V. Canning, *Gendered Harm and Structural Violence in the British Asylum System* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 194pp, £115

Reviewed by Amin Parsa

The asylum system in ways more than one can be described as a system thriving upon harm. In its most humanitarian incarnation, it is an inadequate system of granting protection individually to people fleeing harm and persecution en masse. When put to work, this system ultimately rests upon arbitrary evaluation, accreditation and investigation of claims of harm: What sorts of harm and suffering mandates legal protection? How much harm is enough harm to provide protection? How much and what sort of evidence is convincing evidence to prove existence of well-founded fear? These are basic questions by which the asylum system operates.

In *Gendered Harm and Structural Violence in the British Asylum System*, which won the 2018 British Society of Criminology Book Prize, Victoria Canning takes on the British asylum system by describing and documenting the various harms inflicted by this system upon those it is supposed potentially to protect. Drawing on more than a decade of research in migration studies “including thousands of hours of activist participation with organisations and people seeking asylum, around 70 interviews with practitioners, psychologists, rape support counsellors; and around 10 focus groups with women” (4), Canning painstakingly documents the macro as well as the micro practices, the legislative and policy as well as everyday harms of the British asylum system, while focusing on the lives of women asylum seekers. More importantly, as the result of the author’s wide-ranging research and activist experience, Canning brings different forms of knowledge-making practices into her carefully built argument and discussion.

Gendered Harm and Structural Violence in the British Asylum System begins with a rather unconventional framing. The author notes the original impetus of her book dates back to 2011 when in a conference she was indirectly challenged by a colleague: “If you think England is bad, you should see asylum in Greece” (1). So, the framing and aim of *Gendered Harm and Structural Violence in the British Asylum System* is “to contest the assumption that those seeking asylum in Britain face few challenges” (2). This framing and aim, while making for an interesting origin story, does an injustice to the depth of material that Canning presents.

The book focuses primarily upon the Merseyside region, through which the larger historical and legal trajectory of British asylum is examined to unpack its structural violence and infliction of gendered harm. This is an ambitious project that Canning fulfils to a great extent.

The book contains seven substantive chapters. The first chapter introduces the reader to the British asylum system and situates its historic hostility towards irregular immigration within a brief history of legal and policy development as well as the shifting political situation within Europe, while at the same time giving a nod to the psychology of an island-state. Effectively, this chapter sketches the “contemporary climate of asylum and immigration in Europe, and the role of Britain in facilitating, exacerbating and responding to this” (25).

It is in this chapter and the preceding introduction that the reader is confronted with the scope of Canning’s project. The asylum system as the book’s object of investigation includes all aspects of seeking asylum, from relevant laws and immigration or welfare acts to the application process, the initial accommodation, and practices such as dispersal, detention, or deportation. The book does not attempt to provide an in-depth understanding of all these delicate matters but uses them to present a larger case. Later, in Chapter 3, we are introduced to this book’s operating understanding of structural violence through discussion of destitution, detention, and deportation as examples of such violence. Building on Galtung (1969), Canning insists that structural violence comprises forms of state-inflicted suffering – be it a result of policy or legislative practices, inaction or poor decision making – that “are not accidental or unpredictable, but deliberately decided” (48). From this stand point, *Gendered Harm and Structural Violence in the British Asylum* can also be read as an effort to make pieces of a case against the British legal and political system.

The next two chapters focus on the Merseyside region in order to flesh out different harms – social, physical, emotional and autonomy harm – inflicted upon asylum seekers. These two chapters draw on interesting fieldwork and provide a greater view of the outcome and the actual impacts of the policy and legislative practices upon people who are forced to live through its harmful processes. In these two chapters, the rhythm of Canning’s argument shifts from macro level discussion to descriptions of seemingly insignificant details that contribute to the everyday harms of the asylum system. This shifting perspective and ways of meticulously building diverse trajectories of violence into one is perhaps the high point of Canning’s book.

Taking on a topic as significant and large as mapping gendered harm as well as structural violence in an asylum system cannot be without its difficulties. As such, this book at times makes claims faster and wider than it allows itself to argue. This can be seen as a consequence of the framing of the book as a response to an *assumption* rather than an inquiry of its own. Such framing results in some separation between the detailed empirical investigations from the theoretical analysis. In turn, this obscures the ways in which the empirical informs the theoretical commitments and vice versa. For instance, we are introduced to a working definition

of structural violence, which arguably is the main contribution of this book, about a quarter way through the book in Chapter 3. Even then, and given the scale of this book's assignment, we deal with the asylum system's most conspicuous sites of harm and violence. This is not to undermine the significance of *Gendered Harm and Structural Violence in the British Asylum System*; on the contrary, it is to note the inevitable and rather difficult choices one has to make regarding references, sources, cases, stories, and claims when addressing a topic of this scale.

One instance is when the book addresses "health and harm" in the asylum system only through describing financial cuts and bureaucratic and administrative failures as well as logistic inadequacies that lead the care system to become a site of harm. Yet these discussions surprisingly leave out the inherent and systematic function of the asylum process, as a system of evaluating worthy-of-protection harm, in infliction and promotion of self-harm upon asylum seekers who are led to believe they have a minimal chance of staying. In this regard *Casualties of Care* by Miriam Ticktin (2011) could have been illuminating, for example when asylum seekers in France considered injecting themselves with the HIV virus to make their asylum case stronger (192).

Large frames clearly present expansive horizons; however, such horizons promote the bigger objects and obscure the delicate ones. This is to say the framing of *Gendered Harm and Structural Violence in the British Asylum System* affects the depth of its claim undesirably. As such, discussions on how harm is in fact an organising force in this system escape the book's limits. The same thing happens to discussions of gendered harm. The departure point of this book in its exploration of gendered harm is to "address the ways in which specific acts of violence impact on women and men differently" (27). This is a fruitful point of departure, but it fails to discuss that bordering practices have historically been organised, among other ways, along gender lines (Luibhéid 2002; Luibhéid and Cantú 2005). It would have been interesting also to know, through Canning's extensive experience and fieldwork, how border crossing and being caught up in the asylum process shapes sexuality, and what sorts of performance are imposed upon those seeking protection. What are the harmful features of the British asylum system in this regard and how do these resemble or differ from the harms produced in other systems – in the form of denying entry, over-sexualising migrant women, calibrating gender roles and expectations, and conceptualising kinship and family? *Gendered Harm and Structural Violence in the British Asylum System* does not cover these issues. What it does offer is a generous opening of an expansive horizon in which the links between the everyday and the policy and legislative actions of the state are clear. Moreover, the book's detailed research, and the critical perspectives it introduces, provide the basis for a damning condemnation of the state's asylum system.

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