Women, Human Security, and Environmental Change in the Danube Delta's Village Sfântu Gheorghe

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Abstract

The Danube Delta, once sustained by sturgeon fisheries and robust communal ties, is now contending with declining fish stocks, increased regulation, market integration, and environmental degradation. For women, these changes have translated into increased burdens in domestic labor, economic precarity, and the erosion of traditional support systems. Using a feminist human security framework, this paper argues that the security of delta communities cannot be meaningfully addressed without acknowledging the central role women play in sustaining livelihoods, preserving cultural practices, and fostering social cohesion. These women's voices reflect vulnerability and resilience, revealing how gendered labor, environmental dependency, and intergenerational caregiving converge in complex ways. Their testimonies call for more inclusive, community-based approaches to security policy that center local knowledge and prioritize socio-ecological sustainability. We explore the lived experiences of women in the village of Sfântu Gheorghe, located in Romania's Danube Delta, through the lens of human security. Drawing on a series of oral history interviews, we identify the gendered dimensions of economic, environmental, health, food, and community security in a region undergoing ecological and socio-political transformation. This study contributes to a growing body of work that redefines security beyond state-centric paradigms and the everyday experiences of those most intimately connected to fragile ecosystems.

Introduction

Hidden at the eastern edge of Europe in Romania's Danube Delta, the village of Sfântu Gheorghe stands as both a site of ecological richness and socio-economic precarity. Sfântu Gheorghe has a documented history dating back to the 14th century. The village has been shaped by its geographic isolation and rich ecological wealth, abundant wetlands, diverse fish stocks, and a diverse array of birdlife. Its local economy has been rooted in fishing and subsistence agriculture, primarily sustained by sturgeon and other species, and shaped by multiethnic coexistence and cultural resilience (Cernamorit 2004, 9; 13). However, over the past three decades, the region has experienced profound environmental and social transformations. Habitat loss, overfishing, sedimentation,

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climate variability, and regulatory changes have altered the physical landscape of the delta and the intimate lives of its inhabitants. The monographic study of the area argues that the environment of Sfântu Gheorghe is *"neither truly land nor water,"* marked by dynamic ecological shifts, including erosion, flooding, and habitat transformation, which continue to challenge livelihoods (Cernamorit 2004, 3).

In these transitions, women, overlooked in environmental and security discourses, emerge as both vulnerable and vital actors in sustaining household economies, community cohesion, and cultural practices. In this paper, we explore women's experiences in Sfântu Gheorghe through a human security lens. Drawing on a collection of oral interviews conducted between 2019 and 2021 under the umbrella of Civic Radio Sfântu Gheorghe, we traced how gendered labor, environmental degradation, and shifting socio-economic conditions intersect to shape daily life in the delta. The interviewees, primarily older women, speak candidly and in-depth about food insecurity, the decline of fish species, the burdens of caregiving, and the erosion of communal solidarity. Their stories are about the decline of traditional livelihoods and how this led to new vulnerabilities for themselves. Women serve as the backbone of rural survival. With the decline of traditional fishing and new bureaucratic systems displacing long-standing ways of life, women became increasingly responsible for absorbing the resulting shocks, whether economic, emotional, or ecological.

We used a thematic analysis approach to analyse recurring patterns across interviews to extract key themes related to the multidimensional concept of human security. The analysis is grounded in feminist epistemologies focused on voice, memory, and embodied experience. The oral history used for this paper is a form of counter-narrative that challenges dominant representations of rural life, environmental change, and gendered labor. Our purpose was to reframe security debates around what Hoogensen and Stuvøy (2006) refer to as *"everyday security,"* a shift away from state-centric paradigms toward analyses that center on marginalized, often feminized, experiences (Hoogensen and Stuvøy 2006, 210).

