

IN DEPTH

From fear to acceptance of human vulnerability: perspectives on security

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Following the attacks of 11 September 2001 on the Twin Towers in New York, the need to prioritize security, even when in conflict with human rights, co-opted the framework of the debate. This need involved a whole series of policies based on mass surveillance and people's movement control and initiated a gradual curtailment of freedoms. The hegemonic concept of security returned to the traditional view of the Cold War, associated with the military power of the State to preserve its existence and territorial integrity against external or internal enemies. A close and interested association that was brought into question by other proposals that were emerging –such as human security or critical views on security– and that displaced the State from the heart of security to put life, people and communities in its place. Ever since the beginning of what has been called the “Global War on Terror”, national security has once again monopolized debates and policies, but it is facing ongoing questions from human rights defenders.

As a starting point, and from a holistic perspective, security can be defined as being or feeling free from any harm to life and integrity.¹ Security, understood as a common good, is a recent ideal, which takes on importance as human life acquires value, until it becomes a fundamental dimension of the pact with which the modern State was born. To free us from the fear that –according to some state theorists, such as Thomas Hobbes– is caused by living in a “state of nature” of all against all, where property and assets are coveted by others, we put our protection in the hands of the authority in

exchange for our obedience. Thus, security becomes an “exoneration from the care of public life”,² delegating to the State, through what we know as the “social contract”, the protection of life, liberty and possessions.

**“ Who decides what is a threat to our existence?
Based on what? And, above all, a threat against
whom? ”**

Since then, freedom and security are sold as opposite ideals by more traditional narratives. A zero-sum game where more than one equals less than the other and vice versa. In the last two decades, this perspective not only has come back strongly, but it has immersed us in a process known as securitization, understood as the ability of States to deploy emergency measures and special powers, especially military, in response to existential threats.³ But who decides what is a threat to our existence? Based on what? And, above all, a threat against whom?

Communities and individuals at the heart of security: human security

Some of the first critical voices to undermine the State-centered and traditional view of security suggested that the concept is deeply politicized and subject to interests and priorities. Therefore, they pointed out that security not only does not have a purely technical and objective nature, but everything about it is deeply political and subjective.

Exposing this subjectivity is key to questioning that, if existential threats are not objective, what the State considers threats to its security does not necessarily correspond with the dangers and risks faced by its inhabitants.⁴ Therefore, if threats to human life and dignity are to be addressed, the focus of security policies must be moved away from the State and placed on communities and individuals.

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In the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War and the liberal revaluation of the individual and its individual rights, the architecture of Human Rights evolved, with the introduction of “development” as its key concept. This concept placed on the shoulders of the richest countries the obligation to “help” other countries to grow economically. At the same time, however, a wave of privatization of public services and lands was spreading in the countries of the South, led by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, in exchange for economic support.

In 1994, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) included the concept of “human security” in its Human Development Report. This concept proposed the pursuit of security through development, and not through weapons. With the aim of “addressing the root causes of human insecurity and not just its tragic consequences”, the report promoted human-centered development to achieve peace, human rights and environmental protection, in the face of new threats that were being introduced into the global political and security agenda: poverty, the destruction of ecosystems, the uncontrolled growth of the world’s population, crime and transnational delinquency –such as drug trafficking.

“ Critical views on security denounce the impossibility of achieving human security without touching the power structures ”

UNDP advocated that peace “had to be delivered on two fronts”: the security front, or “freedom from fear” and the economic and social front, or “freedom from want”, inseparable one from the other. Its operational deployment, however, favored one front or the other depending on the State or organization, its ideological positions, and its interests and strategies. Because the fact is, human security is not a univocal or static concept.

First of all, the deployment of human security presents two main approaches, depending on the political proposals to achieve it, the degree of challenge it represents to the traditional view of security and the degree of criticism of existing structures and power relations:

- The broad approach, more faithful to the original formulation of the concept contained in the UNDP report –closely linked to the concept of human development, first, and sustainable development, later. Human security is conceived here in a comprehensive way, as a situation in which people are free from all kinds of threats to their integrity, but also with their basic needs covered. The broad approach breaks human security down into seven dimensions to facilitate its practical materialization: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political.
- The restricted approach, more adaptable to the majority of governments that have opted for it –led by Canada–, has adopted the concept assimilating it only to freedom from fear, neutralizing its most transformative content under the justification of making it easier to apply in practice. This vision, which has become hegemonic in the field of international politics, has borne important fruits, such as the ban on antipersonnel landmines, the nuclear weapons use prohibition⁵ or the formulation of the concept of “responsibility to protect”, an instrument of the United Nations that authorizes States to intervene in countries where governments are responsible for serious violations of International Law, such as genocide or crimes against humanity.

