Accumulated Suffering, Aggravated Vulnerabilities: The Impact of Ditwah in the Eastern Province

October 2026

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கொள்கை ஆய்வுக்கான நிலையம்
ADAYAALAM
CENTRE FOR POLICY RESEARCH

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Address: 70 Manal Tharai Road, Jaffna, Sri Lanka

T: +94 (21) 222 3132

E: info@adayaalam.org

Web: www.adayaalam.org

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Introduction

On 28th November 2025, Cyclone Ditwah made landfall in Sri Lanka. Arriving at the Eastern coast, it already brought 2 days earlier strong winds and bouts of rains followed by large-scale flooding. When it moved further land inward, it caused landslides in the up country that buried entire villages. Finally, it reached the West coast, and densely populated urban centres were swamped with water from rivers and overflowing drainages. Wherever Ditwah went, it left behind a swath of destruction. It directly killed more than 600 people, with 173 still missing[1]. Hundreds of thousands were displaced.[2] Beyond the immediate visible and countable impacts, it also affected livelihoods of already vulnerable populations in the mid- and long-term.

Disasters affect people unevenly as they compound and feed into pre-existing vulnerabilities. As UNDP has stated with regard to Ditwah, *"[t]he highest risks emerge where impact meets structural vulnerability"*.[3] This unevenness is socially and politically produced through political decisions, the violation of social, economic and human rights as well as intersecting social hierarchies and conflicts. Hence, disasters are never entirely natural in that they always have a human-made component. They therefore also function as microscopes that make inequalities strikingly visible, reveal glaring rights violations and shed light on governance.

Human Rights Watch has pointed out that long-standing systemic discrimination has aggravated the impact of Ditwah,[4] while activists, researchers and journalists have revealed the links between past rights violations, such as the denial of land rights of the Malaiyaga community, and the impact of the disaster[5]. Moreover, observers have called

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[1] As of January 2026: Disaster Management Centre (DMC) & Department of National Planning (NPD), *Post-Disaster Needs Assessment Cyclone Ditwah*, Sri Lanka 2025, March 2026 https://www.dmc.gov.lk/images/pdfs/PDNA_Full_Report_Final%20Updated.pdf.

[2] International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Global Data Institute, Displacement Tracking Matrix, Sri Lanka*, December 2025 https://dtm.iom.int/sri-lanka.
As of 20th March 2026, 149.000 people were still displaced: UN OCHA, Office of the Resident Coordinator Sri Lanka, *Sri Lanka: Cyclone Ditwah - Situation Report No. 10 (As of 20 March 2026)*, 20th March 2026 https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/sri-lanka/sri-lanka-cyclone-ditwah-situation-report-no-10-20-march-2026.

[3] UNDP, *Mapping the Initial Impact of Cyclone Ditwah in Sri Lanka. Section: Multidimensional Vulnerability*, 30th January 2026 https://geosmart.undp.org/arcgis/apps/storymaps/stories/25866fbc805c4d70b6bf35c23f896daf#ref-n-czE7Ht.

[4] Meenakshi Ganguly, *Sri Lanka Struggles in Aftermath of Devastating Cyclone. Longstanding Discrimination Against Marginalized Communities Worsens Catastrophe*, Human Rights Watch (HRW), Dispatches, 11th December 2025 https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/11/sri-lanka-struggles-in-aftermath-of-devastating-cyclone.

[5] Sri Lanka Brief, *Joint Statement: The Demands of Malaiyaha Tamil Families Affected by Cyclone Ditwah Calling for the Attention of President*, 30th March 2026 https://srilankabrief.org/joint-statement-the-demands-of-malaiyaha-tamil-families-affected-by-cyclone-ditwah-calling-for-the-attention-of-president/;
Methmalie Dissanayake, *Cyclone Ditwah: The ongoing crisis of Malaiyaha Tamils*, The Morning, 25th January 2026 https://www.themorning.lk/articles/DyGIMNLRG6o7GAXLXaGE; Raisa Wickrematunge, *Cyclone Ditwah and Sri Lanka's disastrous flood mismanagement*, Himal Southasian, 4th December 2025 https://www.himalmag.com/sri-lanka-cyclone-ditwah-floods-landslides/.

out the securitization of the relief process,[6] and the declaration of a nationwide state of emergency.[7] Experts have moreover pointed to severe governance failures including the violation of the Disaster Management Act No. 13.[8] The lack of preparation was also illustrated by the warnings that came far too late.[9] In addition, though a large number of severely affected people were from Tamil speaking communities, government communication including warnings, information on relief, updates by the government and press conferences were hardly available in Tamil, aggravating the danger and the impact of the cyclone for Tamil speakers.[10] Hence in a similar way as Chemmani is "*a test of the Sri Lankan State's willingness and ability to confront its own past and uphold its legal obligations*"[11], Ditwah likewise puts a spotlight on the NPP's promises towards minorities and probes its commitment to be a government not only for elites and the privileged, but also for vulnerable groups and the marginalized.

In order to triangulate Ditwah's impacts on vulnerable, war-affected populations, and the violations of their social and economic rights, Adayaalam conducted from January until May 2026 research in the Eastern Province. This brief summarizes the findings from

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[6] Sri Lanka Brief, *Militarisation of Post Ditwah Relief: MOD Issues Guidelines for Accelerated Disaster Relief Operations*, 15th December 2025 https://srilankabrief.org/militarisation-of-post-ditwah-relief-mod-issues-guidelines-for-accelerated-disaster-relief-operations/

[7] Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), *Statement on the Declaration of Emergency and Emergency Regulations Promulgated on the 28.11.2025*, 1st December 2025 https://www.cpalanka.org/statement-on-the-declaration-of-emergency-and-emergency-regulations-promulgated-on-the-28-11-2025/; Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, *Observations and Recommendations on the Emergency (Miscellaneous Provisions and Powers) Regulations, No. 1 of 2025*, 5th December 2025 https://www.hrcsl.lk/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/HRCSL-Letter-to-the-HE-President-on-05_12_2025-compressed.pdf.
See for an overview over legal and administrative measures with regard to Ditwah Law & Society Trust (LST), *Government Legal and Administrative Measures Following Cyclone Ditwah*, March 2026 https://lst.lk/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Government-Measures-Post-Ditwah-2.pdf.

[8] Pitasanna Shanmugathas, *One of the World's Most Climate-Vulnerable Nations, One of the Least Prepared: Sri Lanka's Deadly Choice*, JURISTnews, 21st December 2025 https://www.jurist.org/features/2025/12/21/one-of-the-worlds-most-climate-vulnerable-nations-one-of-the-least-prepared-sri-lankas-deadly-choice/;
Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), *Key Short-Term and Long-Term Issues to Consider for Post-Cyclone Ditwah Recovery*, 16th December 2025 https://www.cpalanka.org/key-short-term-and-long-term-issues-to-consider-for-post-cyclone-ditwah-recovery/.

[9] Murali Krishnan, *Sri Lanka cyclone tragedy exposes government failures*, Deutsche Welle, 2nd December 2025 https://www.dw.com/en/sri-lanka-cyclone-tragedy-exposes-government-failures/a-74985337;
Lionel Bopage, *Ceylon Ditwah: A Preventable Tragedy*, Groundviews, 6th December 2025 https://groundviews.org/2025/12/06/cyclone-ditwah-a-preventable-tragedy/.

[10] Sanjana Hattotuwa, *Who gets warned? Language, discrimination, and disaster communication in Sri Lanka*, Sanjanah Blog, 29th November 2025; Tharushi Weerasinghe & Sandran Rubatheesan, *Lost in translation: How Sri Lanka's Tamils face repeated disaster warning failures*, The New Humanitarian, 18th December 2025 https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2025/12/18/lost-translation-how-sri-lankas-tamils-face-repeated-disaster-warning.

[11] Adayaalam Centre for Police Research, *Situation Brief No. 7: The Test: Chemmani and Sri Lanka's Accountability Crisis*, October 2025, p. 2 https://adayaalam.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/The-Test-Chemmani-and-Sri-Lankas-Accountability-Crisis_16.10.2025.pdf.

the interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted with war-affected women, people with disabilities, ex-combatants, civil society activists and government officers in Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai Districts.

1. Normalising Vulnerability

"....the military continues developing and expanding its camps, which serves absolutely no public purpose. Kallarippu—which completely submerges under water even with a small amount of rainfall—is the exact same area where these heavily fortified military camps are located. This raises a serious question about where the government's priorities truly lie. In reality, the overriding importance given to military camps must be stopped."[12]

---Human Rights Activist----

Starting on 28th November 2025, the government of Sri Lanka began to issue a series of circulars. In them, they asked government officers "*to take action.....regarding the expeditious provision of relief to the people affected by the emergency situation that has occurred*".[13] The circulars were several times amended to include more people and to disburse more funds.[14] This was in line with statements made by leading government politicians, including President Anura Dissanayake, on the severity of the disaster. The latter publicly declared Ditwah as the "*largest and most challenging natural disaster in our history*".[15]

Yet despite this, many affected by Ditwah in the East were left on their own. What are the reasons for this gap between the aspiration of the NPP government, and the reality on the ground? First, one factor was the laissez-faire attitude of government officers who, by drawing parallels to previous years on the one hand, normalized the disaster and vulnerability, and by comparing the situation to the up country on the other hand, downplayed the hardships people underwent. Second, this resulted in a general lack of preparation and diminished relief efforts. And third, as the quote from the human rights activist shows, factors such as military occupation and infrastructural issues expose vulnerable groups to increased risks of hazards.

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[12] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[13] Government of Sri Lanka, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, *Budget Circular 05/2025* (28th November 2025).

[14] Government of Sri Lanka, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, *Budget Circular 05/2025* (28th November 2025); *Budget Circular 06/2025* (1st December 2025); *Budget Circular 07/2025* (2nd December 2025); *Budget Circular 08/2025* (5th December 2025); Budget Circular 08/2025 (i) (20th December 2025); *Budget Circular 08/2025 (ii)* (8th January 2026); *Budget Circular 08/2025 (iii)* (22nd January 2026).

[15] Hannah Ellis Peterson *"'We have to rebuild from scratch': Sri Lankans relive the devastation of Cyclone Ditwah",* The Guardian, 3rd December 2025 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/02/we-were-all-very-scared-sri-lankans-relive-the-devastation-of-cyclone-ditwah.

Government officers frequently drew **comparisons to the Hill Country** leading to diminishing its impacts in the East.[16] Notions of "normal", "usual" or "minor" flooding that were widespread among government officers failed to capture the impacts the cyclone actually had particularly on vulnerable groups.[17] How widespread this mindset was is illustrated by a government officer's statement in an interview that otherwise focused on technical details and guidelines that officers have to follow: ***"GS officers often joke, '****If water enters a house in our area, the matter can be settled with a 10 or 20 rupee packet of Surf Excel'"*.[18] Such a view is at odds with how people have experienced the cyclone, for example in Mutur where entire areas were cut off from food supplies.[19] Likewise, it was impossible to move around for weeks in certain areas[20]. This widespread mindset among government officers in the East led to a delayed and diminished response to Ditwah. **Entire areas that were sweepingly declared** on flimsily bases as "*not affected*" were **omitted from relief delivery**.[21] As a woman with a disability who works for an association for people with disabilities straightforwardly put it: "*By reporting that 'no one was affected', they denied it [relief] to everyone, including many elderly people in this area.*"[22] This even hindered organizations from distributing relief.[23] Areas that are **frequently subjected to flooding**, instead of being given special attention, were dismissed by government officers from relief especially on the basis that they are flood-prone and that people ***"are used to it***". An activist and family member of a disappeared person told us this: *"…. authorities hold the opinion that [place in Batticaloa District] is a place where flooding is routine. I don't know if they assumed that because [place] is 'used to it', the people there have simply adapted to managing it on their own."*[24]

This normalisation resulted in a lack of preparation as a women's rights activist in Batticaloa District remarked: "….***their preparation is: 'Floods will*** *occur in this area, a school must be identified for it, and people will be housed there during the flood. People will return in 2 or 3 days. During that time, we must give them food for 3 days.' This is the plan considered by the Disaster Management Unit and the Kachcheri. They do not think of anything beyond that*."[25] In some places, the Disaster Management Unit was reported as not functioning at all.[26] In Kalmunai, not enough boats were available to transport and evacuate people and to supply aid.[27] In addition, no disaster meetings were held in

[16] Interview with GS A in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[17] Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[18] Interview with leading government officer B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[19] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026; see also Interview with women's activist A in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[20] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[21] Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[22] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[23] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[24] Interview with an activist and family member of a forcibly disappeared person in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[25] Interview with women's activist C in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[26] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[27] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

Batticaloa. It was only when a Minister came, that meetings were organized.[28] One of the most severe and dangerous flaws in this lack of preparation was the failure to warn people in time. Critical instructions regarding dam breaches and collapsing bridges were not properly communicated, which caused a spike in victim numbers.[29]

A GS also referred to the circulars to justify relief to be only disbursed for Ditwah related damages, a perspective that was echoed by all government officers we spoke with in Batticaloa.[30] This is in line with what people from different places in the East have shared, namely that attempts to register their damages and losses were dismissed on the basis that only Ditwah-related damages could be compensated.[31] Yet the **circulars** spoke more generally of an "*emergency disaster situation*"[32] and did not explicitly exclude "other" flooding that had occurred. In several locations government officers **drew arbitrary lines to designate who should receive** aid and who not.[33] For example, a women's rights activist mentioned a GS who had stated: "*Rainwater falls regularly; relief is only for those who had water enter from the river.*"[34] The arbitrariness of this assessment is exposed by the fact that in another area nearby exactly the opposite was the case.[35]

In addition to the shortcomings in Ditwah response and disaster preparation that exemplified the normalizing of vulnerability, people also mentioned **infrastructural issues** that compounded, and regularized, vulnerability. Among these issues are low-lying marshlands where people were resettled following the 2004 tsunami, and inadequate or even the absence of drainage systems that become overwhelmed during heavy rain.[36] The situation in some areas was further aggravated due to a delayed opening of estuaries.[37]

A human rights activist also pointed to uncurbed illegal activities such as sand mining that endanger people by exposing them to regular flooding.[38] Referring further to the rampant militarization in the East, he suggested the return of land occupied by the military to address this hazard-prone vulnerability: *"...the government could easily reallocate the vast* ***expanses of land unnecessarily given to military camps*** *and hand them over to these citizens living in high-risk disaster zones. By relocating these people and settling them safely on secure state lands while providing sustainable livelihoods,*

[28] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[29] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026.

