



From Invisible to Visible

Michelle Dilhara

Sri Lanka

In 2017, when Michelle Dilhara heard Leonardo DiCaprio speak to the United Nations General Assembly, she was deeply moved. As an aspiring actress, she'd enjoyed his films—but to see how he was using his influence to make a change was truly inspiring.

Addressing world leaders from around the globe, DiCaprio spoke about the climate crisis and the urgent need for action. It was an issue that Michelle cares deeply about. “As an actor I pretend for a living. I play fictitious characters, often solving fictitious problems,” DiCaprio said. “Mankind has looked at climate change in that same way: as if it were fiction. Ignoring the crisis won’t make it go away.”

These words struck a chord with Michelle. She realized that as an actress, she too was now in a position to speak truth to power. After finishing high school, she had joined an acting school and studied with famous Sri Lankan actors like Anoja Weerasinghe and Damayanthi Fonseka. When she was 20, she got her first big role in a television series called *Salsapuna*—and it was a big hit.

“I get a lot of media attention, from TV channels to national newspapers,” Michelle says. “So, I try to use all these platforms to educate, and create awareness on all these issues that I care about.”

Michelle grew up with a passion for speaking up for those whose voices were too often ignored in society. When she was 15 years old, she visited her uncle in the hospital and witnessed some of the inequalities between those with less means and those who were visible in society and those who were not. It made the difference between being surrounded by family and cared for by the system, and being lonely and left behind.

Michelle wanted to do something to help—but as a teenager, she didn’t have the money or influence needed to support anyone. However, she did study English, and she knew the language well.

“So, I thought maybe I could help children with learning English,” she says. “I volunteered at several children's homes, as an English and meditation teacher.”

When she saw the overwhelming need among the children she was helping, she mobilized others to join her. She formed a committee with other young leaders to coordinate and strengthen their efforts. This was the beginning of her “Invisible to Visible” movement, a campaign founded to address the social exclusion of those who are marginalized. She also wrote a book about her experiences, and what she had learned from her research into social issues, entitled *Social Invisibility Is Not a Fiction It Exists*.

Michelle had often heard her elders talk about changing weather patterns in Sri Lanka. She learned that farmers and those with low incomes—exactly the “invisible” people she had been fighting for—were increasingly being affected by climate change.

Farmers struggle with frequent and intense floods and droughts, leading to decreased crop yield. The lack of available drinking water poses a risk to all Sri Lankans, especially the poor. And climate change is a grave threat to the country's rich biodiversity. With one of the highest rates of endemic species worldwide, the negative effects of climate change

threaten to irreversibly destroy many plants, animals, and marine ecosystems. “In the past few years, the rainfall has been heavy,” Michelle says. “I witnessed all of these problems and I knew that something was very wrong.”

After doing some research, she knew what her first action would be. The beaches in Negombo are beautiful—palm trees sway gently in the wind, as the waves slowly roll onto the beach. But mixed in with the sand was all kinds of plastic bottles and bags, all of the trash left behind by visitors.

“The trash just mixes with the sand, and it is not going to decompose,” Michelle says. “That also causes many problems with water pollution.”

Michelle took to social media and called on her followers to gather on the beach. For three consecutive days, they roamed the beaches of Negombo, collecting mountains of plastic trash. Each day, the youth who were there would tell their friends about what they were doing; and the next day even more people would show up.

“The best thing was that all these young people joined together and started this project,” Michelle says. “And to our surprise a lot of the people who were at the beaches actually joined us—so I think somehow they must have gotten the message.”

Michelle has continued to use her steadily growing social media channels, and the airtime she gets on TV, to talk about the issues that are close to her heart. She also organizes awareness campaigns in schools and universities.

And her popularity continues to grow. In 2018, she received the Asian Inspiration Award; in 2019 she won the National Youth Icon Award; and in 2020 she was nominated as both the Best Upcoming Actress and Most Popular Actress of the Year. She uses these platforms to let people know about good causes to support—and she has pledged 60 percent of her income to pay for computer labs in rural schools, beds for children’s and retirement homes, and to give out scholarships for language classes to 1,000 children.

Thinking of the new generation that is being born into this world every day, she feels the need to live sustainably. “We have a responsibility for the future of these children,” she says. To engage others, Michelle decided to use her platform as a well-known actress to mobilize young people for climate action. “What I always tell everybody is that one small contribution from each of us can make a huge change,” she says.

And her climate activism has grown exponentially. Since she had mobilized so many fans to help with the beach clean-up, she decided to reach out to her followers for help with another project. Together, she and the volunteers she gathered planted 1,000 trees in Katana, in western Sri Lanka.

In 2020, after three years of climate activism, Michelle was named as the Earth Day Network Ambassador in Sri Lanka. Every year on April 22, Earth Day highlights both the value and the vulnerability of our natural environment. In 2020, the initiative celebrated its 50th birthday, with social media campaigns, educational events, and broad mobilization—and it is now working with more than 75,000 partners in over 190 countries.

For Michelle, this honor is an added responsibility, and an opportunity to push her climate activism even further. She was featured in the My Future, My Voice campaign, which presented the work of 50 young environmentalists from 16 different countries. To maximize their outreach, these young activists recorded videos and used their social media platforms to educate others about the problems that need to be addressed, and explain what they are doing to help.

With her appointment as ambassador, Michelle has also gotten one step closer to the person who inspired her climate activism in the first place: Leonardo DiCaprio acted as the cochair of the 50th anniversary global committee. “I am really grateful that I was appointed Earth Day Ambassador,” Michelle says. “With this honor, I think I will be able to address even more people on these issues.”

And indeed, she already has: together with the Sri Lankan Government Nursing Officers’ Association, which has about 33,000 members, Michelle championed another tree planting campaign. “I organized this campaign in the Negombo district, to highlight the value of planting a tree to fight the climate crisis,” she says.

Michelle has come a long way as both an actress and an activist. For her, it is important to always follow your instincts. “If your intention is to do the right thing, the universe will remove all the obstacles in your path,” she says. “You just have to believe in yourself, and work until you reach your goal.”

Clean air and a livable climate are inalienable human rights. And solving this crisis is not a question of politics, it is a question of our own survival.

This is the most urgent of times, and the most urgent of messages.

Leonardo DiCaprio

Call to Action: The Earth Day Network's global map of climate activists in 17 countries is ever-expanding: <https://www.earthday.org/> Follow Michelle on Facebook (@mishdilhara), and on Instagram (@michelledilhara).

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