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VIOLENCE, INJUSTICE AND INEQUALITY: THE STATE OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

Introduction

On 14 June 2023, a fishing trawler named the Adriana, with over 700 asylum seekers and refugees predominantly from Syria, Palestine, Pakistan, Egypt and Afghanistan on board, sank in the Messenia region of the Mediterranean. The boat had left Libya on 10 June, with Italy as its intended destination (European Ombudsman 2024). After three days at sea, the Adriana was in distress. The travellers on board had no food or water, the engine was overheating, and a number of people on board were alleged to have died. The boat eventually capsized and sank, after floundering for two days in Greek Search and Rescue waters while under observation by the Hellenic Coast Guard and during which time no rescue operation was launched (Steele 2024). It was only after the boat capsized that a search and rescue operation was launched. Only 104 men, and none of the women or children on board were rescued, and 84 bodies were recovered from the water.

On the 18 June 2023, a private submersible vessel launched on a sightseeing tour of the *Titanic* shipwreck. The small vessel, named Titan, was occupied by four passengers and the captain Stockton Rush, CEO of OceanGate, the company that owned the vessel. The passengers on board had paid around £250,000 each for their places on the voyage. Shortly after the vessel began its dive, contact was lost and soon afterwards a global search and rescue operation was launched. After five days, the air supply on the Titan would expire. Shortly before this deadline, debris of the submersible was confirmed on the ocean floor and all the occupants were declared dead (Russell 2023).

The temporal juxtaposition of these two maritime disasters, and the disparity in both the number of lives lost and the effort spent to save the lives of those on the vessels throw international inequality and injustice into sharp relief. While there is a huge and obvious wealth disparity between the two groups cited in the example above, economics alone cannot explain the contrast between the framing of and responses to these two disasters. Research that considers inequality in IR has tended to focus on economic inequality, and particularly economic inequality between states (for example Wallerstein 2004), in the context of unequal development, dependency and imperialism (Raffer and Singer 2002, So 1990, Prebisch 1950, Amin 1977). Here, I suggest that an economic framing alone cannot capture the distinction in the value placed on human life in the above example. In this article, I turn attention instead to violence as a marker

of inequality. While there are arguments that inequality is expected, attending to violence as a marker of inequality highlights injustice, which is not as easily explained away. In exceptional and spectacular cases, injustice such as the plight of the Adriana garners some attention. These spectacular cases happen with reliable frequency (see data from *Missing Migrants Project* at www.missingmigrants.iom.int) but are still cast as singular and exceptional events. Here, I argue that the continuous violence that results from embedded inequality can usefully indicate injustice in the global system that is often not attributed to that system.

In what follows I give a brief overview of inequality in international relations scholarship. I adopt Aradau's (2008) instructive definition of (in)equality as it relates to injustice as an entry point. I explore this in relation to border violence, using a case study of domestic violence in the context of the UK's 'hostile environment,' a moniker given to the set of policies introduced in 2012 by Theresa May as Home Secretary designed to make life impossible for people who do not have the correct immigration status. Rather than turning to the spectacular violence that is sporadically covered in news headlines, I focus on the everyday domestic violence, less prominent but nonetheless sharing characteristics with terrorist and militarized violence that are more conventionally the subject matter of International Relations (Pain 2017, 2015, Gentry 2015). The case study illustrates ways in which the continuous violence against migrant women can be adopted as a marker of injustice and inequality in the global system. The state is imbricated in violence against migrant women, and this violence benefits the state by reproducing its sovereign legitimacy.

Inequality in International Relations

In the most general terms, IR theory, driven by the conservative premise of Classical Realism has defaulted towards maintaining order and a peaceful status quo between states (Morganthau 2014, Amstrup 1974) and avoiding physical violence (Williams 2004). Order biases towards an unequal status-quo, where a liberal *de jure* legal equality of sovereign states in the international system forms the basis for international organisation (Nogueira 2020). Walker (2002) excavated the difficulty of discussing inequality in political terms, identifying four dimensions of the international that embed inequality, and that prohibit inequality being addressed: economics, great power order, political community, and state-territory. International inequality in international relations tends to refer to asymmetries of power and wealth between states, and this reading is sustained by interventions into inequality in IR such as economic structuralism (Wallerstein 2004) and dependency theory (Amin 1972, So 1990, Ghosh 2019, Vernengo 2004, Mahoney and Rodriguez-Franco 2015), and subaltern realism (Ayoob 2001). Postcolonial approaches have identified power imbalances, historical inequality, and embedded normative racism, orientalism, and Western bias that

reproduces power inequalities in the international arena, but also in the discipline of International Relations (Muppidi 2004, Agathangelou and Ling 2009).

Walker (2002) makes the case that inequality is *expected* within the ordering system of the modern international world, yet is subject to massively institutionalized capacities to discriminate between the inside and the outside (of states) in the distribution of resources. States' ability to control their sovereign borders forms a core part of global political infrastructure in the contemporary international order. Bordering is practiced through a mechanized and digitized archive of biometric data (Amoore 2006, 2024, Epstein 2007, Muller 2019), surveillance technology (Boyce 2016), and militarized apparatus on the physical border (Campesi 2018, Urbina and Peña 2018, Dunn 2021), as well as deterritorialization of borders through offshoring control and detention (Mountz 2020), and imposing internal and everyday means of status surveillance (Yuval-Davis et al 2019). Yet, even in the right to control borders, there is inequality: of resources, of border size and terrain, of technological and infrastructural capacity, of geography relative to the distribution of global population.