[30] Interview with GS A in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[31] Interview with woman A with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[32] E.g. Government of Sri Lanka, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, *Budget Circular 06/2025* (1st December 2025).

[33] Interview with woman A with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[34] Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[35] Interview with women's activist D in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[36] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[37] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[38] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

the government would eliminate the recurrent need to distribute emergency relief packs."[39]

Militarization also played a role in the maybe most egregious example of normalizing politically induced vulnerability, that came up in a FGD with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff of organizations for persons with disabilities.[40] Participants brought up several examples for the danger to livestock and the livelihoods of local farmers resulting from the **occupation** of grazing lands by the military. A participant shared that nine of her buffaloes that had calves just last year were hit by a vehicle and killed. Yet when she went to register their deaths, compensation was denied by stating "*[c]attle are not supposed to be on the road*".[41]

These examples point to the political production of seemingly natural calamities: by not resolutely prosecuting illegal activities such as sand mining that damage the environment; by leaving infrastructural issues such as drainage unaddressed; and by not releasing the vast hectares of paddy and grazing land and land occupied by the military to where people living in hazard-prone areas could be resettled, people, especially from minority communities and vulnerable groups, are exposed to a disproportionate risk for disasters. In all these cases – people resettled to low-laying marshlands, a lack of preparation for annual flooding and disasters, inadequate infrastructure such as

[39] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[40] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[41] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

drainage systems and paved roads, environmental impacts of illegal sand mining, and grazing land occupied by the military – vulnerability is the result of policy decisions, land rights violations and non-accountability, i.e. politically induced. Yet disasters, rather than dealt with as crises that require urgent action, are generalized as common, everyday phenomena and in this way normalized.

2. Equality vs. Equity – Letting People Fall through the Cracks

"They should have considered Equity and Equality. However, what they did can only be described as [forced] Equality—giving the same to everyone regardless of their actual need."[42]
---Government Officer---

A central theme that was running through our research was **the lack of equality in relief distribution**. In addition, **principles of equity –** taking into account the vulnerability of particular groups of people, their specific needs and obstacles to access aid **– were not followed**, resulting in many people falling through the cracks. First, there were no special provisions for vulnerable groups which aggravated structural barriers in accessing disaster relief. Second, the categories to measure impact were drafted in a general manner, without reference to actual damage and losses, and how these affect people's livelihoods. Third, the state relied on civil society organizations to make up for these systemic failures while at the same time hindering their work.

In the circulars, general criteria of eligibility were stipulated. Consequently, relief distribution took the shape of a **one-fit-for-all approach**.[43] A government officer identified both the content of the circulars and the rush as the reason: "*Because of that urgency, we were forced to apply the relief scheme generally to everyone. As a result, equality was unbalanced*."[44] A major issue with this one-fit-for-all approach was the **absence of any tailored policies or special provisions for vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities**.[45]. Yet the many poignant stories of everyday discrimination people with disabilities shared, pointed to massive structural barriers that should have been considered in relief distribution. Many people with disabilities do not have an ID card that specifies that they are living with a disability.[46] Other systemic issues shared were severe problems with transportation, hindering their participation in social life and

[42] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[43] Interview with leading government officer A in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[44] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[45] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026; Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[46] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026; FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026. An activist for people with disabilities stated that of the 450 persons in his association, only 50 have such an ID. Interview with an activist for people with disabilities in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

access to state services.[47] In addition, many public buildings, including DS offices, are not accessible for people with disabilities.[48] Such structural barriers impeded their access to relief.

Ditwah **hit many people with disabilities hard**, as a person with a disability and activist in Trincomalee remarked: *"…our people lost their homes and their livelihoods were destroyed. The gardens of those who do home-gardening were ruined; the fields of those who farm were destroyed. In this way, PWDs in the community have lost many of their means of living*".[49] This is also a consequence of the fact that people with disabilities are also among the most economically deprived, often having no chance to work or to be employed and if, then for low wages.[50] Another issue compounding their economic vulnerability that was raised by both activists as well as people with disabilities, was the exorbitant waiting time to receive disability allowance.[51] A woman with a disability who had to wait for 3 years for her allowance corroborated this: "*I received it only after someone passed away*".[52]

Such pre-existing vulnerabilities which were compounded during the disaster are **structural.** For example, activists have noted the serious flaws in welfare systems like **Aswesuma** that fail to consider many poor families, leaving those previously left out more vulnerable during disasters.[53] This can be also seen from the example of a mother of two with a disability, whose husband is a daily wage earner. She spoke about her disappointment and distress of not having been selected for Aswesuma: "…*I am living amidst great hardships. I have been pushed into a state of mental distress regarding this Aswesuma allowance issue…My husband is a daily wage labourer, and his income is very low. So, the fact that I didn't get it made me very sad*".[54] The cyclone flooded her house which is why she could not continue her tailoring work for 1 month, but except for a dry ration through the GS, she has not received any relief. As she is no Aswesuma recipient, she also did not receive the 6,000 LKR per month for her 2 school-going children. Her family had to rely on the mosque to get food. She hence concluded: "*We are in a state of hardship even to prepare milk for our children*."[55]

This latter statement points to another significant issue that hit vulnerable groups brutally, namely the tremendous rise in costs of living in the wake of Ditwah, which two

[47] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026; Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[48] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026; Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[49] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[50] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[51] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[52] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[53] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[54] Interview with woman A with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[55] Interview with woman A with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

human rights activists summarized as "**indirect impacts**" of the cyclone.[56] They described how prices skyrocketed as transportation lines between the East and Colombo were severed due to Ditwah.[57] Other activists also spoke about private shop owners who raised the prices of basic goods during the disaster.[58]

Such impacts struck marginalized groups the harshest, especially as these groups often have to rely on informal and underpaid labour. In addition to people with disabilities, these include also ex-combatants. Even before the disaster, a human rights activist stated, "*[t]hey were already* ***severely marginalized socio-economically****. Their primary livelihoods consisted of farming on leased lands, keeping livestock, or working as daily wage labourers*".[59] Yet the compounded vulnerability of ex-combatants during Ditwah was not considered. A women's activist also described that people who engage in labour such as "laundry work" were overlooked, hinting at caste-based occupations that are often underpaid and stigmatized: "*They also need to eat, do they not? But these livelihoods are not being recorded. Furthermore, the people doing this work are not the type to go there, demand help, protest, or fight. They focus only on their hard work and their meals*."[60] Similarly, a human rights activist working in Trincomalee district referred to Vedda communities and Telugu-speaking people (*Ahikuntaka*) in the East as particularly vulnerable yet left out during relief: *"[they] remain at the absolute* ***bottom of the social hierarch****y…they do not own land or agricultural property. They survive on daily wage labour…While other people manage to receive food or money in some way or another, these communities receive absolutely nothing. Thus, the government must direct specialized attention toward these social groups. They are* ***oppressed on all front****s—specifically enduring economic, social, cultural, and caste-based discrimination*."[61]

Equity was also impeded by narrow **measurements of impact and relief criteria that were highly generalized** and failed to take into account how people's livelihoods were affected[62]. People could not travel to work or transport goods, were unable to cultivate crops or to collect greens, home gardens were destroyed and those engaged in small home-based businesses could not resume their work until the water had receded. Yet government officers' focus on compensation for damages to houses made it difficult for people whose livelihoods were affected to access relief. For instance, the large number of people performing informal labour – among them many people with disabilities, war-affected women and former combatants – as well as small entrepreneurships fell off the radar in relief distribution.[63] As activists in Batticaloa moreover noted, compensation

[56] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[57] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[58] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[59] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[60] Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[61] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[62] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026; Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[63] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026; FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

was unfairly tied to formal entrepreneurship status.[64] In addition, human rights activists in Trincomalee explained why they focused their relief efforts on daily wage labourers: *"We selected and provided relief to daily wage earners and those struggling for food who were ignored by the government."*[65] Similar accounts on the invisibility of small-scale businesses and informal labourers due to flawed damage and compensation thresholds were rampant in our research.[66]

Similar issues in accessing relief affected **small-scale farmers** and those residing on unallocated lands, leading to severe debt issues.[67] There were also cases of people whose fields were not registered with the Agriculture Department who did not receive aid.[68] This shows that compensation was obviously oriented towards large-scale farmers thereby overlooking not only small-scale farmers but also those who grew home gardens. A women's rights activist elaborated on the unfair relief distribution this entailed, excluding particularly women who earn their livelihood by selling greens or vegetables from their home gardens: *"…the government's stance is: 'If you farmed and the crop was destroyed, take a photo and send it'. They only view loss through this narrow lens. When assessed this way, vendors like these [small-scale vendors] are inevitably left out…there are no registrations or records for self-employed mothers. They might grow crops on a small scale in their home gardens or gather wild greens to sell."*[69]

In addition, research participants highlighted r**estrictive compensation policies and their arbitrary implementation**. For example, government officers in Kalmunai pointed to the narrowness of the categories stipulating that water must have entered the house so that people could not stay there in order to be eligible for relief.[70] In addition, the damage threshold such as marks to prove the height of water was in many cases unreasonable.[71] Activists in a stakeholder meeting in Batticaloa likewise mentioned restrictive policies, and that compensation was limited to those whose doors and windows were broken.[72] In general, compensation methods varied wildly across different DS divisions, with **circulars being implemented arbitrarily,** and relief criteria were highly unevenly and inconsistently applied.[73] According to human rights activists in Trincomalee District, government officers had further narrowed down on their own the categories for compensation, for example by insisting that specific, high-value household items such as refrigerators or sofas must have been damaged or soaked. "*But think about it",* one of them commented*, "if a person is a daily wage earner struggling to get by who doesn't even own basic household items, what belongings of theirs are going*

[64] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[65] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[66] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[67] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[68] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[69] Interview with women's activist D in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[70] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[71] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026; Interview with women's activist D in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[72] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[73] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026; Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026.

to get soaked? On what basis will they assess that he is a person in extreme hardship or a daily wage worker?...The reality is that such a person does not even have a proper house to begin with! Under what scheme or metric will they measure the severe hardship faced by that *individual?*"[74]

In many cases, people were required to stay in **camps i**n order to be considered for relief.[75] Yet there were no proper venues for people to stay.[76] For example, there were no special provisions in camps for people with disabilities as an affected woman with a disability shared with us: "*There was no separate organization or arrangement specifically for persons with disabilities...Specifically, you cannot take a bedridden person with a disability or a person in a wheelchair there and expect them to stay*"[77]. When she told this to the GS, he answered "'*What can I do? That is the place allocated for everyone. Only if everyone comes and stays there will be the flood disaster be recorded*.'"[78] That relief was mostly given to those in camps also posed problems for other groups of people. Two human rights activists whose organization provided aid in Trincomalee described the plight of daily wage earners as follows: "*Daily wage earners were largely stranded inside their own homes. These individuals received very little relief from the government because the government focused primarily on taking care of people staying in schools and public places...Due to four or five days of continuous rain, they had lost their livelihoods and their employment...there are also people who cannot evacuate or leave their locations because of their livelihoods—for example, those who rear livestock like goats, cattle, and poultry*".[79]

The lack of any equity principles in disaster management resulted moreover in serious **information gaps** that contributed to people falling through the cracks. Important information on e.g. registration for relief was disseminated via WhatsApp groups. This completely ignored the number of people who have no access to smartphones and the internet.[80] In addition, while activists in Trincomalee told us that in Tamil-majority areas, information was disseminated in Tamil, activists in Batticaloa criticized that most circulars came in English.[81] Finally, indigenous populations and communities living in remote areas faced a total information vacuum regarding how to register for aid.[82]

[74] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[75] Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026; Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[76] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[77] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[78] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[79] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[80] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026; FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026; FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[81] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026; Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[82] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026.

