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2025, nr 2 **WOKÓŁ POJĘCIA WULNERABILNOŚCI**

A R T Y K U Ł Y I R O Z P R A W Y

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UNIVERSAL VULNERABILITY AS THE BASIS FOR THE NARRATIVE UNDERPINNING CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL POLICY: INDIVIDUAL FRAGILITY, THE RESPONSIVE STATE, AND THE COMPREHENSIVE DIAGNOSIS MODEL

> "'Don't be so sensitive,' people are often told. In other words, don't be so yourself."
>
> Gabor Maté, Daniel Maté (2023: 259)

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary welfare states respond to the varied needs of their citizens with increasingly tailored approaches. Giddens notes that while there is no unified European social model, recent decades have seen convergence among EU countries, resulting in a de facto framework commonly referred to as the European social model—despite national differences (Giddens 2007; Leibfried, Pierson 1995; Golinowska 2018). Discussions on welfare models (for example, Esping-Andersen's typology: Nordic, Conservative, Liberal, with Mediterranean and Post-communist additions) address whether it is possible to simultaneously achieve stable public finances, low inequality, and high employment—a dilemma termed the "service economy trilemma" by Iversen and Wren (1998). While the

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possibility of achieving balance in these areas remains debatable, welfare states continue to adapt in response to ongoing socioeconomic challenges (Taylor-Gooby 2004a, 2004b; Bonoli 2007).

Stanisława Golinowska (2018) notes the emergence of new ideas for welfare reform aimed at tackling future social risks, labor volatility, technological advancements, and demographic shifts. Recent debates have centered on balancing social investment and social protection, incorporating activation incentives alongside support for vulnerable groups. For example, in Central and Eastern Europe, Poland's approach to welfare is described as a "paternalistic-market hybrid," reflecting a mix of investment and paternalistic principles (Księżopolski 2013). Such hybrid approaches, however, are also evident in Western European countries (Cantillon, Vandenbroucke 2014; Ronchi 2018).

Although "social investment policy" (Morel, Palier, Palme 2012; Barr 2001) is a staple of the European agenda, there is no singular understanding of "investment" or uniformity in addressing groups in social crisis. Defining the "subject" of welfare support—who should receive aid and for what purpose—is crucial. Achieving this involves determining the underlying concept of the "subject" that guides social policy choices.

This argument and proposal is consistently put forward by the American jurist Martha Albertson Fineman[1] within the framework of "vulnerability theory" and the vision of a "responsive state." She confronts the "liberal conception of the individual" embedded in the current socio-cultural order with the conception of the "universally vulnerable" (sensitive, fragile) subject. This framing is fundamental to thinking about the nature of investment and care, the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of specific social policy models, and the impact of aid interventions on identified social inequalities—especially the risk that programs designed to reduce inequality may, consciously or not, exacerbate the experience of inequality. The "step back" that Fineman proposes serves to increase the coherence of contemporary social policy thinking. It is a proposal to deliberately turn to the roots of current policies, which lie in a particular conception of both the individual and the social order (for example, citizens' duties and rights, the hierarchies among them, and their experiences with a supra-individual dimension). As such, it may serve as the basis for identifying certain responsibilities and solutions embedded in social policy concepts.

[1] Further: Martha Fineman.

This article aims to introduce Martha Fineman's conception of the subject as creatively articulated in vulnerability theory, and considers the resulting challenges for the state and for social policy—particularly as expressed in her concept of the responsive state. The first section focuses on presenting the foundations of this theoretical framework. The second part identifies challenges that can be drawn from Fineman's thought, linking them to specific, ongoing trends in contemporary social policy discourse. Part three complements the above with a set of suggestions for implementing policy oriented towards providing universal support for vulnerable citizens at street level, in the form of the author's diagnosis model. This approach enables highlighting of the essence of the experience of vulnerability and, at the same time, can be a useful tool for interpreting an individual's personalized situation in various spheres of life, their needs and aspirations, and then for designing dedicated support.

VULNERABILITY AS A UNIVERSAL CONDITION OF THE INDIVIDUAL

In the search for a foundation on which to design social policy interventions, we find inspiration in the *theory of vulnerability* developed since the 1980s by Martha Fineman. In the following section, we outline the fundamental tenets of her argument. These include: her critique of the liberal conception of the individual; the implications of this conception for aid practices and efforts to achieve equality; her vision of the vulnerable individual as central to vulnerability theory; and, finally, the challenges this poses for a "responsive state" committed to addressing universal and widespread human fragility.