Figure 1: Danube Delta and the Village of Sfântu Gheorghe (Google Maps)
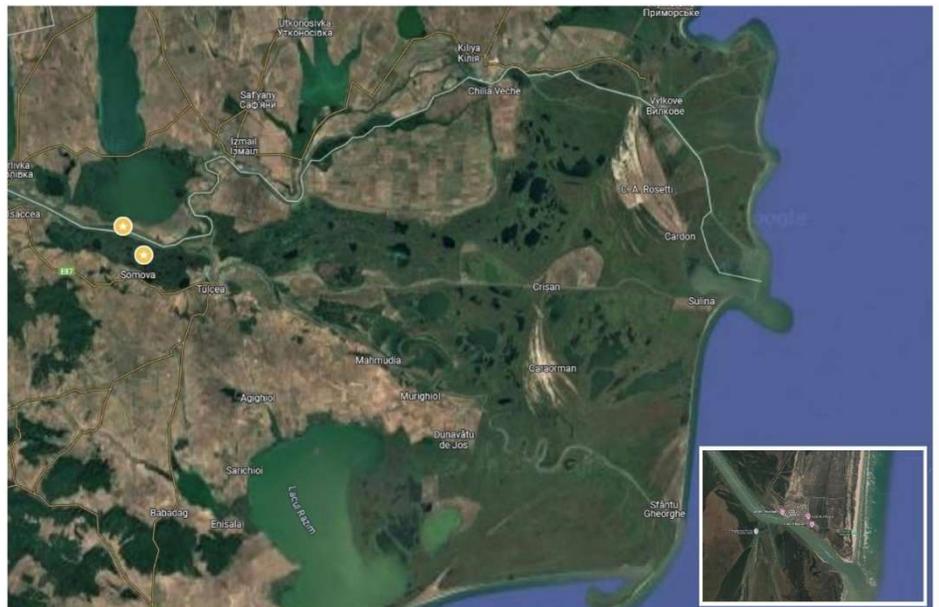
The research is situated at the intersection of feminist theory and human security studies. It draws on theoretical frameworks about women's agency in culturally specific, marginalized contexts and feminist human security literature (Tickner 1992; Hudson 2005). Hoogensen and Stuvøy (2006) argue that, in conditions of structural vulnerability, human security should be understood as empowerment through agency. In addition, the study resonates with recent work that advocates for context-sensitive feminist analysis, including postcolonial and holistic feminist approaches. This framework argues that women's security cannot be detached from their socio-economic roles, cultural expectations, or environmental embeddedness (Martín de Almagro & Ryan 2019; Wallace 2012). This is important for capturing how women in the delta navigate insecurity, both as victims of structural change and active participants in community resilience. They contribute to care work, informal economies, and intergenerational support networks. The scope is to reveal the layered and local dimensions of security that are often overlooked in policy frameworks. To understand the human security of the Danube Delta requires listening to its women as experts of survival.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this study is feminist human security. This framework stands out within the traditional, state-centered security paradigms because of its focus on the lived experiences of individuals and communities. Those marginalized by geography, gender, and socioeconomic status are primerely discussed. The human security framework emerged in the post-Cold War era as a response to the limitations of realist security thinking. It is a multidimensional concept about the protection and empowerment of individuals. The 1994 United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report introduced the categories of human security: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political (UNDP 1994). However, feminist scholars have critiqued the human security discourse for not addressing gendered power relations and the systemic invisibility of women within both security and development frameworks (Tickner 1992; Hudson 2005).

Feminist security studies challenge what is considered a *"security threat,"* whose security is prioritized, and how. Enloe (2000) and Hoogensen and Stuvøy (2006) argue that women's everyday experiences of insecurity, ranging from economic precarity and environmental vulnerability to social isolation, are frequently invisible to dominant frameworks that privilege militarized or institutional conceptions of threat (Hoogensen and Stuvøy 2006). Feminist theorists propose a discussion about how gender roles and expectations shape who bears the burden of insecurity, as well as who is excluded from decision-making processes. As such, women are agents of adaptation, resistance, and survival. Their care practices, community leadership, and informal labor constitute meaningful forms of security-making. MacGregor (2010) further critiques climate discourse for treating women as passive victims of ecological crisis rather than

interrogating the gendered power relations. MacGregor's feminist constructivist approach brings attention the material impacts of climate change, as well as to the discursive erasures and representational politics that silence women's knowledge and labor (MacGregor 2010).