Without provisions for vulnerable groups, and without a framework to assess the impacts of Ditwah in a comprehensive manner,[83] there was a strong sense that **privileged people** were the ones who received relief, while the already vulnerable were left behind. In a FGD with people with disabilities, ex-combatants and staff of an organization for people with disabilities, a participant remarked: "*People who own machinery, cars, and motorbikes are getting everything. We get nothing*."[84] Another participant replied when asked whether people making handicrafts or home-based businesses had received any aid: "*No. They only helped people whose large shops were flooded or those who lost their vehicles*".[85]

Another severe issue was that the **government response was completely insufficient** to cater to emergency needs of affected people.[86] In addition, government aid was dangerously delayed. As activists in Trincomalee noted, the government failed to provide any food during the first three days of the disaster. Due to massive infrastructure and accessibility failures, government help failed to reach some victims even until a full week after the disaster.[87]

[83] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[84] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[85] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[86] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[87] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026.

These structural failures and the lack of equality as well as equity in relief distribution by the state prompted **grassroots organizations and activists to play an indispensable role in providing aid**[88]**,** and government officers relied heavily on NGOs to fill logistical and institutional gaps, especially in taking care of vulnerable groups. This is for example shown by the following statement by a female GS: "*Apart from the relief provided by the government, NGOs have also provided relief. Through that, health kits, dry ration packs, and various other aids were provided. Therefore, even if one type of aid was not provided, other aid is received*."[89] Another leading government officer stated the following: *"…we cannot grant this relief just because a pregnant mother or a family of a person with disabilities is economically disadvantaged. Assistance from various other organizations is provided to such affected individuals*."[90] Government officers would also rely on NGOs and CSOs for data on vulnerable groups.[91] A person working with an organization for people with disabilities revealed that government officers would even hand out his number when being approached by persons with disabilities for help.[92] A human rights activist who engaged in relief work in Trincomalee District scathingly observed with regard to the state's reliance on civil society organizations: "*For a single village, about 13 officials—including the GS, Samurdhi Officer, and DO—are responsible. Despite having this many officials, an independent organization is still needed to help that village!*"[93]

Yet while on the one hand, **grassroots organizations** stepped in to provide relief[94], on the other hand **their knowledge, and their recommendations, were only occasionally considered[95], and the aid they could supply was often sidelined, even met with hostilit**y. For example, activists from grassroot organizations with long-standing work with vulnerable groups were excluded from disaster management and decision-making processes.[96] A women's activist who runs a small organization supporting women affected by violence told us that she is usually never invited to any meetings though her grassroots work would yield important insights and information.[97] A telling example for government officers actively obstructing relief work by independent aid groups was shared by 2 human rights activists who work in Trincomalee district. To deliver aid to overlooked victims such as daily wage earners and ex-combatants, they had to **bypass state structures[98]**: "*When we were distributing relief in [place in Trincomalee District], they imposed many restrictions on us, saying, 'You cannot distribute aid like this. If you*

[88] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026.

[89] Interview with GS A in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[90] Interview with leading government officer A in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[91] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[92] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[93] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[94] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026.

[95] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[96] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026; Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[97] Interview with women's activist D in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[98] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

defy us and distribute it, it will cause major complications.' As a result, we hid the goods in alternative locations for three to four days before distributing them to the people."[99] They then moved around in the evenings and nights to secretly bring the relief items to the people.[100]

At the same time, bureaucratic and political obstacles severely impeded the work of civil society organizations and activists. For example, during Ditwah, the **constraints associations for people with disabilities** faced limited their scope to act and hindered them to provide swiftly relief to people with disabilities.[101] Activists pointed to the logistic and bureaucratic difficulties to withdraw funds. An ex-combatant who is treasurer of an organization for people with disabilities shared that they had to pressurize the GS to certify information on people with disabilities in order to register them for relief.[102]

Disaster management was painted with a broad brush and did not adhere to principles of equity in addition to equality. This led to systematic failures to recognize the compounded vulnerability of particular groups, and to consider their specific needs in relief orchestration. In addition, without individual assessments of damages and losses including livelihood losses, this resulted in the exclusion of affected people from relief schemes. To fill these gaps, state actors outsourced the responsibility to care for those who fell through the cracks to civil society organizations, yet they also severely constrained or even hindered their work.

3. The Triple Burden of Women Affected by the Cyclone

"When you have a home and a job and suddenly your husband is missing, it's a state of shock—you don't know how to accept it. In the village, at a young age, with a baby in my arms and not knowing the language (Sinhala), I wandered around looking for my husband. We know what 'death' is. But 'disappearance' was a new concept to me then…should I cry for my missing husband, or answer my son when he asks, 'Where is Appa?', or answer the people questioning me?"[103]

----Activist, counsellor and family member of a forcibly disappeared person---

The **neglect of vulnerable groups,** especially those who have endured years if not decades of marginalization due to disability or political violence as in the quote above, was widely perceived as a major shortcoming in relief distribution. This shortcoming

[99] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[100] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[101] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with an activist for people with disabilities in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026; FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[102] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[103] Interview with an activist and family member of a forcibly disappeared person in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

harshly hit women in the East – among them many women with disabilities, family members of the disappeared, female headed households and women struggling with poverty[104] – in three major ways: as care-givers, as being war-affected, and as those who often engage in informal and precarious labour and/or depend on home gardens or small patches of land for subsistence.[105] Yet there was a severe lack of women represented within disaster management units.[106]

Many war-affected women engage in **precarious and unstable labour** which is one of the reasons why Ditwah pushed many of them further into poverty[107]: the vegetables they wanted to sell rotting because roads were impassable; the small pieces of land they cultivated and their home gardens destroyed; the chicken or in some cases the single cow they depended on having died; and home-based businesses, or daily wage labour such as domestic work stalled. Many of these groups fell through the cracks of disaster relief. In Batticaloa, a women's activist gave a poignant account of the situation for women from one of the most impoverished areas in Batticaloa District: "*I visit the market often to deliver vegetables, and I saw sacks of produce lying there for four days. Usually, the women who come to Vakarai from outside pack these sacks and leave. However, they face significant difficulties transporting them to and from the area. Because the vegetables and greens sat there for five or six days and rotted, they had to be discarded…Furthermore, if you look near the bridge, you will see six or seven mothers from Vakarai stranded there. They are unable to return home due to transport issues caused by the floods, which impact their jobs*."[108] Another women's rights activist described the overlooking of women's informal and precarious labour: "*Many mothers sell items on the streets, make food at home and sell it to shops, and sell items in the market—many such people have been affected. But they were not considered anywhere*".[109]

In addition, as many of such small-scale businesses are not registered[110] women were frequently denied allowances despite the circular No. 08/2025 (iii) explicitly laying out allowances for "unregistered trading businesses conducted within the permanent building at a domestic premise" and "temporary trades, including pavement and mobile trading".[111] A human rights activist explained, women who engage in small-scale

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[104] In Batticaloa and Ampara Districts, the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) lies significantly above the national MVI. UNDP, *Understanding Multidimensional Vulnerabilities: Impact on People of Sri Lanka*, District Profiles, 2023 https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-03/mvi_district_profiles_eng_final.pdf

[105] Interview with women's activist D in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[106] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[107] Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026; Interview with women's activist D in Batticaloa District in January 2026; Interview with women's activist C in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with an activist and family member of a forcibly disappeared person in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[108] Interview with women's activist D in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[109] Interview with women's activist C in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[110] Interview with women's activist C in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[111] Government of Sri Lanka, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, *Budget Circular 08/2025 (iii)* (22nd January 2026).

businesses such as selling keerai greens or making appams would often not register these out of fear that the taxes would eat up the meagre livelihood earned through these activities.[112] Yet in many instances, **registration** was demanded, despite the circular stating otherwise.[113] Though there were cases in which relief was also given to people who had their businesses not registered, a senior government officer articulated the predominant stance in the Batticaloa area to only provide aid to registered businesses and agricultural livelihoods: "*Because if it is given to unregistered individuals, there are chances for corruption to occur*".[114] The example of an ex-combatant with a disability who grew mushrooms for her livelihood that had rotted shows that even if businesses were registered, they are were not necessarily considered eligible for relief. Though she is registered at the Pradeshiya Sabha as a self-employed entrepreneur, she could not register her business with the DS Office because the land she lives on is government-granted, which excluded her from compensation.[115]

Many women also rely on their **home gardens to feed their families and/or cultivate small patches of land.** Yet the government, as several women's activists stated, had

[112] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[113] Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[114] Interview with leading government officer A in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[115] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

mainly large-scale farmers in mind when providing relief.[116] This is corroborated by circular No. 08/2025 that measures allowance for damages in hectares.[117]

For **family members of the disappeared,** this gendered vulnerability is aggravated by the trauma of not knowing what happened to their loved ones on the one hand, and by the economic burdens placed on their shoulders on the other hand. An activist whose husband was forcibly disappeared when their son was not even 2 years old, compellingly articulated these two agonizing issues: "***For a mother or a woman who has survived 30 years of war, managed daily needs, navigated a patriarchal society, endured sexual harassment or social stigma, protected her children, earned a living, and engaged with complex legal systems****—telling her, 'Mother, you are crying; you need counselling,' is inappropriate. She has managed all these problems and survived until today; at this stage, traditional counselling is not her primary need…now,* ***they are exhausted****. They have searched for years with no solution. They face economic crises, no prioritization in state services, and no special concessions*".[118] This statement powerfully makes the point that in addition to human rights being violated in the act of enforced disappearance, also social rights, e.g. having to navigate a patriarchal society, the burden of finding out what happened and holding the state accountable, as well as economic rights are infringed. Women whose sons, husbands, brothers, or fathers were forcibly disappeared are often forced into informal labour as they had to assume overnight the role of the breadwinners. Therefore, when the cyclone hit, it affected them and their families profoundly.

Apart from non-accountability for the crime, there are other **serious systemic failures exacerbating the socio-economic vulnerabilities of family members of the disappeared** that weighted heavily on their shoulders during Ditwah. As the same survivor-activist analysed, the inadequacy of the Certificate of Absence[119] hinders women to e.g. access bank accounts, and retrieve insurance money or pawned jewellery.[120] This pushes family members of the disappeared into the agonizing situation in which they are forced to either get a death certificate that may provide more financial stability but in this case also forgo accountability and the search for their loved ones, or remain trapped within economic precarity: "*There is a constant confusion: should I seek the truth of what happened to my husband within the justice system, or should I consider*

[116] Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026; Interview with women's activist D in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[117] Government of Sri Lanka, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, *Budget Circular 08/2025* (5th December 2025).

[118] Interview with an activist and family member of a forcibly disappeared person in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[119] The Certificate of Absence was introduced in 2016 after many years of lobbying by family members of the disappeared and human rights groups. It was stopped by the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government and resumed under the NPP government. In its current form, it has several shortcomings. Faizer Shaheid. 2025. *Certificate of Absence: OMP's certificate not accepted by banks*? The Morning, 26th January 2025 https://www.themorning.lk/articles/2k9HNPitbz4FJpRkVt60

[120] Interview with an activist and family member of a forcibly disappeared person in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

my socio-economic life, provide a death registration, and redeem the pawned items?".[121] The cruelty of forcing women to take such a decision is revealed by the fact that many families of the disappeared refuse to accept a death certificate though it would provide them a, if fragile, financial ground to stand on. Precisely these woes, exacerbated by policies, render them exceptionally vulnerable during times of crisis.

Another particular vulnerable group were **women with disabilities** who are often rendered invisible by existing structures.[122] Especially for ex-combatants who have been injured by shrapnels, bullets, and have remaining pieces in their body, it is challenging to obtain the necessary medical records for getting registered as disabled as female former combatant with a disability remarked [123]. The same woman also shared that she was excluded from Aswesuma on the basis that her husband is working abroad because her disability was not taken into account.[124] This lack of registration of people with disabilities also rendered them invisible for being considered for relief during the cyclone.

