

## Meeting a crucial need

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[Harshi C. Perera](#)

by **Nabeela Hussain**

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**(December 07, Colombo, Sri Lanka Guardian)** A lawyer who doesn't like to go to court, Harshi Chithrangi Perera is a human rights activist who spends her time helping victims of torture. Despite the seriousness of her profession, Harshi comes out to those who meet her as a chatty, bubbly person who is dedicated to her work.

The treasurer of Janasansadaya or People's Forum that is situated in Panadura, Harshi's work involves the rights of torture victims and also women's and children's rights. "Janasansadaya is a Non Profit Organization with a mission for a torture free Sri Lanka," Harshi said.

Her work at the People's Forum began when she was at the Colombo University and continues to the present time. "I don't want to go to court and practice law there as I want to continue working for Janasansadaya and the rights of the people who come there seeking our help," she said.

Following her father's footsteps, Harshi has worked her way in the Forum and continues to do everything she can in the hope of achieving their goals. "My father and a few of his friends began the NGO in 1992 and since then it has progressed from shedding light to human rights issues and now to torture in the country," she said.

She says that anyone who comes to them is not asked why they were tortured, "There can be no reason for torture, you just can't torture anyone," she said. Speaking of her work, Harshi said that they help the victim lodge a complaint with the relevant authorities. "You can't say that we exactly give legal aid, we have lawyers who will represent victims and we pay their fees," she explained.

Harshi says that for the past few years the Organization has conducted several cases in the High Courts, Supreme Courts and Magistrate Courts.

"The first project that I did at the Janasansadaya involved children and it was right after the tsunami - we distributed educational equipment and also did a feasibility study and did everything that we could to provide infrastructure facilities for the schools," she said.

Harshi also works together with the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC). Winning a fellowship as the Justice Maker from IBJ an American NGO, Harshi is now handling a project where she can give legal aid to five women inmates and also conduct awareness programmes for those who are in prison. "Most of my work in centres around torture victims but I also work and fight for the rights of women and children," she said.

A regular writer to the Sri Lankan Guardian, Harshi writes of human rights issues and interviews victims as well. "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 helped victims and their families come to terms with their experiences and also conduct awareness programmes.

"Street Programme for Justice Reforms was another programme that we conducted where we displayed banners with information regarding torture and created awareness among the people in many different areas," she explained.

"Testimonial therapy" is another form of therapy for victims, which helps the victims come to terms with their experiences by writing about what happened and talking about it to others. "We have written down the experiences of the victims and then read it back to them, if they give permission then we print the book and present it to him or her at a programme, where the victim will read the story of what he or she has written to those present," she said. Harshi explained that this gives strength to the victims and also gives them mental contentment.

Speaking of her childhood Harshi says that she was born and bred in Wadduwa and it is where she lives currently. "I schooled at Sri Sumangala Balika in Panadura and did Bio for my first try at A/L's and when I didn't get the adequate marks I decided not to continue with my studies," she said.

It was the Chief Priest at the Sri Lankarama temple, Dhamma Wansa Thero who changed her mind and convinced her to continue her studies. "Under his guidance I studied for my A/L's again, but I did Arts this time and I got into university," she said. She says that it was he who conducted tuition classes for her subjects and also found her teachers for her other subjects.

Harshi however says that she was unable to get into the Law Faculty of the Colombo University as she didn't have the adequate marks. Therefore she did her LLB at the Open University. "It was while I was doing my LLB that I started to work at Janasansadaya," she said.

The only child to parents who were both teachers, Harshi says that her parents give her immense support in everything that she does. "I go to my father for advice and any help that I need in the projects that I do," she said.

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.