

Interview 40: SRI LANKA: R.M.C Menike

Mrs. R.M.C Menike (52) is Sinhalese and from Palapathwala, Matale. A staff nurse by profession; she talks about the policing system of Sri Lanka.

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

On many occasions I have not been satisfied with Sri Lankan Policing System. Because of my career I have to work with police personnel frequently. There were occasions in which I have spoken to police officers and we have shared our experiences. After listening to their stories I have developed a frustration, especially towards the senior officers in the police service.

Presently I am serving in a base hospital in the Matale district. It is a very difficult area. One day one officer attached to the police station next to the hospital, came to gain our service. He expressed his frustration with his profession. He explained many stories which made me surprised. It was far different to the situation that I knew before. One story he revealed was this:

One day one senior officer came for an inspection tour to his police station in the morning. At the beginning of the inspection he informed the officers of the station that he needed to have a set of furniture for a house. By the evening the officers had to prepare that for him. At the end the expense for the furniture was borne equally by all the lower ranking officers of the station. He went on to explain that it is very usual practice that when a senior officer comes for an inspection they have to provide what the officer requests. If they failed to fulfill the requirement they have to face various punishments in the future.

He explained the situation with one more example that shows the horrendous situation of the institution. One day the police officers attached to particular road block in their division had to receive a senior ranking police officer who was passing the area in his official vehicle. As he passed the road block he stopped the vehicle and called over the Officer-in-Charge of the contingent and gave him the cap of a special bottle. The senior officer told him that all of the officers manning the road blocks in the area had to find a bottle of that variety of foreign liquor. The officers searched all the liquor shops in the area but failed to find it. Finally they were able to buy one bottle from restaurant of a hotel for which they had pay a very big amount for that bottle. However, the police officers as a whole also were not able to bare that amount. In order to come up with the money they had to stop many vehicles and search for defects for which they could demand fines. Then instead of taking the drivers to court the officers had to suggest that they pay something in order to avoid having to go to court. The drivers all knew about the prolonged court delays and were happy to pay the 'fines'.

He told me that it is very common to have such illegal orders from senior officers when they were deployed to the traffic duties.

After listening to this case I understood psychological trauma that all these lower ranking police officers face while they are engaged in their duty. I further realize that though many people in the country blame the lower ranking police officers for their irregularities, unlawful occurrences and malpractices, most of the times it is the senior officers who actually responsible for these practices.

It is due to all these illegalities and corruption and malpractices that I am presently have deep frustration towards the entire police service of Sri Lanka.

What you think about the relationship between the police and the general public?

I think it has drastically deteriorated to a state that cannot be repaired easily. Now there is no easy way for that. As I observe there are deep frustrations and hatred among public against the police.

I think I can explain the present situation of this condition by an example. Usually police arrest and bring people who were suspected of misbehavior due to drunkenness to the hospitals to produce to a doctor for further examinations. It is one of the daily occurrences that happen in hospitals. I have seen those throughout my career. When police officers bring these suspects in I have witnessed in many incidents where officers treated them in a perverted and degrading manner. I have witnessed the way they talked to these suspects. In many occasions even before they produced before the doctors I have seen how they assault the suspects.

By witnessing this I can predict how the anger and hatred would have arisen among the public against the police.

What do you think about police torture?

I think police torture is one of the fundamental problems that we need to overcome as a nation if we want to see a bright future for the nation. I think this is happening due to the ignorance of the police officers in their profession and duty and while respecting the rights of the people. The fundamental purpose of the police is that they are there to protect the people and maintain the law and the order of the country. Each and every officer in the service is responsible and accountable for this sacred and utmost duty. If they properly understand the duty of responsibility to the service they are supposed to render to the public, they would be no torture at all.

I have seen many suspects who were admitted for treatment after they were extensively tortured by the police. By watching and treating them, while listening to their case histories I have learned how they were tortured in the most brutal and barbaric manner at the hands of the police. In many cases I have met innocents that have been arrested on false charges. But they have been subjected to a severe torture. In many occasions they were in critical condition when they got admitted. On many occasions these patients narrowly escaped death due to our intervention of the doctors and other paramedical servicers. Many of the patients who get admitted to the hospitals by the police officers after being subjected to extensive torture only get admitted at the end stage of their conditions. I am proud to say that we, the health sector of the country were very much trained and experienced to deal with these situations and this may be due to the many emergency situations which occurred during the intense war situation. If the health sector were unable to cope many of these patients would have died.

