

**MILITARIZATION AND TERRORISM
COUNTERTERRORISM MEASURES AND THEIR IMPACT IN
RELATION TO WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS**

Norma Enríquez Riascos
CLADEM.
Bangkok 11-2007

In all the countries of the world, except in the really democratic ones, the role played by human rights defenders is watched from the instances of power with distrust; efforts are taken to silence their voices, specially in situations of conflict and more in situations of armed conflict and even post-conflict ,through the presence of authoritarian governments, constituting all of them situations which represent a serious risk to their lives. These situations are source of persecutions, forced threats, disappearances and displacement, exile and death.

To be a human rights defender represents more than performing a role; it is a commitment to justice expressed in the protection of victims, denunciation of violations and fighting for accountability as well as for guarantees for all.

Within the framework of antiterrorist policies and military preventive strategies which have been developed after the attack to the twin towers in New York, the interests of the great political and economic powers that exist today are being displayed. In a world-wide scope, the great powers especially the government of the United States with some of their allies, have decided to reverse the advances already obtained by humankind regarding matters related to fundamental rights. The antiterrorist policies supported by them, have established that *the aim justifies the means*, and therefore all violations of human rights. At the same time and in name of those human rights, including what they also consider within the scope of the protection of the rights of women, territories are bombed and preventive wars are being conducted without responsibility in relation to the affected civil population and/or their infrastructure and their goods recognized as part of their basic needs. The use

of torture emerges again being legitimized along with massacres which become its collateral effect. Not even the international pacts and treaties have been respected, resulting in the weakening of the ethical and political authority that has been manipulated to get a consensus for a particular government in order achieve a *world-wide peace*.

In the countries still facing armed conflicts such as Colombia or the ones who concluded them in the recent past like Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua Honduras and Peru, levels of militarization of the civil life continue to appear and if the existence of authoritarian governments is added to this, these scenarios become more complex for human rights defenders aggravated by the present tendency to denominate *terrorist* any act, even of non-violent nature, done with the purpose to express critical opinions against our governments. Those antiterrorist policies have led authoritarian governments in Latin America to impose limits to social protests and to the political opposition. Simultaneously, fear and terror are accomplices of some governments so that the anguish provoked in the citizens allows them to approve and to endorse armed interventions and to draw up policies that more than looking into the prevention of terrorism, contribute to develop national geo-strategic interests of power, all merged in the search for security.

Most of the countries that face armed conflicts are poor countries, that despite showing serious economic and social problems, continue to assign a high proportion of their budget to war; some ask for and receive economic loans and international supports for the same objective, although the great unsatisfied demands of their population, their ancestral poverty and misery remain unsolved. In all of them we found divided and polarized populations to which particular visions of the problems are sometimes imposed, making difficult the achievement of negotiated solutions.

The emergence of concepts like "preventive war" or the one of "enemies of freedom and democracy" that align, in the same category of terrorists, those who dissent of the hegemonic vision and those linked to an enemy without face, without specific location that lack rights, dignity, and humanity opposing one against the other. Within the framework of political positions which get

harder every time in relation to terrorism, the institutionalism which is supposed to defend human rights, welcoming a tradition of many of the governments of Central and South America which is to ignore according to convenience international treaties and political constitutions, makes the conditions of human rights defenders to deteriorate at high speed. Women who participate actively in decision-making in the political and social arena, are watched with suspicion by all these forces in our regions. The important roles fulfilled by various women through the creation and strengthening of organizations creating processes of empowerment, are classified as subverting the patriarchal order that condemns women to submission, restricting them to the familiar and domestic scope. For that reason each woman non-traditional leader, each organization led by them for the construction of proposals and articulating efforts with other women or social movements to achieve democracy and peace along with all those that fights for economic, social and cultural rights, are seen as emitting dangerous signals and therefore become victims of persecution by those who consider that these actions alter the established order and lead to social instability.

The presence of women in the political scope is sanctioned drastically, affecting leaders and their organizations as a whole. Many names could be mentioned in each country like the case of genocide in Guatemala, that had special forms of violence perpetrated against the bodies of women. Because of their cruel expressions, these facts are easily comparable with the ones which took place in Peru with indigenous women whose towns were the targets during the period of terrorist attacks in that country where women popular leaders as Maria Elena Moyano and their organizations were also assassinated and persecuted by armed groups, like in Colombia, where farmers, unionists, women of grassroots organizations, have been assassinated, disappeared, forced to move or underwent exile. These women, are not considered as representatives of an immense and valuable human resource in the struggle to overcome and eradicate discrimination and misery. They are seen as dangerous, subversive people by each armed faction; "In their eagerness to obtain the social and political control of territories in dispute, armed groups undertake actions against the organizations of women because they consider

them a visible obstacle , deeply rooted in the communities, which they try to use for their own benefit, or otherwise try to destroy."

