RECLAIMING HUMAN SECURITY IN AN AGE OF GLOBAL FRAGILITY. STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE, POSTHUMAN ETHICS, AND THE POLITICS OF CARE

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Abstract

Three decades after the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) introduced the concept of human security (1994), this continues to evolve under the pressures of ecological collapse, datafication, and new forms of global inequality. This article maps key concepts which inform contemporary human security. It offers an expanded theoretical framework integrating structural and slow violence with new materialism and feminist posthuman ethics. Drawing on the scholarship of Johan Galtung, Rob Nixon, Rosi Braidotti, Achille Mbembe, and Naomi Klein, the paper argues that human security must shift from an anthropocentric to a zoe-centered paradigm.

Such paradigm offers a framework for harmonious coexistence of human, inhuman and non-human beings alike, one that situates care, interdependence, and planetary justice at its core. Four renewal paths - normative, ecological, technological, and epistemic - are developed to guide this transformation. The article concludes with a call for epistemic humility and collective ethical responsibility - particularly by knowledge producers such as academics - toward subaltern communities and future generations.

Keywords: human security; structural violence; slow violence; posthuman ethics; necro politics; data colonialism

Introduction. Human Security at a Crossroads

The concept of *human security* emerged as a response to the Cold War's narrow focus on state sovereignty and military defense. Its original promise - to center people's safety, dignity, and livelihood – remains profoundly relevant in an era marked by climate disruption, digital surveillance, and economic precarity. Yet human security is again at a crossroads. The intensification of ecological degradation, algorithmic governance, and global inequality has outpaced existing frameworks for protection and care.

This matters because human security, if it is to remain meaningful, must evolve to address the new material conditions of life and vulnerabilities. Traditional approaches have struggled to capture the relational, ecological, and posthuman dimensions of insecurity. The theoretical expansion invited integrates Johan Galtung's *structural violence*[2], Rob Nixon's *slow violence*[3], and Rosi Braidotti's *new materialism*[4], emphasizing that security is no longer

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[2] Johan Galtung. *Violence, peace, and peace research.* "Journal of Peace Research", 6(3), 1969, pp. 167–191

[3] Rob Nixon, *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. 44

[4] Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman knowledge*, Polity, Cambridge, 2019, p. 17

only about preventing harm to humans but about sustaining *the webs of life* that make human and non-human coexistence possible.

In revisiting human security through these interconnected lenses, this article aims to renew its ethical foundations. It calls for a post-anthropocentric framework grounded in responsibility, care, and ecological justice – an agenda that resists both the militarization of aid and the commodification of life.

From Structural to Slow Violence: Rethinking the Temporalities of Insecurity

Understanding the deep structures that produce insecurity can reveal how the human security paradigm has evolved. Galtung's theory of *structural violence* - the idea that harm is embedded in social, political, and economic systems[1] - remains foundational. Violence occurs not only through physical coercion but also through social arrangements that prevent individuals from achieving their potential. This conceptualization reveals how inequality, poverty, and exclusion are forms of violence, even in the absence of overt conflict.

Rob Nixon's notion of *slow violence* extends Galtung's insight by emphasizing temporality. Slow violence refers to "the attritional lethality that occurs gradually and out of sight"[2] - the kind of harm that unfolds across generations, such as toxic exposure, displacement, and climate degradation. This concept matters because contemporary insecurity is rarely spectacular; it is structural, delayed, and unevenly distributed.

In the context of human security, integrating structural and slow violence demands a temporal shift. Policymaking often treats crises as exceptional, yet insecurity is sustained through chronic neglect. To make human security effective, we must account for how slow violence operates as an *invisible infrastructure* that erodes lives and futures. Rethinking time in this way – viewing security as the capacity to sustain life over time – reframes prevention and resilience as long-term ethical commitments.

