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A Feminist Perspective on Katrina

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Since the tragedy of the Katrina hurricane that devastated the Gulf Coast and flooded New Orleans, SisterSong has contacted its two member agencies in Mississippi and Louisiana affected by the storm. We reached the Institute for Women & Ethnic Studies whose offices are on Canal Street, ground zero of the flooded part of downtown New Orleans. Their staff is now re-located all over the Deep South, including Atlanta. We also contacted Mississippi Families for Kids, whose offices in Jackson were undamaged by the storm, but who now face a tremendous flood of desperate families with children from all over the Gulf Coast region. They are accommodating many people in their offices and homes and they are seeking housing for hundreds more calling on them for assistance. To directly help these SisterSong member organizations, their addresses are listed at the end of this article along with the addresses of other women of color reproductive justice organizations in the Gulf Coast area needing assistance.

A tragedy of this magnitude forces all of us to examine the impact of this storm and the response to it on women and children. The Deep South has some of the highest poverty in America affecting all races of people, and the world witnessed that great dirty secret that is America's shame. Black and brown people drowning in filthy flood waters alerted the world that this country does not protect the human rights of its own citizens.

I was moved to write this article because I still have family members missing in New Orleans, one of them an 80-year old relative. I was privileged to attend a meeting September 10-14, 2005 on "Women's Global Strategies for the 21st Century" organized at Sarah Lawrence College by the Women of Color Resource Center, the Global Fund for Women, and the Center for Women's Global Leadership that brought together 100 women from around the world. The workshop on Militarization and Occupation helped me understand some of the issues we face here in the Deep South as we struggle to rebuild our lives after Katrina.

From a feminist perspective, there are certain predictions we can make concerning what will happen to some women and children based on our collective experiences in helping women and children survive trauma. Poverty in America is not only racialized but it is also gendered. The aftermath of Katrina must be examined through a gender lens that identifies the myriad of violations experienced by women. A disaster like Katrina is a violation against the entire community, but when threats to women's lives are not recognized, and steps are not taken to ensure that they are, women become doubly victimized – by the disaster and by the response to it.

Vulnerability of Women and Children

The hurricane and the subsequent flooding exposed the special vulnerability of women, children, the elderly and the disabled by revealing the harsh intersection of race, class, gender, ability and life expectancy. Many people could not escape not only because of poverty, but because they were not physically able to punch through rooftops, perch on top of buildings, or climb trees to survive. Horror stories of people abandoned to drown in nursing homes and



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hospitals emphasize that any disaster preparedness planning must take into account those unable to evacuate themselves. Instead, the mainstream media and government sources chose to blame the victims as if these vulnerable people simply made bad choices, ignoring the context in which these “choices” are made. Right wing pundits are already saying that the tragedy was the fault of single mothers who were not married so that their husbands could lift them out of poverty! Those in power do not speak about the intentional chaos in people’s lives created by constantly scrambling for survival while living in poverty or with disabilities that leave many women feeling simply overwhelmed by life itself.

We also know that women’s issues will not be seen as “important” during the crisis, as we are advised that larger issues like maintaining law and order and securing the affected areas are of higher priority. But we need to examine the disaster in the Gulf Coast region from a feminist point of view. We can also learn lessons from the past that can help us understand the present situation, and we can ask for help from our sisters in other parts of the world who have survived military occupations and tsunamis. There is a risk of too much focus on the current crisis, shifting dollars from previous unmet needs, and forgetting older crises around the world and in our country. For example, Mississippi already had only one abortion provider before the storm. Women traveled to Louisiana or Alabama for services. What will an already under-served region do to help women receive reproductive health care?

Re-defining Military Occupation

We witnessed a very authoritarian militarization of New Orleans during the crisis as police and the military were given permission to forcibly evict survivors, arrest or shoot lawbreakers, and impose martial law on the city. No one in authority questioned whether it is ethical to give orders to shoot flood survivors, even if they are supposedly looting. More recent alternative media reports reveal that many of the alleged “looters” were actually heroes trying to find food to feed their families, securing food and relief supplies from stores whose inventories would have been lost to the flood anyway. The concentration camp like conditions of the Superdome and Convention Center provided no privacy for women, no safety for children and for days after the tragedy, no basic needs like food, water and sanitation. Notably, while the police and military were protecting the property rights of business owners, they somehow neglected to protect the lives of women and children jammed into the Superdome and the Convention Center. Women, children, the sick and the elderly died waiting for help.