In those scenarios, the work of human rights defenders has a special complexity due to several reasons:

- As opposed to the traditional perspective, the women who take part in the public sphere, expose themselves or assume political positions are considered dangerous and unwanted. This affirms the view that women who lack of an own opinion are easy to manipulate and this opens doors so therefore from the governments' view they are assumed as collaborating with insurgency.

- Women leaders play a decisive role in the maintenance and social strengthening of the social knit and destabilization and fear take place in the communities when women are attacked ; this makes all armed actors, including the regular forces, to use this fact as a strategy to affect those who they consider as enemies.

- Another form consists of humiliating the opponent, humiliating women, through acts that go against their dignity basically through sexual aggressions displayed in public scenarios.

- A modality developed by the armed actors when they win territories, is the one to establish *coexistence codes* in which they indicate which activities are allowed by them or prohibited to the population. Most of the prohibitions are done in relation to women, in relation to their time, their personal relations, the spaces where they must stay, their organizational work .

- To defend the rights of the victims, turns women into denouncers and contradictors of the governments and other forces.

- The control traditionally exercised by patriarchal societies on the body, the time, the space and the life of women is expressed during armed conflict by "punishments" and violent stigmatization that the armed actors carry out to

sanction women who do not act according to traditional roles. This violence has "moral" connotations and it is paradoxical that, in the middle of an increasing environment of *preservation* of social values, armed actors are elevated as guardians of a "public morality". The areas of the civil life affected by this take dimensions that go beyond the violence related to the driving force of an armed conflict; a clearly discriminatory violence against the women glimpses, affecting daily life and privacy. The women who are in greater risk, are those who dared to assume a commitment with social and political movements and undertook different levels of leadership in their communities.

Courage and commitment beyond armed conflicts and repression.

There is another facet that must be visible in relation to women activists of women's rights and defenders of human rights in general, because they have played an important role in the support processes related to the victims: families, communities and society as a whole. In all the countries of Latin America which are examined or are going through a post-conflict scenario or post-dictatorship, we see that women are the ones who have mainly contributed to the processes of healing, recovery of memory and reconstruction of the social knit through families, organizations and communities. They have also contributed to the identification and elucidation of the facts looking for the sanction of perpetrators.

From diverse spaces, women in professional associations, organizations, rural movements and recently including those involved with sexual diversities, they have assumed the challenge to face fear, pain and to search for truth, justice and reparation. All the work based on testimonies, histories of life patiently reconstructed and through their analysis, all this is directed to understanding and proposing solutions so the horrors cannot be repeated. Some of these efforts are bound to the dissemination of human rights and the International Humanitarian Law, others to the reconstruction of the memory and the social knit.

This work has the objective to make the people realize that defense and prevention do exist, as well as making them to realize which are the conducts to be eradicated. They all represent a cultural transformation. If a peaceful society affirms respect for all the people, options and styles of life; if one sanctions exclusion and discrimination, at times of crisis, including those of armed conflicts, the procedures to follow will have less destructive connotations. Women have contributed with visions respect to war and they express that the violence and abuses they suffer are exacerbated by these situations. They have established that the degrading violence and treatments that are triggered during war persist in the communities later when men return to their families. For that reason they demand to the States and the societies as a whole to commit themselves with cultural changes that can make possible the eradication of discrimination against women; to generate new images and roles which can finally develop in empowerment for women and the total and effective application of the internal legislation which is supposed to protect them against violence. They also claim for the observance of international instruments which the States have signed and/or ratified as well as ratifying the Statute of the International Criminal Court..

To overcome atavist visions on women through the control of their lives, their bodies and their reproductive capacity or potentiality must be highlighted to take steps to a real autonomy. The secularity of the States is a necessary condition so that nobody can feel or dare to impose visions and beliefs in name of a particular religion, undermining the principles of freedom of conscience and the right to construct our plans of life within the aspirations of each human being. Under no pretext a non armed actor can be exempted of responsibility in relation to the attacks against civilians or their attempts to force them to become involved in war. Women in massive mobilizations made in different countries have agreed to demand a demilitarization of the civil life; to remove girls and boys from conflict. They also have raised their claim for their bodies not to be considered as military trophies.

Finally it is necessary to indicate that the States have the obligation to provide greater support and protection to the organizations of human rights and

specially to human rights defenders, for the reasons that have been already mentioned . Until now, the States in Latin America have not complied with their obligations regarding women in general and human rights defenders and we think that these realities go beyond regional borders. It appears that similar circumstances are being faced by our Asian and African sisters; for that reason this reality emerges from our own spaces, from the heart of the women movement transformed in a commitment to be alert and share how to formulate strategically our demands, to position our proposals in order to crystallize our hopes for a better world free of fear, violence and misery.

History has demonstrated, as expressed by Agnes Heller, that women are the only ones able to carry out the greatest cultural revolution in all the planet, without the use of force.