The Posthuman Turn. New Materialism and Feminist Ethics of Care

Contemporary insecurity is not only social but also material: it operates through planetary processes, technological infrastructures, and non-human agencies. To understand these dynamics, we must move beyond human-centered models of analysis. New materialism and feminist posthumanism provide a way forward. Rosi Braidotti's *new materialism* challenges anthropocentrism by emphasizing *zoe* – the non-human, vital force of life – as a shared condition of existence[3]. For Braidotti, ethics begins with recognizing the "relational vitality of all matter"[4]. This view aligns with the ecological and ontological shift needed in human security: security must encompass the resilience of planetary systems, non-human beings, and technologies that mediate our world.

From a feminist perspective, this posthuman ethics foregrounds *care* as an ontological principle. As Puig de la Bellacasa argues, "care is everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world"[5]. Insecurity thus stems not only from violence but from the absence of care. Human security's renewal requires acknowledging the entanglement of biological, technological, and affective life. Thus, new materialism reframes human security

[1] Johan Galtung, *Op. cit*, p. 170
[2] Rob Nixon, *Op. cit*, p. 2
[3] Rosi Braidotti, *Op. cit*, p. 127
[4] Ibidem, p. 45
[5] Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, p. 5

as *life-centered security*: it demands relational thinking, empathy across species and systems, and attention to the material agencies that sustain or threaten life.

Necropolitics and the Right to Exist

This argument is essential because any discussion of security must confront power's relationship to death. Achille Mbembe's theory of *necropolitics* exposes how sovereignty functions through a godlike prerogative to grant or deny life[1]. This is not simply a biopolitical management of life[2], but a politics of *death-worlds* - spaces where populations are rendered disposable.

In today's world, necropolitics operates through borders, prisons, refugee camps, and access to infrastructures (medical, digital, etc.) that categorize and exclude. The subaltern often live within what Mbembe calls *the universal right to breathe* - a fragile condition constantly undermined by racism, environmental destruction, and economic domination[3]. His warning that "the Earth itself is the ultimate body being suffocated"[4] captures the ecological extension of necropower.

Applying Mbembe's lens to human security reveals how certain lives are systematically denied protection. When climate refugees drown in the Mediterranean, or algorithmic bias leads to discriminatory policing, these are necropolitical acts – decisions that define whose existence matters. Human security, to be renewed, must thus become *anti-necropolitical*: a framework that actively contests the normalization of death as governance. As such, Mbembe's thought forces us to confront human security's most difficult question: not only how to protect life, but how to resist the structures that commodify, surveil, or extinguish it.

Disaster Capitalism and the Political Economy of Insecurity

This section explores how economic systems can be additional producers of insecurity. Naomi Klein introduced the concept of *disaster capitalism* to describe how crises - wars, pandemics, or natural disasters - are exploited to advance neoliberal restructuring[5]. Under this logic, vulnerability becomes opportunity: austerity, privatization, and technological dependency are justified as "recovery."

In *The Shock Doctrine*, Klein shows how neoliberal policies emerge from states of emergency, dismantling public safety nets under the guise of reform[6]. Later, in *On Fire*, she warns that the climate crisis is not only environmental but also economic – capitalism's "war on the living world"[7]. This critique aligns with structural and slow violence theories, revealing how insecurity is manufactured for profit.

Incorporating Klein's political economy into human security analysis foregrounds *resilience as resistance*: the need to rebuild collective institutions and solidarities rather than outsource protection to markets. A renewed human security framework must therefore challenge the commodification of crisis, insisting that safety is a public good, not a speculative asset. In essence, Klein reveals that insecurity is not accidental but engineered –

[1] Achille Mbembe, *Out of the dark night: Essays on decolonization*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2021, p. 14
[2] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1. Pantheon, New York, 1978, p. 39
[3] Achille Mbembe, *Op. cit*, p. 32
[4] *Ibidem*, p. 58
[5] Naomi Klein, *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*, Knopf, New York, 2007, p. 486
[6] *Idem*
[7] Naomi Klein, *On fire: The burning case for a green new deal*, Simon & Schuster, 2019, New York, p. 28

and that genuine human security requires dismantling the economic logics that feed on disaster.

