



(<http://www.life.lk/>)



([https://twitter.com/dmlife\\_lk](https://twitter.com/dmlife_lk))



(<https://www.facebook.com/life.lk/>)



([https://www.instagram.com/life\\_lk/](https://www.instagram.com/life_lk/))



(<https://www.youtube.com/c/LifeOnlineSriLanka>)

# Women at Work - Dilanthi Amaratunga

SEP 04 2018.

VIEWS 655

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Email](#)

[More](#)

When the Indian Ocean tsunami struck the island back in 2004, it not only affected many lives but it inspired a few as well. One individual who was inspired to make a change in terms of disaster management was Dilanthi Amaratunga. Being a proud product of Visakha Vidyalaya, Dilanthi was determined to contribute her expertise in infrastructure development towards bringing about disaster management. Today she is a Professor of Disaster Risk Management at the University of Huddersfield in the UK and leads the Global Disaster Resilience Centre at the University. This Centre is committed to excellence in research, education and advocacy to improve the resilience of

nations and communities to disasters. In addition to that, she is involved in various other organisations including the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) and is working towards bringing about a holistic approach to reduce the risk and impact of disasters.



During a recent visit to Sri Lanka, Dilanthi spoke to W@W and shared her thoughts about why she got involved in this field, the progress in Sri Lanka and the challenges faced.

### **How did you get involved in this field?**

I come from a construction management and quantity surveying background and I migrated to the UK in 1997 to do my PhD. I was doing research related to infrastructure development and management at the time and in 2004 when the tsunami happened I was in Sri Lanka on a family holiday. When I saw the devastation I thought it's actually a good opportunity for me to continue the equation in terms of infrastructure development. This is because there are a lot of people including NGOs who concentrate on the 'last mile'. This is about treating people and providing them shelter

but this is short term. In fact, long term sustainability is very important and this is my concentration. We then applied for many research projects and sought PhD opportunities and went from strength to strength.

## **From when the tsunami happened to now, how have we progressed in terms of disaster management?**

I see a huge progress because the tsunami was a big wakeup call for the whole world. The Sendai Framework which came in to place in 2015 will guide all activities until 2030. Sri Lanka and 186 other countries have signed a UN agreement as well. The UNISDR manages the disaster aspect and these frameworks provide a guideline for every country including Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka activities such as passing the Disaster Management Act and the setting up of the Disaster Management Ministry as a mainstream ministry are progressive steps. In addition to that, the inauguration of the Association of Disaster Risk Management Professionals will be a good independent platform because I see big gaps between the government, private and the university sectors. Therefore an independent body like this is important for a country like Sri Lanka to provide that independent platform for people to come together. This field cuts across a lot of sectors including education, health, transport etc. Therefore it needs an interdisciplinary involvement rather than working in isolation.

## **How much of research has gone into setting up of these technologies?**

Quite a lot. In the past, disaster used to be concentrated only on the response aspect. Whenever something happens the NGOs would come in and provide the response for the people. But this has changed since 2015. Now the concentration is very much towards prevention. When you invest in prevention then you don't need to invest a lot of money on the response. One cannot prevent a natural hazard but we could prevent the impact of the damage. Therefore the number of people who lose their lives at a time of a disaster has drastically reduced. During the recent floods in Sri Lanka, people knew where they should evacuate the people to and this saved a lot more lives. But I think there needs to be more efforts in minimizing the economic losses. This still needs to develop in Sri Lanka. If you take countries like the UK they have different schemes to support small businesses. Prevention has very much to do with research and policy. This is because the policy has to be based very much on the results of the research rather than developing them on an ad hoc basis.

## **What is the tendency for women to get involved in this field and take a lead?**

In the NGO sector when it comes to dealing with people, there are quite a lot of women at the practical level. But at the research level I don't see many women participating. There are quite a few females around but unfortunately, they are not heavily involved. But I think more women should really consider these areas because on a positive note one doesn't have to do construction or engineering to get into this field. The issue is very much interdisciplinary so depending on your expertise you can pool it into the equation. It will definitely address a certain aspect of disaster management. This way there is a lot of hope but I see a lack of role models. At the Disaster Management Centre among the directors and deputy directors there are hardly any females. This may be because of the lack of role models and identifying disaster risk reduction as a potential research area. There is also a lack of publicity. I feel lucky that I was able to get involved in this field and I was promoted by the university back in the UK to continue this work. I think females need to be more ambitious and they should continue their work after they leave university. Most females who are capable of carrying out this work leave the country because I have come across a lot of Sri Lankan females who are doing well in other countries.

## **Tell us about the Global Disaster Resilience Centre.**

It was an approach to capitalize on the human capacity so that we can do our activities under this Centre. These activities include research, education and outreach. We have graduated over 40 PhD students in this area and it includes a lot of Sri Lankans as well. However, a lot of them haven't come back except for three females who were my students. These Centres are useful to demonstrate the capacity but even individuals could also do research in this area. But I do not know how easy it is to set up a center in Sri Lanka.

## **Is Sri Lanka equipped with all or most facilities in order to carry out research?**

I think comparing to several years ago we do have a momentum, but it is not enough. There are many overseas schemes which could be accessed by the Sri Lankan research community. But either due to lack of awareness or due to the fact that they are occupied with other work, these opportunities are often missed. The subject itself is global and it is important to collaborate with other institutions. The universities of Moratuwa, Colombo, and Peradeniya have many international

partnerships and everybody should be doing joint activities. Since we are a developing country the government may not be able to pump funding similarly to the UK. But even countries like Bangladesh works with other universities to tap into European funding but Sri Lanka needs to gain that momentum. Therefore rather than being partners, we need to take the lead and hence according to my observations the research base needs to improve.

### **What's the most satisfying aspect in your career?**

It's such a good feeling to see PhD students completing their degrees and starting their academic careers. Several of my students have become professors as well. Giving publication and collaboration opportunities and staff exchanges are another aspect of it. A lot of my students have gone to other countries through our project funding. Of course, there are challenges when it comes to politics and I try my best to stay away from politics. It's really good to see how the research has provided input to the policy. If policymakers don't consider the latest research there is no point in implementing it.

### **The most challenging...**

My family lost about four years of our lives during the JVP troubles back in the late '80s and early '90s. It was such a waste and a major challenge. Age-wise we lost several years and after that also it wasn't easy. When I had my daughter there were tough times again. I have seen the challenges but I haven't been discriminated at any point. One needs to demonstrate through their activities because you cannot convince by just talking.

### **How do you see the future of Sri Lanka in terms of disaster management?**

The research base is improving and the government backing is there as well. However, the lack of connections between these sectors is the main issue. But I'm very hopeful that the association of professionals established is a step in the right direction but it is important that they maintain their independence. It should be able to attract the researchers, NGOs, policymakers and the government alike. Sri Lanka has a long way to go but there is space and many leaders are coming

through from the research point of view. But they also need to go for practice and policy as well. We need to look out and there are a lot of opportunities to attract funding and we are a capable set of people who can take lead in terms of research.

*Pics by Nimalsiri Edirisinghe*

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Kamanthi  
Wickramasinghe**

(<http://www.life.lk/author/28/Kamanthi-Wickramasinghe>)

(<http://www.life.lk/author/28/Kamanthi-Wickramasinghe>)

A psychology graduate who eventually became a journalist to be a voice for unheard voices. A proud Sri Lankan - Thalassophile - Travel fan - Nature lover - Chocoholic - Extraordinarily loud - Frequent laughaholic. Follow me on Instagram - @kamzylifeTM or FB – Kamanthi Wickramasinghe