

Interview 22: Nepal: Sharmila Lungeli

Mrs. Sharmila Lungeli has been working with Nari Bikash Sangh (Women's Development Center), an NGO bringing education, health and advocacy services to women in need in 12 districts of Nepal, since 1991. She entered the organisation as a Motivator and is now working there as a Social Mobiliser in the women's upliftment project, in which she is overseeing five different villages in the Eastern region.

Could you please tell me about your organisation's work?

My organization works for the empowerment and strengthening of oppressed, marginalized and ethnic women. We identify different locations which lack basic amenities and have a minimum standard of development. After this survey, we select those locations in which the presence of the government and of civil society organisations is the weakest. Then we organize a discussion programme with the inhabitants to inquire about their status, living, means of survival. We design the programme format according to the consultation and suggestions from them, for their empowerment. Different skills and income generating trainings are proposed to them so that they can improve their socio-economic conditions. They are also offered adult education programmes to teach them how to read and write.

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

Although the Nepali police are supposed to be the protectors of the law in the country, in reality, they are its violators. This should be changed. The law in Nepal is in the grip of those who have power, money and reach. For the poor and for women, the law and the police are not accessible and most of the time remains silent. The law seems to be only for the influential people. When we take up the cases of common women, the police turn to us in derision. The police disclose sensitive issues to the media which hamper the image of the victim in society. The sort of practices that exist in the police stations should be changed.

How do you think this can be improved?

I think that there should be lobbying activities before the police stations and local government authorities. We once organised a protest against the abusive words the police use with us whenever we go to the police station to register a case. After having held a discussion with the senior police officers, they stopped using abusive words against us. This gave us a clue that when the directive comes from the senior officers, the lowerranking officers follow the orders without difficulty. So we should try to talk directly to the senior police officers in order to regulate the functioning of Nepalese police. There should be initiation from the higher levels on these issues.

What do you think of the police torture in custody?

No, this is definitely not a good practice. Whenever we go to a police station regarding some cases of torture inflicted by the police, we learn that the police were bribed by influential people. The police only run after money. We have never found a police officer who was willing to assist a helpless woman who desperately needed justice. When police officers are given a bribe, they become ready to help the women victims, otherwise they just neglect them and seek excuses to drop their cases. Whenever we go to advocate in favour of the women victims, they treat us like mad people. But this kind of behavior has not prevented us from advocating on behalf of women.

Did you find any difference between police torture on men and women?

The police inflicting physical and sexual torture on women. Take the case of Sapana Gurung from Belbari, Morang district, for example. When she was living alone with her children while her husband was working abroad, some policemen came to her house in the middle of the night and asked her to open the door. They pretended to be injured and very thirsty. Their tone was very friendly, almost like the one of a closely related person. After they had asked several times, Sapana opened the door to have a look. Instantly, they caught her hand and pulled her out. They took her to a nearby river and raped her. She fell unconscious and the police officers took her to a local hospital. As the doctors were unable to treat her, she was taken to B.P. Koirala Hospital in Dharan. When the local villagers demonstrated in front of the police station to condemn this abuse, six people were killed and dozens injured as the police started firing indiscriminately. This sort of incident is normal when police officers are involved.

When we go to the police station regarding a case involving a woman, instead of dealing with the case privately, the police officers disclose the information to the public and the media, which ultimately affects the victim woman and makes her suffer more. Inflicting torture is their routine behavior.

How is the relationship between police and the citizens?

In my opinion, the relationship is not good. There is no coordination. Among the general public, and particularly among women, the belief in the police is very low, near zero. We cannot consider going to the police to register a case of violation of women's rights, especially when something happens within the household, as the police officers, mainly male police officers, act in a very rude manner.

But of course, the relationship of police officers with those in power, those who have money and influence is good. The officers support those people without any questions. In this context, although we try to maintain a good relationship with the police, it is a tough job for us to do so.

If you have a problem, would you consider it safe to go alone the police station to register a complaint?

No, I do not consider it is safe to go alone to a police station if I have a problem because I have seen different cases such as Suntali Dhami's and Sapana Gurung's, and I also know that police officers have been using girls, pretending to love them and then dumping them after a span of time. These sorts of incidents happened in almost all the regions of Nepal. No matter which problem I have, I would never go alone to the police station and if I do go, I would go with a group of friends. I do not have the courage to go there alone after learning about these incidents. Our society has a patriarchal structure. If a woman goes alone to the police station and if something happens to her there, the society will not help her and will instead blame her for going alone to a police station in which there are many male police officers.

Does Nepal have a law against domestic violence? If yes, is it well implemented? If no, what are the problems?

Nepal has a law on domestic violence but it is not effective because it lacks an implementation strategy. When victims of domestic violence go to the police station to file a case, instead of getting justice, they are shouted at by the police.

In cases of child domestic workers, if they are abused and beaten, the police often do not punish the culprit and instead say to the parents “when they are sent to work in others' houses and they make mistakes and get beaten, why are they complaining? If the parents are so worried about their children, why do they send them to work in others' houses?” The mindset of the police officers should be changed, and the law which has been in existence should be boosted by formulating regulations.