

## Gender and Disasters: Theoretical Considerations

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While feminist theory and disaster research have evolved independently, a growing number of scholars are using feminist theoretical perspective to study and respond to disasters.<sup>1</sup> Feminist scholarship demonstrates that gender serves as a primary organizing principle of all societies and is therefore an essential lens through which to view the experience of a disaster such as a hurricane; disaster research suggests both vulnerability and capacity for women experiencing disaster.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, we examine the research and theoretical work on gender and disasters and apply this knowledge to the conditions prevailing in New Orleans before and after the 2005 hurricane season. The goal of this examination is to better understand the ways the 2005 hurricane season affected the lives of women and girls in New Orleans, and to use this understanding to expand knowledge about women and disasters in the United States, particularly in the Gulf South.

### **Social Vulnerability**

In disaster literature, social vulnerability refers to how certain social, economic and political forces influence the extent to which various peoples and communities experience the impact of a disaster.<sup>3</sup> A growing body of research from the social sciences, including anthropology,<sup>4</sup> sociology,<sup>5</sup> geography,<sup>6</sup> and urban planning<sup>7</sup> documents how various attributes and conditions such as poverty, race and ethnicity, gender, age, health and physical ability, and housing conditions, place human populations at risk of adverse consequences from a disaster. These social vulnerability factors are often interrelated and operate through the primary mechanism of unequal access to social, economic, and

political resources and the decision structures that govern them. In other words, disasters may be “natural” events but the impacts of disasters are “social and political events that are linked to who we are, how we live, and how we structure and maintain our society.”<sup>8</sup>

Vulnerability factors often cluster in place, thereby situating some communities and neighborhoods at particularly high risk. For example, the National Research Council reports that those most vulnerable might live or work in areas and in buildings more prone to disasters (such as living below sea level or residing in century-old buildings); be less prepared for a disaster, lacking either an evacuation plan or the materials and supplies necessary to remain safe and to protect one’s self and property; and/or to lack the resources and supplies needed to recover quickly. According to Enarson, et. al, “disaster risk is socially distributed in ways that reflect the social divisions that already exist in society.”<sup>9</sup> Those who experience these conditions are more likely to lack accurate decision-making information, to lose life and/or property, and to suffer psychological, demographic, economic, or political impacts as direct, or indirect effects. The poor, the very young and very old, minorities, the disabled, and, specifically, females have higher risk. When these characteristics intersect, vulnerability multiplies.

### ***The Social Vulnerability of New Orleans***

Census data profiles New Orleans as one of the nation’s most impoverished cities in one of the nation’s most impoverished states—a metropolitan area that had little reserve for resilience before the 2005



*Patrina Peters (foreground) and Sherry Watters speak about their personal experiences with Katrina devastation at the Newcomb College Institute’s 2007 Summit “Educating Women for a World in Crisis”. (Photo by Cheryl Gerber).*

hurricane season. According to the 2005 census, a large number of New Orleanians were at high risk of experiencing the negative impacts of *any* disaster. As shown in Table I-1, nearly twice as many people in pre-Katrina New Orleans were below poverty level than nationally (24.5 percent vs. 13.3 percent), and more than twice as many New Orleans families were living in poverty than the national average (21.8 percent vs. 10.2 percent). New Orleans also had more than twice as many children under 18 years of age below poverty than the average nationally (38.1 percent vs. 18.5 percent). While New Orleans' population over 65 years of age was slightly lower than for the country as a whole, more were in poverty (16.5 percent vs. 9.9 percent). In New Orleans, as in most of the South, race and gender often are interrelated with poverty. New Orleans' predominately minority population, more than two-thirds African American, and an above average number of women, contributed to the social vulnerability and high risk of the population.

Coupled with the social vulnerability and environmental risk factors that in general place a majority of New Orleanians in a more vulnerable position at times of disaster is another contributing factor somewhat specific to New Orleans. Rachel Luft, in this volume, posits that

New Orleans remains a city of neighborhoods. According to Luft, New Orleanians have a cultural allegiance to and historical knowledge of place that is exceptional in North America. She attributes this identity with neighborhood as both cause and effect of low levels of out-migration and suggests the devastation wrought by the storm was experienced as a deep psychological blow because of this unique attachment to place.