A central concept in this study is agency, understood as the capacity to act meaningfully within constraining structures. Recent feminist analyses, including Gervais's (2010) work on Honduran women's grassroots human rights activism, argue that women's agency is expressed through caregiving, community engagement, and dissent grounded in personal experience (Gervais 2010). Martín de Almagro and Ryan (2019) argue that economic empowerment projects in post-war states overlook women's informal labor and impose universalist, neoliberal visions of agency that disregard lived realities (Martín de Almagro and Ryan 2019). These critiques align with Madhok's (2007) call for recognizing culturally embedded and invisible forms of autonomy and decision-making. This is significant in the Danube Delta, where women sustain intergenerational households, navigate ecological hardship, and perform critical, though undervalued, labor.

The analysis is also grounded in the postcolonial feminist and holistic feminist frameworks. These perspectives argue for context-sensitive approaches to women's security. The postcolonial critique was proposed by Martín de Almagro and Ryan (2019) and is relevant in challenging models of empowerment that are externally imposed and combine security with market integration. Martín de Almagro and Ryan question how representation, materiality, and agency intersect in specific local settings (Martín de Almagro and Ryan 2019). Wallace's (2012) holistic feminism integrates care, relationality, and community as foundational elements of women's peacebuilding and security work in post-conflict societies (Wallace 2012). These frameworks argue for the importance of examining women's agency through both Western liberal ideals of empowerment and locally grounded practices of survival, caregiving, and community building. Hoogensen and Stuvøy (2006) conceptualize human security as both *"freedom from fear"* and *"freedom to act."* This dual framework recognizes security as the absence of threat and the presence of agency and empowerment (Hoogensen and Stuvøy 2006, 221). This notion is important in Sfântu Gheorghe, because local women deal with a multitude of insecurities, environmental degradation, and social isolation in old age, while also maintaining community ties and household stability.

Thematic analysis pointed to patterns and themes across the interviews, but it also preserved the specificity of individual voices. This method works well with feminist methodologies focused on reflexivity, narrative, and the importance of positionality. The oral interviews, conducted under the umbrella of Civic Radio Sfântu Gheorghe between 2019 and 2021, were the empirical basis of this research. Feminist methodologies focus on narrative, reflexivity, and voice, positioning oral histories as forms of experiential expertise and as counter-discourses to dominant

security narratives. In line with Tickner's (1992) foundational critique of masculinist security frameworks, this study centers on women's embodied and affective experiences to expose the limitations of security policy frameworks that overlook the relational and ecological dimensions of human well-being (Tickner, 1992). We did not consider women's accounts as anecdotal. Instead, we regarded them as experiential expertise, a concept central to feminist epistemologies and important in creating a more inclusive security concept. The stories from Sfântu Gheorghe do not fit easily into existing policy frameworks. Nonetheless, they should be heard precisely because they challenge us to rethink what security is, how it is gendered, and who gets to define it.

Human Security and Feminist Frameworks

The concept of human security emerged as a critical response to the limitations of traditional, militarized definitions of security that prioritize the state and its borders over the well-being of individuals. In contrast to realist security paradigms focused on external threats and military capabilities, the 1994 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report advanced a paradigm shift: it defined security as safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease, and repression and protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life (UNDP 1994, 23). This new approach identified seven interdependent domains of human security: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political, emphasizing that people and not states should be the primary objects of

security. However, since its debut, the human security agenda has been critiqued for its conceptual vagueness and uneven uptake across different issue areas and regions (Breslin and Christou 2015). Scholars have warned that separating the domains can unintentionally narrow the transformative promise of the human security framework and risk reinforcing policy silos rather than addressing the interconnected nature of human vulnerability (Elliott 2015).