Women with disabilities also shared stories of everyday marginalization that came to bear during Ditwah.[125] A Muslim woman with a disability narrated the impact Ditwah had on her livelihood. Having been abandoned by her husband who does not pay maintenance, she struggles to earn by weaving reed mats. When the floods entered her house, reeds worth 50,000 LKR were damaged, and she could not save the mats already woven. Yet despite having had her business registered, she did not receive any relief for the occupational loss.[126] Another woman, a former combatant who has lost a leg and who is fully dependent on her and her husband's daily wage labour which was impossible to pursue during Ditwah, has not received relief despite many attempts to register. Because of her disability, she could not wait until the GS would arrive, pointing to physical challenges to access and register for government services.[127] She nevertheless did not give up, despite having previous experiences of being denigrated by government officers on other occasions due to her status as an ex-combatant with a disability: "*Specifically, if there was anyone from the GS or GS Office who was opposed to the struggle, they would watch us a little sideways. That is, 'What do we do about you coming limbless*?'".[128] The same woman also spoke of instances when disabled women in particular were intimated by government officers.[129] This points to the reality that

[121] Interview with an activist and family member of a forcibly disappeared person in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[122] Sarala Emmanuel, Ponni Arasu, and Vijayaletchumi Sekar, *Collective Organizing Among Women Living with Disabilities (WLD) to Address and Ensure Their Right to Health in Eastern Sri Lanka*, in Handbook on Sex, Gender and Health: Perspectives from South Asia (edited by TK Sundari Ravindran et al.), Springer Singapore, 2025.

[123] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[124] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[125] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[126] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[127] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[128] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[129] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

women's access to government services is often mediated by men and obstructed by patriarchal structures.

Women's **unpaid care work, and the burden of bearing the responsibility for the household,** adds another layer of vulnerability during disasters. This is compounded in the East by the high number of female-headed households[130]. Many women shared their worries about their children's education and for feeding their families during the disaster. For example, a mother of one who lives with a disability and whose husband has abandoned her stated in a FGD with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and war-affected women the following: "*For female-headed households, even providing daily meals has become a struggle. In such circumstances, they find it extremely difficult to uplift the educational standards of their children*."[131] In the same FGD, another participant spoke about the impact of being excluded from relief on children's education.[132] In these statements, the hope to break free from the cycle of poverty, through providing for their children became conspicuously palpable. A woman with a disability referred to the spiralling costs to feed her children due to Ditwah: "*It is a huge challenge for me to educate my two children and cover household expenses with the small income my husband earns. This is especially difficult because the cost of living is currently very high…Therefore, I am struggling with a severe economic crisis as well*."[133] A women's activist added that during Ditwah, men often stopped paying maintenance because court proceedings were on halt, which also worsened the economic woes for women to care for their families.[134]

Another issue that disproportionately affected women as **caretakers** for their families and those living with disabilities was that in many cases, only people who had moved to camps were considered for relief. A statement by a leading government officer captured this mindset: "*If, instead of going to a camp, people go to stay at a relative's house, it suggests they have the underlying capacity to manage the disaster themselves. Therefore, it is not strictly necessary for us to provide [immediate] aid to them.*"[135] The argument that if people were affected, they would have stayed in camps, was disputed by a women's rights activist who succinctly explained why particularly women as caretakers remained at home: "*Many stayed in their houses. This is because women additionally had the need to care for those at home, persons with disabilities, and the elderly. If they go to camps, they cannot provide such care….. so, even if there was*

[130] 27,1 % of households in the Eastern Province are headed by women, with Batticaloa District having the highest percentage (32,3 %) island-wide. Department of Census and Statistics, *Household, Income and Expenditure Survey*, 2019 https://www.statistics.gov.lk/Resource/en/GenderStatistics/Special_Concerns/FemaleHeadedHouseholdsBySector,ProvinceAndDistrict2016.pdf.

[131] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.

[132] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.

[133] Interview with woman A with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[134] Interview with women's activist C in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[135] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

floodwater on the floor of the house, they climbed on top of tables and stayed."[136] She added that many women with disabilities engage in poultry farming which, in addition to the lack of facilities for them, prevented them from going there[137]. Following that, moving to a camp was impossible as a woman with a disability remarked: "*The reason we didn't go there is that there are no accessibility facilities for persons with disabilities…-When we struggle to move through floodwaters, if we slip and fall on the way, we will become completely helpless.*"[138] Hence women's role as caretakers, the dependence on home-based livelihoods such as poultry farming and the inadequacy of camps that kept them at home, hampered their access to relief.

Bearing the responsibility for the entire household together with women's precarious informal work arrangements, especially in combination with living with a disability or having to exhaust resources in the search for their loved ones, often force them to **take loans**[139]. Two women's activists from Batticaloa shared that even at the height of the disaster, debt collectors put women under pressure. "*While collecting loan payments at other times is one matter",* one of them said, "*doing so during a disaster is an inhumane*

[136] Interview with women's activist C in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[137] Interview with women's activist C in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[138] Interview with woman A with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[139] Interview with women's activist D in Batticaloa District in January 2026.
Such accumulated household debt is among the highest in the Eastern Province with predatory micro-finance companies especially targeting female-headed households in former war zones:
UNDP, *Addressing Household Debt Induced Vulnerability in Sri Lanka*, September 2024 https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-11/household_debt_brief.pdf; Nathan Legrand, *In Sri Lanka, Resistance to Private Indebtedness is a Strategic Issue*, CADTM, 3rd March 2020 https://www.cadtm.org/In-Sri-Lanka-Resistance-to-Private-Indebtedness-Is-a-Strategic-Issue.

act."[140] The toll of such a devastating burden in the midst of a disaster is encapsulated in what a mother told the other activist: "*I am going to hang myself*" [141]. This gut-wrenching statement directs attention to the toll of household debt on women and the exploitative structures behind micro loans that have sparked suicides.[142] With regard to loans, the same women's rights activist also criticized the policy change from providing dry rations and food for people outside of camps, to depositing monetary relief in bank accounts. As she explained: "*When giving money like that, creditors would come and stand at the house with the intention of getting the loan money owed from that relief money. Not only that, if money comes, the men in the house will also not remain quiet. Because the account numbers provided for relief are mostly in the names of men. Therefore, if they take that money, it will not reach the women*."[143]

The triple burden for war-affected women was powerfully and harrowingly captured by a woman whose husband was forcibly disappeared: *"…**if the primary breadwinner of a family has disappeared, the mother in that family takes on the role of going to work and maintaining the household. If the entire village is flooded due to a disaster**, transportation becomes impossible.…In some cases, because she didn't show up for two days, her employer might even tell her not to come back to work at all. Thus, because of the flood, that mother loses both her current income and her job…However, we [the state/authorities] only look at it simply as 'flooding'"*.[144]

In all these examples, heightened vulnerability during Ditwah is the result of accumulated state neglect and the violation of human, social and economic rights of women, especially of women with disabilities, family members of the disappeared and the poor. The overlooking of such groups, and with it, the intersectional dimensions of vulnerability during disaster relief compounded their already dire living conditions. In their stories, many women also conveyed the exhaustion accrued through shouldering the triple burden of having to fight for their survival and their families', the struggle for justice for themselves and for others, and through having to navigate patriarchal structures. Women hence face multi-layered challenges as they desperately try to

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[140] Interview with women's activist D in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[141] Interview with women's activist C in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[142] Feminist Collective for Economic Justice, *FCEJ Calls for an End to the Microfinance Menace*, 17th October 2025 https://www.srilankafeministcollective.org/about-1; Suganya Kandeepan, *Economic crisis and household debt in the north,* Daily Mirror, 24th December 2024 https://www.dailymirror.lk/print/opinion/Economic-crisis-and-household-debt-in-the-north/172-298771;
Ahilan Kadirgamar, *Debt, Distress, Suicide,* Daily Mirror, 17th August 2020 https://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/DEBT-DISTRESS-SUICIDE/172-193932; Chandima Arambepola & Kulasabanathan Romeshun, *Debt at My Doorstep: Microfinance Practices and Effects on Women in Sri Lanka,* CEPA, June 2019 https://cepa.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2019-Arambepola-and-Romeshun-Debt-at-My-Doorstep-WPS-30.pdf.

[143] Interview with women's activist C in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[144] Interview with an activist and family member of a forcibly disappeared person in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

balance home life, work, and community activism. Yet disaster management lacked any form of gender sensitivity or perspective.[145]

4. Politicizing Aid, Mistrusting the State

"When it comes to being disabled, it shouldn't matter if they are Tamils or Muslims; aid should be given to everyone."[146]
---Activist Working with an Organization for People with Disabilities---

Relief distribution was widely perceived to be politicized in that it was hindered, blocked and unfairly distributed due to favouritism, ethnic bias and discrimination. This was in particular the case in areas with ethnic polarization and long-standing conflicts over local governance and administration. With regard to Praja Shakti, the latest initiative by the NPP government, people spoke about the undemocratic selection of members, the party-political orientation of the initiative and the sidestepping of government officers. Especially among vulnerable groups such as ex-combatants, there was in addition a discernible mistrust, suspicion and fear towards the state in general, and towards local administration in particular, sparked by their experiences of harassment and political persecution.

Unresolved administrative conflicts in the polarized, multi-ethnic environments in the East were frequently identified as impediments to relief distribution. In Sampur, Trincomalee and Kalmunai, interlocutors discussed **the systematic marginalization of Tamil areas and** ensuing deep-seated administrative problems as one of the main drivers for inadequate disaster management. In **Kalmunai**, the issue between the "Muslim" DS Office in Kalmunai South that is practically vested with more power, and the "Tamil" sub office in Kalmunai North that is subordinated to the former, reveals long-standing grievances of Tamil people in the area. The conflict over a separate DS office for people in Kalmunai North dates back to 1989. The Kalmunai South DS office that is located in a pre-dominantly Muslim area is accused of holding back funds and hindering Kalmunai North to fully functioning, discriminating against the predominantly Tamil population there. Successive governments have been blamed for not having taken any steps due to political interference to grant the DS office Kalmunai North full powers over land, finances etc. and to put it on par with other DS offices.[147]

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[145] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[146] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[147] Wasantha Chandrapala and S. Rubatheesan, *Give Kalmunai North Division its Due Status, Protesters Demand*, Sunday Times, 31st March 2024 https://www.sundaytimes.lk/240331/news/give-kalmunai-north-division-its-due-status-protesters-demand-553546.html; Tamil Guardian, *Tamils in Kalmunai protest against move to subjugate local division*, 26th March 2026 https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tamils-kalmunai-protest-against-move-subjugate-local-division; Tamil Guardian, *Tamils in Kalmunai continue protest calling for funds for development*, 3rd April 2024 https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tamils-kalmunai-continue-protest-calling-funds-development.

This systemic issue in Kalmunai has severely **affected relief distribution** as a government officer shared in a FGD: "*They [DS Kalmunai South] are the ones who hold all the allocations, but they won't give them…Even if we request an allocation, it takes months to arrive*."[148] This concerns all funds that are sent through District Secretariats, including funds for development projects.[149] Because they had not received the allocation for boats , DS office staff in Kalmunai North were initially unable to access a village that was cut off.[150] The DS office had to contact private persons to ask them for help to conduct relief operations.[151] The situation was further aggravated since the DCC (Divisional Coordinating Committee), where issues pertaining to disaster preparation and infrastructural matters are usually discussed, had not met for 5 years due to the unresolved administrative conflicts.[152]

In Sampur and Trincomalee, FGD participants likewise described discrimination on the **base of ethnicity as** a major obstacle for relief distribution to Tamil areas.[153] In Trincomalee, people cited issues ranging from compiling aid lists with predominantly Muslim persons to declaring Tamil areas as "not affected[154]. In a place in Trincomalee District, the GS had failed to list Tamil names in the official victim registry, resulting in Tamil victims receiving significantly less aid.[155] A FGD participant from Sampur shared an example for the uneven allocation of relief: *"…99% of the officials are Muslims. Furthermore, there is not a single Tamil person within the Social Service Department. Five or six years ago, I came forward voluntarily and registered the allowances for those over 75 years of age. But that has still not come through. However, during the recent disaster/floods, they provided compensations of 1,000,000 and 2,000,000 Rupees to Muslim people, claiming they lost livestock*".[156] In the same FGD, participants also spoke of pressures that Tamil government officers faced. A participant who has not received any aid despite having sent photos of the flooded house said: "*There are very few Tamil officers in the DS Office—you can count them on your fingers. That is the only reason I didn't file a complaint against him (the Tamil officer). He is unable to function because of the pressure placed on him there*".[157] Ethnic discrimination in relief distribution extended also to the non-governmental sector. A FGD participant in Sampur mentioned for example the fisheries association when asked whether relief was provided: "*No. It was*

[148] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[149] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[150] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[151] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[152] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[153] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026; Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026.