Data Colonialism and Epistemic Violence

The digital turn intensifies structural and epistemic inequality. This argument is crucial because data infrastructures now determine access to resources, representation, and agency. Couldry and Mejias conceptualize *data colonialism* as "the appropriation of human life through data extraction"[1]. It extends colonial logics into the digital sphere, transforming human activity into raw material.

Paola Ricaurte describes this as "epistemic colonization"[2], whereby Western corporations monopolize knowledge production through algorithms that erase subaltern perspectives. Data colonialism thus produces *epistemic insecurity*: a condition where those most affected by technology are least empowered to shape it.

From a human security standpoint, this digital extractivism constitutes a new form of structural violence – one that operates silently through code, metrics, and opaque infrastructures. But digital technologies are not neutral as Rosi Braidotti shows, but they participate in what she calls the "machinic assemblages of power" [3]. For Braidotti, these assemblages are not merely technical systems but complex configurations of machines, institutions, norms, and affective forces that organize how subjects are governed and how life is valued. In this sense, digital platforms do not simply collect data – they help produce the categories, hierarchies, and forms of visibility through which populations are managed. They generate new regimes of inclusion and exclusion, redefining who is rendered legible, governable, or disposable within digital orders of knowledge.

Seen through this lens, digital extractivism becomes more than an exploitative economic practice; it is a mode of power that reshapes subjectivity and reorganizes social life. Protecting human security today therefore requires safeguarding digital dignity and ensuring that communities have participatory control over the technological systems that increasingly shape their futures.

In summary, resisting data colonialism requires epistemic justice: democratizing who defines security, who counts as secure, and whose knowledge counts. Only by challenging the machinic assemblages that naturalize certain forms of digital control can alternative, equitable definitions of security emerge.

Ecological Security and the Material Turn

One final angle worth taking into account in drawing the new contours of human security is ecological security. This discussion is important because climate collapse exposes the limits of human-centered security. The ecological crisis demonstrates that no community can be secure in isolation from the biosphere. Drawing on new materialist insights, ecological security can and indeed should be reimagined as *planetary interdependence* rather than environmental management.

Naomi Klein's climate writings resonate here: she argues that "the future will be shaped by the values we bring to rebuilding"[4]. Klein insists that climate disruption is not only an environmental crisis but also a political and moral crossroads. Events of collapse and

[1] Nicholas Couldry & Ulises Mejias, *The costs of connection (review)*, "Social Forces", 99(1), 2020, p. 3
[2] Paola Ricaurte, *Data epistemologies, the coloniality of power, and resistance*, "Television & New Media", 20(4), 2019, p. 355
[3] Rosi Braidotti, *Op. cit,* p. 92
[4] Naomi Klein, *Op. cit*, p. 54

reconstruction expose the underlying values that govern societies and should be taken as criteria for human security: solidarity or exploitation, redistribution or accumulation, care or disposability. In this sense, the climate crisis becomes a test of collective ethics: whether communities choose to rebuild infrastructures and social arrangements in ways that reproduce existing inequalities or, alternatively, cultivate more just and regenerative futures.

This aligns closely with Braidotti's posthuman ethics, which demands an affirmative politics: one grounded in care, relationality, creativity, and collective agency[1]. For Braidotti, ethical transformation does not arise from critique alone but from generating alternative modes of living and imagining community. Her posthuman framework challenges anthropocentric hierarchies and invites an expanded sense of responsibility toward human and non-human others alike. In this view, political transformation begins not with moral restraint but with the joyful, proactive cultivation of new forms of coexistence.

The Anthropocene, therefore, is not just a geological epoch marked by human impact on planetary systems; it is an ethical threshold. It forces societies to confront the consequences of extractivist, growth-oriented logics and to decide between intensifying necro politics - the management of life and death through sacrifice zones, disposability, and exclusion - or embracing ecological coexistence, grounded in interdependence and mutual flourishing. The stakes of this choice are profound: they will determine whether the future becomes a site of expanded vulnerability or a horizon of collective renewal.