The liberal conception of the subject and universal vulnerability

Fineman provides an insightful critique of the contemporary socio-cultural order, which is based on a liberal conception of the individual. As the American researcher writes, the liberal subject is part of a system in which individual freedom and autonomy are seen as superior virtues, privileged over equality (cf. Fineman 2008). Particularly worth highlighting is Fineman's exposition of the pursuit of freedom and autonomy as key motivations of the contemporary individual. The contemporary insider, the person who achieves a position as a full participant in social life, bases their status on independence, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency. This liberal subject internalizes and expresses

contemporary economic, legal and political principles—indispensable to the dominant ideologies of autonomy, self-sufficiency and personal responsibility, through which society is perceived as consisting of individuals acting in their own self-interest, able to manipulate and manage their independently acquired and accumulated resources (cf. Fineman 2008: 10). The economy functions, and is capable of growth, when it harnesses actors determined to achieve and demonstrate self--reliance, "coping," resilience, and motivation for the tasks they will be charged with.

According to Fineman, the popularized and widely internalized liberal conception of the subject creates inequality; it sustains a society based on individualism and competition, in which we constantly compare ourselves to one another and rank ourselves accordingly. What we have, then, is a game of acquiring a particular attractive identity that "belongs" only to a select few (or, perhaps more importantly, does not belong to others). At the same time, Fineman points out that aid activities risk reinforcing this pattern. Here, helping the needy becomes, in practice, a process of "socializing" individuals into independence and self-sufficiency. Fineman signals the need to discuss our motivations, aspirations, and measures of social adequacy. At the same time, she draws attention to how the aid provided by different institutions is formatted. This discussion is relevant for any system that strives for equity or highlights equity as a goal of intervention. In this respect, it is particularly worthwhile analyzing discriminatory processes as major drivers of social, economic, and political inequalities. In Fineman's terms, such processes are, in a sense, "sewn into" aid relationships operating under conditions where the "liberal conception of the individual" is in force. She exposes these dynamics by proposing a different vision of the subject—one that is universally vulnerable.

There is an extensive list of publications and approaches that, in this vein, explore the links between vulnerability and physical, social (race, gender, and ethnicity as social categories of vulnerability), and geographical phenomena treated in terms of scarcity (cf. Anderson 2000; Hewitt 1997; Kuran, Morsut et al. 2020), but in general the essence of these approaches is to expose particular types of individuals and particular groups with the process of attributing their inherent (specific) vulnerability to them. Fineman critiques the approaches indicated above and, at the same time, contemporary attempts to understand and establish equality. In her view, these attempts do not serve to genuinely redress inequalities between the actors in society. As she writes: "This version

of equality is similarly weak in its ability to address and correct the disparities in economic and social wellbeing among various groups in our society. Formal equality leaves undisturbed—and may even serve to validate—existing institutional arrangements that privilege some and disadvantage others" (Fineman 2008: 3). The liberal order notices "those failing" and also seeks tools to support (or solve) the problem. As Ellen Gordon-Bouvier (2021: 2) points out: "This is not to say that the liberal legal tradition altogether ignores those who are the less fortunate or is completely blind to the existence of injustice and oppression among the population." Similar conclusions are also drawn by Fineman (2008: 2), further reinforcing the above theses, and demonstrating the harmfulness and limited scope of contemporary "equality policies." As she states: "Even more significant in the long run has been the fact that the goal of confronting discrimination against certain groups has largely eclipsed, even become a substitute for, the goal of eliminating material, social, and political inequalities that exist across groups" (Fineman 2008: 4). Clara Bagnoli (2016: 14) refers to the above framing (exposing vulnerable groups) within the vulnerability discourse as an ethical perspective, next to which she places an ontological perspective, which is where Martha Fineman's reflection fits in. It is worth emphasizing that the framing proposed by Fineman (2021: 6): "[…] does not seek to deny that there is discrimination, harm and relative disadvantage arising from different kinds of circumstances and situations. Nor does it suggest that particular instances of harm should not be subject to appropriate state action. Rather, it is an argument that 'vulnerability' is an inappropriate concept used to define and isolate these groups or any other specific group from humanity as a whole. 'Human vulnerability is universal and permanent, inherent in the human condition.'"