Turning towards communities and individuals, Benhabib (2006) recognizes the inequalities inherent in the sovereign state and offers the concept of hospitality as a means of mitigating the worst injustices of inequality. Hospitality, properly practiced, protects the state's right to maintain order while porous borders permit entry and membership for people in need. This mitigates injustice that is produced by discrimination between the inside and the outside; yet, when citizenship is linked to (national) identity, the lines of exclusion are not simply territorial, and porous borders need to be phenomenological and affective as well as physical (Lems 2020). This is explored by Schmidtke (2023) who argues that populism invokes a permanent 'state of exception' in which the idealized 'sovereign people' employ an emotionally charged exclusionary impetus that relies on a permanent friend-enemy distinction (Schmidtke 2023). Schmidtke argues that this discloses authoritarian signifiers; the focus on emotion also demonstrates why a juridical system of equal human rights fails to address the inequalities of citizenship.

States hold equal rights to the sovereign control of their borders (although unequal ability to realize that control), yet humans hold no such equal rights without citizenship. This of course is not a contentious claim: Hannah Arendt argued for citizenship as a prerequisite to the right to have rights (Arendt 1973). Yet, as Agamben (2000) contended, the nation state emerges from nativity, or the idea of the human born into a bounded community of belonging (Agamben 2000). Following this line of reasoning, there is no human without political belonging, only dehumanised bodies in the state of exception, that are 'left to die'. Rights are entirely dependent on citizenship. Arendt built on the assumption of the association between rights and citizenship to make the case for citizenship, while Agamben deconstructed the assumption to reveal

the violence inherent within the concept of citizenship. Citizenship as it is practiced, to determine state membership or exclusion, produces injustice and inequality that is made visible through violence.

A key point of inequality within the global system is unequal access to mobility rights (Mau 2010); that is, some people (citizens of some states) are afforded access to basic freedom of movement, visa waivers, and the right to cross borders with or without inspection. Other people are not afforded access to any form of international border crossing mobility due to prohibitive visa terms, financial barriers, or lack of citizenship. When a person makes a border crossing without the consent of the state, they sacrifice the aspects of everyday life that are structured through citizenship: access to police protection, or to social services, or 'public funds.' The lack of access to these things can both constitute structural violence that worsens the effects of poverty and deprivation (Canning 2017 Mayblin 2019), and can create space in which direct interpersonal violence may take place unfettered (for example, see Anitha 2008, 2010, Voolma 2019). As Mau argues, mobility rights are distributed unequally.

Inequality thus has been addressed at various levels in IR: In the global system, amongst communities, and in the institutionalized form of citizenship. Inequality can be interpreted neutrally as 'difference', making it necessary to highlight injustice. Inequality is apparent but is not always conceptualized as a problem: for example, Benhabib's argument that hospitality can mitigate the worst outcomes of inequality does not mark inequality itself as a problem, but categorises the harms that rise from inequality as a problem. In other words, the focus is not on resolving institutionalized forms of inequality, consequently upholding the assumption that people have unequal rights to *be in the world*. Hence, the need to attend to violence as the vector through which inequality is identified in the global system. I seek to address institutionalized inequality as injustice: first making the case that inequality is saturated with violence, and then centring analysis on violence as a marker of inequality, to challenge institutionalized forms of inequality.

Inequality: the injustice of insecurity

Aradau's (2008) concept of in/equality as a response to a social wrong is an instructive way to conceptualise inequality for IR as a practical and pragmatic concept. The distribution of power in the international system maintains and protects inequality, which for Aradau is immediately evident in the security versus liberty dyad. As a means to conceptualise an equality for IR that does not endorse or rely on discrimination, I follow Aradau's move to draw on Ranciere's formulation of equality as practice, that is, as an undoing of inequality. For Ranciere, inequality is cemented within and reproduced by the very systems that seek to identify and address inequality (Ross 1991). Inequality is specifically not just economic but is sociocultural and practiced in the limitation on who has the right to *think*. Ranciere terms this limitation the distribution of the sensible:

4

that is, the limitation itself emerges from aesthetic properties, the visible distribution of the ordering of the social world. The distribution of the sensible is the accepted ordering of the world, which is not a natural or material phenomenon but is a matter of 'perception and belief', which are aesthetic qualities, although they do have material effects. The aesthetic properties of this distribution are constitutive of the powerful and pervasive intersubjective ontology that forms the core of social order (Ranciere 2009). In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* Ranciere argues that equality is a practice of undoing such inequality, to make visible the invisible. This is exemplified in the recognition of the equal right to think, philosophize and know: to centre the knowledge of those who are conventionally taught and led, but not centred in the production and machinations of power and agency that drive ideology: Ranciere's example is the working classes (Ranciere 1987). Ranciere describes emancipation as a performance of equality that accepts stories and writings of everyday life as philosophical thought, making them visible and in doing so, reordering the distribution of the sensible (Ranciere 2009).