Feminist scholars were among the earliest to challenge and critique the gender-blind assumptions embedded in both traditional and post-Cold War security discourses. Tickner (1992) argues that the definitions of security were written from a masculinist standpoint. This favors military strength and state sovereignty over the lived experiences of insecurity faced by women and marginalized communities. As Tickner notes, *"gender hierarchies have contributed to the perpetuation of global insecurities."* As such, it is important to reframe security from the standpoint of those traditionally excluded from security policymaking and scholarship (Tickner 1992, 5). Enloe (2000) advocates for *"feminist curiosity"* as a way of uncovering the deeply embedded assumptions that render women's labor, voices, and agency invisible in international affairs. A critical feminist approach to security must begin with the everyday lives of women. It should examine how women experience war, peace, work, and displacement rather than with abstract geopolitical calculations. Therefore, feminist analysis must be attentive to how women are left to manage the aftermath of crises,

whether war, disaster, or economic collapse caused by state-level failures that rarely consider the gendered impacts (Enloe 2004, 3).

These feminist critiques come together in the feminist human security framework. The feminist human security framework broadens the definition of what is a threat. It questions whose insecurities matter, who defines them, and whose labor is invisible. Feminist security scholars call attention to unpaid care work, informal economies, environmental degradation, and community disintegration. These insecurities are all sources of insecurity that disproportionately affect women. They are frequently overlooked by both national security and mainstream development policies despite their importance to the survival of households and communities. The feminist human security approach is focused on agency as daily acts of survival, caregiving, and adaptation in difficult times. We will show that the women of Sfântu Gheorghe do not frame their experiences in the language of formal politics or institutional empowerment. Instead, their oral histories are filled with accounts of resilience, intergenerational responsibility, economic ingenuity, and environmental memory. As such, they contribute to the redefinition of what human security entails in ecologically fragile and socially marginalized settings. Listening to women describe how they salted fish at dawn, nursed children during winters of scarcity, or navigated a maze of bureaucratic fishing restrictions challenges us to expand both the scope and scale of what counts as security.

Economic Insecurity and Gendered Labor

Economic insecurity is the central, recurring theme in the oral histories of women from Sfântu Gheorghe. They reveal how post-socialist restructuring, ecological decline, and bureaucratic shifts have collectively dismantled their traditional livelihoods. For many of these women, informal cash-in-hand labor, often gendered and intergenerational, remains the foundation of survival in a precarious economy. Women performed the bulk of economic and domestic labor, processing fish, preserving food, cleaning, caring for children and grandchildren, cooking in guesthouses, and tending gardens. They did this without contracts, wages, or state recognition. Many recall decades of *"day laboring"* in the fish industry or seasonal tourism work with no official records, which now leaves them with minimal or nonexistent pensions. As one woman expressed, *"I worked 14 years in a carpet section. Then, I worked for 12 years at the forestry base as a day laborer and 10 years at the fishery, also in a day laborer role."* The interviewee also explains, *"If our work records had not been destroyed, I would have had a decent pension because I worked at the fishery. The fishery had toxic working conditions, and the carpets were no exception."* This narrative reflects a broader gendered reality: women's labor sustained the local economy but was rendered invisible in institutional terms. This invisibility has consequences in old age, where women, especially widows, face rising costs of food, energy, and medical care with limited formal support. This vulnerability is exacerbated by social

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expectations of self-reliance, which many women internalize despite expressing frustration over being financially dependent on children or neighbors.

The collapse of traditional livelihoods, particularly fishing, has restructured gender roles and increased economic dependency. Many women note that once-abundant fish stocks, such as sturgeon and carp, are now gone. Fishing has become increasingly bureaucratic and commercialized. Fishing licenses are difficult to obtain and retain, particularly for older or inexperienced residents. They are often revoked if state quotas are not met, regardless of the availability of fish. One interviewee noted, *"They will not renew the fisherman's license, and next year, they will not be able to fish anymore."* These developments have excluded many families from traditional fishing and undermined the transfer of intergenerational knowledge from fathers to sons. As young people leave the village for work, widowed or single older women are left to manage households on their own. In several cases, the absence of male income earners or out-migration has pushed women into unregulated, low-wage sectors, such as tourism or informal barter economies.