Fineman proposes a "pro-identity" (cf. Cooper 2015) vision of the "fragile subject" as, at the same time, a commitment to creating a new model of the state and social responsibility (also called a "radical ethic of care"; cf. Fineman 2021: 6), focusing on the exploration of human nature, and not just those rights attributed to and denied to human beings (a procedure Fineman herself calls "tracing" human rights) (cf. Fineman, Grear 2013: 2). As Fineman points out: "[…] I want to claim the term 'vulnerable' because of its potential in describing a universal, inescapable, enduring aspect of the human condition that must be at the centre of our conception of social and state responsibility. Vulnerability, thus freed from its limited and negative connotations, is a powerful conceptual tool with the potential to define the state's obligation to provide a richer and

more robust guarantee of equality than that currently provided by the equal protection model" (Fineman 2008: 9; cf. Mackenzie, Rogers, Dodds 2013). For researchers adopting this "universal" approach, vulnerability is a fundamental feature of the human condition, biologically natural and constant, but also related to the personal, economic, social, and cultural circumstances in which individuals find themselves at different points in their lives (cf. Brown, Ecclestone, Emmel 2017: 497–510).

The degree of a person's vulnerability varies over the course of their life and the conditions of their varied perception of this life (subjective assessment of risks, problems and needs), but also depends on the objective conditions of specific communities (cf. Brown, Ecclestone, Emmel 2017). Liberalism proposes independence, or the focus can be on aid, starting from a vision of the individual's dependence on organized care, whereas Fineman directs attention to human "interdependence." This is an invitation to solidarity between individuals and groups similar to one another because of the vulnerability inevitably inscribed in the life cycle.

Martha Fineman's diagnosis undoubtedly offers a compelling critique in this respect. Of course, such a vision may seem utopian today, given that the contemporary economy, social life, and culture are thoroughly embedded in the model of relations and human aspirations criticized by Fineman. Yet, at the same time, we have so much confirmation of how destructive this entrenched model seems to be for the individual. Fineman does not stop at diagnosis, and also indicates directions for designing an institutional response.

A responsive state in the face of universal vulnerability

In their life cycle—or that of their family—contemporary human beings may encounter numerous problems they find difficult to prepare for or cannot respond to on their own, and here the involvement of state institutions is essential. In light of Fineman's reflections, the state's involvement represents not only protection but also the empowerment of the individual in a particular aspect of life (in terms of accessibility and the quality of performing specific roles), and an investment by the modern state in supporting the functioning of its citizens, guided by a concern for social order. In Fineman's thesis on vulnerability, there is no such category as "non-vulnerability" (or independence and self-sufficiency); there is only resilience, which we can rely on when we encounter life's challenges and opportunities (cf. Fineman 2019: 362–363). Resilience

arises from relational structures and access to resources—obtained from the state and communities—that enable us to survive, adapt, and thrive. It therefore reflects the potential for interdependence and solidarity. While vulnerability is universal, resilience is particular, found in the assets or resources an individual accumulates and expands over a lifetime and through interaction with and access to social institutions (cf. Fineman, Grear 2013: 2). Relationships reassure individuals when they experience risk and when they struggle with the burdens of everyday life. In this view, the state is responsible for shaping the model of relationships that is expressed in individuals' everyday lives. It promotes a particular vision of interpersonal relations—one that must be coherent in order to have a chance to exist. As Fineman points out, the realities of corporeality require human beings to remain embedded in social relations and institutions throughout their lives (cf. Fineman 2021: 6). She observes that these relationships and structures provide the resources that generate the capacity to adapt, adjust, survive, and even thrive. Dependency, while constant, also fluctuates over time depending on the need to connect with particular social institutions and relationships (cf. Fineman 2021: 10, 12). The state is established as a legitimate governing entity; it is tasked with establishing and monitoring social institutions and relationships that foster the acquisition of individual and social resilience (cf. Fineman 2017: 134). As Fineman states, the call for a state response does not prescribe a particular form; it rather only reflects the reality of human vulnerability. This approach to law and policy therefore allows for tailored solutions suited to different legal frameworks and political cultures (Fineman 2017: 2).

