

## **Interview 33: SRI LANKA: Seetha Kumarasinghe**

Mrs. Seetha Kumarasinghe, a Sinhalese from Mathale is a 56-year old retired lady police sergeant.

### **What do you think about the policing system in Sri Lanka?**

I have worked for twenty-five years as a police sergeant in the police service. Despite that, I feel severely demoralized and discouraged about the workings of the police department. Hiding behind the police uniform, there are so many wrong things that the police do; I have seen these things over and over for many years. for a long time. Many police officers treat the police institution as if it is their private property. They want to keep their own pride; they do not hesitate to do what they want to do, whether it is good or bad.

I can give you one example: there was a woman who came to the police station with her daughter to file the case of her daughter's rape. None of the police officers did anything to record the statement. Instead, the officers began to make jokes about the woman and her daughter, insulting them in various ways. The mother and her daughter were placed in a pitiable situation. Then, one of the officers made an unwarranted suggestion to the mother and the daughter and started insulting them in very dirty language.

### **What do you think about the relationship between the police and the people?**

The relationship has degenerated to a very low level. The people have lost all faith and respect in the police. I know this from my own experiences. Poor and helpless people come to the police to make complaints. They want to make these complaints so that they can take some sort of legal action. They don't have great financial resources and they don't have connections. Because of this, they cannot get anything done at police stations. Due to these failures, those who are poor have no faith in the police.

Let me give you another example: I saw one woman who came to the police station every day for many days to make a complaint, but nobody recorded her complaint. Eventually, she came with an officer from a human rights commission, because she was unable to get the complaint recorded earlier. She stated that her 14-year old daughter had been abducted by someone in her neighborhood. The police officer told her that since the girl had been with the kidnapper for several days, there was nothing that the police could do. Then they said that the only thing the woman could do is to get her daughter to marry this boy. I was shocked to hear this; for a man to kidnap a 14-year old child is a statutory offence and it amounts to statutory rape. When a police officer gives advice like this, saying that there is nothing that can be done except to get the girl married to this boy, what kind of legal relief can people expect from the police as an institution? It was only because this woman came with an officer from a human rights commission that she was able to get her statement recorded and the case taken to court. The mother and daughter were deeply shocked by the attitude and behaviour of the police.

Due to the ignorance and neglect of the police officers, many criminals enjoy freedom. Incidents like this happen every day, and as a result, people have lost a lot of faith in the policing institution.

**If you had to face some problem, what steps would you take?**

Since I have been a police officer (even though I am retired now,) it is still possible for me to get something done. For example, I lost my identity card once and I went to the police station and I was able to get a statement recorded. Because I was a police officer, I was able to get that done quite easily. However, I have seen personally that many people who come for similar incidents to the police station have to come back to the police station many times to get a thing like that done. However, I am so discouraged by the situation, that if I can get my issues resolved by other means besides the police, I will do that rather than going to the police for help.

**What do you think about torture?**

The relationship between the police and torture is like the relationship between the tree and the bark. These two things are so close that they are inseparable. The majority of police officers believe that they won't be able to obtain any information or correct evidence without the use of torture. When police officers go for training, they hear about how to obtain evidence without using torture, but the majority of policemen do not like to hear things like that. Police officers get a mean type of enjoyment from the use of torture. Often, officers come and share their experiences about the way they have used torture and the results they have obtained. It is difficult to listen to the stories of their cruel assaults. To give you one example, one person was brought to the police station for a robbery. He was about 20 years old. He was tied by the thumbs of both his hands and pulled up and down from the top of the roof and assaulted. Later, the police found out that the person they had abused had not done the robbery, it was actually done by someone else. The police often torture people without inquiring into anything. There are police officers who don't do this, but I am describing from my observations what the majority of police officers do.

**What do you think about the law against domestic violence?**

From very recent times, that is from 2005, there has been a law against domestic violence. There are a lot of problems related to the actual working of this law. Police officers have been allowed to play some role in the workings of this law, but they do not show much responsibility when trying to deal with their obligations under this law. I have seen cases where an officer would be trying to record complaints relating to domestic violence, but others would be standing there telling him not to get into unnecessary problems, not to create unnecessary problems by getting involved in this type of case. In a case where a man had caused serious injuries - injuries which could have led to the death of his wife and their child - the police did not even take the woman to the hospital for treatment. She was advised to establish peace with her husband by herself, and this advice was given in a threatening way. Later, it was revealed that her husband owned a three-wheeler and he treated the police with liquor in the afternoons. This is the way that the police officers showed gratitude to this man. The wife's complaint was not taken seriously at all, and they did not even take her to the hospital.