[154] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[155] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026; FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[156] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.

[157] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.

not provided to anyone. However, it was provided in the Mutur areas. They received aid in 2, 3 stages/instalments. Our areas were not looked after. Ethnic discrimination is the primary reason for this."[158]

Even organizations who wanted to provide humanitarian aid were blocked. For example, a participant in Sampur told us that the DS did not give permission to distribute dry rations to Tamils: "*All the packs were piled up at the DS Office. No one knows what happened to them. But they were not provided to Tamil areas.*"[159] In Trincomalee, people working for an association for people with disabilities spoke about hindrances to their work that they traced back to ethnic discrimination.[160] In Sampur and other places[161], people mentioned that the Disabled People's Organization (DPO) mandated for each GS Division is not functioning which was ascribed to ethnic discrimination in the administration. This is a blatant example of the failure to implement national and international policies to safeguard the rights of people with disabilities which leaves a vacuum in services and awareness of how to register for relief schemes.[162]

The sidelining of Tamils in relief distribution also led to **clashes with government officers**, as another FGD participant, a fisherman who, as other fishermen, had not received anything but a bag of rice from either the state or the Fisheries Association, told us: "*Not a single rupee of money or a single item was provided to us by the government. We only received one bag of rice. We were without work for many days. We didn't receive any help from the Fisheries Association either*".[163] When they protested, the GS threatened to arrest them.[164] Yet in addition to ethnic discrimination, activists in Trincomalee also observed caste-based discrimination in Tamil GN divisions.[165] The excessive power that local government officers hold in deciding on relief distribution has hence further exacerbated marginalization based on ethnicity and caste.

Ex-combatants in particular, shaped by their experiences of harassment, stigmatization, exclusion and neglect, were suspicious if not anxious to engage with state structures, hindering their access to relief. Though several research participants told us that the situation has improved under the current government, we heard in

[158] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.

[159] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.

[160] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[161] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026; Interview with war-affected woman A in Amparai District in February 2026.

[162] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026.

[163] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.

[164] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.

[165] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026.

different locations that ex-combatants were still visited and surveilled by the CID[166]. As a female former combatant shared: "*The CID (Criminal Investigation Department) officers used to come to meet us. Because of this, society looks at us differently. Since CID officers were coming every day, I eventually told them: 'If you keep coming like this, my mother and I will jump into the well and end our lives'*".[167] The CID also came recently to the house of this ex-combatant.[168] Most of the ex-combatants also expressed a deep-seated fear and suspicion to engage with the state, whether it is claiming their rights, e.g. land they had lost after being displaced[169], or accessing and registering for relief.[170] In addition, many have **deep psychological scars** from being abandoned, also by the community.[171] This is aggravated for female ex-combatants. Hinting at rumours accusing female ex-combatants of engaging in sex-work, a woman in Sampur summarized it as follows: "*Outside, there is the CID problem, and within the community, there are instances where they speak about us wrongly.*"[172] Another female ex-combatant movingly summarized their vulnerability as follows: "*...former combatants...are trapped in fear and rarely go anywhere. If they speak up about anything, people threaten to call the CID. Because of this fear, we remain marginalized even today. It is heartbreaking to think that we fought with such pain, sacrificed our limbs for this land and these people, yet today we cannot enjoy true freedom*".[173] And as an activist for people with disabilities observed, these scars hinder ex-combatants access to aid: "*...I feel deep sorrow when I see other combatants who are pushed even further back...Many haven't even registered for relief because of fear*".[174]

We also heard of **ex-combatants who faced targeted discrimination** concerning compensation because they are involved in protests regarding land conflicts and archaeological issues.[175] A human rights activist from Trincomalee District spoke about the intentional exclusion and victimization of ex-combatants in relief distribution, and his

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[166] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026; Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026; FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[167] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[168] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[169] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[170] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[171] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.

[172] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.

[173] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[174] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[175] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026; FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.

organization's risky decision to provide them with aid despite government officers seeking to hinder them: *"…some of these individuals face ongoing friction with the government. This is because they consistently stand against government actions on various local issues—such as land disputes and the arrival/encroachment of Buddhist monks (Bhikkus). Consequently, when these official relief schemes are rolled out, certain authorities begin to deliberately exclude them. This situation appears to be a clear act of political retaliation. Therefore, to us, serving these individuals was far more important than securing formal permission from the DS Office*."[176]

Another issue that came up was **favouritism and corruption** in selecting people for relief, a problem that was seemingly rampant. For example, in some places GS were accused of "*simply registering their own people*".[177] In addition, several people remarked that GS often relied on information provided by others. There was a widespread impression that these people would only add their relatives and those known to them to the list.[178] This intransparency with regard to relief registration and provision, and the holes this created through which affected people fell, sparked off protests in different places.[179] As there were no categories to measure the actual impact on people's lives, that would e.g. also take into account how their livelihoods were affected and people's pre-existing vulnerabilities, furthered this, leaving scope for arbitrary assessments that gave the GS a significant amount of power in deciding who receives relief.[180] As a human rights activist remarked: *"…the government possesses a vast, expansive structure. However, it is the tiny loopholes within this structure and the lack of flexibility in various places that provide politicians and other influential individuals with major opportunities to exploit the system. For instance, when relief is distributed, if it is specified that it must be executed strictly under state oversight, then that oversight must be robust and fitting*".[181] Linking the latter to the executive presidency he added: *"…the President holds executive power. In such a scenario, when a state structure operating under his direct control is granted all-encompassing powers, the chances for it to consistently drift toward corruption and injustice are incredibly high*".[182]

[176] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[177] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[178] Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026; Interview with women's activist A in Batticaloa District in January 2026; FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[179] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026; Interview with women's activist D in Batticaloa District in January 2026; FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.

[180] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026; see also stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[181] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[182] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

The Case of Praja Shakthi

Praja Shakti added to this mistrust towards the state. Praja Shakti risks to create an overtly politicized structure - an extension of the ruling NPP coalition – that would run parallel or more likely in conflict with a vetted and accountable governance structure.[183] This perspective was also prevalent among research participants. Even those who referred to potentially positive aspects - e.g. data collection on vulnerable groups and their possible inclusion in committees[184] – there was a consensus that Praja Shakti is a highly political initiative with non-transparent structures. For example, research participants in all 3 Districts spoke about the undemocratic processes through which the chairmen and that members were selected with 'NPP people' being favoured.[185] A women's rights activist in Batticaloa remarked: *"...they mention that 'Praja Shakthi is going to do all development in the village'. But in our view, it seems like a political move. All those in it are NPP people*."[186] The power accumulated in **Praja Shakti** also came out in an interview with a war-affected woman from Ampara District: "...*everything is under the main control of the NPP. They are the ones with decision-making power. They maintain Praja Shakthi under the guise of working for the people, but they remain the ultimate decision-makers*".[187] Activists likewise stated that all development work has to go through Praja Shakti in future.[188] At the same time, there was also confusion on what the function, aim and activities of Praja Shakti would be[189].

Yet people reported cases where **Praja Shakti** members got involved in relief work.[190] In Punnaichcholai, there were rumours of corruption regarding relief distribution through Praja Shakti.[191] In Sampoor, a FGD participant alleged that NPP party members in Praja Shakti wrongly claimed they were affected and got relief, including the chairman.[192] In Trincomalee, people also observed that Praja Shakti meetings, despite having begun only 2 months before, already show a clear trend that Muslim participants are given structural prominence.[193] Though formally acting

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[183] Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), *Statement on Praja Shakthi, Clean Sri Lanka, and the Constitutional Integrity of the Sri Lankan State*, 2nd May 2026 https://www.cpalanka.org/statement-by-the-centre-for-policy-alternatives-on-praja-shakthi-clean-sri-lanka-and-the-constitutional-integrity-of-the-sri-lankan-state/.

[184] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[185] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026; FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026; Interview with war-affected woman A in Amparai District in February 2026; FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026; Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[186] Interview with women's activist C in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[187] Interview with war-affected woman A in Amparai District in February 2026.

[188] Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[189] Interview with woman A with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with leading government officer B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[190] Interview with GS B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[191] Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[192] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.

[193] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026.

under the DS, in practice government officers are sidelined by **Praja Shakti** committees and members.[194] For example, a participant in the FGD in Sampur explained her/his criticism of Praja Shakti: "*It operates as a controlled activity. For example, if all of us are in a Praja Shakthi group and we ask, 'Our village needs this specific thing,' they aren't going to give everything. Even if they do provide something, there is a controlling nature where they dictate, 'Give it only to this specific person.' In this project, the GS (Village Officer) cannot make the decisions*".[195] Praja Shakti was in general viewed as a government-supportive tool that also co-opts local activists and the youth federation to turn them into government loyalists.[196]

These instances of administrative bias and ethnic discrimination have impeded relief delivery and resulted in unfair aid distribution. Aid distribution was politicized in that administrative bias in ethnically polarized contexts could be acted out due to the far-reaching decision-making power of government officers and the lack of accountability for systematic failures. In addition, a lack of transparency, favouritism and corruption led to protests in different areas, and Praja Shakti was widely perceived as contributing to the politicization of structures for relief distribution and development work.

5. Accumulated Suffering

"*We ate by taking out loans*."[197]
---War-Affected Woman---

"*After the cyclone, I have reached a state where I can't do anything*".[198]
---War-Affected Woman---

The two stories of Meena and Kamala[199] illustrate the suffering and trauma that has accumulated over decades in the lives of war-affected women in the East and that compounded their vulnerability during Ditwah. They also reveal the emotional toll and exhaustion of continuous struggles for survival. Out of them speaks vividly the urgency to link social justice with disaster management to address the violations of social, economic and human rights not just with regard to disasters but also in the past.

"*Because of the issues surrounding my brothers, we have reached a point where **we can't show our faces anywhere.***"[200] This quote comes from **Meena**, an elderly woman whose two elder brothers were in the LTTE. One of them was killed by the IPKF, another brother was forcibly disappeared, and a third brother died after having been beaten by

[194] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026.
[195] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.
[196] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.
[197] Interview with war-affected woman B in Amparai District in February 2026.
[198] Interview with war-affected woman C in Amparai District in February 2026.
[199] For security reasons, their real names have been pseudonymized.
[200] Interview with war-affected woman C in Amparai District in February 2026.

the army. Her statement encapsulates the persecution of ex-combatants and their families by the state, that also leaves them bereft of any social support networks. Meena's narrative is about systematic betrayal by the state and by her community. It was people from the village who had informed the army about her brother who died of a heart issue after having been beaten, and her husband who was a LTTE helper. She tells gut-wrenchingly of government officers asking for bribes for being considered for housing schemes and for relief that she could not afford to pay: "*[a]t that time, we didn't even have enough to eat. Only now are we able to eat one proper meal*".[201] Her dire situation was compounded by the regular harassment through the army and the CID, which forced her to flee several times and has instilled in her a profound fear, not only of the security forces but of the state more broadly: "*Recently, when an official came, I asked, 'Sir, why are you taking our family details? Are we going to be sent away somewhere else?'....Out of that fear, we decided, 'Let's just stay as we are and perish.' If the government gives help, let them; otherwise, we will just continue like this*."[202]

Narrating harrowingly multiple displacements and extreme poverty, Meena repeatedly stated that there was no one to help her. Though she had, as she underscored, "registered everywhere" for relief, she was left on her own, without ever having received any state support except for Samurdhi, which had been cut off when her sons went abroad, and recently Aswesuma. Worried that she is unable to provide for her children - she has no money to build houses for her two married daughters - she shared the desperation that trickled down to the next generation: "*Now, my children say, 'We should have just stayed there [in the Vanni].' They say if we had stayed there, we wouldn't have to suffer like this now; we could have just died there*".

Meena lives in a tin sheet house the roof of which was blown away during Ditwah. Her house is in a such a state that it leaks whenever it rains: "*If it rains, we cannot stay inside. My 23-year-old daughter is even ashamed to step out of the house because of the dilapidated state it is in. This is the condition we live in"*.[203] When she showed the GS photos of the damage, the GS had told her that "*no aid has been released for such damages*".[204] In addition, her home garden where she had grown pulses, eggplants and long beans was destroyed, adding to her economic hardship. The family had earned a meagre income by selling vegetables from her garden and both her son, who could not find work after the cyclone, and her husband, who has high blood pressure, are daily wage labourers. Moreover, the 20 chicken she had raised had died because of the heavy rains. Towards the end of the interview, the resignation and hopelessness that this situation, in which she had received no support, chillingly came out: "*I'm not doing anything. I used to make and sell Idiyappam. Since the rains, I haven't done that. I haven't planted any crops since the rains either....After the cyclone, I have reached a state where I can't do anything*".[205]

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[201] Interview with war-affected woman C in Amparai District in February 2026.