The shift from communal, collective fishing practices to state-regulated licensing systems has disproportionately affected those lacking political connections, capital, or education. Women describe feeling disempowered when navigating the bureaucracy surrounding licenses and fishing regulations. Many view these new systems as reinforcing inequality. The wealthier or better-connected individuals have better access to local resources. This has gendered implications. Older women are effectively barred from re-entering the economy and find few viable alternatives for income generation. In addition, the decline in subsistence agriculture and livestock-keeping due to disease outbreaks and environmental degradation has removed the remaining traditional safety nets.

From a feminist human security perspective, the lived experiences of women in Sfântu Gheorghe are a mix of gender, age, environment, and bureaucracy that result in economic vulnerability. Their testimonies challenge narrow definitions of economic security and demand a broader accounting of unpaid labor, informal economies, and the structural exclusion of women from local decision-making. These women exhibit remarkable resilience, cooking for tourists, adapting food storage strategies, and supporting their grandchildren. But their labor is still framed as a means of survival rather than a means of achieving security. As argued by feminist theorists Tickner (1992) and Enloe (2004), security cannot be separated from the everyday labor that sustains life. The women of Sfântu Gheorghe are finding ways to face insecurity. Their stories reframe economic insecurity as the consequence of institutional neglect and the invisibility of feminized labor in dominant policy frameworks.

Food Security and Shifting Subsistence Practices

Food security, as defined by the 1996 World Food Summit, exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and preferences for

a healthy and active life (FAO, 1996). In Sfântu Gheorghe, this definition has become increasingly challenging to fulfill. For older women who carry the responsibility of feeding multi-generational households must deal with degraded ecosystems, reduced access to traditional foods, and rising dependence on volatile markets. Food security in Sfântu Gheorghe has historically been sustained through a close interdependence between local ecosystems and community practices such as fishing, foraging, and small-scale subsistence farming. However, as climate change, ecological degradation, and economic restructuring intensify, the village has experienced a dramatic shift away from traditional subsistence methods. Villagers have gravitated toward a more precarious dependence on external markets. Women's narratives from the Civic Radio interviews trace this shift with clarity and urgency.

Fish, especially sturgeon and shad, has been the primary source of dietary protein and a cultural and economic anchor in Sfântu Gheorghe. Interviewees repeatedly reference the importance of fish to daily sustenance, seasonal rhythms, and community identity. Many told childhood memories of salting fish at dawn, exchanging smoked carp with neighbors, or preserving sturgeon roe. But sturgeon is now nearly extinct in the delta, a collapse widely attributed to overfishing, poaching, and ecological disruptions. Women mentioned that fish is no longer available in the quantities or seasons they once relied upon. The loss of sturgeon, in particular, has had cultural and nutritional consequences. It eroded long-held practices of food

preparation and seasonal abundance. As one woman observed, "*It is the food of everyday* [fish]. *The food of everyday life for the villagers.*" This narrative reflects broader regional patterns. Across climate-vulnerable deltas, the decline in wild fish stocks has eroded food sovereignty in rural communities that lack access to alternative food sources (Lauria et al. 2018). Fisheries remain vital to food systems, but they are increasingly managed through top-down regulatory regimes that restrict local control over resources.

Food systems in Sfântu Gheorghe used to operate on seasonal cycles of abundance and preservation. They were marked by foraging in the spring, fishing in the summer, and storing food in preparation for the harsh winters. These practices allowed families to buffer periods of scarcity and maintain food autonomy. But today, this seasonal logic is breaking down. Many women describe an increased reliance on purchased goods, mainly from Tulcea, the nearest urban hub. Interviews reference the rising costs of basic food items, such as flour, oil, and meat, as well as the inability to preserve fish or garden produce at previous scales. Women noted that freezers are now essential but costly due to rising electricity prices. A few still preserve vegetables in jars or maintain small gardens, but economic pressures and ecological uncertainty are increasingly outpacing subsistence practices. This shift aligns with findings from studies in other deltaic contexts, such as Bangladesh, where land-use changes and environmental degradation have made communities more vulnerable to

market fluctuations and less self-reliant (Parven et al., 2022).

