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Women in the Wake of the Storm:

*Examining the Post-Katrina Realities of the Women of
New Orleans and the Gulf Coast*

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About this Report:

This report is the third in a series examining the experiences of women, particularly women of color, in the areas hit by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. In Part I, we discussed poverty among women and people of color in the Gulf Coast region and in the South more generally. In Part II, we presented data from before and after the storms, examined women's role in the labor market prior to the hurricanes, and offered policy recommendations for reincorporating women into the workforce during and after the rebuilding period. This report shares findings garnered from a series of interviews held with a diverse group of women from throughout the Gulf region. In telling their stories, it provides an analysis of women's increased vulnerability during times of natural disasters and lays out policy recommendations that pinpoint how best to address those needs in the wake of this disaster, and in anticipation of the next.

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“...we down here have been forgotten.”

--66 year-old grandmother, Orleans
Parish Resident, and Katrina
Survivor

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For most Americans, the horrors of Katrina have devolved into nothing more than a sad, but distant memory. We have written our checks, said our prayers, and if we were especially generous, volunteered a few days or weeks of our time toward rebuilding efforts. Yet for many who call home the various cities, towns, and vast rural stretches all along the Gulf Coast that felt first-hand the wrath of Katrina, the daily struggle to reclaim some semblance of the life they once knew remains. In many ways, that struggle is a lonely, tumultuous challenge, wrought with shifting rules of the game, and a cycle of frustration that begets progress in one respect, with simultaneous retrenchment in several others.

Nearly all of those within the crosshairs of this historic storm have their own tales of challenge and heartache. But like what is commonplace around the world, in times of natural disaster, those groups who are most marginalized before tragedy strikes, bear the brunt of ill-effects during the disaster, and long afterwards. As a result, the on-the-ground impacts of natural disasters are anything but “natural.” Instead they are shaped by social constructs that value some and devalue others as they relate to race, class, and gender in broader society. Katrina was, and is, quite ordinary in that respect. Although it threatened all, those most vulnerable to its effects were the ones with the fewest resources—both formal and informal—to draw upon when it mattered most.

Impossible to ignore in the storm’s immediate aftermath were, of course, its race and class dynamics. Stark images beamed from the Superdome, the Convention Center, the overpasses, and the rooftops, all made clear the double disadvantage of race and class in America and its implications for life and death in times of crisis. But largely overlooked was the overarching role of gender in this tragedy and how its intersection with race, class, and even age, colored the realities we all saw unfold on those hot summer days in the immediate aftermath of Katrina and beyond.

This report examines the issue of women’s increased vulnerability during times of natural disaster and explores how the experiences of women impacted by Katrina align with international norms associated with gender and disaster. It also provides an overarching race/class/gendered analysis of the post-Katrina experiences of women, with a special emphasis on what they are doing now to rebuild their lives, reconstruct their homes, restore their families, and reclaim their communities.

The findings relayed below are derived from a series of semi-structured one-on-one and small group interviews held with a diverse cross-section of women who returned to the Gulf Region and are active contributors to the rebirthing of their communities following this historic disaster.

Women’s Exposure to Violence and Sexual Assault Heightened as a Result of Housing Shortage

The overwhelming level of destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina created an acute affordable housing shortage throughout the region, but especially within the city of New Orleans. It has been estimated that of the approximately 142,000 units damaged or lost as a result of the storm, nearly four-fifths (79%) were affordable to low-income housing. Due to this shortage, many women and girls must now share accommodations with extended family members, acquaintances, or even in some cases, known former abusers, simply to have a place to call home. According to the city’s remaining domestic violence and sexual assault service providers, the resulting overcrowding has led to abuse specifically linked to the Katrina experience.

Living at the Bottom Before Katrina, Making Ends Meet Now is an Even Greater Challenge

Prior to Katrina, the women of the Gulf Coast were already among the poorest in the nation, and since the storm their situation has only worsened. Not only has women’s representation in the workforce decreased in the storm’s wake, but so have their wages. Ironically though, within some sectors, wages associated with previously minimum-wage jobs have now gone up substantially as employers are finding it harder to find workers due to the area’s post-Katrina population drop. Yet, while some wages, like those within the fast food industry for example, have now increased to \$10.00 per hour, those increased earnings must now stretch further to accommodate a 45% jump in rental rates, and increased costs for a variety of other necessities including utilities, groceries, insurance, health care costs and more. Many who have returned to New Orleans in anticipation of higher pay ultimately face a rude awakening when subsistence costs are factored in.