One of the ways in which the occupation was achieved was by controlling terminology through language coups. Did you notice that some news media reported that white people “find” food while black people “loot?” Control of communications became control of self-validation as the prejudices of the powerful constructed meanings that rendered any countervailing notion ineffective.

There are reports of massive arrests, police brutality and even deaths at the hands of the police and military during this crisis, yet these reports were not featured in the mainstream news, just over alternative sources such as the Internet. There are also stories of people being shot by authorities in the Louisiana Superdome. One brief report on CNN told the story about the Gretna Police Department blockading a bridge by firing over the heads of people attempting to leave the city to enter this predominantly white suburb west of New Orleans. The Gretna police even



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confiscated food and water from women and children on the bridge at gunpoint, claiming they did not want their town “turned into another Superdome,” an ominous racist reference to the fact that most of the people were African American. The normal brutality with which cops usually treat poor black people lends considerable credence to these unproven rumors, particularly if the police are operating in situations with little likelihood of formal investigations into their actions because they are “justified” by the crisis. “They came to help” language may thwart really seeing the negative effects of the occupation and may forever obscure any notion of accountability.

Unfortunately, actions like these also denigrate the undoubtedly heroic actions many people in law enforcement and the military demonstrated as they risked their lives in contaminated water to rescue survivors. But as feminists, we should not confuse individual compassion with structural injustice. Both can exist in the same place at the same time.

While the news media focused on the black/white conflicts during the crisis, little or no mention was made of the Native American, Asian American or Latino communities also devastated by the storm. Erasing these communities from the public’s consciousness became another form of structural violence.

What we need are expanded definitions and understanding of what is meant by military occupation. Occupation is about space, land, and resources. There is little consciousness in the minds of the American public that we live in occupied land or that we are occupiers. I don’t believe the term only applies to Palestine, Afghanistan or Iraq. Communities of color, particularly Indigenous Nations, have always experienced law enforcement and the military as occupiers, but the Katrina crisis exposes how we must expand the concept of military occupation way beyond the narrow and limited definitions of the United Nations.

There is a porous membrane between occupation and war as the Iraq invasion proves. It’s as if these occupying armies read their orders from the same script. The residents of the affluent parts of New Orleans hired their own private security firms to “protect” themselves against the flood survivors. Our definition of occupation must be widened to include not only agents of the state such as the police and the military, but also must include transnational corporations, some of whom also operate their own private armies. We need to redefine occupation as a violent means to maintain order and confiscate our land. We must connect militarism with occupation and reveal who controls the resources and who benefits from the process of occupation. These are all expressions of the same phenomenon.

Ironically, the occupation of New Orleans and the occupation of Iraq share one major obvious commonality. Both are greased by oil – its production and its shipping. It is no coincidence that a port through much of America’s oil flows is quickly militarized while hundreds of people die in flooded houses. Offshore platforms in the Gulf are responsible for about 30 percent of U.S. crude-oil production and states along the Gulf Coast are home to half of the nation’s refining capacity. The same company in Iraq – Halliburton – will receive major contracts to help in the rebuilding of New Orleans. Was Iraq a practice run?

What was particularly telling about the Gulf Coast crisis was that the owners of casinos and Wal-Marts were apparently able to return to their businesses much more quickly to repair storm damages long before federal assistance arrived to reduce the needless loss of lives. Perhaps



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we will become the United States of Wal-Mart after this. They may be the first businesses to offer jobs to the massive numbers of people forced into unemployment because of the storm. Will we be in any position to challenge their labor practices and impact on communities if they are the only employers available? Wal-Mart already discriminates against the women it presently employs. With President Bush relaxing the minimum wage laws for companies hired to rebuild the Gulf Coast, will more women make even less money, below the paltry \$5.15/hour federal minimum wage? You bet they will because more than 400,000 jobs were lost in the disaster.

