

Interview 3: SRI LANKA: Inoma Karunathilaka



Mrs. Inoma Karunathilaka has been involved in civil society organizations and women's organizations for several years. She has been an active member in helping torture victims. Now she is studying psychology.

She made following comments on the issue of policing in Sri Lanka

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

First of all I would like to say I have no trust about our policing system. This is one of the most corrupt institutions in Sri Lanka. The main point is that many of them don't know how to behave and they don't know the discipline at all. Especially women cannot go to the police station alone. The policemen try to cheat them. They are trying to manipulate the women and to misuse them. Most of the poor Sri Lankan women and girls have faced many problems and some of them were abused by the police officers.

I have visited several police stations for an official purpose, and personally what I felt was that they had respect for the dress. If they feel that these persons came from an affluent background then they will treat them well, otherwise they will treat the people like dogs. Here I would say one thing. There are some good police officers too, but their voices have no power because they are very few in number.

I have many friends who work in the police. Most of them studied with me at the University and did the Human Rights Diploma. They are also not happy with the system. One inspector of police (IP) told me that they receive very low salaries and because of this, most of the police officers take bribes as they face financial difficulties. We cannot justify this because we are all human. We cannot say that they are right or wrong. The root of the problem is with the system. Furthermore, most of the senior police officers used junior officers as a weapon, and due to fear and respect for the senior officers, they do what they are told. One senior police officer told me that he would advise his sons, daughters and even enemies not to seek a job with the police.

The Sri Lankan police system should be changed. There should be a good disciplinary system. This change should be initiated from the top, a top to bottom reform, not from bottom to top. When the top level changes and when they respect the rules and regulations, the lower levels would also follow suit. Our country should learn from other countries the way of how they overcome the problem of corruption. Personally I think they should get the ways and techniques from the Independent Commission against Corruption (ICAC) in Hong Kong. There were some top officials who participated in

the training programme at the ICAC with us. After the programme they told me that the ICAC is a good system but could not be implemented in our country due to the financial situation. The authorities should be concerned about this and they should try to do what they can, otherwise the situation would be worse.

What do you think about the use of torture?

There is no right for any person to torture or to take the lives of others. Life is the most spiritual and holy sacrament. God had sent us to this world to do a mission and to collect merits. But unfortunately our police officers do not know the value of life. They misuse the power given by their profession. They use torture as a weapon to take evidence, or to get credits from their senior officers. A distressing situation is that most of the junior police officers don't even know about the torture act. Traditional methods should be changed. Especially the civilians' mentality should also be changed. Most of the civilians believe that the police should use torture and give punishments. In this situation, the media has a big role to play. If the media play their roles well, it helps people to think twice and change their way of thinking. Torture is not a good method. It put people's lives in agony, not only a person's life but the whole society.

Recently, we heard a lot of depressing stories about police torture which occurred in our country. When the police officers wear their uniform, they think they are powerful and they do not respect the rules. A main reason for them not respecting the rules is because most of the police officers are not educated. When the police officers are stressful, dispersed or suffering from mental illness, they release their pressure or emotions on the people. They release their anger by torturing the suspects or the innocent people. The sad thing is that some of their mentality is very low and they torture and abuse the young children too. I think the police recruiting system and its training system should be changed. Police officers would then have a calm and pure mentality. However, the final responsibility goes to the government. The government has the responsibility to change the system.

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

Public relations depended on the person. The people see the police as a dangerous animal because of their acts. They regarded the police in a negative point of view. As the people don't have the clear mentality about the police system, they don't trust them at all. Here is a good example illustrating the relationship between the police and the people. When there is a road accident, people would punish the driver and burn the vehicle as they do not trust the police. People know that if the owner or the driver of the vehicle is a powerful and influential person, the police will take their sides. This is the mistrust built up by the police officers. Therefore the relationship between police and the civilians are very poor.

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

This is a hard question. Honestly speaking if I have a personal problem I would think twice before going to the police station. It is only when there is no other alternative I will go there because the Sri Lankan police is not a safe place for anybody.

I have gone to the police station many times due to some official purposes but I never went alone. I always contacted my friends and got their help as there might be situations when a female goes alone. If a female goes to the police station alone most of the police officers would go around asking many unwanted questions. Another issue is the way the police officers talk. Sometimes fear would automatically build up because of the way the police ask questions. Most of the poor women face problems due to this fear. Police officers know how to make use of the situation and they get the upper hand. All these situations occur due to loop holes in the system and the poor mentality of the police officers.

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

There are domestic violence laws and charter in Sri Lanka. The Women's Charter on December 1992 by the office of the State Minister for Women's affairs and it was approved by the government of Sri Lanka on 3rd March 1993. It clearly mentioned about the "Right to Protection from the Gender-based violence" and it included domestic violence as well. Later in 2005, the government has passed the Act No. 34 in 2005 which was based on domestic violence. Usually the laws and regulations are written on the books. However, according to my knowledge it was not properly implemented in Sri Lanka. Some women organization work and fight against domestic violence and try to implement laws, but unfortunately not a lot of civilians are aware of these laws. Also they fear going to the police to make even a simple complaint. A police friend of mine once told me, "The police station is not a place to solve family problems. If somebody goes to the police due to domestic violence or family problems, they will never come together". Furthermore he explained to me that there should be a system to give advice or counseling for the families in the police, but there is no such system in our policing system. Very recently I have read some news saying that in every police station, there is a separate unit for the women's and children issues, but I have no idea about their functioning.

Another issue is about the great influence from our cultural. Our culture taught us that the society is male-centered and women have to protect the family under any circumstances. But sad thing is that very few families practice the democratic family values. All the others especially families in the rural areas and plantation sectors are male dominated. A lot of women and children had suffered from domestic violence and violent behaviors by their fathers and husbands daily, but they would not come forward due to cultural barriers, or because their children's lack of knowledge about their rights. Women from the middle class and upper class are smarter and they would go directly to courts and divorce. However I don't know how to justify this. When comparing with the past nowadays the divorce rates are very high.

We cannot rely on the laws only because these laws cannot protect the people, and because they are not being implemented properly. Court delays are another problem. The court delay directly affects the system. This helps to take the grant for the perpetrators, police and also for the lawyers. This is the reality in our society.

My personal opinion is that people should know the values of the family, especially those who have children. All the rules and laws are there, but there should also be a system to solve family problems as well. The authorities should find the cause for domestic violence and should give a proper solution for them, and the government has the big role to play.