In the context of international relations, the aesthetic production of the world is made through acts of mutual recognition of states (Kyris 2022) and acts of sovereign violence that reproduce the legitimacy of the state as holding the authority on the use of violence (Chatterjee 2005, Chowdhury and Duvall 2014). In the contemporary world, the violence of bordering constantly remakes the sovereign state and rearticulates the right of the sovereign state to protect its borders (Radziwinowiczówna 2019, Yuval-Davis et al 2019). Migrants who have transgressed the order of sovereign states by crossing boundaries and / or existing without the proper immigration authorization (for example, overstaying a visa, or possessing a status that does not reflect their true circumstances) claim mobility rights that were not afforded to them by the structures of the international system. In other words, as equal participants in the social world, migrants who travel without state authorization, or challenge the limitations that are set on everyday life by the state, are practicing their equality in the making of the social world. This has been explored in research on performative citizenship (Isin and Nielsen 2008, Isin 2017) and migrant agency (Mainwaring 2016, Squire and Bagelmen 2012, Nyers and Rygiel 2014, Squire 2017). The brutal and visible inequality of violence against migrants responds to and rejects such an emancipatory performance of equality. It is a practice of inequality, made legible through attending to the violence on migrant bodies and which, when placed at the centre of analysis in IR, highlights injustice in the global system where the hierarchization of belonging means violence against some is considered permissible. Violence against migrants seeks specifically to limit their equality, to reject their articulation of the social world and to reproduce the extant exclusions of the distribution of the sensible. Violence against migrants reproduces the *perception* that the state has the right and the need to use such violence to preserve order for citizens. The visibility of this violence is particularly significant: when states leave migrants to die at sea (Davies et al 2017, Estevez 2014, Squire 2017), or use

violent enforcement at land borders (Brito 2024) this rearticulates the right of the state to use such violence. This distribution of the sensible is not limited to relevance for migrants or people who may become migrants; rather, it is an aesthetic production of the world that makes and reiterates the state's right and need to exclude, to deny rights, to limit or prevent democratic participation, and to use violence to preserve order. The visibility makes the order. This distribution of the sensible clarifies violence as a necessary undertaking of the state and the inherent and unjust inequality in the international system of states determines who belongs, and who is a legitimate subject of violence.

As the border is performed continuously through a climate of fear of violence (Huysmans 2006), simultaneously surveillance is extended beyond the physical border to the citizenry, whereby everyone is an object of suspicion until proven otherwise (Yuval-Davis et al 2019). In practice, this functions by distributing immigration checks or blockades throughout the state and within everyday life. Health care providers, social services, letting agents, educators and employers all practice surveillance on behalf of the state as well as being surveilled themselves (Ibid, Griffiths and Yeo 2021), imposing inequality in access to needed protection from harm, healthcare, social services, or housing (Goodfellow 2020; El-Enany 2020, Yuval-Davis et al 2019). This is justified as equal (surveil everyone) but in practice it extends inequality by perpetuating the injustice within the distribution of the sensible that polices belonging and deprives some people from access to social resources: people who are already vulnerable in some characteristic end up vulnerable in multiple ways. Inequality is not just that of the citizen against the state (or multitude against the Leviathan), but infiltrates social life as the inside and outside of the state is not at the border, in a friend-enemy distinction, or held in the binary of citizen / non-citizen. As Yuval-Davis et al (2019) argue, the everyday processes of bordering enhance existing inequalities and introduce new and complex forms of inequality, where encounters with everyday people who practice forms of bordering and surveillance impact most significantly 'on the lives of migrants and racialized minorities identified as suspected illegal border crossers' (Yuval-Davis et al 2019: 98). This extends even to specialist service delivery, targeting vulnerable victim-survivors and unequally impacting Black and minoritized women (Thiara and Roy 2022). The right to be free from violence, indeed the right to have rights, becomes dependent on *proving* one's insiderness, co-opting the practice of inequality into everyday life in multiple sectors. A blockade, or 'firewall,' is erected for anyone who might struggle to meet the administrative burden of proof of their insiderness (Yuval-Davis et al 2019, citing Rumford 2006), which extends social inequalities, impacting violently on women, minoritized people and people affected by poverty among others (also see Innes 2023).

Mark Bevir (2015) marks the trend to embed immigration surveillance across public and social services as 'joined up security' where security practices that were conventionally in the international sphere between states shifted to include state

building and aid provision, and threats that were marked internal to the state became subject to the same logic of threat to the system as those outside (Bevir 2015). Hence, in his example, the development of the 'Department of Homeland Security' incorporated twenty-two agencies in data collection and analysis including the coastguard, immigration and customs, emergency management, and transportation security (Bevir 2015: 42). This type of security governance 'joins-up' the international with the experiential, the local and the everyday. Visa policies that govern who can be inside are applied outside of the county and bureaucracies take on responsibility for entry/exit decisions before travel from the country of departure (Mau et al 2012). This has also been privatized: visas are managed by private agencies tendered by the state, and according to concerns such as health and economic need. These security and surveillance processes that precede travel impact the act of travel, whereby the right to enter a country must be demonstrated before embarking on a journey via regulated channels (conventionally passenger transport but since 'carrier liability' acts, also logistics, see Mau et a 2012). Attempts to move outside of sovereign immigration rules constitute a transgressive act of assuming liberty (freedom of movement). The act of migration itself is an expression and practice of human equality. The brutal policing of this act is a practice of inequality that evinces injustice in the global system.