Several interviewees also noted the decline of backyard livestock-keeping, which once complemented fishing as a source of food and income. Some women recall keeping pigs, chickens, and even cows. But they no longer do so due to a combination of factors, including animal disease outbreaks, especially swine flu, predation by wild animals such as jackals and stray dogs, high feed and veterinary costs, space constraints, and municipal restrictions. Many mentioned that they now rely on pensions or their children for meat. This is a drastic shift from previous generations, who produced almost all their food locally. This pattern mirrors findings in the Mekong River Delta, where riverine food environments are deteriorating due to damming, pollution, and climate change. This compromises both subsistence and commercial food systems (Manohar et al., 2023). In Sfântu Gheorghe, the breakdown of these informal, hyper-local food environments reflects both ecological disruption and the erosion of gendered subsistence knowledge passed down through generations.

In feminist human security terms, the changes in Sfântu Gheorghe's food landscape illustrate how environmental and policy shifts disproportionately affect women, who bear primary responsibility for household nutrition and food provision. As with other marginalized delta communities, these women are forced to navigate shrinking ecosystems, inadequate institutional support, and rising costs, all while continuing to absorb social

expectations of caregiving and provisioning. Their testimonies reveal loss, but also adaptive strategies rooted in care work, memory, and embodied expertise. They preserve food when possible, reusing jars, adjusting menus, and relying on social networks, continuing to sustain life in a context that increasingly devalues both their labor and their knowledge.

Health Security and Aging in Isolation

Within the feminist human security framework, health security refers to the ability to access physical, mental, and social well-being across the life course. In Sfântu Gheorghe, older women face several insecurities related to aging, geographic isolation, and declining public services. Their narratives reveal that structural inequalities, cultural norms of self-reliance, and gendered caregiving responsibilities affect access to healthcare. Their experiences align with what Bergh and Gill (2013) describe as a *"freedom from want"* model of health security, one that emphasizes sustained well-being and access to essential care rather than a narrow focus on disease or emergency response (Bergh and Gill 2013, 167).

Interviewees describe significant challenges in accessing medical services. Many recount difficulty recovering from surgery or serious illness without local care or aftercare support. In one case, a woman shared how she had no one to help her recover after surgery: *"I had to crawl on all fours to the bathroom because I did not want to call anyone. I did not want to be a burden."* This theme of shame about dependence recurs throughout the interviews. Cultural expectations of stoicism

and female self-reliance make it difficult for many to seek help, especially as mobility declines and partners pass away. Older women also express mistrust in local healthcare systems and dissatisfaction with limited or inconsistent access to medical care. They must travel long distances to urban centers like Tulcea or Constanța for routine checkups. These health burdens are worsen by financial precarity. Lack of income affects access to medications, nutritious food, and other supports necessary for a healthy life in old age. The absence of robust public health infrastructure in rural settings may be an issue of development, but it is also a matter of human security, particularly for women and the elderly (Gostin, 2021).

Most older women in Sfântu Gheorghe do not get to retire into a position of dependence. Many continue to shoulder intense caregiving responsibilities. A recurrent narrative in the interviews is raising grandchildren while adult children work abroad, often in Western Europe. This transnational caregiving dynamic creates a new form of insecurity. Women must balance household chores, childrearing, food provisioning, and emotional labor with little outside assistance. Care work must be central to how we conceptualize security, especially in aging societies where the state withdraws from welfare provision and informal networks become lifelines (Hudson 2005). These women are managing their own aging and health issues and are sustaining the health and education of the next generation under precarious conditions.

Geographic isolation, especially during winter months when the village is cut off from regular transport, further exacerbates health vulnerability. Women describe being alone for days or weeks, with only neighbors or distant relatives for support. The absence of formal elder care services or emergency response infrastructure creates chronic anxiety. This social isolation is a material determinant of health, shaping who can access care, medications, and even food. The 1994 UNDP Human Development Report argues that health security encompasses protection from both disease and structural exclusions that prevent people from living whole and healthy lives. In rural areas like Sfântu Gheorghe, the erosion of public services disproportionately affects older women, whose gendered roles and cultural expectations discourage them from seeking help or relocating to care homes.