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Nonetheless, critical views on security consider that the adoption by some governments of the restricted approach to human security has stripped the concept of its most transformative content to make it more digestible and functional for liberal peace, and further away from any critique of the socioeconomic structures that, among other things, maintain North-South colonial domination. These voices denounce the impossibility of achieving human security without touching the power structures,⁶ while asking: What happens when it is the State that generates, with its policies, insecurity among the citizenry?

Human security and feminism: accords and discords

Questioning the role of the State as protector, because it is an actor that can contribute to generate and to perpetuate inequalities, is precisely one of the greatest contributions of feminist perspectives on security. Feminists believe that many of the policies pursued by States –especially those that have a punitive basis and that are based on the logic of punishment– have had a negative impact on the lives and experiences of insecurity of people in general, and women in particular. This is believed to be the case especially among those who are part of the social, ethnic and religious groups considered to be potentially “threatening”. Feminism also critically confronts the so-called universality of human security, which, under the term “human”, has often tended to generalize male experiences and voices under a false universal character,⁷ making invisible the differential experiences of women and a gender analysis of security.

“ Transformative proposals regarding security face an intense process of securitization that has endangered freedoms that were believed to be solid ”

Security as a field of study and political practice has historically been impervious to gender analysis, i.e., to power and subordination between men and women and in relation to other socially marginalized identities. These unequal relationships, though, totally condition our understanding and experience of insecurity and vulnerability. However, this historical exclusion does not imply that security in its traditional conception is gender neutral. On the contrary, the militarization of social life that drives this vision requires a strict sexual division of roles, in which men are saviors of the homeland, while the bulk of the sustenance of life is left under the responsibility of women in a normalized manner and free of charge. At the same time, when it has been functional at the strategic level, the traditional view of security has used the discourse on women's rights to justify measures such as the invasion of countries like Afghanistan, which in turn have had serious impacts on the security and human rights of women.

But what exactly does a feminist perspective bring to the field of security? Gender analysis suggests that the customary violences that occurs in the family, at home, and in the community are interconnected with the dynamics of violence in more macro terms. Thus, the classic feminist slogan “the personal is political” applies to the international arena and the field of security. In addition, and this coincides with human security, the feminist perspective focuses on individuals and communities from a broad understanding of the threats to life and integrity and to whom security must be applied. It does so by addressing power relations and gender inequality, and their intersection with race and class, as key facts for understanding the experiences of insecurity⁸ experienced by women and other gender and sexual identities escaping the norm, such as trans or LGBTIQ+ people.

“ Life care management will allow human communities to evolve from being frightened individualities to accompanied vulnerabilities ”

Alternative and transformative proposals regarding security today face an intense process of securitization that has endangered freedoms that were believed to be solid, while weakening the international system for the protection of human rights. In this new world order, what used to be social conflicts or issues of public order –migratory flows, cultural and religious minorities, drug trafficking, new social movements– are now addressed via exceptional solutions, many of them of dubious legitimacy and legality.

Thus, for example, in the era of the fight against terrorism, the interconnection between security and development is put at the service, not of poverty reduction, but of alleviating the fears of the richest countries through the reorientation of cooperation funds to those regions and countries that are considered a threat to the West.⁹ The development world is under pressure to redefine its criteria and a blackmail relationship is generated in which the Global South is committed to stopping the migration and recruitment of new violent extremists, by whatever means necessary, in exchange for development aid. This situation is replicated in the case of the so-called Prevention of Violent Extremisms, which, in some cases, as reported by researchers like Arun Kundnani¹⁰ and activists like Ainhua Nadia Douhaibi,¹¹ has been used to justify mass surveillance of ethnic or religious communities. This deployment often results in the violation of fundamental rights and does not lead to a solution to the phenomenon of terrorism. Human security thus becomes an alibi at the service of securitization.

It is not an easy context for the deployment of security alternatives that put people, communities and their needs at the center. But at the same time, visions –such as feminism– have emerged with strength to draw attention to the structures of power and domination with the goal of transforming them. What feminism proposes is a community and everyday security that places the notion of vulnerability at the center of

the debate and of political practices.¹² Security is an insatiable ideal and only an approach based on the restoration of community ties and the accountability in life care management will allow human communities to evolve from being frightened individualities to accompanied vulnerabilities.

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