In several ways, the low levels of out-migration help to explain why many residents did not evacuate. Unlike most Americans who have family and friends spread throughout the country who can provide a welcoming retreat in times of emergency, many New Orleanians had only other New Orleanians upon whom to rely. It was not uncommon to hear somebody say they had never been outside the city. In 2005, 82 percent of Louisiana's native born population still lived in Louisiana, second only to New York (82.3 percent) in the percent of people who live in the state in which they were born. Nationally, the average was 67.5 percent.<sup>10</sup>

### **Gendered Dimensions of Vulnerability and Disasters**

Traditional gender roles place women in the home as homemakers, the bearers of children, and primary caregivers. Men, traditionally, are assigned the role of family

**Table I-1. Percent of the Population Experiencing Social Vulnerability Factors for New Orleans and the United States: 2005**

Indicator	New Orleans	United States
Population below poverty level	24.5	13.3
Families below poverty level	21.8	10.2
Population over 65 years	11.1	12.1
Population over 65 year below poverty level	16.5	9.9
Population under 18 years below poverty level	38.1	18.5
Population African American	67.5	12.1
Population Female	53.4	51.0

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey 2005. United States and New Orleans city. "General Demographic Characteristics: 2005"; "Selected Economic Characteristics: 2005."*

provider and protector, as the wage-earner and liaison between the home and the public sphere. Although considerable variations exist among actual families, it has been noted that even when heterosexual couples do not follow traditional gender roles in their day-to-day activities, they tend to revert to them in a time of crisis.<sup>11</sup>

Increasingly, research demonstrates that role-conditioned gender differences occur at all stages of disaster response.<sup>12</sup> Women's and men's ideas about their work and family responsibilities have major consequences for their risk perception, preparedness, and evacuation.<sup>13</sup> Women tend to be more risk-averse and more likely to respond to hazard warnings.<sup>14</sup> While this might suggest that women and children will consider protective actions and seek safety, their plans may well conflict with those of the men with whom they are interdependent. The result might not lead to safety.

In addition to assessing risk differently, women and men often respond to disasters and losses in different ways. Men are much more likely to stay behind during an evacuation and to volunteer to assist with rescue, security, cleanup and other, often hazardous, community activities. Men often feel they have let their families down when they cannot protect them from the disaster and provide for them in the aftermath—in other words, when they fail to fulfill the traditional male role.<sup>15</sup>

Women's caregiving responsibilities also may place them at greater risk of injury and even death as they place the wellbeing of others, particularly their children, above their own.<sup>16</sup> The pictures of women walking through floodwaters leading children and elderly family members to "safety" became a common sight in the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina. Women were "hard-pressed to get out of the path of the storm and further compromised in their ability to

recover after the blow."<sup>17</sup> One woman's description of the challenges she faced trying to survive the rising water describes powerfully what she endured: "I had to walk from my neighborhood (Hollygrove) all the way to the Superdome in breast-high water" [approximately four miles].<sup>18</sup>

Lack of transportation was a visible marker of the economic vulnerability of New Orleans women, a fact documented by Census data. In 2005, nearly 15 percent of women workers in New Orleans reported they had no vehicle available compared to just 4.3 percent of women workers nationally.<sup>19</sup>

The lack of transportation not only stands as a barrier to women's evacuation, it often becomes a barrier to women's employment following a disaster, limiting women's liberty of migrating to look for work, or to return to work. Men often do migrate, leaving behind very high numbers of female-headed households. Mothers, grandmothers, daughters, aunts and sisters have to continue their care-giving roles and daily tasks such as cooking and laundry, often in damaged homes, shelters, temporary trailers or the crowded homes of friends or family—impossible situations and thus ones that make it extremely challenging to succeed in these roles. The stresses of living in a post-disaster setting often strain family relationships at the very time the social networks of family and friends are most needed.<sup>20</sup>

While extended family living may spread responsibility for childcare, care for the elderly and the disabled among several family members, it is just as likely to sandwich the responsibility of care on the shoulders of just one person as facilities for the elderly and childcare fail to reopen or become economically prohibitive. The lack of childcare has postponed the return of many women and families to New Orleans and has become a major barrier to women's employment. According



