
MORALITY AND THE POLICE

A series of developments over the past few weeks has brought into focus the role of the state and the Police in safeguarding certain notions of “public morality” in Sri Lanka. Recent news reports show that a number of couples who were holding hands, kissing and cuddling in public areas including parks and beaches have been arrested in the cities of Kurunegala, Matara and Colombo. The arrests in Colombo have been attributed to a concerted crack down on “vice” within the capital by the Police. Similarly the removal of “indecent” hoardings in and around Colombo city was carried out by the Bureau for the Prevention of Abuse of Children and Women of the Sri Lanka Police. Apparently the Bureau made this move because it was “prompted by the sense that the younger generation of Sri Lankans do not show sufficient respect to women and that modern culture treats them as commodities.” This also comes on the heels of moves by the Women and Children’s Desk of the Police to ban all pornographic content on mobile phones through the Children’s Courts.

The Police appear to be guided by a strong conviction of the need to protect and respect women as well as to fight against the “commodification” of women in Sri Lanka. This is indeed laudable, and Cat’s Eye is pleased to note the concern shown by the Police on these issues. However when the Police decide to act on an issue such as this it is extremely important to question as to whether these measures really do protect women or whether the outcomes and fall outs of this kind of action outweigh its benefits. This is obviously not something that can be quantified or measured but nevertheless any executive action seeking to safeguard public morality needs to be carefully thought out.

Public Morality

In this article Cat’s Eye will explore the implications of policing “public morality” for society in general and more specifically for women in Sri Lanka. A glance at the cases

referred to above suggests different understandings of acts that “corrupt” public morality. This leads to the question as to whether “indecent” hoardings on public roads in Colombo are as likely to “corrupt” public morality as the sight of couples holding hands in public? Furthermore reports on the arrests of couples in Colombo also note that the Police raided guest houses, hotels and motels in the early hours of the morning. This is also problematic since none of these places are essentially “public” in the same sense that a billboard is public. Clearly the definitions of acts that are “indecent”, acts that can “corrupt” public morality and areas that are considered

The role of family, education, culture, religion etc in defining public morality, in learning to respect other members of society – should be highlighted here. The “religiousness” of Sri Lankan society as indicated in statistics – does not seem to translate into our daily practices in the “public sphere.” The sexual harassment of women and girls on roads and in public transport is an indication of this. Another indication is that any woman who chooses to walk about in the city in the night, unaccompanied, does so at a risk to her safety – both physical and emotional. Is it possible at all to change such negative perceptions of women, by removing “indecent” hoardings? Moreover, is the Police the most appropriate public authority to take up this matter?

Cat’s Eye raises these questions because it is well aware that beneath the veneer of protecting public morality lies a stricter policing of a woman’s morality, a control over her body and her sexuality. Within such a context Cat’s Eye wonders at which point a private consensual act impinges on considerations of public morality. Who should ultimately decide on the demarcation between the boundaries of public and private morality? With this in mind the earnestness shown by the Police to protect public morality require a careful reexamination in terms of what it means for women in Sri Lanka. ■

We reproduce several recent Cat's Eye articles which cover relevant topics . Courtesy, *Sunday Island*