

Why Did Hurricane Katrina Hit Women So Hard?

by Laura Butterbaugh

Thanks to the Internet, the images of the victims of Hurricane Katrina were as vivid as they were shocking: A hysterical woman pleading to TV cameras that women and girls were being raped in the Superdome. A woman slumped over in a wheelchair in a back corner, a covering pulled over her now-lifeless face. A woman describing how she feared for her and her 10-month-old baby's lives in the flood and chaos and handed her baby to a stranger boarding a bus bound for the Astrodome in Texas, begging her to take care of the baby. I still wonder if that woman was ever reunited with her baby. In fact, few of these stories have any resolution or closure. Some of them, such as women's reports of rape, have been challenged or disputed, attributed by authorities to hallucinations or stress. One thing, however, is beyond dispute: the people who were victimized most by the storm's damage and the social chaos it unleashed afterwards were disproportionately *women* and their children.

Natural disasters are gendered events. In 1995 a powerful earthquake hit Kobe, Japan, where 1.5 times more women died than men. The tsunami in Asia last year led to

the deaths of, on average, three to four times more woman than men. Most recently, most of those killed and injured by the earthquake in Pakistan were women and children.

Katrina was no exception to this pattern. While women make up 54 percent of the population of New Orleans, they made up about 80 percent of the people left behind to fend for themselves (or not) during and after the storm.

Why were so many women left behind? How do women experience a natural disaster differently from men? Why are women more vulnerable? These were questions that should have been asked by the disaster planners, media, and commentators. While they were asking hard questions about race and class and the impact of the hurricane, how did they all miss that gender was an equally important issue? In an analysis of the disaster, race, class and gender are inextricably linked. Why, even at their most visible, are women still *invisible*?

Inequities and their Consequences

More than one in four women living in New Orleans, and 15 percent of all families there, live

below the poverty line, compared to 14.5 percent nationally. In the broader Gulf Coast region, 17 to 19 percent of women live below poverty line. Single, mother-headed house-

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holds make up 56 percent of families in New Orleans, and four in ten of those households fall below the line. There are similar figures for families in the wider Gulf Coast region. The median household income for an African American woman in New Orleans is just \$19,951 per year. These women were already living on the margins even before the hurricane struck: "[F]or many women and children affected by the hurricane, poverty, uncertainty and devastation are not new" (Miller).

The generous outpouring of financial and material aid to hurricane victims makes me cynically wonder why, before the hurricane, the majority of donors would never give a second thought to these women's lives. "Why do the poor deserve all of this support after a natural disas-

ter, but not in the normal, struggling course of their lives?" asks Angela Bonavoglia in *Women's Enews* (see resources at end of article).

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The low-income New Orleans and Gulf Coast women and their families experienced a convergence of barriers that made it extremely difficult or impossible for them to leave. Worse, it was known beforehand by disaster planners that they could or would be left behind in harm's way. The women we saw on Internet streams were not foolhardy or cavalier about the Hurricane's dangers. They did not evacuate the city because they lacked the means to do so. One-third of New Orleans residents did not own a private car, yet the official emergency plan called for people to evacuate by car. Even if they had a car, many women were unable to manage the logistics of leaving including lacking money for gas or hotel rooms if they did leave (especially, as pointed out by Weitz, since the hurricane hit at the end of the month, when paychecks were already spent).

Some women did try to leave, but were turned back—the roads blocked with traffic. Appallingly, one of the last viable bridges was blocked by police forces on the other side in Gretna, Louisiana. Officers fired their guns into the air and even took the evacuees' food and water. In a blatant display of racism, white,

car-driving people were allowed over the bridge but African American pedestrians were not.

Another barrier to evacuation for many was that they were already maxed out by struggling with issues of poor health or disability, or from caring for family members suffering from poor health or disability. This

became a double whammy, impeding those women's ability to flee the storm beforehand, and then making them more vulnerable to the desperate conditions in the storm's aftermath when there was no food, water, electricity, medical care, or other basic necessities.