Thus, Fineman calls for a "responsive state." This new state entity —as an institutional system—should be based on an internalized "understanding of the meaningfulness, universality and constancy of vulnerability," which, in turn, leads to "politics, ethics and law being shaped around a full, comprehensive vision of human experience if they are to meet the needs of real actors" (Fineman 2008: 10). Once again, it is worth emphasizing that the above theses require deep reflection on the various conditions in which the individual operates in the life cycle, the influences that shape their quality of life, and in regard to the way they think about themselves and others. This entails reexamining the education system and labor relations, the promoting of attitudes embedded in marketing strategies both applied and available, family-oriented policies, and so on. Comprehensive implementation of the above vision of social relations in practice is a highly complex task. It may also appear utopian

—its realization so blatantly at odds with the mechanisms currently in place that all that remains is resignation.

According to Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel (2017), the concept of vulnerability can be used to develop a model of citizenship based on interdependence and empathy, emphasizing the ethical and social obligations between the state and the citizen, and in interactions between citizens. Also, as Anna Grear points out, one of the most promising aspects of the growing scholarly interest in the concept of vulnerability is its potential to respond to the complexity, affectivity and vulnerability of the living order and the many beings interdependently co-constituted by and within it (cf. Grear 2013).

VULNERABILITY AS A CHALLENGE FOR CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL POLICY

Martha Fineman's theory of vulnerability is an interpretation of risk from an ontological perspective. Vulnerability is inherent to the human condition and requires response in the form of a specifically organized system of institutional support, mainly implemented according to a specific vision, a narrative articulating the rationale for organizing and targeting support).

As emphasized in the introduction, we find many different concepts in various European countries that have emerged through their social policy reforms. However, there is also a hint of convergence in the shape of common trends, priorities, and specific solutions as elements of a broader European strategy. These include processes in EU social policy, such as the development of systems for the production and distribution of social services, among others: one-stop-shop support; a multi-sectoral approach and personalization in the provision of services; the modernization of support methods, triggering the co-production of services; and de-institutionalization, involving the provision of services outside institutions—in the living environment or by encouraging local communities to build reciprocal relationships, foster social involvement, promote voluntary activity, and the like (cf. for example, Golinowska 2018; Rymsza 2013). The above trends are part of a process of *"recalibration" of the welfare state* related to the challenges brought about by current development, as well as social needs, instruments, and methods (cf. Hamerijck 2013). A priority in the current programming period of 2021––2027 for EU funds is the development of comprehensive local systems of social services of general interest, provided to the general population in the

public interest and therefore free of charge or priced at a level that does not constitute a barrier to access (cf. *Integrated Care and Support*… 2021). Do the above priorities converge with the challenges Martha Fineman outlines for the state and its social policy?

Moreover, Martha Fineman's ontological assumptions entail specific practical ethical implications, which in turn can provide a narrative basis for social policy. The more attention we pay to experts, highlighting how social policy research and discourse today are based on several key concepts, with limited reflection (with rare exceptions) on their nature and robustness, the more relevant such a basis becomes. This refers to concepts that have become the cornerstones of national and international social policy (cf. Clasen, Mascaro 2022; Béland, Petersen 2014; Daly 2021), and also applies to the notion of "equality" as a motive, purpose and format for social policy interventions.

Fineman emphasizes inherent equality, rather than the process of pursuing it. This is not an anti-exclusion strategy in which special, vulnerable, or inadequate groups are singled out, but rather a recognition of the precariousness of life conditions and their variability across the life cycle of all individuals. It reflects an egalitarian experience of the instability and risks that are inevitably inherent in the human condition, as well as the needs and aspirations that require support or redress.

However, at the same time, this perspective seems potentially "liberating," for example to members of the "middle class" overwhelmed by the daily struggle for status, a class that, in Poland since the 1980s and elsewhere, has been described by scholars as tormented, depleted, vanishing, shrinking, or being squeezed (Horrigan, Haugen 1988: 9), "being washed off the deck" (Karwacki, Szlendak, Lepczynski 2023), with its members remaining constantly susceptible to various threats (Ravallion 2010; Wietzke, Sumner 2018). The problem here is that self--reliance or self-sufficiency may constitute an internalized marker that distinguishes the middle class from the "state-dependent" popular class (cf. Karwacki, Szlendak, Lepczynski 2023). Such a vision may persist despite people at the center of the social structure experiencing problems, lacking security, or dealing with instability.

From this logic (based on vulnerability theory and the consequent principles proposed by Martha Fineman), three key assumptions can be predefined for developing investments in social governance.