*A family inside their FEMA trailer  
(Photo by Cheryl Gerber)*

**... households headed by a woman made up 46.3 percent of all households in the city in 2005, and many of those households were in poverty or headed by a woman over 65.**

to the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, as of June 2008 just 117 childcare facilities were open compared to 275 facilities pre-Katrina.<sup>21</sup> Many facilities for the care of the elderly and the disabled, often built just one story high for ease of access, have failed to reopen because of severe flood damage, or to regain their pre-Katrina resident population because of the shortage of health care aides.

***Women's Vulnerability and the Intersection of Race/Ethnicity, Class and Household***

Disaster research has indicated that women generally are more vulnerable than men to disasters.<sup>22</sup> Not only does this vulnerability result from women's socially constructed role as the primary caregiver but also from women's unequal employment opportunities and lesser earning capacity. This means that women typically have less access to resources such as transportation, immediate cash or savings, secure housing and employment; and less control over decision-making and economic resources. Thus women tend to be more encumbered and to have less liberty to evacuate readily and less capacity to recover quickly.

Disasters do not affect all women equally, however. Differences of race/ethnicity and class status have been shown to be important factors in women's disaster experiences. Women who are poor, have low-incomes, or incomes that are seasonal or insecure, have more constraints and hence fewer choices with regard to evacuation and fewer resources for recovery.<sup>23</sup> In particular, female-headed families and women-alone households, especially households of the elderly, are more likely to lack the physical and financial resources to respond to the immediate emergency. Women who are socially and/or economically disadvantaged are most vulnerable to long-term impacts including the inability to return home to the place of attachment, family, and connection, making it more difficult for them to recover over the long run.

The demographic profile of pre-Katrina New Orleans exposes New Orleans as a city with one of the greatest numbers of women in the most vulnerable categories: women-headed families, women-alone households, and women in poverty. For example, in 2005, 40.6 percent of New Orleans' families were headed by a woman with no spouse present compared to 18.9 percent of family households nationwide. Particularly visible among female-headed households in New Orleans is the interweave between race and social class. Almost 42 percent of New Orleans' female-headed families were in poverty; 97.2 percent of which were African American. Among the 72,873 non-family households in New Orleans in 2005, 46.3 percent were comprised of a woman living alone, more than a third (35.5 percent) of whom were over 65 years of age. A small number of households (478) were comprised of a female householder with a female partner. Taken together, households headed by a woman made up 46.3 percent of all households in the city in 2005, and many of those households were in poverty or headed by a woman over 65.<sup>24</sup>

Disasters often bring a wave of undocumented male workers seeking construction work opportunities in the United States. While frequently unaccompanied by their families, those women who do follow are often at high risk. Not only do the women immigrants lack access to the formal health and social services that may exist, they lack familiarity with the informal networks that may be emerging to fill these voids. They may also experience isolation from their families who remained behind, and confront cultural confusion and language barriers.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, women with access to economic resources may have greater choices among evacuation and recovery strategies, and have a larger safety net because of insurance coverage, savings or income security. (For example, faculty

members and most staff at Tulane, Loyola and the University of New Orleans continued to receive salaries although the universities were closed fall semester 2005). However, having adequate resources does not inure women to the emotional impact of evacuation and losing their homes and belongings, the stress of rebuilding, the anxiety over job security, or concerns for the health, safety, and well-being of family and friends.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, when the needs and concerns of women are neglected in disaster preparation plans and recovery policies, all women, regardless of income or resources are affected.

Disaster theory, as well as disaster preparation and recovery policies, often assumes a nuclear family structure that posits male protection, and privileges male-headed households for relief aid and the reintegration of men into the work force. As a consequence, women-headed family and non-family households do not always receive the needed assistance and services to which they are entitled.<sup>27</sup> Charlotte D'Ooge's chapter on Queer Katrina opens our eyes to how these unchallenged assumptions of the nuclear family structure disadvantage women, particularly lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women. D'Ooge also reminds readers that "woman" is not a unitary concept. Rachel Luft discusses how so-called "gender blind" housing policies ignore the large number of female-headed households; and Pam Jenkins and Brenda Phillips (Chapter VIII) note how the assumptions of the male as head of household can place abused women in a more vulnerable position relative to their abuser.