Environmental Insecurity and Ecosystem Collapse

In Sfântu Gheorghe, the environmental crisis is no longer an abstract concern. It is now a lived reality, visible in sediment-clogged canals, receding fish stocks, and the collective memory of a more bountiful past. Environmental insecurity in the Danube Delta stems from multiple stressors, such as climate change, overfishing, deforestation, canal blockage, and sedimentation. These have disrupted the delicate ecological balance that once sustained local livelihoods, expecially those tied to fishing. For older women in the village, the changes are both environmental and emotional. They deeply feel the loss of place, identity, and intergenerational continuity. Environmental change is too often framed as a gender-neutral crisis in policy discourse, obscuring

the fact that it is shaped by deeply entrenched power structures and hegemonic masculinities (MacGregor 2010). In the Danube Delta, this manifests in the marginalization of women's ecological knowledge and the devaluation of their labor in climate-adaptive practices.

Interviewees describe how fishing practices have been transformed by both ecological degradation and regulatory interference. The decline of sturgeon and other native fish species has had cascading effects on local food security and the informal fish-based economy that many women relied upon. *"Unfortunately, many canals have become clogged, and fish no longer breed there. The delta is changing; we are changing it,"* one woman noted. The tension between environmental degradation and institutional neglect is palpable in their stories. The erosion of biodiversity has also ruptured the oral transmission of ecological knowledge, as younger generations migrate away and elder knowledge bearers pass on. The collapse of the delta's ecosystems also carries psychological and social consequences. Women express grief and helplessness at the sight of once-fertile wetlands drying or becoming blocked. Their testimony echoes what Amadi and Ogonor (2015) document in Nigeria's Niger Delta, that ecosystem disruption is both a material and existential threat, generating displacement, food insecurity, and emotional dislocation (Amadi and Ogonor 2015). As the environmental foundation of their lives weakens, so does the sense of rootedness and agency.

These findings closely align with green theory perspectives, which advocate for a holistic, ecocentric understanding of security that encompasses both human and non-human vulnerabilities (Ari & Gokpinar, 2020). Green theorists critique anthropocentric and state-centric paradigms that often overlook the lived experiences of communities like Sfântu Gheorghe. In such isolated places, climate and ecological changes do not trigger immediate migration. Instead, it results in slow, such as the gradual erosion of ecosystems and traditional livelihoods over time. Feminist scholars similarly argue that environmental degradation disproportionately affects women. Women are often responsible for managing natural resources at the household level and who bear the burdens of adaptation with limited support or recognition (Hudson 2005; Tickner 1992).

Mirroring the findings of Amadi and Ogonor (2015) on the Niger Delta, we find that the Danube Delta is increasingly vulnerable to environmental insecurity without sufficient adaptive governance. The sedimentation of canals, mentioned in several interviews, restricts mobility and access to food sources, while bureaucratic inertia compounds ecological harm. *"If a canal is clogged, water does not flow, oxygen does not reach it, and fish are no longer able to breed there,"* one woman explained. Such testimonies are critical insights into how localized knowledge intersects with broader ecological transformations, including delta collapse and biodiversity loss.

The environmental security of the women living in Sfântu Gheorghe does not necessarily refer to concepts such as sea-level rise or abstract climate models. It is

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more about the erosion of a once-symbiotic relationship with the delta's ecosystems. It is a form of ecological grief compounded by bureaucratic neglect and generational disconnection. Listening to their stories is essential both for documenting change and rethinking security through a more inclusive, ecological, and feminist lens.

Community Security and Social Fragmentation

In Sfântu Gheorghe, community security was once derived from deeply rooted social cohesion shaped by shared labor, traditions, and interdependence. Women's oral histories recall a past of collective rituals and solidarity, where *"everyone helped each other."* Bread was shared without hesitation, and seasonal rhythms, especially around fishing, created a powerful sense of belonging. These accounts align with feminist human security approaches, which understand community as a primary site of resilience, identity, and support, especially in times of social or ecological stress (Hudson 2005; Enloe 2004).

