

Interview 13: PAKISTAN: Taranum Khan

Mrs. Taranum Khan is a Program Officer at the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan in Karachi. She is a lawyer by profession and works on different issues, including violence against women. She has joined many courses from different international organizations and has also participated in the Folk School program of the Asian Human Rights Commission.

What do you think about the policing system in your country?

The policing system in our country is of the worst kind and there have been no efforts to improve it. The policing system and laws relating to the police should be changed according to the latest developments in the investigation system. I think that there should be changes in the curriculum of the police training; subjects of human rights should be included in the curriculum. If human rights are included, there should be concrete practical steps which show the officers how to follow international human rights norms.

The people hate the police because the police are highly insulting. The police generally misuse their power to implicate people in false cases, and then demand bribes. They also use violence and abusive language. When a person is arrested, the police resort to torture. The governments have not looked at reforms within the policing system. The martial law governments in particular have used the police to repress the people. Anybody who is arrested or wanted in any case is suspected of being a criminal before any investigation is carried out.

What do you think of the use of torture?

Torture by the police is a terrible thing. The police use torture so as to humiliate the citizens. The police have always resorted to physical torture but now they have adopted new methods so that marks of torture are not visible on victim's bodies, and there is no evidence. In many cases, the police inflict injuries on specific parts of the body where marks will appear only later.

The main purpose of torture is to take confessional statements or to get money from the arrested person. In ordinary cases, the police torture the people on behalf of powerful or rich people. In the case of women, the police not only use physical torture, but have also been known to strip them naked in the police station, or use very filthy language to insult and humiliate them. And in many cases, they rape women too.

What are your views on the public relations of the police?

It will take a very long time for the relationship between the public and the police to improve, because the police have the mindset that all arrested persons are criminals. When they have such a mindset, how can one expect the police to change their attitude? The police only foster good relationships with the rich and powerful. For ordinary people, whenever the word 'police' comes to mind, the image of torture automatically appears.

Proper training and education of the police is extremely necessary. Until and unless the police have a concept of human rights, they will always resort to torture and humiliation of the citizens. The police are also from the same society but when a police officer wears the uniform, he or she thinks that they are above the ordinary citizen and that to abuse this power is the only way to deal with the people.

If you have a problem, would you go to a police station to get help?

No one likes to go to the police station. The concept of the police station is a nightmare, particularly for women. Everybody is scared of the police. If anyone has to go to the police station, even for an application or verification of any document for official purposes, she or he would not go alone because they are so terrified of the police.

Is there a law against domestic violence in your country and what is your opinion of it?

In our Criminal Procedure Code, the laws against domestic violence are negligible. For example, in cases of acid throwing or burning, the First Information Report (FIR) can be lodged only if the victim has been burnt on over 65% of their bodies. For women who have been burnt over less than 65% of their bodies, no FIR can be lodged. This is highly discriminatory and gives impunity to the perpetrators. In many cases, women die having been burnt on 40% or 50% of their bodies.

Women who are victims of domestic violence by their in-laws or relatives do not report to the police station because there is no explicit law against domestic violence. The bill against domestic violence is still pending before the assembly, but lawmakers do not think that this is a national issue. Women of Pakistan need laws against domestic violence and more importantly, the proper implementation of this law.