The needs and concerns of women in disaster preparation plans, as well as in long-term recovery policies and practices, are often subsumed under the umbrella of "women and children," with "children" being the operative word. While understanding women's domestic responsibilities is a key element in such policies, it is also important to recognize that domesticity links

to other factors such as housing, health care, employment and safety for women with children, as well as those without.

### *Gender Vulnerability and Employment*

In times of disaster, just as women's domestic responsibilities are increasing, the economic burdens and uncertainties are likely increasing as well. Yet the opportunities for women to seek alternative sources of income are greatly reduced because of barriers to employment such as childcare and transportation, the loss of jobs in traditionally female occupations, an emphasis on jobs in construction that favor males, and the lack of disposable income to fuel the informal economy women often rely upon.

In 2005, approximately 62 percent of New Orleans women, 16 years of age and older were in the labor force. Despite the fact that a majority of the women who work outside the home are the only—or the primary—wage earner, or substantial contributor to the family's income, women are more likely than men to be employed in jobs hit hardest by disasters. Employment, particularly in the South, continues to perpetuate a race and gender segregated labor force with little overlap between jobs for women and men, or jobs between White and Black/African American workers.<sup>28</sup> Women are over-represented in the informal economy as domestic workers and childcare workers, for example; and in under-paid jobs carrying little security or benefits such as health insurance and paid leave.<sup>29</sup> In New Orleans, many of these jobs were located in the hard-hit tourism industry and were heavily dependent on cash tips. Other traditionally female jobs hit hard by the immediate impact of the storm were nursing and teaching

The gendered division of labor that exists throughout the South has kept women from obtaining jobs in the building trades that are most needed to physically rebuild New Orleans

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### CHART I-1. HOUSING AND GENDER

The information available on New Orleans housing and gender following Hurricane Katrina is consistent with disaster research indicating a greater need among women, especially those over 65 years of age, and the disabled. For example, findings from one non-profit agency, the Catholic Charities program “Operation Helping Hands,” indicates that the vast majority of those seeking assistance with gutting their homes are women, particularly those over 65, and the disabled. Of the 163 homeowners in the “Rebuilding Program”, 70.5 percent are female, 16.5 percent are couples; and 13 percent are male.

#### “Operation Helping Hands” Statistics for Guttled Homes

	Heterosexual Couples	Single Females	Sex not Reported	Total
Total Households	94	724	17	1106
• Seniors*	74	516		768
• Sick Or Disabled**	70	475		726

\* 59 Households did not report age

\*\* 75 Households did not report health status

post-Katrina. Moreover, the gendered division of labor disadvantages women in the process of reconstruction; few women have direct experience selecting and working with contractors or subcontractors to detail the extent of the work to be done and negotiate costs. By and large, disaster research neglects this residential rebuilding role now required of thousands of families in New Orleans, and often assumed by women. The data from just one agency, Chart I-1, Catholic Charities of New Orleans’ “Operation Helping Hands”, illustrates the greater assistance needed by women, particularly the elderly and disabled.

The immediate and short-term effects of a disaster on a woman’s economic status depend in part on the resources available to her before the disaster. However, it appears that if a woman wasn’t poor before the disaster, she likely will be after. Few women come out “ahead” after paying for

the repair or rebuilding of their home and yard; replacing clothes, household furnishings, and/or cars. These major payments may come on top of payments on these same items that were lost in the disaster, and possibly under the additional stress of unemployment, depleted savings, and high credit card debt after months of displacement. In the year after Katrina, despite a tight labor market, the median earnings of men increased while the median earnings of women declined. Chapter IV in this volume on employment and earnings by Beth Willinger examines in detail the status of New Orleans women before the storm and the negative economic impact of the storm on New Orleans women, particularly African American women.