Firstly, in terms of rhetoric and the organization of support, *it is essential to adopt universal design solutions*—namely, solutions that consider all citizens' needs and aspirations. The spotlight is not on individuals in social

crisis but on the problems of different social groups and categories (rooted in a logic of equal access and shared risks in the social structure), which also express civic status—entitlements but also obligations. Accordingly, the middle class—with its own set of needs, situated within the life cycle of individuals and families—also becomes a collective subject of state social policy (cf. Stankowska, Karwacki, Leszniewski 2023). We thereby have a universal system of access to specific forms of citizen support, accompanied by a commitment to interaction, co-responsibility, and the active expression of interdependence. As Herbert Kubicek and Martin Hagen (2000: 1) observe: "The modern state has assumed many responsibilities, ranging from ensuring public safety and guaranteeing basic infrastructure for the functioning of individuals, continuing with the provision of health and welfare, and ending with the pursuit of common interests such as the promotion of a strong economy or the protection of the environment." This commitment must extend to the various categories in the social structure. The state is responsible for social solidarity, as is also expressed in the fact that the institutional system is sensitive to the needs of various groups, constructing targeted services for individuals and social groups of diverse status, while also stimulating relationships based on solidarity and building social ties, which are treated as an investment challenge. Another challenge lies in ensuring that the available institutional support is tailored to the specific living conditions, needs, and aspirations of different groups and categories, while maintaining a constant intention to avoid stigma or segregation.

Secondly, *social service becomes the instrument of support* available within the institutional system, drawing on the potential of different social actors in a multisectoral approach, and responding to the personalized needs and aspirations of individuals and groups. Integrated service is result of professional reflection and the search for an optimal formula to empower citizens. Provided by professionals and available in the universal system, it is a tool of equality policy that serves to stabilize, mitigate, and compensate for specific situations and risks that arise over the course of the life cycle. Establishing a wide range of social services, modernizing service delivery systems, distributing information on service availability, personalizing service packages, professionalizing service staff, and implementing pro-quality service standards are becoming critical challenges within the framework of state policy. This is reflected in local institutional networks as a manifestation of coherent local social policy. The concept of "one-stop" institutions has become crucial in providing social services. This coordinated model for producing and distributing

social services, as an expression of comprehensiveness and continuity in responding to the needs of all citizens, has its counterparts (in terms of general mission and the range of specific functions) in the institutional systems of other countries (Kubicek, Hagen 2000; Wollmann 2018; Howard 2017). Such institutions perform a variety of roles and integrate diverse services. In a comprehensive framework, Kubicek and Hagen (2000) distinguish between First-Stop, Convenience Store, and True One--Stop, referring respectively to the integrated provision of information, access to services in one place, and the provision of unified services to citizens[2]. Integrating these three functions thus remains a challenge in the modernization of public policy.

Thirdly, *a responsive state fosters civic participation and social solidarity*, aiming to strengthen social ties and participation, and to encourage the inclusion of citizens through processes of local *governance* and co--production of services (Denhardt, Denhardt 2000; Pestoff 2012). This area presents several challenges. A system of universally accessible services and various functions being integrated by "one-stop" institutions reflects a bonding policy in which institutions bring citizens together rather than separating them into narrowly targeted service structures. Professionally facilitated community engagement, based on a thorough assessment of needs and capacities, should foster integration, strengthen local social capital (from a community perspective), and bring together locally relevant goals and projects. Public institutions tasked with putting together a wide range of services also face the challenge of building reciprocal relationships, developing voluntary activity, and building informal networks that can replace or complement institutional support. Such community animation is conducive to the inclusion of community members in the dialogue with the institutional system, opens up the communication of needs and aspirations, invites participation in policy evaluation, and activates relationships with a specific territory understood both as a physical space and network of relations. This sense of local identification is naturally furthered by the accessibility of services and through opportunities to get involved in the system of creating and delivering social services.

The concept of a responsive state is not only about guarantees of civic entitlements, and the system of central and local government institutions through which they are delivered, but also about creating the conditions

[2] In the Polish institutional system since 2020 there are already institutions that integrate the three above formats and functions — social service centers (centrum usług społecznych).

for social self-organization, civic engagement, and communitarianism in the spirit of mutual solidarity. Of relevance here is the elaboration of Fineman's proposals by such scholars as Amitai Etzioni and Lester Salamon. Etzioni points to the challenge of building authentic communities, meaning ones that respond to the "real needs" of all community members. Like Fineman, he thus demonstrates a solidarism that seeks to balance order and autonomy (for example, Etzioni 1996). In defining the essence of the responsive state, it is therefore worth taking inspiration from Etzioni's reflections on such aspects as the building of "layered loyalties" within local communities, and the levelling of risks of conflict. The responsive state also creates the conditions for civic initiatives. As Lester W. Salamon's studies indicate, civic actors have shown the capacity to adapt to changing economic and political conditions over time, and exhibit a culture of adaptive entrepreneurship (Salamon 2003; Young 2022). There is no doubt that such citizen activism is an expression of social solidarity and a necessary component of a responsive state.