Violations of International Human Rights Standards

We also witnessed the incredible violations of the human rights of the Katrina survivors. Not only was their right to survive threatened by the painfully slow response of local, state and federal governments, but their right to stay united as families, their right to adequate and safe shelter, their right to social services, their right to accurate information, their right to health care and freedom from violence. All of these are human rights violations but the one that brings the Middle East most forcefully to mind is the violation of the *right to return* to one's home. For those of us with short-term memories, keep in mind that the Supreme Court ruled this year that governments have expanded powers of eminent domain that may be used to prevent some survivors from ever returning to their communities as land is turned over to corporate developers. New limits on the protections of bankruptcy laws will also cause further harm to Katrina's survivors.

The concept of peace and security is dreadfully misused during this crisis to impose a police state. The United Nations urged societies a decade ago to re-examine what is meant by security, beyond law enforcement, the military and the state. The 1994 Human Development Report by the United Nations introduced a new people-centered concept for human security: "Human security means....safety from constant threats of hunger, disease, crime and repression. It also means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the pattern of daily lives, whether in our homes, our jobs, in communities, or in our environment." Activists in the U.S., especially after 9/11, requested a re-consideration of security that included the protection of human rights and civil liberties, the meeting of people's basic human needs, and the use of peace processes and UN mechanisms that can avoid war and prevent genocides.

The reality is that women live in a borderland of insecurity all the time, yet the needs of women are invisible during discussions on security pre-occupied with criminals and terrorists. Poverty, hunger and deprivation of human rights are the real threats to security because security is determined by the extent to which people have their basic needs met and can live in freedom and safety, not by the number of armed occupiers in their communities. A militarized community does not feel safer, just more policed, so that what is allowed and what is accepted is constantly determined by those outside of the community.

Our people removed from New Orleans have been called "evacuees," a term that has no legal basis in international law. They are, in fact, **internally displaced persons**, a status that affords them legal rights and protections. The U.S. government is very careful not to use this term to describe the people from New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast because it would trigger obligations defined by human rights treaties to meet the needs of our people. The U.S. government is always careful not to use language that requires it to protect people's human rights.

For example, the government was resistant to using the word “genocide” to describe the theft of Indigenous lands and the enslavement of Africans at the 2001 World Conference Against Racism. John Bolton, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations appointed by President Bush, will be busily trying to undermine anti-poverty goals at the UN Millennium Summit which begins this week, instead of focusing on eradicating poverty, improving education, and empowering women. The U.S. government’s assault on the human rights framework is unending, and we must not let them get away with it. We must respond by ensuring that the Katrina survivors learn about their human rights and the obligations they are due from our government.

Speaking of racism, it was racism that stopped the distribution of the \$2000 debit cards to the survivors. Right wing critics, claiming that the (mostly black) poor people were irresponsible and likely to cheat the system, halted FEMA’s distribution of this immediate cash relief. Instead, the government switched to a bank account deposit system, ignoring the fact that many poor people don’t have bank accounts or can’t access them if they do because of the disaster. Many do not have the identity documents required to use standard banking procedures. Some survivors who received the cards before they were discontinued report that they received much less than \$2000; some received only \$200. Who will do a race, gender and class analysis of who received what relief?

Despite the magnitude of the catastrophe, it is amazing that the authorities found the time to harass undocumented immigrant women and men in the affected region. Reports of people targeted by immigration officials have surfaced, and many are afraid to seek help for fear that their suffering will be exploited as an opportunity to forcibly deport people. Those without social security numbers are being denied emergency assistance by some agencies.

Another under-reported story is what happened to the survivors in some of the cities to which they escaped. Because of anti-poor ordinances in cities like San Antonio and Atlanta, some survivors have been arrested for panhandling and jaywalking in cities they perceived as refuges. Some have been concentrated into hastily erected camps resembling detention centers, isolating them from the communities that purportedly welcomed them. There will be an increase in the criminalization of the poor leading to a surge in growth for the prison industrial complex.

Gender-Based Violence

Often poor women and children are the first ones forced into prostitution to survive. There will be an increase in the demand for prostitution created by the massive military and police presence in the affected states, similar to the rise in prostitution that surrounds our military bases around the world already. Women are not “opportunities to relieve stress” as many soldiers are encouraged to believe. Because of the limited real choices women face, we expect that there will be a rise in the prostitution and trafficking of women and children. We also expect that there will be a rise in the exploitation and sexual abuse of displaced children. Increases in the abuse of women and children will mean rises in other things like unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV/AIDS. We expect these things because they occur to women and children even without the desperation and vulnerability created by such a national disaster.

