

Interview 20: SRI LANKA: Gannoruwa

Mrs. Gannoruwa, 80, was a Sinhala teacher in a primary and senior school and she now campaigns against disappearances. Her son was abducted in 1989 on his way to school, four days after taking his qualifying exams for university.

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

The police system is not balanced. The police treat people who have money and reputation well, but they don't treat ordinary people with respect. Some high-ranking officers are better sometimes though.

It was a small child who told me that my son had been seen being taken in a van; he had been in his school uniform. When I went to the station, the sergeant in our local police station said, "we don't want to hear from you" and scolded me with bad words. I told him that I was a teacher, and that he should listen to me. They said "please go away" and so I went to Kandy Police Station and met the Superintendent. He called my local station and challenged them, and told them to write it down. Back there, the OIC insulted me for going 'to the big shots.' He started to write down my complaint on a loose sheet of paper rather than in the complaint book and when I complained, he said "please keep your mouth shut, I'll do what I want." I wrote down the details of the case myself and sent it to President Premadasa. I got a reply from his office and we were told that a Parliament minister from Kandy and the Human Rights Commission would investigate. But no real steps have been taken to investigate. My son was disappeared because my husband was a businessman who supported the Sri Lanka National Party.

The police cause more problems than they solve. The police should protect policies, yet they are the ones who violate them because they protect thieves and smugglers and persons like that instead. In my neighbourhood, there's a place that sells illegal arak (alcohol) and when I told the police they didn't even try to follow up. If a good active policeman is working in a police station and he tries to inquire about those things, he gets transferred to a rural area! That's what happened near us. There was a good officer in our area. We were seeing some reductions in the problems with alcohol and drugs in our community, then he got transferred. I can tell you endless stories like this!

What do you think of the use of torture?

Torture should never be used. When torture happens, sometimes that person dies, and sometimes they are disabled for life, or have to live with all kinds of injuries. It is not acceptable. If the police can conduct investigations without torturing, but by talking and interrogating, then Sri Lanka would have a good legal system. For example, if there is a very rebellious boy in a family, if they punish and beat him and treat him in a bad manner he will just become worse. If they can treat him kindly and advise him they he may change. Torture is bad for the whole of society.

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

I have two images. For those with money, they are treated in a fine manner. They can drive their vehicles directly inside the police station and even the OIC will get up from his chair and meet them. But for low-caste or ordinary people, it's a different story. They are treated in a bad manner. They find it hard to get help if they don't spend money. There's a boy near our house who is addicted to drugs, and he has severe mental problems now.

One day he was fighting with his parents and assaulting them, and smashing up the house. Apparently, they called the police station twelve times, and were told that to get help, they would have to go to the police station first. When my daughter called to say that she couldn't leave her children at home to go to work because they were feeling insecure, then only finally did they come; I think because we have a better reputation.

If you have a problem these days would you go to the police station? [Laughs]. I would never go back to a police station after our incident! And my children are not allowed to go either! If I see them in the street... well ... [stamps her foot].

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

I know that there is a law. It's like this: some men try to show their power and normally, the women keep silent. I even had this problem in my house with a family member; my daughter was assaulted by her husband. She beat him back with a pole! But there were so many violations that she made a complaint with the police station, but as a civil case, for maintenance of the children after they separated. That was in 2007 and 2008. We weren't aware of a domestic violence law then. But I know now that there is one and that it's new for us and people are not aware of it.