

Interview 6: SRI LANKA: B. Yvonn

Mrs. B. Yvonne is a 34-year old mother who resides in Kandy. She had to visit police stations due the robbery of her household items. She talks here about the lessons she learned.

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

There are good laws but they are not implemented by the police. The officers may record a statement, but by the next day, this statement has completely disappeared. The law is not properly enforced in this country; anybody can make the law virtually disappear. Now I will give you an example: someone stole all the belongings in my house, and my husband and I went to make a complaint. When we went to the crime division of the police station, they told us that they could not record this and told us to go to the section on small complaints. When we got to that section, they sent us back to the crime division and like this we were sent up and down many times before someone recorded our statement. After one week had passed, we found out that nothing had been done on our complaint. So we went to make inquiries and found that there was no record of our complaint in the police's books. Something had happened to the record. This is the type of thing that happens in the police stations.

What do you think about the use of torture?

If we were to examine ten police officers, it is unlikely that we would find even two that do their job properly. The police can turn a good man into a bad man. For example, suppose there is a small transgression. A policeman might try to find out what happened if he wants to help the transgressor correct his wrongdoing. Instead, what often happens is that the blame is placed on someone who has accidentally become involved in the issue, some innocent person. The police know full well who the criminals are and who is innocent, but frequently it is the innocent that the police place these problems on.

These people are then put in prison and when they are released, they are extremely angry people, and often it is then that they become criminals. When people have been tortured, beaten and punished for crimes they did not commit, they come to hate everything and they hate the law as well. This turns them into completely different people.

The police should stop torture, harassment and ill treatment because it really doesn't help anybody. The law should be used to help people, to understand their problems and to reform them and do something good for society.

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

People don't want to go to police stations even when they have a problem. People who go to police stations have to go numerous times before their complaint is finally recorded. The police will keep asking people to return on another day. The complainants attend hearings, but the accused are never produced. In this way the complainants are constantly harassed.

Today, when people see a policeman 100 metres away, they become upset. That is how big the distance is in the relationship between the people and the police. If there is to be a good relationship between the public and the police, there should be proper implementation of the law. When the implementation of the law is poor, the relationship between the police and the people is also very poor. If the police do their job properly, people will respect them and their impression of the police would improve.

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

I don't think I would have any security if I went to make a complaint. In fact, as I have said earlier, I have made complaints to the police station. But they have never acted on the complaints or done anything positive with these complaints. I feel deeply discouraged and demoralized because of the way the police have dealt with me. I am discouraged about the law itself.

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

If there is a law to help families, that law should help to solve problems between people. If the law favours men, then what happens is that there is a separation of the parties. If the person who is at fault is assisted by the police, who then harass the victim, then there is injustice. That is the kind of thing that happens. It is not because the law is bad but because the enforcement of the law is bad. The officers who enforce the law are not good. Let us say that we take some action about a family dispute by going to court. What happens? We have to pay so much money to the lawyers and have to go so many times over many, many years. It is because of this that people become bankrupt. It is far better to settle problems through discussions, but not through this kind of system. The law must be able to solve these very complex problems, but it appears that the law as it is today is only there to harass people and if you try to use the law to solve a family problem, the situation becomes even worse.