We have already received reports of the rapes and murders of women and children among the survivors herded together in the Superdome and New Orleans Convention Center under



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inhumane conditions. We do not know whether or not media racism exaggerated these reports, but we already know that some men do not know how to cope with a lack of control over their lives and they often express their frustration by abusing and violating women and children. Domestic violence and sexual assault will increase because women are more vulnerable and more men will become violent as the occupation and displacement continues. This culture of violence breeds more violence against women. This happens every day anyway and a tragedy like Katrina exacerbates these dangerous tendencies, especially in a situation lacking any social control and order.

Development for Whom? Using A Gender Lens to Rebuild

There is a difference in how women see what ought to happen and how men see what should be done. It will be important during this crisis to listen to the women of the Gulf Coast and incorporate their perspectives on what should be done to help people recover from this disaster.

We can learn a lot from our sisters around the globe who have endured terrible tsunamis and callousness from military occupiers and humanitarian agencies. Now is the time to contact our sisters from Asia who survived the December 2004 tsunami or women from the Middle East who have lived for years under military occupations. They can offer valuable lessons about empowering women during national crises. They are the experts we need, not the men with guns pointed at us as we sought food and shelter. This is a moment for global solidarity, even if the Bush Administration is too arrogant to accept help from people in countries they don't respect.

This is not only a teachable moment for America but an opportunity for learning as well. This may be the moment to have serious discussions about the lack of human rights protections in this country by asking the question, "Why were we so vulnerable?" Even many government officials had to admit that the unjust war against Iraq decimated our country's ability to respond to this crisis in a timely and effective manner. This is a chance to connect issues of poverty, war, occupation, racism, homophobia, militarism and sexism, and make the distinction between natural disasters and man-made ones.

Women's voices must be lifted to evaluate the role of humanitarian agencies that responded to the crisis. There will be many agencies and groups profiting from our suffering while ignoring our local women's organizations and our capacity for making decisions about what we need. In fact, some of these humanitarian agencies may actually facilitate the occupation of our communities by turning over lists of undocumented people to the authorities, not recognizing the family rights of same sex couples, or participating in re-development strategies that ignore the needs and perspectives of women.

To counter this, women must seize our power and make our concerns known in the media, to government agencies, and to the humanitarian organizations. There are human rights standards that humanitarian agencies should follow and most require that women's perspectives are respected and incorporated. Women's organizations must work together, giving space to the creativity, energy and brains of young women. We cannot allow them to ignore the voices of local people or ignore the voices of women demanding inclusion.



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Women must ask critical questions during this crisis. Who are the groups benefiting from the disaster and who are the groups hurting or excluded? Women must help get the attention of people not immediately touched by the catastrophe and reach people who feel too comfortable to be outraged, because everyone is eventually affected by a tragedy of this magnitude. We must work together to address our collective trauma, fear and anxiety so that we can reduce its multi-generational impact.

Under the classic style of economic development of poor areas of America, communities are destroyed, people are forcibly relocated, and transnational corporations are invited to re-develop the seized lands. They called this Urban Renewal in the 1950s and 1960s. The 1970s brought us Spatial Deconcentration. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was called Gentrification. Now it will be called Security.

It may take as long as five years to rebuild the Gulf Coast, particularly the city of New Orleans, and right now we need to demand that the services to which we are entitled – that are our human rights – are delivered with respect, efficiency, and dignity. Our sisters from other countries advise us that disasters can wipe out the past and create an opportunity to better include people to reshape the future. We can use this moment to force bureaucracies to become more flexible, like changing normal admissions procedures to get our kids back in schools or demanding that quality public housing be provided instead of permanent refugee camps. We need schools, voter registration, immigrant services, drivers' licenses, housing, medical care, and public assistance put on the fast track, not bottle-necked services mired down in the typical bureaucratic snarls that characterize government assistance programs.