Reframing human security through ecological interdependence connects slow violence, material vitality, and feminist ethics of care. It shifts focus from mitigation to *nurture*, from control to relational stewardship. In sum, ecological security grounded in new materialism understands that to secure humans, we must secure life itself.

Paths Toward Renewal: Normative, Ecological, Technological, Epistemic

The previous sections have shown how contemporary security challenges cannot be addressed through incremental reforms alone; they demand a paradigmatic shift in how security is conceptualized, practiced, and governed. Based on the conceptual keys already described, this section proposes four convergent and complementary paths for thinking and implementing human security in the contemporary world: normative, ecological, technological, and epistemic. These reflect the multidimensional character of human security and respond directly to the structural transformations discussed earlier: digital extractivism, planetary crisis, algorithmic governance, and the persistence of colonial logics. Each path represents not merely a policy direction but a framework for renewal, capable of repositioning human security within an ethic of interdependence and collective responsibility.

The Normative Path: Ethics of Responsibility

The normative path is foundational because conceptual renewal must rest on an ethical reorientation adequate to conditions of structural interdependence. As Iris Marion Young[2] argues, responsibility for structural injustice is not a matter of attributing guilt but of acknowledging participation in systems whose effects extend beyond individual intention. Young's "social connection model"[3] reframes responsibility as a shared and forward-looking commitment to transforming unjust structures. This perspective informs the normative path

[1] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*. Polity, New York, 2013, p. 153
[2] Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for justice*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, p. 7
[3] *Ibidem*, p. 105

for human security, which must grapple with systemic vulnerabilities – economic, environmental, digital – rather than isolated threats.

In order to describe the normative architecture of contemporary human security, we need to update the framework of reference to include non-human nodes. Complementing and furthering Young's *social connection model,* Rosi Braidotti situates responsibility within a posthuman ethics grounded in relationality. As such, ethical subjectivity becomes part of "collective assemblages of mutual interdependence"[1], thus challenging the liberal security paradigm built on autonomous, self-contained actors. For Braidotti, responsibility is not only distributed but *affirmative*: an investment in sustaining and enhancing the conditions of life for human and non-human actors alike. This shift resonates with our emphasis on vulnerability as shared and co-produced.

Re-centering ethics in human security therefore requires moving from a model of protection to one of cohabitation. In this perspective, security can no longer be something states or institutions deliver to passive subjects but a co-created process in which communities, institutions, and environments are mutually implicated. Such a framework aligns with contemporary debates about reconceptualizing security as a relational good rather than a hierarchical mechanism of control. The normative path urges the field to cultivate an ethics capable of addressing interconnected harms - economic inequality, climate disruption, algorithmic discrimination - through shared responsibility and collective resilience.

The Ecological Path. Planetary Entanglement

The ecological path underscores that human security today is inseparable from planetary security. In complete alignment with-, and as the setting for the "collective assemblages of mutual interdependence", climate instability, extreme weather, and ecological degradation increasingly function as threat multipliers that destabilize livelihoods, displace populations, and exacerbate conflict dynamics. Braidotti's concept of "zoe, or life in its non-human, planetary dimension"[2] provides a crucial ethical framework for capturing this entanglement. By decentering the human, zoe-centered ethics reframes environmental degradation not as an externality but as a direct assault on the conditions of life.

When integrated with Kaldor's (2007) human security paradigm, a new synthesis emerges: one that links freedom from fear and want to the health of ecological systems. Kaldor's insistence on bottom-up, people-centered approaches gains renewed significance when viewed through the lens of ecological interdependence. The combined framework reveals that social justice and environmental justice are mutually constitutive; neither can be achieved in isolation. This mirrors our argument that ecological collapse is not only a hazard but a diagnostic of deeper structural violence.

Crucially, subaltern epistemologies – Indigenous, Black, and land-based traditions – offer essential guidance for articulating sustainable forms of coexistence. Santos describes these as "ecologies of knowledges"[3] that resist extractivist logics and foreground relational stewardship. These perspectives challenge dominant security logics that prioritize extraction, militarization, and territorial control. The ecological path signals the need for integrating environmental ethics into the core of security research rather than treating it as a thematic add-on.

