

Pullquote: "You think it wouldn't affect you, but there's a very high possibility it can."

Storyteller name: Shekainah Mendis

Location: Colombo, Sri Lanka

Disaster name: 2016 floods Sri Lanka

Disaster year: 2016

As-told-to: Sylvia Ndirangu

Edited by: Sylvia Ndirangu

Shekainah Mendis, a lively and motivated young woman, comes from Colombo, Sri Lanka's growing business hub. Shekainah was born into a family that has long lived in this coastal city, and she grew up surrounded by the regular shifts in the amount of monsoon rains. At 14, she was a determined tenth-grade student who balanced her academics with a love of extracurricular activities such as acting and sports. Her mother, aware of the region's vulnerability to flooding, had rebuilt their family's home on a sloping foundation.

Despite these preparations and the community's familiarity with seasonal rains, nothing could have prepared them for the enormous rainfall that hit in May 2016. This disaster was an important moment in Shekainah's life, changing her sense of normalcy and developing a greater awareness of climate change's real consequences.

Shekainah's story becomes a painful reminder of the vulnerability and resilience required to face disasters as she recounts her experiences during those difficult days. The purpose of this introduction is to set the stage for Shekainah's personal experience of the disaster by clearly introducing her, her background, and how the floods affected her life.

Colombo, the vibrant commercial capital of Sri Lanka, was my home. At 14, I was in 10th grade and preparing for our major O-level examinations. These tests are an important point in our academic high school journey, these exams determined future educational choices and chances. The pressure to perform well was intense, because success in these exams could result in admission to important colleges and universities. My days were full of activity from sunrise to sunset. School ran from 7:30 a.m. until 1:30 p.m., but that was only the beginning. After that, I would dash to drama club rehearsals, Interact Club meetings or sports practice. I swam, played basketball, and participated in athletics. By the time I arrived home, which was usually around 6 or 7 p.m., I was worn out.

My mother had rebuilt our house, her childhood home, with a sloping foundation to prevent flooding. We were used to a lot of rain during the two monsoon seasons we had every year, which are usually from October to November and May to July. The rivers and canals would rise, then fall. It was just part of life in Colombo.

On rainy days, I recall making it a habit to check the water levels in the Swan River and the canals. The speed at which the water rose and the intensity of the thunderstorms could indicate whether a season was likely to be harsher than usual. We had no idea that this year's rains would be unlike any other.

The extremely high rains in May 2016 were the first indications that something was wrong. I recall looking out my window and seeing the rain pounding on the glass with a force I'd never seen before. The familiar pitter-patter was replaced by a thunderous roar. "This isn't normal," I thought, a knot of worry forming in my stomach.. With the exception of the steady rush of

water, the busy streets fell strangely quiet. There was a tension in the air, and it felt heavy and thick with wetness. Even the rain's usual scent changed. There were rumours of possible floods at school. Sandbags started to show up outside houses and businesses. There were several alerts regarding strong showers and increasing water levels on the news. The entire city seemed to be holding its breath, curious about how awful things may become.

As the rains got heavier, our daily lives were turned upside down. Getting to school became difficult because the roads were dangerous, with water coming up to the tires of cars. "You really don't want your vehicle on the road because the water is going to go into your exhaust and it's just going to mess up your car," I remember thinking. Every day we worried that our fabric school shoes might become wet and leave us with drenched feet. The usually colourful city took on a dull grey appearance. "Everything was just wet and muddy," I remembered, "and constantly a little cold." At school, rumours of potential closures spread, but classes went on. The community rallied together - I overheard my parents offering shelter to friends in riskier areas. It wasn't until I saw the television showing "houses underwater in some areas" and heard about landslides that I realised how serious the situation was. We arrived at school one morning to find that a large tree had fallen and blocked the main entrance. That's when it hit home: this wasn't our normal overflow. Despite the chaos, there was a sense of unity.

After several days of constant rain, the floodwaters began to subside in early June. The destruction was enormous, with homes demolished, roads washed away, and people killed. According to official estimates, at than 200 people died and hundreds of others were displaced. As the waters decreased, they left a heavy coating of mud and debris, a reminder of nature's power. Looking back as an adult, I realise how fortunate my family was to have avoided the worst of it. The image of soldiers rescuing people from rooftops and the community banding together to provide assistance left an unforgettable effect on me. I recall our school organising donation drives, with each class bringing different basic items. While I didn't completely understand the connection to climate change at 14, the event created a seed of awareness that has developed over time.

The 2016 floods were a wake-up call that shifted my perspective on climate change and natural disasters. "You think it wouldn't affect you," I thought, "but there's a very high possibility it can." The experience increased my awareness of climate issues. The long-term effects on our community were significant, with people becoming more cautious and placing greater importance on being prepared for disasters. I discovered that climate change is unexpected and can occur anywhere. This experience has made me more concerned about the future, but it's also sparked hope. Seeing people come together during a crisis and take small steps like recycling gives me hope that we can make a difference if we act quickly

Looking back on the 2016 floods, I realise how unpredictable and widespread climate change can be. This encounter has increased my awareness and concern about our changing world. The floods in Colombo and the wildfires I've seen in Canada demonstrate that no location is immune. However, there is also hope. Witnessing people come together amid disasters, such as the military forces rescuing flood victims and schools organising contribution drives, gives me hope in the world's resilience. My message to others is simple: "Believing in this does not require you to have personally experienced it. You know it's real, especially when you're with other people who are going through it." We must be more cautious, attentive, and proactive in solving climate change. Every small action matters, from recycling to raising awareness. Together, we can make a difference.