We need to demand economic re-development strategies that center our needs, not those of casino owners, in the picture. It will be mighty tempting to use this as an opportunity to not rebuild our communities in New Orleans or the rest of the Gulf Coast. New Orleans is particularly at risk of becoming a tourist mecca with a French Quarter, plantation mansions, and endless casinos where the only jobs available to people of color will be low-paying ones supporting the tourist and oil industries. We have to claim our human right to sustainable development and insist on the enforcement of economic and social rights in re-development strategies. We have the right to quality schools for our children, jobs that pay living wages, communities free of environmental toxins, and opportunities to develop our full human potential. We have the right to reclaim our land, rebuild our homes, and restore our communities.

Because many people lost their identities during the disaster, we can learn from our sisters in South Africa and Palestine who lost their identities when their countries were occupied. They took advantage of the chaos to create their own identities, determine their own facts, and promote community-based definitions of identity. They registered their own people as aid recipients and issued numbers and identity cards to help people have access to services. We have to define citizenship from our own point of view to challenge the powers that are taking over our communities and committing human rights abuses. People who are in occupied territories lose faith in the benefits of citizenship and in legal rights that are frequently denied. This is where international human rights laws become important. Claiming our identities as internally displaced persons forces our governments to not define us as charity cases, but as citizens with rights that must be respected and protected.



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It is also predictable that the people who name the repression by our government will be attacked and we must defend the women who will come under assault, like the human rights defenders movement. We will be called racist for pointing out the racism in America. Our inability to effectively defend people will lead to their isolation. Women already get attacked even before we're in the public sphere, in our personal lives through gender-based violence, but we can expect an escalation of these attacks if we loudly demand accountability from authorities. They will threaten to take away our children, deny us benefits, and accuse us of being unpatriotic and selfish. We cannot let them scare us because our lives – and those of our families – depend on us being united in resistance.

Specifically, we must demand the full funding of services women will need to recover from this crisis. Of the billions of dollars that will be poured into the region, we must demand increased funding for domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers, abused children's services, reproductive health programs, and services for the elderly, immigrants, and people who are disabled. We must demand that those doing assessments of what is needed not use gender-blind methods that fail to see the differences between the conditions of women and men, and fail to meet our need to be free from all forms of violence but especially sexual violence. It is vital that women and men, girls and boys are researched separately to understand the needs of each group. For example, research indicates that men are most likely exposed to violence in public places whereas violence against women is much more common in domestic spaces.

We need to demand support for local women's organizations which are arguably the best way to get information to women and obtain information about women's needs. Yet often women's organizations are ignored either because they are not known to the decision makers or their work is not valued. We need the solidarity of feminists from around to world to help us claim our human rights. Ignoring women as a resource to help recover from this tragedy will affect the entire society for years to come.

Following are four reproductive justice organizations affected by this crisis. We encourage you to send donations directly to them to help them out in this crisis:

The Institute for Women & Ethnic Studies, a reproductive justice organization that works with young women in New Orleans on teen pregnancy, sexual health education, and training of physicians of color to deliver abortion and other reproductive health services, had its offices at 1600 Canal Street, in the heart of the flooded downtown of New Orleans. Because their staff is dispersed across several states in the Deep South, they are asking that people visit their website at www.iwes.org to make donations. One of their program assistants, La'Keidra Hardeman, has relocated temporarily to Atlanta and her email is hardeman@iwes.org. They will need new computer equipment, office furniture, and a host of other items basic to rebuilding their agency.

Mississippi Families for Kids did not suffer direct damage because of the storm, but have responded to unprecedented demands for their services helping kids needing adoption and families in crisis. They are located at 620 N. State Street, #304, Jackson, MS 39202. Their phone number is 601-360-0591.



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Women With a Vision is a HIV/AIDS reproductive justice organization in New Orleans. They are presently working out of Houston, TX because of the relocation. Their temporary contact and address is Deon Haywood, 11614 Eaglewood Drive, Houston, TX 77089. Phone 504-931-7944.

The Children's Defense Fund, Southern Regional Office is located at P. O. Box 11437 Jackson, MS 39283, Tel: (601) 321-1966, Fax: (601) 321-8736, www.cdf-sro.org. Their program, The Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative (SRBWI), promotes the first human rights agenda in the United States aimed at eradicating historical race, class, cultural, religious and gender barriers experienced by southern rural black women.