The above three challenges, which stem from vulnerability theory, are reflected in contemporary directions seen in *welfare state modernization*. Fineman's theory and suggestions do not therefore "reinvent the wheel," but enable an understanding of the nature of the modern individual's entanglement in life situations, which are embedded in their life cycle and the choices they make, and result from social situations and events (expected and unexpected) they experience. This narrative allows us to reposition contemporary social policy systems.

The diagnostic model we propose seeks to incorporate the key features that the ideal approach should have in order to respond to the challenges discussed above. It is grounded at the intersection of people's vulnerabilities, their life cycle and aspirations, personal and community resources (available social capital), and civic participation. At the center of this model are people "in the flesh," and not an abstract, categorized, and essentially undifferentiated figure, as often imagined in universalist approaches to social policy.

VULNERABILITY: A DIAGNOSTIC CHALLENGE (MODEL FOR ASSESSING UNIVERSAL VULNERABILITY: PREVENTION AND COMPENSATION)

The concept of vulnerability is complex and often conflated with social exclusion or fragility. We advocate for universal vulnerability, as it

supports a deeper understanding of individuals' conditions, influencing public policies and third-sector educational methodologies (Antonucci, Sorice, Volterrani 2024). Fineman (2016) emphasizes vulnerability's universal and relational nature, depending on individuals' access to resources (social, ecological, relational, and other forms), individually and collectively. In addition, taking into account everyday social and digital practices (Reckwitz 2002), alongside the growing trend of singularities (Reckwitz 2020), further contextualizes contemporary vulnerabilities.

Our diagnostic model of universal vulnerability seeks both to prevent social exclusion and to support personal and family-level interventions. Social exclusion entails deprivations across resources, entitlements, and participation, reinforcing exclusion if compounded. Integrated investments are therefore necessary to strengthen these areas. Social inclusion and exclusion mark the conventional boundaries of risk; inclusion does not eliminate risk, and exclusion does not entirely deprive individuals of resources.