[1] Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman knowledge*, Polity, New York, 2019, p. 46
[2] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*. Polity, 2013, p. 60
[3] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward an Epistemology of Blindness Why the New Forms of `Ceremonial Adequacy' neither Regulate nor Emancipate*, "European Journal of Social" Theory, 4(3), 2001, p. 254

The Technological Path. Humanizing the Algorithm

The technological path responds to the accelerating entanglement between algorithmic systems and security governance. Digital infrastructures – from biometric borders to predictive policing – are reshaping how security decisions are made and which lives are rendered visible or vulnerable. Lucy Suchman warns that contemporary AI systems are embedded in militarized epistemologies, arguing that *"*the apparatuses of war configure what counts as intelligence, threat, and life itself"[1]. This insight exposes how algorithmic systems do not merely process information; they define security categories and distribute risk.

For decades, researchers, some policy makers and few industry representatives have rung alarm bells regarding the standardization effects of technologies produced and reproduced largely by white males. Huelss explains how algorithmic governance often creates *"*the illusion of objectivity while reproducing historical patterns of exclusion"[2]. Predictive models, risk scores, and automated decision-making systems embed normative assumptions that disproportionately and negatively affect marginalized populations. The veneer of neutrality obscures the fact that algorithms inherit biases from training data, institutional cultures, and geopolitical hierarchies. This dynamic mirrors our earlier critique of digital extractivism as a form of structural violence.

Humanizing the algorithm requires embedding human rights principles – transparency, accountability, explainability, inclusivity – into the design and regulation of digital systems. This does not mean resisting technological advancement but ensuring that technologies serve human security rather than undermine it. The technological path opens a critical research agenda on algorithmic accountability, digital sovereignty, and the governance of autonomous systems in security contexts. It reframes cybersecurity and AI not as technical problems but as political and ethical questions concerning the distribution of power.

The Epistemic Path. Decolonizing Knowledge

The epistemic path is intimately connected to the normative path. It highlights that security knowledge is never neutral; it shapes which threats are recognized, which actors are protected, and whose suffering is rendered invisible. Decolonizing human security thus requires interrogating the epistemological foundations that sustain hierarchy and exclusion. The dominant Western epistemology functions through "epistemologies of blindness"[3], which silence or marginalize alternative forms of knowing. In antithesis, an "epistemology of the South" demands cognitive justice and the recognition of plural knowledge systems.

An ethical episteme cannot be understood in the contemporary debate on human security in the absence of a decolonial framework. Mbembe's analysis of necro politics reinforces this critique by showing how colonial modes of power continue to structure global security architectures[4]. Necro power operates through *"*the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die"[5] illuminates how border regimes, humanitarian interventions, and surveillance infrastructures often reproduce patterns of disposability rooted in colonial histories. The keynote speech underscored this continuity, emphasizing that without

[1] Lucy Suchman, *Algorithmic warfare and the reinvention of precision*, "Critical Studies on Security", 7(2), 157–170, 2019, p. 138
[2] Hendrik Huelss, *Transcending the fog of war? US military 'AI', vision, and the emergent post-scopic regime*, "European Journal of International Security", 10(2), 2024, p. 195
[3] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Op. cit*, p. 257
[4] Mbembe, *Op. cit.*, p. 225
[5] *Ibidem*, p. 12

epistemic transformation, human security risks reproducing the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle.

Epistemic justice becomes both the method and the objective of a renewed human security project. Methodologically, it demands participatory processes in which subaltern, feminist, indigenous, and diasporic perspectives meaningfully influence agenda-setting, data governance, and threat assessment. Substantively, it shifts the definition of security from abstract universals toward lived experience. The epistemic path offers a framework for expanding the field's methodological pluralism and addressing blind spots in conventional security thinking.