#### **Gender Vulnerability and Housing**

Despite the importance of home and place in the experience of most women, little disaster research specifically addresses

the impact of housing loss on women. Internationally, the United Nations has recognized as a human right “women’s equal ownership of, access to and control over land and the equal rights to own property and to adequate housing.”<sup>30</sup> In the United States, by and large, housing is viewed as a private property issue, not a human right. Local and federal governments therefore do little to guarantee a woman’s right to adequate housing; to provide housing, regulate affordability and access, or investigate discriminatory policies and practices, except perhaps reluctantly in times of disaster.

Because well over half of New Orleans residents rented their home or apartment prior to Hurricane Katrina, it may erroneously be assumed that the specific dwelling held little emotional meaning for the inhabitants. However, many renters were long-time residents with ties not just to the dwelling, but to the neighborhood. The post-Katrina housing shortage is acute throughout the city. The availability of safe and affordable housing has been aggravated by the demolition of four public housing complexes (an estimated 4,500 units, 88 percent of which were occupied by women householders pre-Katrina), the difficulties in obtaining homeowners insurance, and by the national housing crisis. While these events affect all New Orleanians, the economic and social disadvantages women face are magnified by the lack of adequate housing. Female-headed households, particularly single mothers with incomes below poverty, widows, lesbians and transgender women, women with disabilities, migrant women workers, and women who are marginalized by race, class, ethnicity, age, and other factors are especially vulnerable to discrimination in a tight housing market.<sup>31</sup>

As mentioned previously, the lack of adequate housing has prevented the return to New Orleans of thousands of people, particularly single mothers with children. Women who returned must allocate a much higher percent of their incomes to rent, or if

buying or renovating their home, must pay higher insurance premiums and property taxes. With higher debt and lower income (see Chapter IV), women are placed at risk of bankruptcy and homelessness. While domestic violence is a primary cause of homelessness, there is a widespread fear of homelessness among women, which illuminates women’s understanding of their precarious social and economic standing, health, safety and security. Rachel Luft and Shana Griffin discuss in detail in Chapter V the critical issue of housing, and draw attention to how and why “housing” is both home and community to New Orleanians.

### ***Gender Vulnerability and Health***

The resulting impacts from disasters are frequently more severe on women and girls than those of their male counterparts. Women’s physical, reproductive and mental health needs, along with other facets of women’s lives, have largely been ignored by U.S. disaster managers. When women’s health is considered as part of disaster preparation or recovery efforts, the focus is largely on women’s reproductive role. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently released key findings from research on the health concerns of women titled “Health Concerns of Pregnant Women and Infants in Times of Natural Disasters.”<sup>32</sup> As with other issues, the healthcare of women gains prominence within the context of children’s needs, not independently.

Women’s reproductive health is an important aspect of disaster planning and recovery. As Meghan Greeley reports in Chapter IX on young women’s sexual health, the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, as well as unintended pregnancies, can lead to long-term improvements in the health and economic well-being of New Orleans teens. However, reproductive health may not be the central concern for many disaster victims. Women live longer, and thus in

any community, there will be more elderly women, often living alone, who will need help and healthcare throughout the response and recovery. Research exists to document the health differences between women and men and the need for greater scrutiny over women's total health. For example, heart attacks are the No.1 killer of women and as more women are likely to need short- and long-term assistance, it would be well for relief workers to know the different warning signs for women and men and to prepare accordingly. Nancy Mock discusses in Chapter VI the loss of the Charity Hospital system and its impact on health care, largely revolving around coverage for the uninsured and the absence of widespread availability of primary care and ambulatory care for the poor and low income population.

The adverse psychological toll of natural disasters on women and girls has been well documented.<sup>33</sup> A review of 160 studies of disaster victims revealed that women are at elevated risk for specific psychological disorders such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), due in large part to their experience of ongoing stressors, the loss of psychosocial resources and health programs following disasters.<sup>34</sup> Yet the short-term needs and long-term interests of women and families are often ignored in the rush to restore businesses and the physical infrastructure.<sup>35</sup> Stacy Overstreet and Berre Burch illuminate in Chapter VII the many ways in which more women than men experienced the stress of Hurricane Katrina and suffer from posttraumatic stress after the storm.