[202] Interview with war-affected woman C in Amparai District in February 2026.

[203] Interview with war-affected woman C in Amparai District in February 2026.

[204] Interview with war-affected woman C in Amparai District in February 2026.

[205] Interview with war-affected woman C in Amparai District in February 2026

Meena's plight points to a range of systematic failures that haunts war-affected people in the aftermath of the cyclone: accumulated trauma and hardships that made them vulnerable; corruption in the distribution of relief and registration for welfare schemes; the harassment of families of former combatants; and state neglect.

Kamala, a 65-year mother of 6, shared another agonizing tale about violence during the war that rendered her susceptible to hunger in the aftermath of Ditwah. When asked about how the cyclone had affected her, she replied: "***We ate by taking out loans*.**"[206] Since the economic breakdown in 2022, more and more households have to take out loans for food.[207] In Kamala's case, however, this desperate situation emerged from her extremely vulnerable situation as a result of the injustices she had experienced during the war that came to bear during the cyclone. In 1990, with the army approaching her village, her family had to flee[208]. Like many other refugees, they stayed in a school and later in a temple at Veeramunai that functioned as a refugee camp. On 12th August 1990 Muslim home guards, sanctioned by the security forces[209], entered the buildings where several thousand[210] had taken refuge, ending in a massacre during which many civilians

[206] Interview with war-affected woman B in Amparai District in February 2026.

[207] Colombo Urban Lab, *Borrowing to Eat. The Impact of Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis on Colombo's Working Class Poor,* September 2023 https://www.csf-asia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CUL-September-2023-Policy-Brief.pdf.

[208] Interview with war-affected woman B in Amparai District in February 2026.

[209] University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), *The War and its Consequences in Ampara District*, 16th October 1990, p. 70f.

[210] University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), *The War and its Consequences in Ampara District*, 16th October 1990, p. 71.

including children were killed, and many more injured. As Kamala chillingly narrated, "*because of the shooting there, the whole school was covered in blood. They shot three children there, one after the other*".[211] During the massacre, she herself and her daughter were injured. Her husband, she continued, "*was holding our eldest son in his lap, fearing he would be hit by the explosion. At that moment, as he moved to protect him, he was hit. He was wounded because of that*".[212] Her husband was brought to Sammanthurai hospital, where the injured were threatened by a mob[213], and from there to Ampara hospital. There, survivors of the Veeramunai massacre were deprived of basic care[214]: "*In the hospital, they wouldn't even give us food. They would even turn off the taps so we couldn't drink water…I would cut a saline bottle, use it to take water from those flasks, and give it to the children*".[215] Her own wound was only treated a week after the massacre when she had been brought to Karaithivu hospital, leading to this daunting experience: "*Because I went out to pluck Ponnanganni while the shrapnel was still inside, seven boils formed on my leg. After those healed, the shrapnel came out on its own. I poked at it with a needle, and it fell out*".[216] Adding to this, she also spoke about how survivors were threatened: "*When they were stitching [wounds] at the Sammanthurai Hospital, they told us, 'Go away, you are just the meat we put in the pot'. We lived in constant fear like that until the Red Cross brought us here and settled us*".[217]

At Ampara hospital, Kamala had to witness the enforced disappearance of her husband together with 2 other men who survived the Veeramunai massacre: "*They took them from the hospital in a car. When we saw this and screamed, they pointed their guns at us and threatened to shoot*".[218] Her desperation and helplessness came out in the following statement: "…*they took him away after beating him. When we went to stop them, they grabbed us and locked us in a room*".[219] This traumatic and painful experiences of loved ones being injured and forcibly disappeared, of displacement and of having survived a cruel massacre against civilians also catapulted her into economic hardships. 5 months pregnant, and on her own with 5 children, Kamala had to navigate agonizing circumstances. They stayed for 4 years at a refugee camp in Thirukkovil where she also gave birth to her youngest daughter. 2 years after the massacre, the daughter who was injured by shrapnels in the massacre, developed a fever and died. Recounting how she managed to survive, she told us: "*I went here and there plucking grass and greens; the children were very small. One child had just been born, and there was no way to even buy a tin of milk for them*." When asked "*who was there to help you*" she replied poignantly:

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[211] Interview with war-affected woman B in Amparai District in February 2026.

[212] Interview with war-affected woman B in Amparai District in February 2026.

[213] University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), *The War and its Consequences in Ampara District*, 16th October 1990, p. 72.

[214] This is corroborated by a UTHR report that states that despite the Sinhalese staff wanted to help, they were threatened by a Muslim army soldier with his partner, who mistreated and abused survivors:
University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), *The War and its Consequences in Ampara District*, 16th October 1990, pp. 72-75.

[215] Interview with war-affected woman B in Amparai District in February 2026.

[216] Interview with war-affected woman B in Amparai District in February 2026.

[217] Interview with war-affected woman B in Amparai District in February 2026.

[218] Interview with war-affected woman B in Amparai District in February 2026.

[219] Interview with war-affected woman B in Amparai District in February 2026.

"*There was no one*".[220] The memories of her multiple traumas still torment her today, more than 35 years later: "*When I think of the tragedies that happened in 1990, I can't sleep at night*".[221]

Since 1994, after having returned with her children to her home village from the refugee camp in Thirukkovil, she provided for her family by plucking Ponnanganni (water amaranth) and Thiraai (greens). She sells these in Sammanthurai despite her feelings that are grounded in her experiences of the massacre, and the dread in Sammanthurai hospital afterwards: "*I carry that thought in my mind whenever I go. But where else can I go to sell it? I go there thinking, 'These are the people who shot our people'*".[222] This statement speaks of the dreadful situation she was in even before the cyclone, with no other way to earn a living than to sell in a place that is connected with her trauma.

Because of Ditwah, she was not able to earn anything, also not through the idiyappam she used to sell from home, or the paddy grains she would collect after harvest, and mill and boil. Kamala was therefore forced to take a loan to eat due the inadequacy of relief distribution during Ditwah in combination with systematic failures to address past violence and ensuing economic hardship. She has not yet received the living allowance of 6,000 LKR by the OMP despite having registered 1 year before. And although Kamala is an Aswesuma recipient, and therefore registered as particularly vulnerable, she did not get any support after the disaster, in a situation where prices of food had sharply increased: "[*n]o one came to see us. No relief was given*" as she stated. When being asked whether she had approached the GS, her answer spoke of anxiety and warding off disappointments: "*If I ask and he responds by saying, 'Am I supposed to help only you?' what am I supposed to do*?"[223]

Kamala's experience piercingly recounts that survivors of massacres against civilians and women whose family members were forcibly disappeared were in addition to the multiple trauma that they have been subjected to, also brought into dire economic situations. It also shows the necessity to adopt a social justice-oriented approach to disaster management with relief schemes that target war-affected people.

[220] Interview with war-affected woman B in Amparai District in February 2026.

[221] Interview with war-affected woman B in Amparai District in February 2026.

[222] Interview with war-affected woman B in Amparai District in February 2026.

[223] Interview with war-affected woman B in Amparai District in February 2026.

6. Of Not Being Seen and Heard

"...going to them again and again to make our voices heard will not work if it's not going to be received."[224]
--- Female Ex-Combatant with a Disability---

Systemic failures and marginalization of vulnerable groups in disaster management came out in the many poignant accounts of not being seen, and heard, by the state. People were rendered invisible by GS who did not come and see losses as well as by government officers' insensitivity and the lack of data on vulnerable groups. This set up barriers for accessing relief, which were compounded by obstacles in the registration process such as the narrow time frames set and that photographs were demanded as proof. Vulnerable groups were also rendered inaudible by the exclusion of grassroots activists and organizations from disaster management meetings and decision-making processes.

People would share poignant stories of how they desperately appealed to DS staff or GS "to come and see" for themselves, just to have in many cases their hopes that their losses will be accounted for disappointed. **Hence, not being seen and heard came out in** many discussions, and "no one came to see" in particular was a frequent experience that was shared in interviews and FGDs.[225] An activist for persons with disabilities pointed to the importance of government officers proactively reaching out to vulnerable groups: "*There are people who are physically unable to go out and provide their details, yet no one comes to visit or inspect them.*"[226] For instance, a woman with a disability shared how she pledged the GS to come and see the damage as she could not wade through the floodwater: "*Three feet of water had entered our house. Therefore, a situation arose where we could not stay in the house. So I said, 'GS, come and see my situation. I cannot even walk. I will fall into the water.' But as a GS, he did not come to see at all*".[227] It was only after a protest that government officers visited affected people's houses.[228] A similar situation arouse in another locality where according to a women's activist a protest was necessary to pressurize government officers to inspect damages and to register people.[229] However, a protest in Sampoor remained unsuccessful since, as a participant in a FGD stated, "*[e]ven then, no one came to ask us why we were protesting...We stood in front of the office for many hours, but then we left, realizing it was*

[224] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026.
[225] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.
[226] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.
[227] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.
[228] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.
[229] Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

of no use".[230] In yet another place, intervention by "public figures" was necessary to bring the GS to visit the houses of a female ex-combatant and other people with disabilities.[231]

Being left out manifested also in desperate and often futile attempts of getting **registered for relief**.[232] Common statements that people heard when approaching government officers to register were: *"We have finished the registration*" or "*The time is up*."[233] There was a general feeling that government officers prematurely closed the relief distribution process.[234] Vulnerable groups were moreover outrightly told that no aid would be available for them. For example, a person working for a disability organisation told us that they had no chance to register their beneficiaries for relief.[235] There were also cases where people were not registered because they lived in brick houses and a common assumption among government officers was that only particular houses, e.g. those with tin sheet roofs, were damaged.[236] A women's activist also spoke of bribes government officers demanded to put people on relief lists.[237] In general, many had to rely on others to fill in forms, to approach a particular GS, to write letters, to channel their needs through a group etc. in order to have a chance to access relief. [238]

Another recurring topic in our discussions with vulnerable people was **insensitivity and a rude if not aggressive attitude** displayed by government officers that left them humiliated and scared[239] as in the case of a woman in a FGD with ex-combatants and people with disabilities: "*There were massive losses. We also raised chickens, and nearly 20 died.…They [government officers] told us, 'It's just regular rain during a cyclone; chickens always die in places where water stagnates.' They even asked us mockingly, 'Will you come and register for relief every single year when it floods*?'".[240] In the same FGD, another woman described a similar experience: "*I lost a lot of chickens. When I went to register the loss, the officials asked me, 'What is this, mother? You come every day to register something; can we register things every single day?' Feeling insulted, we just came back. I lost more than 30 chickens. The flood entered the house, and all the*

[230] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.

[231] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[232] Interview with women's activist A in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[233] Interview with women's activist A in Batticaloa District in January 2026; FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[234] Interview with women's activist A in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[235] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[236] Interview with women's activist A in Batticaloa District in January 2026; Interview with an activist and family member of a forcibly disappeared person in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[237] Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[238] Interview with women's activist A in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[239] Interview with war-affected woman D in Amparai District in February 2026.

[240] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

chickens drowned and were floating in the water."[241] Such resignation as a result of structural neglect and non-recognition also came out in the remark of another FGD participant: "*We didn't receive any such thing [relief for lost livestock]. We asked and then just gave up. They simply don't take us into account*".[242] Similarly, a female ex-combatant with a disability shared how she was harshly chased off by the GS despite several attempts to register for relief. "*Once registration started, there was a crowd at the registration place for two consecutive days*", she explained. "*Since we couldn't stand there for a long time, I went on the third day. They said the GS hadn't come that day*".[243] After this, she called the GS and to get registered for relief. The GS asked her why she hadn't come on the day of the disaster. Then the following exchange between her and the GS ensued: "'*To come immediately to the registration place, I am not an ordinary person like others. Because I don't have a leg below the thigh.' Additionally, I said, 'I'm asking you because of the hardship,' and she replied, 'Okay. I'll talk in person. Come to the office on Monday.' Finally, she said, 'It wasn't registered for everyone. Not for those who have shops and are sitting waiting to die, and not for those doing other work.' After that I didn't go*".[244]

Such disparaging treatment was apparently no exception.[245] These humiliating and denigrating ways of engaging with vulnerable people left for many a mark as a female ex-combatant with a disability stated: "*Not even 1 kg of rice has been given to a single person with a disability here…That had a deep psychological impact on everyone*."[246] Ex-combatants in particular were discriminated against and intentionally overlooked during aid distribution.[247] A human rights activist hence criticized government officers' abuse of power: *"…many of them [government officers] think of themselves as 'authorities.' But no one here is an authority. They are public servants. All government servants are supposed to be people's servers. But they do not behave like servers of the people; instead, they act like dictators. They operate under the mindset that 'they can dominate the people, and the people must come begging to them*.'"[248] Such experiences of GS officers acting authoritatively and blocking access to relief were common.[249]

Yet even if people nevertheless managed to register and make themselves heard under these circumstances, they would often be stranded without any relief – again especially vulnerable people such as the elderly, people with disabilities and war-affected women – as the **burden of proof** was shifted to the affected people. Despite not being mandated in any of the circulars, most people told us that government officers **demanded photos**

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[241] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[242] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[243] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[244] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[245] Interview with an activist for people with disabilities in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[246] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[247] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026; Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[248] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[249] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026.

or even videos as evidence.[250] This weighted particularly heavily on those who do not own smartphones. For example, even if people had previously registered their businesses, poultry or cattle, they were told that they could not access relief without photos as in the case of a participant in a FGD with ex-combatants and people with disabilities.[251] But even those in possession of a phone with a camera were unable to take photographs.