Anyway I would like to say that we have to take all the possible steps to totally eradicate this practice of torture. I personally believe that normal policeman needs to be at least up to the standard of the layman. So how can one man could treat another in this way? I think we have to think twice about what is going on in this country.

In official state premises a man killing other man while executing his official powers -- what is this? In the recent past in many reported occasions hundreds of people have died while they were in police custody. In many occasions I have treated patients who were subjected to torture by police, though we saved their lives they will be disabled for the rest of their life. On many occasion I have thought that even in our ancient times the Kings would have not used this kind of punishments to the people.

I think the perverted mind set of many officers are the main cause of these practices. This may be the result of those mindsets. How can this type of officers be in a state service which is meant to uplift the life of the people? I believe even an ignorant layman would not treat an animal in our country like this. These things are such cruel practice.

According to the leaning that I had in health sector I believe these practices can only happen as a result of the deviation of mentalities or psychological illness. Otherwise no one can execute such cruel things that they have done to these patients.

So I think the origin of this problem may be due to two defects in the police service. One way is at the recruitment process where there are obvious defects where the interviewers cannot identify the good officers who are in sound psychological and physical condition for the service.

Otherwise it may be due to the culture or the working environment that push the officers or encourage the ordinary officers to use this kind of inhuman practices in their carrier. Anyway it is the duty of the lawmakers or the supervising bodies of police service to look into the root cause of these practices and make necessary precautions to eradicate this practice. Anyhow I would say this cannot exist in civilized world. As a country we have to eradicate this as soon as possible. It is the government that needs to pay its highest attentions to these areas to find better remedies to these problems.

If you have a problem do you go to a police station to take their service?

I think you raised an important question as certainly there are many occasions that as ordinary citizens of the country where we need to get the service of the police. But due to the frustration and unclear image I have never been encouraged to go the police to get their service at all. I think if there is such situation I would try to get a service by some other option. Due to the experience that I am have on the policing system of Sri Lanka and the stories that I have learned I have no will to go to get their service.

I think due to the profession that I am engage in I belong to a category that deserves a certain respect in the society. So I think I have earned this certain self respect too. I know that when people went to the police station to get their services the officers in duty in some occasions completely destroy the respect of the people. Mainly it is the language they use to talk to the people who come to get their service. Sometimes it is their behaviour which is generally of a very lower standard.

I can explain the situation with example: one of my friends who was working with me in the same service one day went to the police station for a land dispute. While they were accepting her complaint the police officers on duty cursed her in very obscene language. Later my friend learned that the other party of the dispute had talked to the officers in the station before her arrival as they had a relative in that station. This is the way how innocent people are put into very shameful and disgustful situations due to personal bias of the officers.

Is there a law against domestic violence in Sri Lanka? What is your idea on that?

I know that there is such law in the country. There was an awareness programme for all our staff also on that law. So I am proud that we are having such law in the country. The daily reports of electronic media like, televisions, radio and the printed media as well explore many incidents that happened in a widespread manner. In these cases wives and children have been subjected to many difficulties and very vulnerable situations. As a health sector professional I have experienced the same. I have participated in treating many patients who got injured due to domestic violence.

I learned that the particular law provides special protection to the wives and the children in vulnerable situations especially against the cruelties that happen domestically and even against the continuing harassments. I know that there are provisions that enrich parties to take even legal actions too. I personally am happy with that law. When I listen to the patients, the wives who were subjected to domestic violence I know that this is one of the major problem that exists in the country. I listen to the cases that end up with hospitalization. But the number of people who keep the situations hidden under the carpet and suffer alone would be much more.

I can explain my experience with an example. One day a 14 year child was admitted to the hospital where I was in service for treatment. The doctors diagnosed a fracture on the right leg. When the child was admitted the mother of the patient also came to the hospital and got treated for a head injury. The mother was with another child of one and half year. Though the mother came to the hospital with a hemorrhage her condition was not that severe so the doctors put in three sutures and were able to treat without much difficulty. Then the mother left the hospital. But at the very beginning we didn't know the connectivity between these two patients. Later the child who was treated as an indoor patient revealed that her father assaulted her mother due to being inebriated and when the child tried to intervene in his intoxicated state he struck her as well.

Then we let the hospital police post know the situation asked them to start an investigation. Later we came to know that legal steps have been taken against the father under the new Prevention of Domestic Violence Act.

So I believe that this law would help to protect the wives and the children within the families.