The violence perpetrated by states against migrants, and indeed against anyone who is unable to easily prove their insider status, is not inter-state violence (war declared by one state on another) nor can it be typically characterized as upholding the social contract between a state and its citizens and punishing transgressions from the contract such as policing might be. This is state violence against people that is international or global in nature as it is not bound within state territory and belonging. It can be framed as mass violence because people are targeted for their group membership characteristics (migrants whose travel is unauthorized). Migrants who are not sanctioned by the state are subject to extreme deprivation, detained indefinitely, and killed or left to die because of this group membership characteristic, despite the dimensions and parameters of group membership being solely determined the perpetrators of the violence (Squire 2017, Davies et al 2017, Mayblin et al 2020). This is a continuous violence, which might be a 'slow violence' of deprivation and ongoing calamitous circumstances created and preserved by state policies such as Mayblin et al describe (2020). It might be a violence of inaction, political indifference, or abandonment creating harms, deprivation, and even death in migrant camps in Europe from which departure often requires further risk and border transgression that criminalises or exceptionalises migrants (Davies et al 2017). It might be the violence of imposing risk, withdrawing rescue, and only exercising humanity on dead bodies that Squire (2017) terms the thanatopolitics of governing – or attempting to govern – migration through death. These forms of violence are all exercised by the state in

different contexts and with the state constructed as different types of agents (such as the international unitary actor protecting sovereign borders, or the internal bureaucratic system that determines who receives and who is denied social support or the basics for human wellbeing), acting in different global and local spaces, and intervening at different points in chronologies of migration. Yet the role of the state hides this continuous violence under a cloak of legitimacy.

Continuous state violence

There are numerous ways that violence has been conceptualised across disciplines, yet violence as a concept has conventionally been relatively absent in mainstream International Relations (Thomas 2011). Violence might be interpersonal (Violence Prevention Alliance 2010), structural and identified by outcomes rather than actions (Galtung 1969), or embedded in a regime of violence such as Walby (2013) theorises the international system. State violence is usually recognised only where the sovereign exceeds the exception: that is, in cases where violence wielded by the state is considered to be illegitimate. However, this distinction means that 'legitimate' forms of state violence – violence designed to protect the status quo in the distribution of power – tend to be accepted. Torres (2014) characterises three dimensions of state violence – political, genocidal, and legal. I conceptualise the state as *fragmented*, where agency is identified in practice rather than by the actor (see Innes 2025). The fragmented state is comprised of individuals, collectives such as political parties, institutional and bureaucratic entities, resources held, and relationships. Similar to Painter's (2006) articulation of the prosaic state that identifies the state-as-effect rather than state-as-object, to conceptualise the fragmented state is to linger on the inevitable gaps in the actualization of the state. These gaps might operate with the potential for an existence outside the reach of the state, but also produce the problems of life without state authorisation, whether these problems are localised or far-reaching, temporary or long-standing. The gaps of the fragmented state are spaces of inequality. Meanwhile, the fragments of the state are held together by a complex system of power, that is, sovereignty. This power is symbolic, giving meaning to the state and the contexts in which the fragments operate (Ibid), while the symbolic power is reproduced through physical and violent practices. State violence reproduces the sovereign exception, which functions to hide state responsibility for violence.

The violence of the state might be direct physical violence, it might be abstracted physical violence (such as drone attacks), or it might be psychological, legal, or bureaucratic violence (Vogt 2013, Canning 2020, Mayblin et al 2020, Menjívar 2013). Physical interpersonal violence is rarely attributed to the state. However, if we think of the state as fragmented, or as a system composed of multiple agents, actors, institutions, and relationships, it becomes easier to locate physical interpersonal

violence for which the state can be held responsible or accountable. According to Torres' definition of state violence, state violence against migrants can be considered political violence, where this violence can be defined as the use of force against a group due to a perceived political threat (Torres 2018). However, state violence against migrants necessarily stretches the definition of political violence, in the sense that migrants do not self-define as a group, political or otherwise. They are perceived as a group through state moves to securitize immigration and constitute migrants as a threatening other. Yet, there is little basis to understand migrants as a cohesive political collective with a defined political objective that challenges the political authority of any given state. Rather, political violence against migrants by a state is carried out as a result of state perception and construction of migrants as a threatening group and the distribution of the sensible that underscores this perception.

The lack of a cohesive and self-identifying collective as the subject of political violence has two consequences. The first is that this violence is incontestable: migrants cannot collectively acquiesce to the demands of a given state because they are not a collective, nor do they have defined political goals with which to bargain. This incontestability is at the international level, whereby states are united in their possession of sovereignty and their use of violence that sovereignty endorses and needs in order to be sustained. The second is that violence against migrants is continuous. The exercise of migrant agency to reject social injustice (that is, in border crossing that transgresses the immigration rules of the sovereign state) is met with aesthetic and material violence to reinforce the order of states. Violence continues at the will of the state, and with broad reach into all parts of life, as evidenced by numerous studies such as Yuval-Davis et al 2019, Canning 2017, Mayblin 2020. The continuity is not just *unending violence* but continues throughout migration experiences and trajectories. Violence is continuous across levels of analysis from the global to the local. Violent interactions with the various fragments of the state, whether these are bureaucracies, practices of surveillance, policing, social services, or immigration encounters during border crossing evidence the practice of inequality that is necessary to maintain the unequal global social order, the distribution of the sensible of the international system of sovereign states.