However, many women now speak with nostalgia and grief about the erosion of that cohesion. The disbanding of fish brigades, the decline of communal celebrations, and the privatization of work have fractured daily life. One woman reflected, *"Back then, there was a general understanding among people... we would make fish soup and share it with my parents... It became a tradition."* Moreover, *"But now it is no longer like that. Now, if they can cheat you out of even a piece of bread, they will."* This transformation signals the loss of communal identity and the emergence of isolation, envy, and mistrust. These are symptoms of a more profound social fragmentation accelerated by modernization, economic inequality, and generational divides. Several interviewees observed that neighbors are no longer dependable and that people keep to themselves. A moral geography of decline, where the disappearance of intergenerational practices is felt as a form of communal insecurity, is palpable through comments like *"young people are not like us."* This aligns with Enloe's critique of how global modernity, market logic, and gendered expectations often undermine informal social networks without replacing them with equitable support structures. Adger (2003) argues that social capital, the networks of trust, reciprocity, and community norms, is important in enabling collective action and resilience to environmental stress (Adger 2003). In Sfântu Gheorghe, the decline of such capital is experienced as the loss of communal celebrations and shared labor. It weakens the village's adaptive capacity to ecological and socio-economic change.

Amidst this fragmentation, women continue to serve as cultural anchors. They organize village feasts, preserve traditions, and mediate between generations. They preserve recipes, storytelling, and manage religious and holiday observances. Their roles reflect what feminist scholars identify as relational forms of security. They are practices that maintain a sense of place and purpose through care, memory, and ritual. Nevertheless, these contributions are mainly invisible to formal governance structures. They come with emotional labor and fatigue, especially for older women who are left to carry cultural continuity on their own.

Community security in Sfântu Gheorghe is deeply gendered, historically collective, and now endangered. The social fabric that once buffered material hardship is fraying. This leaves individuals, particularly women, vulnerable to economic and environmental pressures and loneliness, cultural dislocation, and intergenerational disconnection. Their testimonies remind us that security is about connection. Rebuilding community security in marginalized settings demands both policy support and cultural recognition of women's roles as stewards of social life.

Conclusion: Rethinking Security from the Margins

The oral histories of women in Sfântu Gheorghe compel us to rethink the meaning and practice of security in ecologically vulnerable and socially marginalized settings. Their testimonies illustrate a deeply embedded, lived understanding of security grounded in care, memory, resourcefulness, and connection. These women navigate intersecting forms of insecurity, economic, environmental, food-related, health-based, and communal. They sustain multigenerational households, preserve cultural practices, and support their communities without institutional support.

A key policy implication that emerges from this research is the urgent need to integrate women's ecological knowledge and lived experiences into environmental governance and sustainability planning. Their expertise is rooted in decades of informal labor and relational care work. It represents a critical yet underutilized resource for building local resilience. Gender-blind approaches to climate and environmental policy risk reinforcing structural inequalities. They overlook those most vulnerable to environmental shifts (MacGregor 2010). In fragile ecologies like the Danube Delta, resilience is about both ecological conservation and the continuity of social relationships, knowledge systems, and adaptive traditions.

We also call for development strategies that center gender and community as foundational to sustainable futures. This is important, especially in post-socialist and delta regions, where traditional economies have collapsed and formal services remain weak. Social capital, trust, reciprocity, and collective action are needed to adapt to environmental change (Adger 2003). In Sfântu Gheorghe, women continually preserve and reinvent this social capital through acts of care, cultural transmission, and community solidarity. However, without formal recognition or institutional backing, this labor remains vulnerable to exhaustion and invisibility.

Reimagining human security in such contexts requires moving beyond abstract humanitarian models and technocratic development plans. It demands an approach that treats women as experts in survival and transformation. Their voices push us to redefine security as more than the absence of violence or scarcity. Security should be the presence of dignity, interdependence, ecological integrity, and cultural continuity. Listening to women from Sfântu Gheorghe, we see that security from the margins is not marginal security. It is foundational, generative, and vital to any vision of a just and sustainable world.

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