After the Disaster

We are all familiar with the images of clean-up after the Katrina disaster, or any disaster for that matter—men working hard to clear the streets of debris and garbage, repair roofs and roads, or touring the area to make speeches and promises. Meanwhile, what are women doing? The same work they have always done, only now made next to impossible by the disruption of home and finances and finely-tuned support networks that low-income women carefully build and balance so they can navigate through a life with not enough money—taking care of dependent children and parents, cooking food, maintaining a household, supporting their families financially and emotionally. Further, on an international scale it is documented that women are the ones

who mobilize communities to respond to disasters by raising money, forming networks to meet social needs, and other behind-the-scenes work. No wonder that women are more likely than men to suffer from post traumatic stress syndrome after disasters.

Women in the cities and regions where many victims of Katrina have relocated are not faring much better than their sisters in New Orleans were—the poverty rates in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Jackson, Mississippi; and Little Rock, Arkansas range from 18 to 22 percent for women. Overall Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas all rank in the bottom ten of all states on indicators of women's status such as poverty rates and health insurance coverage. So while the evacuated women may have escaped the hurricane they will be hard-pressed to rebuild lives no matter whether they stay in their new locales or return to the Gulf Coast.

Opportunities Gained and Squandered

Rebuilding efforts need to include attention to the practical nuts and bolts of women's lives, in addition to the tangible nuts and bolts of rebuilding businesses, casinos, and roads. For instance, the current focus on rebuilding single-family homes on the Gulf Coast belies the fact that a greater percentage of renters and residents of public housing and mobile homes are women. "Katrina and Rita should inspire us to begin a new national dialogue on poverty and its disproportionate impacts on women, especially women of color. Research tells us a great deal about the solu-

tions that work such as access to training and work and family supports. We must face the persistent poverty that is growing around our nation and work together to advance policies addressing its root causes," notes the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR). The social issues that were problems before the storm are exacerbated afterwards—lack of child care, reproductive and basic health care, and training, education and jobs with wages that will lift a family out of poverty.

So far the redevelopment plans are doing exactly the opposite. Instead of focusing attention and resources on programs with records of helping the poor, federal efforts are instead veering toward creating tax-free zones for businesses, suspending programs to help minority businesses, cutting safety net programs such as food stamps and the Section 8 housing assistance program, and lifting prevailing wage laws.

"The majority of relief efforts are intended for the entire population of a disaster-affected area, however when they rely on existing structures of resource distribution that reflect the patriarchal structure of society, women are marginalized in their access to relief resources" (Pan American Health Organization). Successful efforts to get the region, including women living there, back on its feet will require attention to pre-existing needs that contributed to the severity of the disaster in the first place, not putting the burden of reconstruction on the backs of those least able to afford it while handing the "have mores" no-bid contracts and fatter profits.

Another well-documented event impacting women after disasters is the rise in violence against women, including rape, domestic violence, and other forms of abuse. Many of the already-scanty resources for helping women in these circumstances were destroyed by the hurricane. Particular attention needs to be paid to rebuilding and expanding resources, and reaching women who need those services. Men who were victims of the hurricane must also be targeted since there is a high risk that they will become abusers.

Gender-sensitive rebuilding efforts will serve both women and men better in the long run by making communities safer, more economically stable, and healthy. And women (and their children) will reap the benefits of being lifted out of poverty and experiencing a life free of violence, including domestic and sexual violence. Women have special needs due to our gendered society that puts women at long-term risk, and those needs must be addressed. "Black women and single mothers in this region need policies that extend emergency assistance for more than a few months, and that provide living wages and job training that will allow them to find economic security both during the rebuilding phase and beyond," according to a recent report by the Institute for Women's Policy Research. Focusing on "gender-blind" rebuilding is in reality gender-sensitive, by favoring white, wealthy men and their property interests. And women will pay the price. ♦

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Endnotes:

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