The shocking violence against migrants happening at the border, horrific deaths in the Mediterranean (Barnes 2022, Dearden et al 2020, McMahon and Sigona 2021), on migrant routes through the Sinai desert (Gebreyesus et al 2019, Adeyinka et al 2023), and through the Northern Triangle of Central America (Boyce et al 2019, Brigden 2018, Infante et al 2012, Leyva-Flores et al 2019) are reported and evidenced. There is evidence that migrants in insecure status experience violence more frequently than the citizen population and when they do experience violence, they have little recourse to the law, or to the necessary support services (McAdam 2015, Innes et al 2024). States are responsible for or complicit in this violence: either as the perpetrator in the form of

policy and practice, or as the responsible agent through withdrawal of normal violence prevention measures that are afforded to citizens, such as policing and social services, or even the most basic need of shelter (Mayblin et al 2020).

State violence against migrants is a symbol of the state's legitimacy: an expression of sovereignty and therefore of the right to use fatal violence in the name of security. Performative acts of violence solidify the state in a world of human movement that challenges the state. This might be things like violent border enforcement such as the use of dogs in border enforcement that dehumanises migrants, constructing them as 'edible bodies' (Brito 2024); or the conspicuous passive violence of allowing boats to flounder, preventing sea rescues and confining migrants on board boats (Stierl 2021); or abandoning migrants in camps and detention centres (Davies et al 2017). The authorisation for these acts of violence comes through sovereign appeals to threat and insecurity – that might be physical, which is the most common symbol: for example, small boat crossings into the UK have been increasingly the focus of government and media (Burroughs 2018, Parker et al 2022). It is the aesthetic imagery and imaginary both of threat, and of the need to violently suppress such a threat in the distribution of the sensible, that permits the continuous and incontestable use of state violence. To consider this continuous violence in practice, in the subsequent section I turn to domestic interpersonal violence, both as it is construed in global governance, and in practices of inequality within the state. Turning attention to how this violence is continuous from the global to the local, and framing this violence as a marker of inequality in the global system seeks to contest the distribution of the sensible that authorises and relies on this violence.

Inequality and Violence: the state of international migration

The case study below illustrates a pathway first to position the state, conceptualised as fragmented entities composed of multiple agencies, institutions and bureaucracies, as appropriating domestic violence against migrants as a means of reinforcing the ordering of the international system of sovereign states. Second, the case study demonstrates that this appropriation is a form of injustice, whereby violence operates as a significant marker of inequality. This inequality in practice cannot be explained by difference in attributes, but by the ordering of states that determine who belongs and who can be subject to legitimate and authorised violence. In appropriating domestic violence to reinforce the ordering of the international system of sovereign states, the state then authorises that violence, even while simultaneously constructing migrant perpetrators of violence that need to be controlled. I note here, in this framing of the appropriation of domestic violence by the state, I do not intend to challenge or reduce the responsibility attributed to the individual perpetrator of interpersonal violence. Rather, I examine the

points at which the state denies protection from domestic violence to migrants specifically, and therefore appropriates and doubles that violence as a mechanism of immigration deterrence and sovereign governance. The denial of protection from domestic violence for migrant women represents a dimension of the continuous violence of the state against migrants, and is demonstrative of the injustice of embedded inequality in the international system.

Domestic violence and abuse in global politics

Domestic abuse affects roughly one in every three women globally, over the course of their life (World Health Organisation). It is a major issue for human rights and for public health (Rakovec-Felser 2014, Chandan et al 2020). Studies measuring prevalence agree that violence against women is at epidemic level proportions (Alhabib et al 2009, Sardinha et al 2022, Stockl et al 2013). There is no specified risk profile for domestic violence, but intersectional factors such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, geography, and education level impact likelihood (Femi-Ajao 2020, Heron et al 2022, Heise and Campbell 2012, Sen and Bolsoy 2013, Edberg et al 2021). Insecure immigration status is a key contributing factor that traps women in violence domestic settings (Salcido and Adelmen 2014, Femi-Ajao et al 2020).

Domestic violence is widely studied across disciplines including Health Sciences, Public Health, Sociology, Psychology, Criminology, Law and others (Chrisler et al 2006, Ogbe et al 2020, Ogbonnaya et al 2021, Ragavan et al 2020, Reina and Lohman 2014, Ronagh 2013). In the context of international politics, domestic violence is linked to dimensions of violence such as gender-based and sexual violence although conventionally in IR these are limited to study in conflict and post-conflict settings rather than domestic settings (Gray 2018). Critical and feminist approaches in IR have turned closer attention to domestic violence in international politics; for example, Jacqui True's seminal work mapping the political economy of violence against women, notes that economic and social subordination contribute directly to violence that happens within the home, and draws an important continuum between social structure and systems as a determining factor of gender-based violence, and interpersonal power dynamics. In other words, domestic violence is not only an outcome of male aggression in the private sphere but is also produced by public political, social and cultural phenomena (True 2010). The World Health Organisation classes domestic violence as both a major public health problem and a violation of women's human rights (WHO). The United Nations prioritises violence against women under the global issue and 'Sustainable Development Goal' of gender equality. UN Women is the dedicated entity of the UN that aims to accelerate gender equality and the empowerment of women worldwide. Other international instruments are present at the regional level: In Europe the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the 'Istanbul Convention' requires state

parties to develop legal protections for women at risk of domestic violence and abuse (see Istanbul Convention 2011). The Inter-American Convention on the Eradication, Prevention and Punishment of Violence Against Women recognises domestic violence as an abuse of human rights and specifies duties on state parties to act to protect women from domestic violence (Organization of American States, 1995). The ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence Against Women added particular provisions specifying legal action in response to domestic violence in 2010 (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2010). The African Union Framework on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls acknowledges domestic and intimate partner violence as key forms of violence to address (African Union 2024). These examples suggest that domestic violence, while largely sitting adjacent to violence against women, is acknowledged at the international level and incorporated into international political agendas.

