

The war on terrorism – an attack on women's rights

When the US's war on terrorism started it was accompanied by words like "human rights" and "democracy". But, according to a report presented on the 10-year-anniversary of the terror attacks on World Trade Center, women and LGBT persons have become the unseen victims.

Ten years have passed since the attack on World Trade Center in New York, on the 9th of September 2001. The so called war on terrorism that followed has gotten a lot of attention from media and human rights activists, because of its violations of human rights, like torture and imprisonment without trials. Crimes committed by the US government on numerous occasions. But when researcher Jane C Huckerby interviewed female relatives of Guantanamo prisoners, she realized that there were almost no material available on the affects of the war on women's situation.

Worked with UN's special rapporteur

- We contacted the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights and counter-terrorism, Martin Scheinin, and encouraged him to write a report on gender and counter-terrorism for the UN, says Jane C Huckerby.

She and her team worked together with Martin Scheinin on the report, and in 2009 it was presented for the general assembly. The report suggested that women and hbt persons had become victims in the war on terrorism.

- To say that there were strong reactions is an understatement. Many governments were furious that Martin Scheinin had highlighted hbt persons situation and over the fact that he had used the gender concept in a way that didn't concern biology but social stereotypes. Honestly I think they were mad just to hear someone with a counter-terrorism mandate speak about a gender perspective.

Study on USA's counter-terrorism policy

But the research didn't end there. For the last three years Jane C Huckerby and Lama Fakih have done an extensive study of USA's counter-terrorism policy from a

gender perspective, for the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice at New York University School of Law.

To get information on how the war on terrorism has affected women on grass-roots level, they conducted workshops in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

- At the same time we devoted a lot of time to interviewing US government representatives, to get their thoughts about the gender perspective of their counter-terrorism work.

Fundamental violation of human rights

The combined results of these studies became the report "A Decade lost – Locating Gender in US Counter terrorism". It confirms that the counter-terrorism programs affects women's situation in a negative way.

- The results were the same in all the cases we examined: women and sexual minorities had been the unseen victims of USA's war on terrorism. So we call the report "a decade loss", because of the total silence surrounding this fundamental violation of human rights.

Increase of gender-based violence

According to the report, the war on terrorism affects women in multiple ways. Gender-based violence has increased both in Afghanistan and Iraq, gender stereotypes have been reinforced and stricter border controls have rendered victims of human trafficking even more oppressed and vulnerable.

- Also, USA's strict counter-terrorism laws have made it harder for both private persons and different types of bodies to support hbt and women's rights organizations, since they often have to be small and secretive, and don't dare to sign the counter-terrorism documents that USA demands.

The studies show that women are getting caught between counter-terrorism operations, acts of terrorism and states failing to protect them. And when it comes to

negotiating treaties with terrorists and extremist groups, women's rights are being sacrificed.

Aid focused on men

- Another thing we saw clearly was that the American aid has increasingly been focused on preventing terrorism, and men are seen as more likely to become terrorists than women. Therefore the resources have been put on programs for boys, even in places where girls' needs are much bigger, says Jane C Huckerby.

The American military has engaged themselves in several non-military activities to make them more popular. Most of the time they haven't consulted the women in the societies where they have been, but only the men in charge, thereby enforcing patriarchal structures instead of contributing to a democratic development.

- One example is when American military were building wells in a village in Kenya. They didn't consult any women, although women almost always are in charge of fetching water. So the wells were placed at the wrong spots and then broke, causing the village's whole water supply to dry up.

Surprised by the gender-blindness

Jane C Huckerby and Lama Fakih find it striking how gender-blind the war on terrorism has been.

- USA have constantly talked about democracy and women's rights, but in reality women's security has not been prioritized.

The researchers now hope that the US government will learn from the report. Their ignorance concerning the effects of the war on terrorism has been the most surprising finding in the studies, says Jane C Huckerby and Lama Fakih.

- But several of the officials we have spoken to, have realized their gaps in knowledge and shown interest in our report. We hope that this will lead to the use of thorough gender analysis in international actions. So they don't continue to unintentionally punish women and LGBT persons.

Hanna Navier

A copy of “A Decade Lost” can be downloaded to the right.