Child Care Scarce, but Key to Women’s Reentry into the Workforce

Two-thirds of New Orleans’ child care facilities remain closed nearly two years after the storm, creating a significant barrier to work for mothers seeking to reenter the workforce. Childcare facilities in severely battered coastal communities of

“It’s very upsetting to me that sexual abuse is becoming part of the Katrina experience for children. Moms are having to take their children back to homes where moms were abused because they have no place else to go ...the more that government fails to provide housing the longer this goes on and the more children are at risk.”

“Stress is the biggest problem we’re having, and I’m trying to get everybody to understand... a lot of us are coping, but a lot of us are not.”

“...there’ve been cases of trafficking, you know? And the human trafficking thing for me is big because it’s just like how can people be worried about illegal immigration and not be worried about modern day slavery?”

Mississippi remain greatly limited as well. The area does boast, however, a few examples of what is possible through partnership and a commitment to addressing child care needs. The Mississippi Low Income Child Care Initiative has been successful in forging partnerships with a number of foundations and relief agencies, to date amassing more than \$600,000 in funding toward reconstruction efforts in Harrison and Hancock Counties in Mississippi. Industry has also contributed to the effort. In recognition of the linkage between child care and worker availability, Chevron Corporation has financed the full reconstruction of licensed child care facilities throughout Jackson County, Mississippi, thereby filling the childcare needs of this previously devastated area.

Women’s Health Care Needs are All But Forgotten in Katrina’s Wake

With the loss of employment comes the loss of health insurance. Even women who were solidly middle class before Katrina, now find themselves either struggling to pay exorbitant health care costs or fearing what will happen if the worst occurs. To further complicate matters, New Orleans’ previous state-sponsored Charity Hospital system—the network of health care facilities providing service to all regardless of income or insurance status—remains unopened after the storm. And with many of the area’s private practice physicians failing to return as well, few health care options exist. Some local groups have banded together to help address at least a portion of the area’s prevailing health care needs. The New Orleans Chapter of INCITE: Women of Color Against Violence, in partnership with the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund, have developed a women’s clinic scheduled to open in the summer of 2007 to help address this continuing need.

Women interviewed for this study also nearly uniformly expressed the need for mental health services to address the high levels of stress prevalent throughout the region. As women struggle to care for their partners, their children, their elders and their broader communities, personal needs often get pushed aside. Some now cope through anti-depressant medication but many would prefer just to have someone to talk to. To address this need, counseling on a broad scale is necessary to help women, children, and men cope with the sometimes overwhelming stress associated with starting over.

Immigrant Women both Shielded and Victimized by Invisibility

Women too have been included among New Orleans’ increasing Latino population. Some have come with their partners, some have come alone. Each come seeking a better life, but upon arrival, they discover that things are often not quite as they had been promised. Women without legal status have been especially vulnerable to unscrupulous employment practices. Some have been underpaid, others have worked for days only to not be paid at all. Yet with housing expenses to meet, many end up amassing debt, but lack the earning power to break free. Worried about their immigration status, these women keep silent, fearing employer retribution, or worse, detainment and deportation. Greater oversight of employer practices are critical to ensure the exploitation and unfair treatment of these women and others comes to an end.

Addressing the Post-Katrina Needs of Women

Many of the women profiled in this report felt as if their voices had gone unheard both in the initial chaos of the first few days after the disaster as well as throughout the long recovery period. The following set of policy recommendations address many of their concerns and point towards what a gender-informed disaster relief strategy would entail. Such strategies serve to not only address those women still reeling from the ravages of Katrina, but also as a way of thinking proactively about how we might better address the needs of women before, during, and after disasters yet to come.

