

Interview 16: SRI LANKA: Rathnayake

Mrs. Rathnayake, 48, runs a small business sewing clothes. Her husband disappeared in 1989 after having been arrested. She filed complaints with the police and the Human Rights Commission but no authority has admitted responsibility and no investigation has ever been instigated.

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

The policing system is not independent. There needs to be significant changes in the system. After I lost my husband, I saw people involved in crimes and members of the JVP go free. I also know of innocent people who were arrested. My husband was never involved in those kinds of activities, his brothers were - but the [authorities] took him. We were sleeping, and police officers came in and took him from the house. I never saw him again.

I do not have a great image of the police. We were neglected at the station, our complaint wasn't written down until a year later and we weren't listened to. We were just dismissed. The police said "we never brought him here, you should just go." I must have gone two or three times to the Kandy Police Station and stood morning to evening outside the gate, not being allowed in the station. They would block me. I also went two or three times to another police station. They wouldn't let us in.

What do you think of the police's use of torture?

Torture should never be used. The police should never use torture because it denies people of their basic rights. If someone does something wrong, they should be punished through the legal system, not by assault. If it is used, people become inhuman; it makes people cruel to each other. They will lose their humanity. Yes, there is a justice system in this country, but the procedures are not being followed.

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

The police don't have a good public image. Even now, when we go to the police station for some matter or the other, we have to wait for several hours and waste time because they don't do their job properly. This attitude comes from the main officials at the top. They are not interested in what is happening in other divisions below them. They are the ones that should act. Even the government needs to have more awareness about this issue, and provide advice to police officers on how to do their duty well.

If you have a problem these days would you go to the police station? We have to go to the station because that's the main step that we can take; we have to obey the law. But I would never go to a police station alone, I'm too scared. I don't trust them. I feel that I have to protect my dignity there; they never talk to us well, or speak kindly. They never say "please sit down, just wait a minute." They let us stand, no problem - for several hours, no problem.

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

I don't have any knowledge about that, whether there is one or not.