

Save the dates: PhD course Thursday 19 & Friday 20 November 2026 in Bergen

Gender, sexuality and vulnerability in theory and methodology

Over the past few decades, vulnerability has attracted considerable attention, fuelling discussions in feminist and queer theory, gender studies and related disciplines. While 'vulnerability' has a longer conceptual history within feminist normative theory and ethics, its more recent surge in popularity stems in no small part from Judith Butler's influential work. Butler's understanding of vulnerability as deeply embodied and relational has been immensely generative but has also provoked significant debate, particularly concerning the somewhat ambiguous onto-political status of 'precariousness'.

By extension, some scholars have engaged in efforts to rethink the relation between vulnerability and sovereignty, challenging the masculinist fantasy of invulnerability prevalent in traditional conceptions of sovereignty. While one segment of this discourse aims to construct alternative understandings sovereignty by centring vulnerability, another segment emphasises the dissolution of representational distinctions between an inner and outer world, including notions of sovereign exteriority (in terms of emergency or exception). If the former position attempts to reconceptualise sovereignty from the view of vulnerability, the latter pursues a vulnerability that questions the core tenets of sovereign power in all its variations.

The latter intervention is often associated with post-humanist, new materialist or indigenous perspectives which assign agency to non-human relations, thereby also expanding vulnerability beyond human affairs. In the context of the Anthropocene, vulnerability has also resurfaced as key concept in governance, particularly in climate, environment, disaster and security policies oriented towards resilience, which challenge conventional ideas of sustainability, security and protection.

In contemporary policy frameworks and research methodologies, vulnerability is conceptualised less as an impediment to be overcome and more as an inherent aspect of life. This emergent field of enquiry posits vulnerability as a condition of collaborative creation and mutual learning, cultivating heightened awareness and responsiveness within an interconnected world. The analytical focus is redirected from discrete individuals to their practices and their embeddedness in complex human and non-human environments.

As the term vulnerability has dispersed through contemporary scholarly and policy discourses, its significations have gradually shifted from a primarily negative to a more affirmative approach, even as conventional understandings of vulnerability continue to inform both scholarly and political discourses – often in contradictory ways.

The Norwegian Research School in Gender Studies invites doctoral candidates to reflect on various conceptualisations of vulnerability in feminist, queer, gender and

sexuality research, both theoretically and methodologically. Participants are encouraged to consider the pertinence of vulnerability in (parts of) their research projects, how it relates to other key categories, and how it is relevant to their research areas more broadly.

Programme details and practical information will be disseminated ahead of the summer seasons, when registration opens. Candidates affiliated with Norwegian institutions within gender studies will be prioritised.

The application deadline is Monday 31 August 2026.

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