

EXECUTIVE
REPORT
& SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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Katrina
and the **Women** of
New Orleans

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Preface

Hurricane Katrina was the costliest, and one of the most deadly hurricanes ever to reach the United States.¹ Yet, when it made landfall across Plaquemines Parish on August 29, 2005, Katrina had weakened from a Category 5 to a Category 3 hurricane, with winds that continued to decrease as the storm passed over the greater New Orleans area. Nevertheless, as is now well known, the impact on New Orleans was catastrophic.

Numerous geographic and political reasons for the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina have been aired at length in the media and addressed by several governmental and scholarly reports. Far less concern has been directed to understanding how the storm has affected the lives of New Orleanians, particularly the lives of women and girls. This report is the first in a series of reports from the Newcomb College Center for Research on Women to focus on the gendered dimensions of disasters. In this report, we place the lives, experiences, perspectives and contributions of women and girls at the center of analysis to better understand the immediate, and possibly long-term impact of Hurricane Katrina.

Most of the contributors to this report were New Orleans residents in August 2005, and we remain so today. Our position as New Orleanians, as women, and as researchers trained in participant observation, as well as other qualitative and quantitative methodologies, provides us with a unique perspective on the ways Hurricane Katrina has affected women and girls. Many of us have held concerns that the needs and experiences of women have been, and continue to be overlooked or marginalized with regard to disaster management and research. Missing from the research is the recognition that disasters are differentially experienced by

women and men. Most reports generalize their findings to all people, or perhaps disaggregate the data based on race and/or ethnicity. Few reports disaggregate the data to provide information specific to women and men—an exception is the work by the Washington based Institute for Women’s Policy Research.² More common are reports such as The Brookings Institution’s report “Resettling New Orleans: The First *Full Picture* from the Census” (emphasis added), which makes just one reference to women: as female-householders.³ Yet our common knowledge illuminates the greater economic, social, psychological and physical vulnerability of women, both in the days immediately preceding Hurricane Katrina and in the months and years following.

On Sunday, August 28, 2005, Mayor C. Ray Nagin ordered the evacuation of Orleans Parish. By mid-afternoon on that day, officials in the neighboring parishes of Jefferson, Lafourche, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. James, St. Tammany, Terrebonne, and Washington also called for voluntary or mandatory evacuations.⁴ Regardless of parish or neighborhood, more than a million people in the metropolitan area and along the Gulf Coast, including more than 450,000 residents of New Orleans were told to leave behind their homes, work, places of worship, friends, and sometimes family members and pets. Cobbling together whatever funds were on-hand on a Sunday before an end of the month pay-day, and finding whatever mode of public or private transportation out of town that was accessible and available, hundreds of thousands of people scattered throughout the United States. Those who did not evacuate before the storm, but still were able to make their way to the area of the New Orleans Superdome, found themselves bused, flown or otherwise herd-

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ed to whatever cities were willing and able to welcome them. With cell phones made unusable by flooded transmitters, locating friends, family, co-workers, classmates, and colleagues—not to mention pharmacies, dentists, doctors, and insurance agents—presented additional challenges to heighten feelings of displacement. Then the anticipated three-day mandatory evacuation turned into more than 25, when, on September 24, 2005, just as New Orleans was about to welcome its residents home, Hurricane Rita, the fourth most intense Atlantic hurricane ever recorded, struck the Texas/Louisiana coast. This effectively postponed the return of water, electricity, and city services; and delayed the eventual, but still unknown, realization of loss and the full recognition of the overwhelming task of clean-up and rebuilding still ahead.⁵ Of course, the experience of tragedy was relative—some homes remained virtually intact, while others literally floated away. Still, more than 400,000 New Orleanians were drifters and “homeless” for at least a month—and for thousands, for many more months to follow. But for that month alone, the burden of maintaining some semblance of “normal” day-to-day family life, wherever that happened to be, fell largely on the shoulders of women.

Many residents remain displaced today. Some have resettled elsewhere, or have resolved never to return to New Orleans or to their Gulf Coast home. The most recent report from the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center estimates that as of September 2008, 72 percent of New Orleans pre-Katrina households—and approximately 87 percent in the six parish region—were actively receiving mail.⁶ One objective of the current report is to determine the demographic profile of the women who have returned, and those who

have not, and to document how the women who *have* returned are making out with respect to housing, employment, earnings and the challenges of daily life.

Despite the neglect of women in discussions of reconstruction and rebuilding, women are indispensable to recovery efforts. Women comprise over half of the New Orleans population, and more importantly, women comprise more than half of the labor force. Although the reconstruction economy tends to disfavor women who may not have the skills (or childcare support) required in the construction trades, women have assumed both traditional and non-traditional jobs post-Katrina. Women also have emerged as civic leaders to organize and lead collective actions for local, state and national-level renewal and reform in response to the structural crisis and political vacuum left in the wake of the storm.⁷ Women have galvanized a new vision for education sector transformation, and women are quietly energizing neighborhoods as well as international communities around the priority needs for rebuilding a safer, and more resilient city.

This report examines the impact of the 2005 hurricane season on women and girls in New Orleans and reports on the status of women in the New Orleans area both pre- and post-Katrina with regard to economic opportunities, housing, health care, mental health, domestic violence, and reproductive health. It also considers how the recovery of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast can build upon the leadership of women to address the needs and include the contributions of women and girls.

Finally, this report—even as it celebrates women’s resiliency and leadership—is a call to action!

Endnotes

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- 5 National Hurricane Center. 2007-01-23. "[November 2005 Atlantic Tropical Weather Summary](#)."
- 6 Greater New Orleans Community Data Center. <http://gnocdc.org>
- 7 David, Emmanuel. 2007. "Gender and Emergent Groups following Katrina." Unpublished manuscript; Tyler, Pam. 2007. "The Post-Katrina, Semiseparate World of Gender Politics." *The Journal of American History*. 780-788; Pyles, Loretta and Judith S. Lewis. 2007. "Women of the Storm: Advocacy and Organizing in Post-Katrina New Orleans." *Affilia* 22: 385-389.



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