

Interview 36: SRI LANKA: Chandralatha Fernando

Ms. Chandralatha Fernando, a 48-year old teacher from Dekinda, Nawalapitiya talks about Sri Lanka's policing system.

What do you think of the policing system of your country?

I am frustrated with the Sri Lankan police for several reasons. An example of the policing system's issues is as follows: one day there was a dispute among two young students at the school where I teach. Finally, one child pushed the other and he fell down a staircase. As a result, the child who fell fractured an arm joint. Since I was the class teacher for both children, I went to make a complaint at the police station, following the instructions of the principal. After I had made the complaint, I admitted the child to hospital, having informed the child's parents of the incident. Later, we learned that the parent of the child who pushed the child down the staircase had also gone to the police station and made a complaint. The police initiated an investigation based on this complaint. Later, we came to know that one of the police officers at the station was a relative of this child who enabled the second complaint and began investigations. We then learnt that the parents of the child who had been pushed down the staircase had received threats and were told to withdraw their previous complaint. This minor incident speaks to the larger policing system of Sri Lanka, where police officers abuse their power and harass the innocent and poor.

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

I think the use of torture by anyone under any circumstances is unacceptable. As a teacher, I am proud to say that I have never abused any of the children I have taught. Unfortunately, I don't see the same attitude with many of my fellow teachers. I have seen them inflicting physical and psychological torture to their students.

There are some police officers who execute their duties without torturing people. But I have seen many officers who torture innocent and poor people, mentally and physically. I want to mention here that many people give their attention to physical torture but speak little of the mental element of torture. My personal opinion of this is that we give more significance to the torture that we can see with our own eyes and that people can receive medical treatment for. But many of us ignore the psychological trauma and its effect on mental health on those who have been tortured. We need to examine the extent to which psychological/mental torture affects the life of those who have undergone torture. There is a severe lack of attention paid to this issue by responsible authorities and public officials in this country.

I also want to comment on the lack of professionalism on the part of those who are engaged in this field in Sri Lanka. As an example of the issues that affect the system, one day, a teacher who I have known for a long time was arrested due to a complaint made by another teacher who had a personal grudge against him. The complaint was fake and baseless. But because the teacher making the complaint had a relationship with some police officers who helped him make that complaint, the other teacher was arrested and tortured by the police officers for many months. Later, when the case came up in court, the teacher who made the complaint was acquitted due to medical evidence. The fact that the first teacher had a relationship with the police officers and had them torture this innocent person will never be considered by any of the state authorities in Sri Lanka's present context. Indeed, none of the state

authorities went to the trouble of assessing the agony that he underwent following their illegal actions. After all this happened, the education department interdicted his services, and his family struggled financially. He underwent mental trauma for a long time. He was also subjected to severe, degrading treatment by members of his extended family and community because he had been accused of rape. This is an example of the arbitrary, malicious and abusive behavior of police officers who make these illegalities possible in our society.

What is your idea of a good relationship between the police and citizens?

Oh! There is no need for us to talk about that. Sometimes I feel that the policing institution is a place where Sri Lankans are merely employed. I have observed the great distance between the police officers and the general public. I have noted that the lowerranking police officers are discriminating and degrading to the general public, often more so than the senior officers in service. For example, there is a woman in our village called Anula. Almost all the villagers help her as she is disabled. One day, she had went to the police station to make a complaint regarding a land dispute. But the police officers on duty did not take any interest in her case, even though she went to the police station more than ten times for this case. Such an experience speaks to the way the Sri Lankan police have become an institution that only help privileged people in our society.

If you have a problem, would you feel safe to go the police and complain?

If I had a problem, I would not go to the police seeking their assistance; I believe that it is better to bear the damage rather than to seek assistance from the police. There are police officers who were my former students, so if I need the help of the police, I am in a position to get it. But I believe that the police department has been established to protect the law and order of the country, respecting individual rights equally and impartially. I feel frustrated that only the privileged and powerful can use the services of the police. Those who go to the police station are often seeking revenge, and the police often enable this. As a result, the people have lost their faith and trust in the law enforcement agencies of this country. They no longer believe that this institutional setup is able to implement the rule of law in the country so that law and order can be restored. They are not willing to make complaints to the police; they have lost faith with that organization. The collapse of these law enforcement agencies have motivated the increasing tendency towards crime in this society.

Is there a law against domestic violence in your country?

I am not aware that there is a law against domestic violence. But I honestly believe that if such a law existed, it would benefit society. I have listened to many stories of children who come from abusive homes; I have seen how much of physical and mental trauma these students undergo while living in these dangerous situations. For example, one day while I was checking my students' homework, I found that one student had not done anything. When I asked him why, he said that his father came home in the evenings after drinking and beat his mother and his siblings. He said that his father also verbally abused his mother, his siblings and himself which made it difficult to complete his homework. He said that when his father was drunk, he had torn up his exercise books. From time to time, he said that his mother and her children would leave their home at night and stay with relatives, and then this child would do his work in school the next morning. But on this particular day, the father had come to the relative's house and fought with his mother, preventing the child from doing his homework. When I heard this story, I was shocked at the physical and mental trauma that this child, his mother and his

three siblings experienced. I know that the task of eliminating domestic violence from a society is not that simple, and cannot be overcome in a day. But I do think it is a contemporary necessity that we have a law that can control domestic violence in some way.