalization, generally interpreted by the literature on refugee masculinities in terms of gender challenges and loss of masculinity (Charsley and Wray 2015), should thus not be understood as isolated events associated with their relocation in Europe, but rather as the product of a gendered vulnerability continuum reproduced and sustained by mobility dynamics, racialization processes, and migration governance in the Mediterranean region.

Conclusions

This article contributes to the literature on refugee masculinities by showing the critical role of masculinity in shaping refugee men's experiences of violence in the entire forced migration experience along the CMR, from its inception to the settlement context. Here, the experience of gendered violence emerges as a critical driver of forced migration, being shaped by and shaping situated gender relations both in the public sphere and private spaces, including the familial context. Adding to feminist literature on the migration-violence nexus, I thus propose to see men's multilayered experiences of violence and insecurity as mediated by their marginal position within locally salient masculine hierarchies along the lines of age, race, and migration status. Further studies should investigate how other social divisions may also shape positions of structural vulnerability in this migration arena. Considering the West's engagement with African masculinities is often based on essentialist, racist, and dehumanizing discourses (Palillo 2022a), further research should investigate how European refugee law and asylum determination procedures interpret these stories of African men's experiences of violence perpetrated by non-state actors or in private spaces.

In addition, this study produces qualitative insights into the social processes prompting so many young Sub-Saharan African men to migrate along the CMR. Far from implying that participants shared the same migration drivers and refugee experiences, the article recognizes how diverse forced migration trajectories speak directly to the common theme of problematic male youth transitions in contexts characterized by deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and political uncertainty. Here, participants narratively construct their forced migration experience as a gendered process inhabiting the divide between masculine ideals and their socio-material realities in the pre-migration phase.

Challenging mainstream gender-essentialist understandings of the migration-violence nexus in policy and media discourse on the Mediterranean "refugee" crisis, I propose to see the CMR as a highly masculinized migration arena where hegemonic masculinity plays a crucial role in the social reproduction of violence against forced migrants. In Sicily and Libya, gender and mobility dynamics, together with racialization processes at the local level, appear to reinforce participants' structural marginal position, shaping gender-specific vulnerabilities to male interpersonal

violence, forced labor, imprisonment/detention, and labor exploitation in these contexts. Consequently, this article contributes to the feminist study of international migration by showing that forced migrant men's mobility experiences should also be located along a gendered vulnerability continuum across different migration stages and intersecting structures of patriarchy and racism. With only five narratives, however, we need further quantitative evidence to corroborate the qualitative findings and explore the cumulative effect of vulnerability.

Finally, this article aims not to add another pre-fixed group of "vulnerable" refugees to humanitarian classification. On the contrary, I strategically use an intersectional understanding of structural vulnerability for problematizing how men's protracted experiences of violence and insecurity fall beyond the scope of humanitarian action, being the product of a multilayered web of structural insecurities across interrelated mobility experiences and transnational spaces. For this reason, masculinity research should expand its traditional focus on refugee men's experiences in humanitarian intervention spaces, exploring how structural dimensions of violence impact forced migrants over time and space and across different social policy domains, local political economies, and intersecting systems of oppression. By overlooking these intersectional power dynamics, asylum institutions often reinforce refugee men's structural marginalization and cannot effectively respond to their resettlement/protection needs in Sicily. For this reason, refugee policy must finally recognize and engage with the consequences of refugee men's accumulated experiences of gendered insecurity and intersectional vulnerabilities across the Mediterranean region, promoting gender-sensitive integration/reception strategies, administrative procedures, and mental health care for all asylum applicants.

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