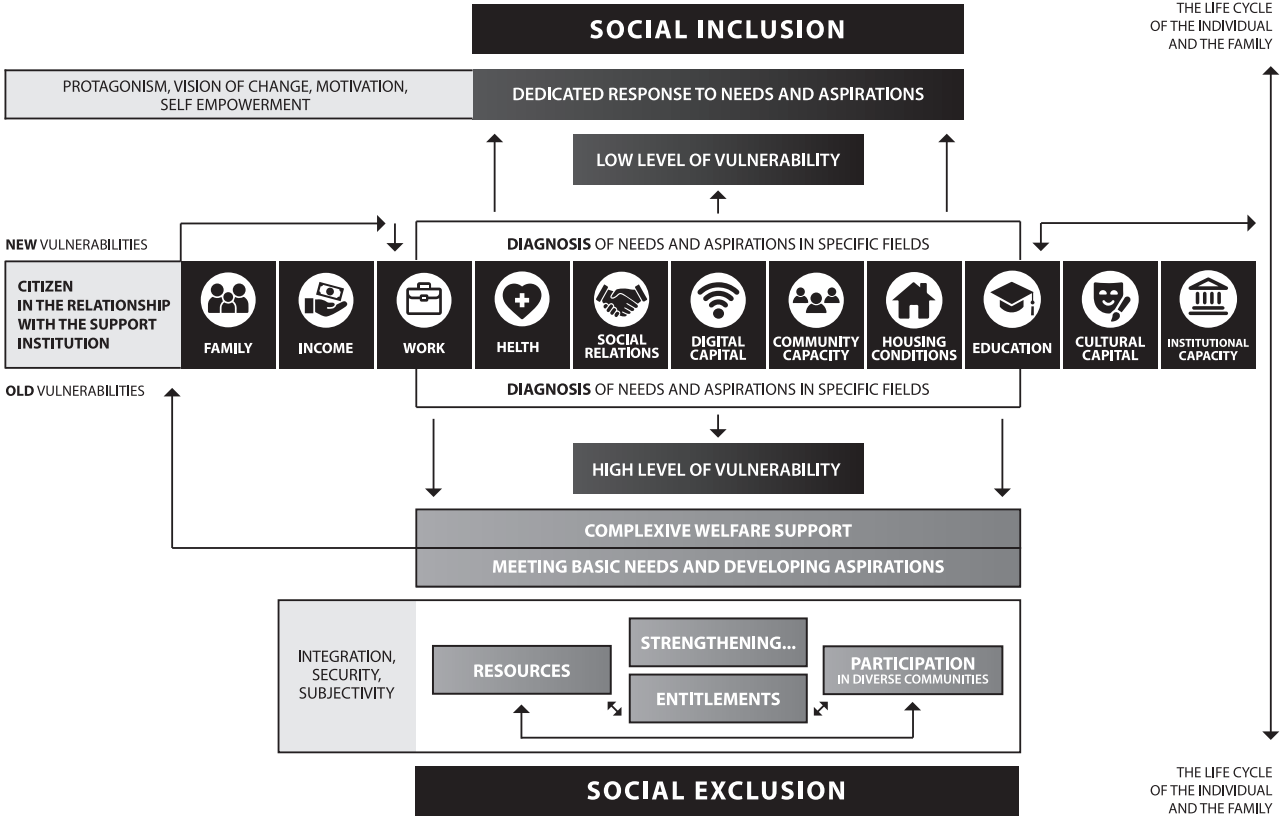
Following Castel's (1995) view, social vulnerability reflects a gradual process of impoverishment, whereby individuals may shift from stable social integration to disaffiliation (extreme poverty). Through incremental disruptions, this transition gives rise to precarious situations, forming an area of social vulnerability.

Our model (Figure 1) incorporates participatory processes, resources, rights, and relationships between needs and aspirations (Appadurai 2004). It recognizes that individual and family life cycles are embedded within communities, where personal spheres interact with social and digital spaces. The model's vertical axis represents individual and family life cycles, highlighting the often-overlooked diachronic perspective that is essential in social work for understanding the impact of life trajectories. The horizontal axis covers key spheres of life (family, work, social relations, health, housing, digital engagement, community skills, cultural capital, education, institutional relations), each with particular needs, aspirations, resources, rights, and participatory opportunities.

For instance, family life offers stability through relationships that require the gradual development of skills and responsibilities, while work and income contribute to economic stability and personal fulfilment. Social relations, often subjective, impact individuals' psychological and social equilibrium, potentially leading to exclusion when coupled with other vulnerabilities. Health issues, especially chronic conditions, often become labels under which multifaceted needs are overlooked, thereby limiting preventive and promotional approaches for specific disabilities.

Figure 1

Elaboration of the diagnostic model of universal vulnerability in the life cycle of the individual and the family



Source: Authors' study.

Housing conditions, both structural and hygienic, affect vulnerabilities over time, potentially requiring preventive support. With the rise of mediatization (Hepp 2020), the digital sphere introduces vulnerabilities that impact other life spheres (Ragnedda 2020). Community life skills contribute to personal and communal balance, helping to mitigate community vulnerabilities.

Education, cultural capital, and institutional engagement form an interconnected sphere where background and access to resources affect personal development and participation in public services. Structural vulnerabilities often underpin inequality, restraining individuals and families within certain social limits.

Our model seeks to dismantle such inequalities by fostering participation and leveraging personal and community resources to meet immediate needs while preventing further fragmentation. It aligns with community dynamics, in which public institutions and third-sector actors find the development of targeted intervention strategies challenging due to the stratified nature of vulnerabilities.

Of course, the fields used to verify individual fragility within the model constitute only a "baseline set," which in aid practice can be supplemented and reconstructed through interaction between the aid institution and the client-citizen. It is therefore necessary to adapt the model to the individual (for example, the relevance of the "work" field), as well as to develop interview (conversation) scenarios to identify individual needs and aspirations. The key here is to link the individual's nuanced situation with appropriate service packages.

