

# Silent Tears

## Ms. Vindhya WEERATUNGA (Sri Lanka)

Kumari was a beautiful girl, born to a middle-class family in Sri Lanka. She had two younger sisters. Life was not very kind to her from the beginning. Her father passed away suddenly, when she was 10 years old. Her mother became the breadwinner of the family, overnight.

As the eldest girl, Kumari had to shoulder the main household responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning and helping her younger sisters with their school work, as her mother was busy working. Kumari became the 'mother' to her sisters.

However, thanks to the free education system in Sri Lanka, Kumari completed her secondary education and gained admission to a local university. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in Management and also gained a professional qualification in finance.

Soon after graduating, Kumari found a job at a private company. She worked hard and managed to save enough money to have a simple wedding ceremony, when she got married to Saman, whom she met whilst in university. After marriage, she moved into Saman's house and started living with her in-laws.

Soon after, Kumari got pregnant. It was only after marriage that Kumari learnt that her mother-in-law suffered from a mental disorder. Kumari suffered in the hands of her mother-in-law and was again back to cooking and cleaning, in addition to going to work. She dreamt of the day when she would have her baby and looked forward to it.

Unfortunately, life had other plans for Kumari. Her baby was born dead, which devastated Kumari. However, she had to get back to her normal life. She returned to work and in work she found happiness. After two years, Kumari got pregnant again and gave birth to a baby boy.

Yet, the miseries in Kumari's life were not over. When her son was about two years old, doctors diagnosed him with a speech disability. Kumari struggled to keep up with her work, household chores, and also attend to her child. Her husband was increasingly working late into nights, claiming to be busy at work. Since the child kept getting worse and needed special care, Kumari had no other option but to leave her job and stay at home.

Amidst all this, one day, Kumari was in for the shock of her life when Saman told her that he was in love with someone else at work. He demanded for a divorce. When Kumari refused to give him the divorce, Saman left home to live with his mistress. This affected Kumari and especially the child terribly. Finally, Kumari agreed to the divorce. Even though Kumari was raising the child on her own, with child support from Saman, she was not able to gain the legal custody of the child. The court determined the legal custody to be given to the father considering the best interest of the child, as in many similar cases in Sri Lanka, especially when the mother is not an income earner.

Even though Kumari is now considering moving to another country to start life fresh, she is unable to take her child and leave, because her ex-husband would not

allow her to take the child out of the country. Opportunities are rare for her to return to work too, as she has had a career break and companies are reluctant to recruit her.

Kumari moved back to live with her mother, who is now old, retired, and bitter. She has had a difficult life herself and does not want to be burdened with a divorced daughter and a grandchild with special needs.

Kumari is not the only woman in Sri Lanka who has been faced with these circumstances. There are hundreds of divorce cases pending in the Sri Lankan courts and the number is increasing rapidly. In Kumari's case, her ex-husband married his girlfriend and is living happily. But for Kumari, it is very challenging to find a man who is willing to accept her, plus her child. If she cannot find employment soon, her misery will continue for many more years to come.

What does the future hold for Kumari? Her silent tears tell the story of many such women in Sri Lanka.

(Inspired by a true story. Names have been changed to maintain anonymity.)