

## Human Rights Achievements Garner Deserved Accolades

A lawyer who doesn't like to go to court, Sri Lanka JusticeMaker Harshi Chithrangi Perera is a human rights activist who spends her time helping torture victims. Despite the seriousness of her profession, Harshi comes across to those who meet her as a chatty, bubbly person, dedicated to her work.

The treasurer of Janasansadaya (or "*People's Forum*"), situated in Panadura, Harshi's work, in addition to representing tortured individuals, addresses women's and children's rights. "Janasansadaya is a non-profit organization whose mission is a torture-free Sri Lanka," Harshi said.

"My father and a few of his friends began the NGO in 1992, since then it has progressed from shedding light on general human rights issues to specifically addressing torture in Sri Lanka." Following in her father's footsteps, Harshi is working in the Forum and continues to do everything she can in the hope of achieving their goals.

She says that clients who come to them are not asked why they were tortured, as—according to Harshi—"there can be no reason for torture, you just can't torture anyone." Speaking of her work, Harshi stated that they help victims lodge complaints with the relevant authorities. "You can't say that we exactly give legal aid; rather we have lawyers who will represent victims and pay their fees," she explains. "Over the past few years Janasansadaya has conducted several cases in the High Courts, Supreme Courts and Magistrate Courts.

Born and bred in Wadduwa, where she still lives, her work at the People's Forum began when she was at Colombo University. She opted for an LLB at the Open University. "It was while I was doing my LLB that I started to work at Janasansadaya," she recalls. "The first project that I did at the Janasansadaya involved children, immediately after the tsunami – we distributed educational equipment, arranged a feasibility study and did everything we could to provide infrastructure facilities for the schools," she said.

In addition to implementing her JusticeMakers project, in which she provides legal aid to five female inmates, she is also conducting awareness programmes for those who are in prison. "Most of my work centres on torture victims, but I also work and fight for the rights of women and children." Harshi also works together with the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC).

A regular writer to the Sri Lankan Guardian, Harshi specialises on human rights issues and victim interviews. "Writing is another passion that I have and something that I hope to continue," she said.

Speaking of the work, Harshi says that they've created Victim Solidarity Groups where they conduct awareness programmes and helped victims and their families come to terms with their experiences. "*Street Programme for Justice Reforms*" was another programme that we

conducted. We displayed banners with information regarding torture, raising awareness among people from a wide geographic background,” she explained.

“Testimonial therapy” is another form of counselling for torture victims, which helps the victims come to terms with their experiences by writing about what happened and talking about it to others. “We write down the experiences of the victims, then read it back to them. If they allow it, we then print a book and present it to him or her at a programme. There, the victim will read their story to those present.” Harshi explained that this gives strength to the victims and allows them to find peace.

The only child to two former teachers, Harshi says that her parents give her immense support in everything she does. “I go to my father for advice and any help that I need on projects”.

Harshi says that anyone can come visit Janasansadaya at 81/2, Arthur V. Dias Mawatha, Panadura, Sri Lanka or visit their website on [www.janasansadaya.org](http://www.janasansadaya.org) or call them on 38-2235191 or 38-2231415 for more information or help.

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