In security studies, domestic violence sits alongside gender-based violence and sexual violence. These more general forms of violence against women have taken some priority, in part due to their identification in conflict settings and the prioritisation of reducing gender-based violence as a result of conflict, and the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war (Meger 2016). Nevertheless, Gentry (2015) traces the relatively longstanding association between terrorist violence and domestic violence, citing work as Dobash and Dobash (1979), and Johnson's (1995) concept of patriarchal terrorism. Pain develops this link between domestic violence and global terrorism as a continuum that asserts political control through fear (2014). Studies that argue domestic violence is a form of terrorism tend to emerge from sociology and criminology, and consequently emphasize the social structures and socio-cultural gender hierarchies that perpetuate domestic violence (Johnson 1995, Pain 2012, Gentry 2015).

There is less attention to the institutional frameworks or the political relationships of responsibility and accountability for domestic violence. Gentry's work does an excellent job of critically engaging with work in IR that does characterise domestic violence as a security issue, to demonstrate that it structures this characterisation in the non-West, to make the case for women's rights as a threat to the Western state, or the Western world, while ignoring or failing to account for the same forms of violence in the West (Gentry 2015). Work that examines domestic violence as a security threat in the West tends to do so only at the substate level (Prenzler and Fardell 2017), or specifically as a threat to female victims, rather than at the state or systemic level.

Meanwhile, there is a well-established literature on domestic violence as a significant public health issue (Haegerich and Dahlberg 2011, Gilligan 2000). Domestic violence is often described as 'endemic' (Sorensen et al 2021) and even 'epidemic' (Alhabib et al 2010). Violence shortens lives and has severe physical health

implications, biologically affecting the brain, neuroendocrine system, and immune response and consequentially affecting mental health, increased risk of cardiovascular disease and premature death (Rivara et al 2019). To consider domestic violence as a security issue and as relevant to international politics is consistent with other questions of health security that travel across borders, are global in nature, and require a global response (Elbe 2010, Youde 2022). Nevertheless, global health security internalises biases that either positions issues that are specific to women's health such as obstetrics as local rather than global, or perpetuates the same Western bias that Gentry observes in studies of terrorism, obscuring problems that inhabit the West, or blaming them on immigrants and non-Western culture (Gentry 2015, Harman 2018).

I conceptualise domestic violence as part of a continuum from global violence. In a similar way, Rachel Pain (2015) made the case that domestic violence and global militarised violence are parts of a single complex of violence. Pain examines the emotional and psychological conduit of violence, conceptualising the intimate experience of violence positioned within a political landscape. She focuses on the 'warlike nature of domestic violence during peacetime' (Pain, 2015: P), excavating the common power structures, emotional landscape, and politics of domestic violence that is not confined to the exceptional state of conflict but is an everyday phenomenon. I follow this framing of continuity in my own adoption of continuous violence, with a focus on how that continuous violence reveals injustice and in doing can be adopted as a marker of inequality inherent in the global system. In this way, the continuity links the spectacular violence at the border, that is constructed as exceptional and singular injustice, to the everyday experience of violence. This has two objectives: the first effectively demonstrates that the portrayal of border violence as exceptional is a fallacy, and the second reveals, through a discussion of domestic violence, the distribution of the sensible in which injustice is normalised, embedded, and accepted.

Domestic Violence in a hostile environment

It is well evidenced that insecure immigration status is a factor that prevents people in such a status from accessing protection from violence (Innes et al 2024a), and in particular from protection from domestic violence (Anitha 2008, 2010, Salcido and Adelmen 2004, Femi-Ajao 2020, Voolma 2019). In 2014, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention, entered into force. This legislation has the objective of protecting women from all forms of violence, and particularly domestic violence. The provisions on domestic violence apply to all victims of domestic violence and are not limited to women, but sit within the context of this legislation on violence against women because women disproportionately suffer domestic violence, and domestic violence is linked to other forms of violence against women. In total, eleven of the 38 ratifying states have applied a reservation for article 59 (see Council of Europe,

2024), which states that if a victim of domestic violence has a residence status that depends on their abusive partner, they should be granted an autonomous status if the relationship breaks down. In applying this reservation, states including the UK refuse to commit to any obligation to assist a person who is at risk of violence in an abusive relationship to leave that relationship without compromising their immigration status.