A women's activist evocatively described the impossibility to document damages while seeking shelter with one's family: "*Will people be busy taking photos while a disaster is happening? That is impossible. At that moment, we are focused on protecting ourselves and our children; no one is in a mindset to take photographs.*"[252] Likewise, a participant in the FGD in Trincomalee bitterly remarked: *"Now, if a cyclone hits, we aren't even supposed to try to escape; instead, we are forced to go searching for 'evidence,'"*[253] adding: "*They literally ask, 'If the cyclone is carrying you away, why didn't you take a picture of it*?'"[254] In addition, people were unaware that photographs were a requirement

[250] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026; Interview with leading government officer A in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with leading government officer B in Batticaloa District in February 2026; FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026; Interview with GS B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[251] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[252] Interview with women's activist A in Batticaloa District in January 2026; see also Interview with women's activist C in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[253] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[254] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

for accessing relief.[255] Yet even if people managed to bring photos or **even videos this did by no means guarantee that they would receive relief as the** account of a woman with a disability illustrates: "*We had taken videos of the water entering our houses as evidence. When we showed them, they looked at it and claimed we were lying and that we were showing videos of floods that had occurred previously*."[256]

The **inadequate and uneven flow of information** further impeded vulnerable groups' access to relief. For example, a women's activist pointed out that no efforts were made to contact areas that were completely cut off.[257] In addition crucial information, including alleged deadlines for registration for compensation, was in many cases solely distributed through WhatsApp groups.[258] This not only ignored that phone networks were cut off and that most internet service providers went down during the cyclone, but also contributed to widen the digital divide.[259] A participant in a FGD with ex-combatants and persons with disabilities who had lost livestock and wanted to register for relief shared the following: "*They told us that all of that is finished. They said a group has been opened on the phone [likely a WhatsApp group]. In reality, who is even in that group? Not everyone has the facility of a Smartphone. So, I asked, 'How can you say something like that?' To that, the GS (Grama Niladhari) replied, 'That project is ove*r'".[260] In the same FGD, another participant reported that the government officer told him: "*'The closing date has passed.' I asked, 'Who did you notify?' and he casually replied, 'That's what the [phone] group is for'*".[261] Due to such massive communication and information-sharing gaps, indigenous people and those living in remote areas thus often remained completely unidentified by the state.[262] Such breakdown in communication hence widened structural gaps in disaster management and deepened inequalities.

The **state's failure to collect and update data** added to such structural invisibility of vulnerable groups in disaster management.[263] For example, there is no statistical breakdown of data on people with disabilities, and compensation was based on the GS' rushed situation reports.[264] There was also no proper information collected regarding "*what kind of impact occurred…how it affected women, and how it affected persons with disabilities*", and the data submitted centered on those who stayed in camps.[265] A

[255] Interview with women's activist B in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[256] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[257] Interview with women's activist C in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[258] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[259] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026; FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[260] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[261] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[262] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Trincomalee District in May 2026;

[263] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026; FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[264] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[265] Interview with women's activist C in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

women's activist therefore demanded that "*[officials] should possess a clear understanding regarding which families fall under which classifications. However, up to this point, the Grama Niladhari has not been aware of who requires what. The cyclone occurred suddenly, but if they are working throughout the entire year, they ought to have identified these matters already*".[266] Given this lack of data and the invisibility of vulnerable groups, there were no special provisions for, and not even a consideration of for instance people with disabilities in disaster management.[267] This was corroborated by a female ex-combatant with a disability who came to the following verdict: "*During this disaster time, not one person talked about people with disabilities. Are there people with disabilities? What do they need? — neither the government nor politicians thought about or looked at this*."[268] Despite the frontline work of organizations, many who were severely affected hence fell through the cracks. As an activist from an association for people with disabilities shared: "*Currently, we [our organization] are standing at the forefront and doing the work. However, some people with disabilities remain 'hidden' (homebound/unseen)*."[269]

This invisibility resulted in a lack of basic relief for vulnerable groups. For example, victims were left with no place to stay and no vessels for cooking as activists reported at a stakeholder meeting in Batticaloa.[270] There were moreover examples from different places where people had **no access to food**.[271] In Kalmunai, an area was completely cut off but, as government officers stated, the Navy refused to bring dry rations asserting that "'*[t]here are no orders to go to that particular village*'".[272] And a disabled woman in Kattankudy shared: "*...in all 18 GS Divisions, there are many people whose houses were broken, trees fell, roofs blew away, persons with disabilities, and those who went without food for two or three days. Even at that time, no one went and provided them with food*".[273]

This invisibility of vulnerable people was coupled with them also being rendered inaudible in disaster management. For example, the exclusion of women, civil society actors and representatives from vulnerable communities from the *Rebuilding Sri Lanka Fund*[274] was in line with their **exclusion from disaster related meetings** on the local

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[266] Interview with women's activist D in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[267] Interview with women's activist C in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[268] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[269] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities and staff from an association for people with disabilities in February 2026.

[270] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[271] Interview with two human rights activists who work in Trincomalee District in February 2026.

[272] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[273] Interview with woman B with a disability who is also an activist in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[274] Women and Media Collective, *An Outrageous Exclusion: The Government of Sri Lanka Must Ensure Women's Representation in Disaster Decision-Making*, 3rd December 2025 https://womenandmedia.org/womens-representation-disaster-decision-making/; Sanjana Ravi, *A Call for Inclusive Representation in National Rebuilding*, Daily Express, 8th December 2025 https://dailyexpress.lk/commentary/argument-commentary/33691/; Anushka Wijesinha & Stephanie Nicolle, *Who Decides What 'Rebuilding' Looks Like After Cyclone Ditwah*? Colombo Urban Lab, 6th December 2025 https://www.csf-asia.org/who-decides-what-rebuilding-looks-like-after-cyclone-ditwah/.

level.[275] In some places, it took pressure from civil society organisations on the national level that a meeting was held to which civil society organization were invited. However, as a women's activist told us: "*Since they must provide extensive infrastructure and two or three lakhs, those invitations go only to large organisations like World Vision. These groups also tend not to discuss grassroots issues when attending such meetings. They merely discuss matters pertaining to their own projects and then leave*".[276] Yet her and others' longstanding work with vulnerable communities are pivotal to make these visible, and audible in disaster management: "*...only if we bring one or two individuals to speak about local produce can we let them know which problems we are facing and what resources we are not receiving.*"[277] Another women's activist who attended a meeting corroborated this: "*Mostly, they talked about where tanks have breached and where roads have broken. Additionally, they talked about matters regarding fishermen and agriculture. They did not talk about daily wage labourers at the bottom level or the occupations done by women.*"[278] Adding to that, an ex-combatant and woman with a disability came to this bitter conclusion: "*The story of people with disabilities is not told in the government either*".[279]

These accounts all point to the shifting of responsibility from the state to its citizens, from ensuring adequate distribution of relief to having to fight to access it. They also illustrate the state's failure to take care of its citizens. These examples also reveal the bottleneck of disaster relief, which are local government officers, on whose demeanour, work, decisions, and biases inclusion and exclusion in relief schemes depends. They also show more generally the breakdown of state administrative accountability during disasters: Relief was rendered inaccessible for a large number of affected people from vulnerable groups due to state neglect in recognizing people and their losses, structural barriers to register damages, insensitivity and arbitrary decision-making of government officers, and structures that rendered them invisible and inaudible.

[275] Stakeholder meeting with activists in Batticaloa District in May 2026.

[276] Interview with women's activist D in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[277] Interview with women's activist D in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

[278] Interview with women's activist C in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[279] Interview with a female former combatant with a disability in Batticaloa District in January 2026.

7. Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Frontline Government Officers

"When a disaster occurs, everyone should be made a stakeholder. Only when responsibilities are distributed among everyone will the system function properly."[280]
---Government Officer---

Government officers highlighted a range of serious issues that they, as frontline workers, faced, being sandwiched between the government and its disaster management, and the large number of affected people who could not adequately be helped. First, they had to deal with systemic pressures such as changing and unclear instructions, and the vagueness of categories to measure impact that brought them in the difficult position to ultimately decide on relief distribution. In addition, bureaucratic hurdles such as tight reporting schedules, insufficient staff and systemic failures before the disaster such as the lack of data on vulnerable groups compounded these pressures. This all constituted a huge burden for frontline government workers as they were ultimately the ones held responsible by the state as well as the general public.

Government officers identified the **ambiguous and changing stipulations in the circulars** issued by the government as a major challenge to their relief work. First, the circulars lacked clear instructions and there was no proper guidance[281] for those supposed to implement them, GS and DS staff in particular.[282] They also came shortly after another and often required modifications in practice. As the first circular was only issued on November 28th but the cyclone had made landfall in the East already on November 26th, government officers initially followed existing disaster management guidelines that were partly negated by later circulars.[283] One of the most significant changes was from estimates of actual damages and case-based allocation to fixed amounts.[284] Another change was the shift from the provision of dry rations to depositing

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[280] Interview with GS B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[281] The confusion over guidelines is not surprising when checking the National Disaster Relief Services Centre's website, where many guidelines and circulars, including circulars issued under the NPP government, are not available in Tamil, and at times not even in English but exclusively in Sinhala, including the Disaster Relief Service Guidelines no. 01/2025 dated 21-05-2025 to select beneficiaries that the Ditwah circular from December 5 explicitly refers to:
https://ndrsc.gov.lk/web/index.php?option=com_phocadownload&view=category&id=2&Itemid=75&lang=en&limitstart=20 (last accessed 12th July 2026).
This is another illustration of the widely reported failure of the government to communicate important information regarding the disaster in Tamil:
Sanjana Hattotuwa, *Who gets warned? Language, discrimination, and disaster communication in Sri Lanka*, Sanjanah Blog, 29th November 2025
https://sanjanah.wordpress.com/2025/11/29/who-gets-warned-language-discrimination-and-disaster-communication-in-sri-lanka/; Tharushi Weerasinghe & Sandran Rubatheesan, *Lost in translation: How Sri Lanka's Tamils face repeated disaster warning failures,* The New Humanitarian, 18th December 2025
https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2025/12/18/lost-translation-how-sri-lankas-tamils-face-repeated-disaster-warning.