The degree of a person's vulnerability changes over the course of their life and the conditions behind their varying perception of this life (subjective assessment of risks, problems and needs), but also in relation to the objective conditions of the communities in which they live (cf. Brown, Ecclestone, Emmel 2017). Liberalism promotes independence, or the focus can be on aid, starting from a view of the individual as dependent on organized care. Fineman, by contrast, draws attention to human "interdependence." This is an invitation to solidarity between individuals and groups similar by virtue of the vulnerability that is inevitably inherent in the life cycle.

Naturally, this view contains a tension between the universality of vulnerability—and, consequently, human similarity—and the nuanced destinies of individuals across different dimensions, of which the changing social situation is only one aspect of the broader human experience. Of course, it is impossible to fully account for the diverse

characteristics of each individual and, for example, the interplay of various human burdens (which the intersectional approach seeks to capture to some extent). A person's individual fate, experiences, intergenerational burdens, dilemmas, and fears form the basis of a rich panorama of human differences. Yet the fact that everyone goes through the same biological cycle, is prone to health and relational crises in private life, while also being dependent on geopolitical, economic, and environmental influences, provides the basis—the guiding idea—for the policies to be pursued. It is on this foundation that a personalized offering of support can be based and further designed, to the extent possible in the local space.

SUMMARY: A "RESPONSIVE STATE" IN ACTION

The article explores Martha Fineman's vulnerability theory, which views vulnerability as a universal human condition. The authors argue that the liberal model of the individual—focused on autonomy and self-sufficiency—creates inequalities, and propose a new approach based on solidarity. Since vulnerability is inevitable and shared, social policies must be restructured with an emphasis on interdependence and building resilience through relationships and access to resources. Modern welfare states should address the needs of vulnerable citizens with personalized interventions that avoid stigmatization. The proposed model involves creating integrated and accessible social services that promote inclusion and equality through active community involvement. The article highlights policies that go beyond compensating for weaknesses, focusing on prevention and the promotion of well-being. Finally, a diagnostic model of personal and family vulnerabilities is proposed in order to activate prevention, compensation, and promotion by shifting away from the traditional approach to welfare and social policy. The universality of the support offered in the form of one-stop social service packages and community animation becomes a coherent investment in equality policy —one that is sensitive to the specificities of various groups and social categories, yet simultaneously oriented towards ties and similarities rather than structural distinctions. It aims to combine the investment and care guaranteed by the state with the active involvement of citizens through dialogue and co-governance.

Universal vulnerability can become an important perspective in the design of aid solutions and integration strategies in contemporary socio--political conditions. At the same time, key global processes (and problems) expose our commodified dependence and fragility. The climate

crisis, the scarcity of key resources in specific places in the world, migratory movements in search of access to these resources, Russia's aggression in Ukraine and its consequences, and the conflict in the Middle East are unleashing generalized threats that transcend the dimensions of space and status—which is of particular significance. Martha Fineman's concept exposes what is shared in the experience of contemporary risks. It is a profoundly humanistic perspective that positions each individual in relation to the threats of the present, recognizing the commonality of risks, universal needs and nuanced aspirations. Solutions to the inflammatory situations and crises of the contemporary world have potential when grounded in solidarity, rather than in perspectives perpetuating competitiveness, independence, and confrontation.

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Abstract

This article presents the vulnerability theory articulated by Martha Albertson Fineman as part of the discourse around the problems and needs of contemporary citizens and the state's responsibilities in addressing them. The authors point to the potential of this approach to reveal the complex experiences of people from different groups and social categories, going beyond the "traditional" categories of clients of aid institutions, typically treated as recipients of social support. In Fineman's view, recognizing citizens' universal vulnerability and fragility constitutes the basis for a new model of human relations grounded in solidarity, as well as a new perspective for uncovering social inequalities. It also presents a set of challenges for the recalibration needed in the contemporary welfare state, and provides specific guidelines for social institutions and services on how to respond effectively to the needs and aspirations of citizens. Of the article's three main sections, the first presents the essence of Martha Fineman's vulnerability theory, the second discusses the challenges for social policy stemming from it, and the third offers inspiration from Fineman's proposals for social policy at street level. The authors propose an actionable diagnostic model of the potential vulnerabilities in various spheres of life, deriving from Martha Fineman's reasoning. This is a valuable tool for preventing social problems and, simultaneously, enabling the accurate construction of "tailor-made" service packages to compensate for deficits experienced and to respond to manifestations of universal vulnerability.

key words: vulnerability, life cycle, social policy, social services, social investment and prevention, Martha Albertson Fineman's theory