The UK Hostile Immigration Environment was orchestrated and introduced by Theresa May as Home Secretary and refers to policies that are designed to make life difficult for immigrants in the UK. The subsequent policies transformed bordering practices and everyday life for everyone: as discussed above, targeting migrants created vulnerabilities for other minoritised and marginalised populations (Yuval-Davis et al 2019). The most notable of these policies impacted policing, education, social services such as housing, social support, and health and social care, including preventing migrants from accessing National Health Service healthcare through the introduction of eligibility-checking and charges. The policing of healthcare in this way made migrants in insecure status less likely to seek healthcare outside of emergencies (Rassa et al 2023, Van Hout et al 2024). Healthcare is a significant point of contact with the state to facilitate intervention to protect victim-survivors from domestic violence.

In terms of access to protection from domestic violence, the most common points of intervention tend to be policing in response to direct violence, healthcare, and specialist domestic violence services (Innes 2025). The impact of hostile environment policies in these areas has been relatively well documented. To summarise, policing guidelines permit data sharing of identity details of victims and witnesses to crime, even in cases of domestic violence. In the NHS, charging was introduced for immigrants, and secondary and tertiary care denied to undocumented migrants without payment (Department of Health and Social Care 2023). The deterrent effect of immigration enforcement within the NHS has a significant impact on individual health in the context of missed appointments and a lack of preventative care (Pilav et al 2022, Rasa et al 2023, Nellums et al 2021). The charges alone act as a deterrent to seeking anything beyond emergency care and the threat of immigration consequences for unpaid bills further cement this deterrent. This has particular gendered consequences in the impact on perinatal care (some of which is exempt from charging, but the complexity does little to quell fear (Cassidy et al 2023). Women, particularly those of childbearing age, form the majority of those charged for NHS services (despite not comprising the majority of the chargeable population (Ibid, citing Dobbin 2022 et al).The resultant lack or avoidance of contact with the NHS makes for fewer opportunities to disclose domestic violence, and therefore fewer opportunities for intervention or referral to specialist services. Specialist domestic violence services cast a wide net in terms of supporting victims of domestic violence and abuse. Nevertheless, they are also impacted by

hostile environment policies. Services in most cases are funded in part or in whole by public funds. Crucially, this is the case for emergency accommodation for victims of domestic violence. For this reason, specialist services often struggle to support people in insecure status or with a NRPF stipulation in their visa (Yong 2024, Thiara 2019).

The Domestic Violence Concession (DVC) permits a route to apply for protection in cases where a relationship on which leave to remain depends has broken down due to violence or abuse. Yet, applying for support under the DVC exposes the applicant to the risk that they will lose their status and become removable. In addition to the complex legal language and application requirements, this pathway is constructed to protect the state against its potential misuse, rather than protect the victims of violence. The degree of risk that must be assumed by the migrant to use the concessionary protection is in fact a deterrent measure rather than an appropriate means of encouraging disclosure and support seeking (Innes 2025). Moreover, as Cassidy (2018) finds, the route to protection from domestic violence often extends carcerality while immigration status is applied. The author contextualises layered form of forced (im)mobility as a consequence of leaving an abusive relationship (Cassidy 2018).

There are significant barriers to disclosure of domestic violence that apply more generally and often overlap with insecure migration status. These include negative healthcare provider attitudes (including minimizing experiences and disbelieving accounts), fears about safety, and fears about the consequences of disclosure (Heron and Eisma 2021). Heron et al (2022) also found that in UK healthcare settings, disclosure was prevented by feelings of shame and embarrassment, by the physical presence of a partner, and by the organisational environment in which the conversation happened (for example, the setting was inappropriate, or there wasn't time). Additional factors impact minoritised women, including community influences, problems with language, and negative staff attitudes exacerbated by structural racism (Femi-Ajao et al 2020, Plough 2022, Decker et al 2019). Insecure migration status is a significant and well-evidenced barrier that affects minoritised and migrant women (Reina et al 2014, Innes et al 2024, Anitha 2010). Moreover, disclosure is a process, rather than an event (Thiara 2020), and the hostile immigration environment in the UK places barriers across the process at every point at which a person may interact with services linked to the state.

Domestic violence is a particularly significant problem in this context, and it is within this realm of hostile immigration politics, exemplified by but certainly not limited to the UK, that this becomes a relevant question for international inequality: centring analysis on this violence as a marker of inequality evinces the global injustice that privileges state belonging. It becomes clear not only that states are unwilling to offer protection, but are adopting domestic violence perpetrated against non-citizens in

insecure migration status as a mechanism of deterrence. The state *uses* this violence to reinforce the norm of sovereignty.

Practicing Equality

It is worth looking at efforts to prevent the violence of the state as it manifests in the hostile immigration environment. Certainly individuals, activists and activist organisations have pushed back against these measures. Here I turn to two meaningful successes, in healthcare and education. While these efforts have certainly lessened the worst effects of the hostile environment in these sectors, they fall short of practicing equality in the context of international migration. The political success of the pushback requires the sacrifice of practicing equality for migrants and therefore, while successful in efforts to protect migrants in these sectors, falls short of practicing equality and shifting the distribution of the sensible.

