

## Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka Commemorates International Women’s Day 2026



The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) commemorated International Women’s Day 2026 on 10 March 2026 at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (BMICH). The event was held under the theme “Women, Climate Change, and Disasters: A Rights-Based Response with Lessons from Cyclone Ditwah”



The programme focused on the experiences of women impacted by cyclone Ditwah and highlight the need for inclusive, rights based dialogue that strengthens resilience, equality, dignity and women’s participation in recovery and decision making. Approximately 150

participants representing government institutions and civil society organizations attended the event.

The keynote address was delivered by Ms. Janaha Selvaras, Commissioner of the National Women's Commission. In her remarks, she highlighted the structural inequalities that women continue to face in their everyday lives. She emphasized that women today require more than recognition they need targeted action to address structural inequalities.

Climate change, she noted, is not just an environmental issue but a human rights challenge, affecting fundamental rights like life, health, food, water, housing, and development. Legal developments, including the UN recognition of the human right to a healthy environment (2012–2022) and the 2025 International Court of Justice judgment, establish state obligations to protect the climate system for present and future generations. She highlighted that developing countries, including Sri Lanka, are increasingly facing climate change litigation emphasizing rights-based approaches.

Ms. Selvaras, stressed that climate change affects women disproportionately, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, due to gendered roles, economic dependence, and limited access to decision-making. Women are not just victims; they are agents of resilience and social transformation. Cyclones and disasters, such as Cyclone Ditwah, revealed the intersectional vulnerabilities of women, including those from minority communities, and exposed issues like gender-based violence, displacement, and loss of livelihood.

From a legal perspective, Sri Lanka's climate governance is largely through general environmental laws (e.g., National Environmental Act No. 47 of 1980 and Disaster Management Act No. 13 of 2025) but lacks a gender-sensitive approach. The speaker argued for women-centered climate policies that recognize women as decision-makers, address structural vulnerabilities, and integrate intersectional perspectives.



Furthermore, she highlighted the role of the National Commission on Women, established under Women Empowerment Act No. 37 of 2024, to protect and promote women's rights, including advocacy, policy formulation, and addressing climate-related gender vulnerabilities. She concluded that disasters like Cyclone Ditwah are not isolated events but ongoing challenges, and effective laws, policies, and institutions are essential for justice, inclusivity, and foresight. Rights, response, and action are essential to ensure women's protection, empowerment, and participation in climate change and disaster management.

A dedicated session was also conducted to share the experiences of women directly affected by Cyclone Ditwah. The discussion was moderated by Ms. Dulmini Ekanayake, Attorney-at-Law. The panel featured diverse perspectives, including representatives from the disabled community, an entrepreneur, a Free Trade Zone worker, and a social activist, who shared their challenges and insights on disaster impacts and recovery.

Furthermore, a panel discussion and interactive question-and-answer session were held to examine the responses of relevant government institutions and the measures currently being implemented to address the challenges faced by women affected by Cyclone Ditwah.

The panel discussion featured representatives from several key institutions, including the National Building Research Organisation, the Central Environmental Authority, the Disaster Management Division, the Ministry of Public Administration, Provincial Councils and Local Government, and the Faculty of Law at the University of Colombo. This discussion was moderated by Dr. Amali Wedagedara.

The event served as an important platform for dialogue and collaboration, highlighting the need for strengthened institutional responses and inclusive policy approaches to ensure that

women's rights and perspectives remain central in climate resilience and disaster management efforts.