#### ***Gender Vulnerability and Safety***

Disaster planning and recovery efforts generally assume a nuclear family structure that is based on cooperation rather than conflict, and remains together through each stage of the disaster. Noted previously is the high proportion of women who live

alone or who are heads of households. Single mothers, elderly women, low-income women and girls, and the disabled often live in uncertain environments before a disaster and likely depend on community-based services and resources rather than male relatives for transportation, housing, healthcare, food, and shelter from violence. As a consequence, they are greatly affected by the damage and destruction of social services resulting from a disaster.<sup>36</sup> Poor women and girls in New Orleans were particularly at risk because their social networks were highly place-rooted in their neighborhoods. These networks were washed away, leaving women and girls without important social capital required for return and recovery.

Women's social and economic disadvantages are to a large extent the leading factors in women's physical vulnerabilities. Violence against women including sexual assault, and particularly intimate-partner violence, tends to increase in periods of disaster as measured by requests for services and counseling from battered women's shelters and police protective orders from abusers.<sup>37</sup> Whether it is the increased economic and emotional stress brought about by the disaster, an effort to gain power and control over a situation in which there appears to be none, or other social and/or psychological factors, research shows that the risk of emotional abuse and physical violence to girls and women increases in the aftermath of a disaster. Limited resources and a lack of alternatives increase women's vulnerability to violence and physical risk at each stage of a disaster as women may find it necessary to depend on existing or potential abusers for the means to evacuate, or return to an abusive relationship when desperate for housing or other help.<sup>38</sup> Pam Jenkins and Brenda Phillips discuss in Chapter VIII the increase in the incidence of relationship violence in New Orleans following

Hurricane Katrina when, at the same time, the safety net of providers, and social and legal services collapsed. The destruction of domestic violence shelters in New Orleans, as well as the homes of relatives who could provide a safe haven, put abused women and children at risk for having to remain or return to an abuser.<sup>39</sup>

### **Resilience and Leadership**

Disasters have a way of exposing the weaknesses in family, neighborhood and community social structures. These weaknesses both reveal that which was overlooked or forgotten, and provide leadership opportunities for those willing to fill the voids. Disaster management has tended to be male-dominated and modeled along a military style top-down process. This formal disaster management system tends to under-utilize women in the disaster context because the actions defined as central to recovery are perceived to be more within the masculine realm.<sup>40</sup> Yet many of the vulnerability and recovery needs of families, neighborhoods, and communities would be well served by engaging women as informants, responders, and emergency managers

Women are a rich community resource to be tapped at all times, but particularly during a disaster. Enarson and Morrow note that “[I]ronically, crisis affords women a platform for demonstrating effective leadership as elected officials, emergency managers, community activists, and neighborhood leaders.”<sup>41</sup> Women’s leadership often emerges through the non-profit and informal disaster response and recovery systems as has been evident in the Gulf Coast recovery. Women in New Orleans have risen to fill local leadership needs and have had a spectacular impact on the bottlenecks that prevented attention and aid from flowing to the city. These leadership initiatives continue to drive the recovery of the city and the region.

Opportunities for leadership may come about because men have migrated or become more intensively involved in rebuilding activities.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, more women now are in positions to make a difference. The increase of women in professional positions means that a sizeable number of women can call upon their professional networks and put whatever resources they have to work rebuilding social and political structures. Women’s leadership may also come about because women are dissatisfied with decision-making processes that do not include their priorities and concerns.

Beth Willinger’s chapter on women and government (Chapter X) is a call for women to take an active role in the political process and to become involved in developing long-term solutions for the city and state. Willinger also notes several agencies and organizations that New Orleans women can pressure to be made more accountable to the concerns of women.

### **Conclusions**

In summary, the social construction of vulnerability and resilience has a substantial gender dimension that plays out to increase vulnerability among certain demographic groups of women while opening opportunities for women-lead recovery efforts on the other. In the chapters that follow, we explore in greater detail the gendered dimensions of disasters and specifically the theoretical issues of women’s greater vulnerability to disasters as well as women’s leadership and resilience. New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina serve as the rich framework for this investigation.

**“Ironically, crisis affords women a platform for demonstrating effective leadership as elected officials, emergency managers, community activists, and neighborhood leaders.”<sup>41</sup>**

## Endnotes

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