Ethical Responsibility and Future Generations

This point is crucial because human security's long-term relevance depends on our capacity to imagine futures beyond ourselves. As Hans Jonas warned still in the Cold War, ethics must extend to the unborn[1]. The *imperative of responsibility* demands that we act in ways compatible with the continuity of genuine human and non-human life.

For scholars and policymakers, this entails epistemic humility: recognizing that our frameworks shape reality. Following Arendt's call to act *in concert*[2], we must cultivate solidarity across generations and species. The survival of humanity depends not merely on technological progress but on sustaining empathy, justice, and care as the foundations of collective life.

In conclusion, human security is no longer about defending humanity against threats but about defending *the conditions of life itself* - biological, ecological, and epistemic. It is both an ethical compass and a political practice for an age of global fragility, requiring expanded research and concerted implementation through ethical policy making.

Conclusions. Toward a Posthuman, Life-Centered Human Security Framework

The analytical trajectory of this article gestures toward a necessary reconfiguration of human security as a life-centered, interdependent, and justice-oriented framework capable of meeting the pressures of global structural transformation. By adopting posthumanism as an explicit conceptual anchor, the four proposed paths - normative, ecological, technological, and epistemic - can be consolidated into a unified perspective that recognizes humans, nonhumans, infrastructures, and environments as co-constitutive elements of security. This shift enables human security institutions to respond not only to immediate threats but also to the slow violence, systemic inequalities, and planetary disturbances that shape lived vulnerability.

Operationalizing this reconceptualization requires clear, implementable principles. **Normatively**, posthuman ethics can be embedded through institutional mandates that obligate consideration of multi-species wellbeing, interdependence, and structural justice in policy design. For example, national human security strategies could incorporate "more-than-human impact assessments" to evaluate how interventions affect ecological systems, marginalized communities, and future generations simultaneously. Similarly, peacebuilding missions might institutionalize participatory forums that include Indigenous governance bodies and environmental stewards alongside traditional human rights actors.

[1] Hans Jonas, *The imperative of responsibility: In search of an ethics for the technological age*, University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 26

[2] Hannah Arendt, *On revolution*, Viking, 1963, p. 88

Ecologically, the framework calls for integrating environmental thresholds and ecosystem resilience directly into security governance. This can be operationalized through early-warning systems that combine hydrological data, land-use patterns, and community knowledge to anticipate slow-onset crises. Regional organizations such as the African Union or UNDP climate-security programs could pilot "ecological security corridors" that protect biodiversity while reducing climate-driven displacement, drawing inspiration from transboundary conservation areas in Southern Africa or community-managed water systems in Morocco.

Technologically, algorithmic accountability becomes a guiding principle for governing digital infrastructures now central to human security. Clear mechanisms include mandatory algorithmic audits for decision-support systems used in refugee management, predictive policing, or resource allocation. Independent oversight bodies could be empowered to review data provenance, evaluate bias patterns, and ensure transparency in automated risk assessments. Initiatives like the EU's emerging AI regulatory frameworks offer a practical template for embedding these safeguards in humanitarian technologies.

Epistemically, decolonial knowledge practices require structural changes in how expertise is recognized, validated, and mobilized. Policymakers can institutionalize co-production models that grant equal epistemic authority to local communities, displaced populations, Indigenous practitioners, and regional researchers. In practice, this could involve revising UN field reporting protocols to incorporate community-generated data or partnering with local camp committees and NGOs to shape protection strategies emerging from within affected spaces rather than imposed from international centers of knowledge.

Together, these pathways yield a human security framework attuned to structural and planetary interdependencies. Posthumanism provides the analytical architecture that links ethics, ecology, technology, and epistemology into a coherent whole, revealing the intertwined vulnerabilities and potentials of human and nonhuman worlds. The broader contribution of this project is to reposition human security not as a residual or crisis-driven agenda, but as a transformative orientation capable of addressing systemic injustices, ecological destabilization, and the algorithmic infrastructures that mediate contemporary life. In doing so, it offers policymakers, international organizations, and communities a principled and practicable roadmap for navigating the profound shifts redefining global security in the twenty-first century.

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