- ✓ **Make the provision of affordable housing a top priority.** The safety of women and girls remain in jeopardy with each day that severe housing shortages go unaddressed. The Louisiana Hurricane Housing Task Force has estimated that the city of New Orleans alone needs roughly 30,000 affordable housing units immediately to even begin to address the current demand. Land grabs and post-disaster upscale condo development fail to address this need. Focusing instead on the provision of affordable housing is not only the right thing to do for the safety of women and girls, but also makes sense for businesses who now find themselves scrambling to attract and retain employees that find it difficult to keep up with skyrocketing housing costs.
- ✓ **Incorporate women in the rebuilding economy through non-traditional training and enforcement of anti-discrimination laws.** Women by and large have been shut out of the most lucrative aspects of the rebuilding economy and have suffered as a result. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, carpenters in the region were demanding and getting \$50 per hour or more for their labor. Although wage rates have subsequently returned to normal, even these “normalized” rates still far outpace those of traditional female employment in the area. Providing women training in the skilled trades would help increase their chances of earning a rate of pay that would allow them and their families some level of economic well-being. And buttressing that training with aggressive enforcement of anti-discrimination laws in hiring and pay would help to alleviate some of the difficulties women report facing in trying to gain access to the trades.
- ✓ **Increase the availability and quality of child care and schools.** As the population of the region continues to expand, so too does the need for child care and educational institutions. In order for women and families to return the region, these two services are nothing short of a necessity. The opportunities for critical public and private partnerships are there, particularly with regard to the redevelopment of child care facilities. Yet more needs to be done to turn these opportunities into realities.
- ✓ **Address both physical and mental health care needs, especially among the most needy.** Health care post-Katrina, for many, has become yet another disaster. The aggressive recruitment of health care providers, including bilingual providers, is a critical necessity as are investments in the

“...it’s been harder for women to get jobs in construction because a lot of times people won’t hire women for construction—even for house gutting. I know many many women who have called inquiring about a job and when they find out they are women, they say that they don’t need them anymore.”

“...a need to feel like you matter. Like you truly matter... coming home to a place that wants you, coming home to a place where you can get affordable housing, access to healthcare, your child a decent school to go to. You’re not really stigmatized for being who you are... [I] need to feel like [I] really matter. I don’t feel that way.”

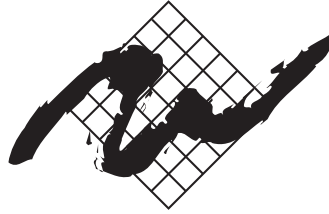
“...We know how difficult it is to try and maneuver in systems that don’t work. Let’s create a system so that we can support women or support anyone that’s a victim. Let’s create systems that work.”

full reconstruction of health care facilities throughout the region. Facilities that will properly care for those without health insurance and those who speak only Spanish are especially crucial. Reopening Charity Hospital and additional health care clinics must be a high priority to reach out to these particular populations. As New Orleans and the Gulf Coast continues to inch closer to its pre-Katrina population density, the area’s health care demands will only increase. Meeting that need is critical to the reconstruction of safe and vibrant communities.

The broad availability of counseling and other mental health services are critically important as stress levels remain greatly elevated throughout the population. Women face special demands as caregivers, comforters, organizers, and planners, and often do so under the pressure of extremely limited material resources. Also, special attention should be given to those women and girls whose Katrina experience has included domestic violence or sexual assault to help them work through the lingering emotional scars such violations leave behind.

- ✓ **Include a broad representation of women on decision-making bodies addressing this disaster, and any future bodies formed for the purpose of pre-disaster planning.** Women in this study expressed time and again, the belief that their voices too often went unheard, their needs, too often unaddressed. It is easy to overlook that which is not represented. To make sure that the particular needs and concerns of women are included as recovery efforts go forward, a significant representation of women must be included in decision making bodies. And just as important, it is critical that pre-disaster planning improve and that planning must, from the beginning, be inclusive of women and address their particular needs and vulnerabilities.

The women of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, much like women under similar circumstances around the world, have been distinctly challenged by Hurricane Katrina. Their economic vulnerability and care-giving responsibilities limited their mobility before the storm, and afterwards they continue to face distinct challenges to their safety, well-being, and economic stability. Yet despite these challenges, the women represented here have become critical partners in the rebuilding of “community” in every sense of the word. They have been on the ground, from the very beginning, doing everything from trudging through the post-Katrina sludge, lending their sweat to the rescue and clean-up efforts, to organizing family, friends, and neighbors to push through seemingly impossible odds to make sure their communities were saved, and not erased from existence. They have done their part. They now deserve, at the very least, to have their voices heard, their needs addressed, and to be assured that future disasters will not replicate many of the horrors that they have in fact endured. Through their voices, we hope to learn, take those lessons to heart, and then properly plan for those disasters yet to come.



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About IWPR

The Institute for Women's Policy Research conducts rigorous research and disseminates its findings to address the needs of women, promote public dialogue, and strengthen families, communities, and societies. IWPR focuses on issues of poverty and welfare, employment and earnings, work and family issues, health and safety, and women's civic and political participation. IWPR's work is supported by foundation grants, government grants and contracts, donations from individuals, and contributions from organizations and corporations. Members and affiliates of IWPR's Information Network receive reports and information on a regular basis. IWPR is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization that also works in affiliation with the women's studies and public policy programs at The George Washington University.

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