For example, there has been considerable resistance to the Home Office's reaches into the healthcare sector. Led by healthcare professionals, the *Patients not Passports* campaign privileges the healthcare needs of patients and refuses to withhold care on the basis of immigration enforcement. The Home Office has made several attempts to compel the delivery of data for immigration enforcement purposes, yet the considerable resistance from healthcare professionals has successfully halted data sharing, pending an inquiry. While successful, the politics of this campaign emphasized that preventing healthcare is bad for the *public good* (Button et al 2020). Of course this is an inclusive public, incorporating migrants in the public sphere; yet the language betrays a need to obscure the true objective of migrant equality by framing the campaign in the hierarchical language of the sovereign state and the common interest of public health. In other words, healthcare justified *only* to protect the health of migrants is not politically viable in the distribution of the sensible.

Similarly, in education there have been efforts by the Home Office to use the education system to identify families without immigration status. In 2016 a policy change required schools to store data on children's nationality status in the National Pupil Database, following a memorandum of understanding that would permit the Home Office to use the database for immigration enforcement purposes under the Hostile Environment policies (Gayle 2016, Home Office 2016). A coalition *Against Borders for Children* successfully campaigned against this policy and in 2018 the National Pupil Database stopped collecting and sharing nationality data (Weale 2018). Education forms a key space of intervention in cases of child abuse, neglect, and family violence (Kourti et al 2021). While the campaign to stop data sharing was significant and certainly achieved positive effect, it falls short of challenging the distribution of the sensible that internalises inequality because the need to protect migrant families was

secondary to the need to protect *children*. This distinction is then further realised in the emphasis the Home Office puts on age assessments in order to deny rights to migrants when they reach the legal age of adulthood (Rosen and Khan 2024). The campaign to end the provision of child nationality data to the Home Office was a successful political project that centred the language of 'child' rather than the language of 'migrant', and this distinction reveals that the injustice of violence against migrants is still present: the language of violence against migrants would not compel political change, while the language of violence against children did and does. Hence, the former violence is exposed as acceptable.

International inequality and global injustice

When protection from domestic violence, from fear within private spaces, and from physical violence and death is dependent on immigration status, inequality and injustice is apparent. Unlike other intersectional markers of difference, immigration status is institutionally designed to prevent support being accessible. This is policy by design that betrays the distribution of the sensible, positioning migrants as threatening transgressors to the order of the state and therefore deserving recipients of the violence of the state. Injustice is active and intentional, and responds to a constructed transgression of the rules of the state (migrating without proper authorisation), while extending to any insecure status. Protection from physical violence underlies the right to life, the right to freedom from torture, and the right to liberty and security. These rights are differentially distributed to migrants, who forgo their access to these protected rights by crossing a border. The differential distribution of these rights is demonstrative of global injustice and inequality.

To apply Aradau's (2008) concept of inequality, there is an intersubjective social wrong in the denial of basic rights. Rather than correcting this wrong and ensuring that protection from violence is available despite insecure migration status, violence is instead used by the state to, in the first instance, function as a form of immigration deterrence and in the second, to reproduce the sovereign legitimacy of the state. Yet, this practice of inequality is subject to negotiation. The violence is framed as legitimate and incontestable, yet acts of equality in response to such violence reveal the distribution of the sensible. Such acts might be activism against bureaucratic violence, such as the *Patients not Passports* movement to end immigration surveillance in the NHS and the *Against Borders for Children* movement that removed the immigration-identifying data from the School Census (Webber 2019). Campaigns by groups such as *Southall Black Sisters, End Violence Against Women* and *Right to Remain* to extend the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 to migrant women are practices of equality These actions reveal the violence and in doing so centre injustice in the international system: the

same injustice that functions to practice inequality by performing violence against migrants as legitimate acts of sovereign states.

Even where these acts of equality have been successful, the state tends to be situated as protective, rather than considered a key perpetrator of violence. It is not enough to mitigate inequality, when the institution of the state continues to use violence. In this way, while the distribution of the sensible might be revealed through the visible injustice of violence as a marker of inequality, it is not deconstructed or successfully contested when the state is sought as the protector. I suggest that the state should be acknowledged as the perpetrator of unjust violence against migrants. Border violence is a practice of inequality that sustains the hierarchization of those with authorised belonging to the state, and those who are subject to violence to reproduce the sovereign state. The hierarchy is evident in global practice of inequality. The mechanisms that are currently available for migrants in insecure status to find protection from violence rely on them acceding to the distribution of the sensible by disclosing their insecure status even when that disclosure puts them at risk of removal, such as in the DVC discussed above (Yong 2024), and accepting that their presence and safety should be subject to the preferences of the state and the assumed social order . Equality would be protection without qualification, protection just because it is needed, and that need is evidenced by the request or the injustice. While there are many willing organisations, collectives and individuals working to provide protection, these organisations are also (knowingly and frustratingly) disciplined by the distribution of the sensible and the power of the state.

Attending to violence, and in particular state violence, in the global politics of migration reveals the injustice of embedded inequality in the international system. Inequality is recognisable in spectacular moments of visibility such as the juxtaposition of responses to the Adriana sinking and the Titan implosion. Attending to everyday, continuous and interpersonal forms of violence for which the state can be held responsible such as in the example of domestic violence in a hostile environment above offers an additional dimension to make visible injustice in the global system. Violence here works as a marker of a practical inequality that is inherent in the system of sovereign states. Such a marker reveals the mechanisms of international inequality, the injustice of this inequality, and the pervasiveness of state violence against migrants. While injustice is immediately legible in violent events, injustice is also embedded in the unequal social order, continuously ordering and bordering protection from and submission to violence.

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