[282] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[283] Interview with leading government officer B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[284] Interview with leading government officer A in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with leading government officer B in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Government of Sri Lanka, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, *Budget Circular 08/2025* (5th December 2025).

money directly to people's bank accounts which was a first.[285] There were also changes regarding the documentation and proof needed. Initially, as a government officer explained, they collected among other details also proof of land deeds. Yet a new circular referred to an official form in need for "extensive information" as he told us.[286] These changes proved to be challenging to implement as a female GS shared: "*When looking at the major struggles we faced during the Ditwah Cyclone, whenever a circular is issued, we proceed with our activities and preparations in accordance with that circular. While we are in the middle of doing so, they cancel it and issue the next circular*.[287]

Another issue that was identified by government officers was the vagueness of the **criteria** to measure impact and to select those who should receive relief, leaving them with the burden to ultimately decide on the distribution of funds. In a FGD with DS staff in Kalmunai, a participant explained: "*For us, the circular is the foundation. Because there are gaps (ambiguities) in the circular, we are the ones who have to make the final decisions. The question is, what should we base those decisions on*?"[288] The suddenness with which the funds arrived and relief had to be distributed added to the pressure to decide.[289] Government communication in combination with the constraints set by the circulars and the vagueness of criteria also provoked conflicts with the public as people could often not understand the reasoning behind decisions.[290] In Kalmunai, this even led to a protest.[291] At the same time, government officers felt that the criteria stipulated in the circulars were too strict, causing the exclusion of affected people from relief.[292]

As the circulars did not specify particular vulnerable groups to whom relief should be given,[293] the GS were the ones who had to deliver the data for relief distribution. Government officers spoke about the gruelling **reporting schedule** that they had to follow thereby. GS had to compile 2 daily "situation reports", one in the morning by 9 am and one in the afternoon by 3 pm. As these reports were the base for official figures[294] of the number of people affected and to assess the disaster's impacts for relief allocation, this placed a huge burden on GS. According to new guidelines, these reports had to include many details.[295] Yet physical visits within a short time window necessary to prepare the reports were especially challenging in large GS areas: "*'Send the report by 3:00 PM.' When it is specified like that, can I go and check all 2,500 families immediately? It is not possible*".[296] Due to this time pressure, government officers admitted that

[285] Interview with leading government officer A in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with GS B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[286] Interview with leading government officer B in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with GS B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[287] Interview with GS A in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[288] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[289] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[290] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[291] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[292] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[293] Interview with leading government officer A in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with leading government officer B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[294] Interview with leading government officer A in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[295] Interview with GS B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[296] Interview with GS A in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

mistakes were made and details have been missing.[297] The feasibility to report was further impeded by the weather conditions as a senior government officer explained, *"[w]e had to send our GS officers into the field at 10:00 PM. It was pouring rain and the winds were extremely strong; just getting to the location was a major challenge"*.[298] Especially for female GS, transport and traveling to collect data for their reports posed in general a challenge.[299] *"...[I]t is very difficult for me to go everywhere",* a female GS shared, "*I travel by foot. No transportation allowances are provided. We only get the usual 600 Rupees (travel allowance). No special transport facilities are provided for disaster work."*[300]

Especially GS were distressed as they are the ones who would ultimately be held responsible in the auditing process which was further complicated by the fixed amounts that had to be distributed.[301] This ultimate responsibility for distributing funds, and the fear of the audit also came out in a statement by another government officer who remarked: *"...we are the ones who will have to face future inquiries or be forced to pay back the 'penalty funds'"*.[302] The fear of having to face the audit also prompted government officers to request more evidence than stipulated in the circulars.[303]

Frontline local government officers also described **the barriers** they faced in helping vulnerable groups. Referring to a housing scheme where daily wage labourers live that was without water and electricity, DS officers in Kalmunai North spoke about their efforts to help but that their hands were ultimately tied due to the unresolved administrative issues in Kalmunai that made it difficult to access funds. As a government officer elaborated: "*...money isn't even provided for simple things like changing a lightbulb or cleaning a toilet. We cannot do it with our own money. Even if we did, the question would be asked: 'Why should you do it with your own money? There is a government procedure. It is stated that private personal funds cannot be spent [on government tasks].' In such situations, the mental stress between the administration and the general public only leads to increased problems and conflicts"*.[304]

GS in particular, as those working on the frontlines of disaster management, directly faced the **anger and desperation of people** and were frequently **verbally attacked**.[305] For example, the confusing government communication that sparked off feelings of being treated unfairly among people were directed towards GS: "*...this directly affects*

[297] Interview with GS A in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with leading government officer B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[298] Interview with leading government officer B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[299] Interview with GS A in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[300] Interview with GS B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[301] Interview with GS B in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with GS A in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[302] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[303] Interview with GS A in Batticaloa District in February 2026; FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[304] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026.

[305] Interview with GS A in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with leading government officer B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

our Grama Niladharis (GS) because they are the ones facing the public on the ground."[306] The same senior government officer spoke about the distress that weighted on GS and observed "*instances where Grama Niladharis (GS) have broken down in tears; some have even talked about quitting their jobs. They are exhausted by the constant complaints and harassment.*"[307] At a meeting, a GS was threatened to be slapped.[308] A female GS told us that she had to take her husband with her to visit camps and houses for her protection.[309] She also reported an incident where people ganged up to hit her for not inspecting their houses.[310]

GS and other government officers also mentioned how **government communication** complicated their work. They shared for example that the spreading of information via social media, especially the huge amounts allocated for disaster relief, impeded their work as it raised people's expectations and led to conflicts with affected people.[311] The pressure this created for frontline government officers took a toll on them as a female GS reported: *"If a post says, 'The President said to give 25,000 or 50,000 Rupees; go get your relief,' what can we do? During that time, I was under such pressure that I couldn't even answer my phone. My mental health was affected; I felt I needed counselling*."[312]

In general, there was exhaustion and a strong sense of **being left alone** among frontline workers.[313] "*On that day",* a female GS told us, "*I visited houses from 6:00 AM until 9:00 PM. In between, I also visited the displacement camps. It is extremely difficult when one person has to bear all these responsibilities*."[314] Such lack of support was exacerbated by local Disaster Management Committees that were not properly functioning as a GS explained: "*When the public faces a disaster, people will stand by the victims' side, but no one comes to stand by our side (the officials*)".[315]

As these accounts show, frontline government officers found themselves in a difficult place as they had to deal with bureaucratic and administrative constraints but also the expectations and desperation of the public, as well as their anger and resentment. Government officers faced many challenges that can be traced back to disaster management on the national level such as the number of circulars that compelled them to constantly adjust their work, and the vagueness of criteria that forced them to make decisions who would get relief and who would not. They were burdened with the pressure to prepare reports that informed disaster management and relief allocation, yet without sufficient support.

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[306] Interview with leading government officer B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[307] Interview with leading government officer B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[308] Interview with leading government officer B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[309] Interview with GS B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[310] Interview with GS B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[311] FGD with DS officers in Kalmunai in February 2026; Interview with leading government officer A in Batticaloa District in February 2026; Interview with leading government officer B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[312] Interview with GS B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[313] Interview with GS A in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[314] Interview with GS B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

[315] Interview with GS B in Batticaloa District in February 2026.

8. Rights Violations and the Human-Made Dimension of Natural Disasters

"What we know from disasters past, for those who wish to see, is that they hold up a mirror to the class and social fractures otherwise papered over or made unseen by the rich and powerful. Those who are hit first and hardest; those who are the last to receive help; those who get forgotten when the relief shelters close and the donation drives dry, are from the basement of society."[316]

Natural disasters reveal glaring inequalities, lay bare systemic failures and expose rights violations as this research brief has shown. They have therefore always also a human-made component and are intrinsically connected with questions of social justice. Our research has shown the following:

First, the violation of social, economic and human rights produces vulnerability that renders certain people more susceptible to hazards and aggravates their impacts. This socially and politically produced vulnerability explains the unevenness with which disasters affect people: who bears the brunt of climate change and has to live in flood-prone areas; who has to reside in an area with inadequate infrastructure that aggravates flooding; whose environment is affected by illegal sand mining; who is unable to flee due to a disability caused by the war; who is stranded without food in a remote area; who is forced over night to assume the role of the breadwinner because of the killing or enforced disappearance of a loved one; who has to graze cattle in dangerous places due to the militarization of land; who has to depend on home gardens to have enough to eat; who has to raise chicken, cultivate a small plot of land, or perform daily wage labour to survive; whose house is leaking without any means to repair it; who doesn't have resources to fall back on due to the war; who has to live on land without a deed; who has been violated by the state and carries a deep trauma. At the same time, structural barriers that hinder access to relief increase vulnerability.

Second, disaster management exposes state-citizen-relations and lays bare present and past discrimination, exclusion and state neglect. It reveals how and where aid is politicized; which groups are overlooked and excluded in relief efforts; state based discrimination; whose losses are rendered invisible and whose needs inaudible; mistrust or even fear towards the state based on previous experiences; who receives life-saving information and who not; in how far the state fulfils its duties to protect its citizens by adequately planning and preparing for disasters; and whether relief processes are thought through from marginalized members of society or not.

Third, inadequate disaster management takes an emotional toll, and accumulated trauma and hardships aggravate the impact of disasters. In our interviews, we have heard and seen resignation and exhaustion that resulted from the normalization of vulnerability by state actors; insensitivity and hostility experienced at the hands of government officers; neglect by the state; being overlooked in relief efforts and falling through the cracks; and a constant, unrelenting struggle for survival. This is exacerbated in the case of women, especially war-affected women including women with disabilities,

[316] B. Skanthakumar, *The Great Flood*, Polity, 5th December 2025 https://polity.lk/b-skanthakumar-the-great-flood/.

family members of the forcibly disappeared and those heading households, who often carry a triple burden as care-givers to others, bearing the responsibility for the entire household during disasters; as those who more often engage in informal and precarious labour and/or depend on home gardens or small patches of land for subsistence – livelihoods that were severely impacted by Ditwah; and as carrying the trauma and socio-economic brunt of having lost homes, loved ones or limbs as a result of the war.

Fourth, structural barriers, systemic failures and inequity in relief provision constitute structural violence. Consequently, disaster management is intrinsically linked with questions of social justice that also must be seen in a larger historical perspective. Deeply ingrained inequalities, systemic patterns of discrimination and structural barriers for vulnerable groups to assert their rights and access state services come to bear during disasters. They hence disclose patterns of injustice and a lack of accountability in both past and present. Structural violence is thus compounded by disasters if intersecting vulnerabilities are ignored and past violations are left unaccounted for.

9. From Reaction and Band-Aid to Prevention and Structural Reform: Recommendations

"Let the hardships we suffer end with us. It should not happen like that to the future generation. I believe it is better for women to be in decision-making positions. Especially when affected women are included, they will know exactly what the impact feels like. Therefore, I believe that knowing the nature of the suffering, they will provide the appropriate relief."[317]

Adopt a social justice approach to disaster management

- Stipulate special provisions for vulnerable groups including people with disabilities, women, ex-combatants, family members of victims of enforced disappearance, workers in the informal economy and oppressed caste communities
- Adopt bottom-up approaches for need assessments
- Devise relief based on the input of stakeholders including women, people with disabilities and economic as well as socially marginalized groups
- Revise relief categories to explicitly include people working in the informal sector and remove administrative obstacles to receive aid
- Integrate activists and grassroots organizations in planning, decision-making and disaster management
- Ensure the representation of women and people with disabilities in disaster management
- Remove bureaucratic obstacles to relief delivery
- Ensure the immediate provision of dry rations and food to people whose houses were flooded
- Collect and update data on vulnerable groups on the GS division level throughout the year
- Improve the system for real-time situational updates
- Set up camps that are accessible for people with disabilities and cater to needs of women
- Offer people in flood-prone areas alternative plots of land to resettle
- Rigorously implement national language policy and ensure the parallel release of circulars, information, weather forecasts etc. in Sinhala, Tamil and English
- Draft disaster management plans that address the needs of vulnerable groups
- Analyse and reckon with the failures of the Ditwah response

[317] FGD in Trincomalee District with ex-combatants, people with disabilities, war-affected women and activists in April 2026.

Address discrimination, exclusion and state neglect

- Guarantee the functioning of associations for people with disabilities
- Remove barriers for people with disabilities to obtain ID cards
- Ensure the recognition of the Certificate of Absence and expand its validity
- Strengthen women's independence by rectifying their socio-economic vulnerability (e.g. expedite maintenance cases and enforce payment, reform the MMDA, set up support schemes for women's small-scale businesses, revise the microfinance bill, address civil society criticism of Aswesuma to integrate more people, establish more safe houses…)
- Implement universal social security schemes
- Enable tax-free registration of small-scale businesses
- Issue land deeds to marginalized people
- Safeguard the rights of ex-combatants and stop surveillance
- Cooperate with NGOs and CSOs to address rights violations of vulnerable groups
- Address administrative issues and discrimination in Muthur DS Division
- Counter favouritism and discrimination in governance by implementing and upholding execution of state services in an equitable and equal manner
- Enforce the constitutionally guaranteed language rights of Tamil speakers

Rectify structural barriers, systemic failures and inequity

- Release land occupied by security forces and state agencies (e.g. Forest Department, Department of Archaeology, Mahaweli Authority, Ministry of Buddhasasana, Cultural and Religious Affairs)
- Roll back militarization and gradually close military camps in the East
- De-politicize Praja Shakti: ensure democratic processes to select members and chairwo*men, integrate it into existing governance structures to ensure accountability and avoid parallel structures, fully subordinate it under Divisional Secretariats and stop political interference
- Convert Kalmunai North into a full-fledged DS Office and guarantee its independent functioning
- Ensure transparency of relief schemes, registration process etc. and improve information flows
- Strengthen government officers' accountability by overseeing and regulating local actors and structures (e.g. external monitoring of relief work through e.g. independent Divisional or District Monitoring Committees)
- Strictly prosecute illegal sand mining
- Ensure the functioning and regular meetings of Disaster Management Committees also outside of a crisis
- Establish support systems for GS in disaster situations (e.g. dividing GS Divisions during disaster and integrate SSOs etc. in reaching out to affected people)