

## **Gulf Coast Women Reflect on 5th Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina**

Challenges of slow recovery and women's marginalization after the recent oil spill

New Orleans, Louisiana, August 31, 2010: Who is listening to the women of the Gulf Coast? The silence about their concerns is deafening in this week of fifth-anniversary commemorative events about Hurricane Katrina. The Katrina story—and now the BP disaster—has been a story focused exclusively on race, class and age, as if women and men, boys and girls are not also embodied in a gendered social world. Who is listening to women in the fifth year and fifth month of these two great American tragedies?

The living conditions and family lives of women are diverse, and so are their needs and concerns along the Gulf Coast at this fifth year marker. But at the grassroots level, where community women have historically been leaders, some see not just "roadblocks" on road to recovery but potholes—even a "foot on the neck." At a recent meeting in Jefferson Parish, a local woman protested "Well, I feel pimped. Everyone has written on us, photographed us, celebrated us, made money in fundraisers off us and we still have neighborhoods that look just like they were a month after Katrina came." Rather than approaching community recovery by working with the community and women leaders, outside agencies with their resources and funding continue to alter the balance of power. Local women worry about communities less unified than before in the chase for external donor dollars. Communities with historically high levels of resilience are put off balance by approaches to recovery that overlook women's economic needs, especially in resource-dependent regions. Looking around her, local activist, disaster scholar and Gender and Disaster Resilience Alliance [GDRA] member Kristina Peterson hears local women objecting to "outside groups that come in with their resources, name tags, clipboards and salaries while the community has no money—they are carpetbaggers!" Another GDRA member with long-term community recovery experience was advised to "start rebuilding where something was already working--where there was drinkable water and electricity, start from there. But it's starting to feel like there is nothing working – like the table cloth is being pulled from under us just as we're getting ready to sit down at the table."

Across the region, women's recovery varies. But many women with children think they are still in limbo, unable to return to neighborhoods without affordable and habitable housing, employment, functioning schools, safe spaces for children, food supplies, health care—or the neighbors and kin that make a place a home. Government cutbacks in spending on housing and social services hit women hard in the aftermath of Katrina. Many women-led families are losing their FEMA trailers after five years. The four largest public housing units in New Orleans were shut down, along with the single public hospital. The buses used primarily by women still aren't back to normal. Reproductive health care services were inaccessible for many months. Domestic violence calls from Louisiana to the national hot line increased by 20% in the first two months after the oil spill, echoing post-Katrina increases in sexual assault and abuse. Women needing abilities assistance still struggle for accessible housing and meaningful help regaining their independence in Katrina + 5. Children's needs have increased but mothers have less help now with so many child care centers still closed. Strong women's networks enabled many to escape a flooding city, but even these tenuous threads are frayed as time passes and families remain displaced.

The twin assaults on the Gulf Coast threaten the livelihoods, culture, and very future of indigenous women and communities. African American women know their families are still in trouble. Latino families who came with their partners to help rebuild the region find themselves facing sexual harassment as well as exploitation at the hands of unscrupulous employers. Vietnamese women in fishing families are once again in the eye of the storm as shrimpers and others struggle month after month, day after day with uncertainty. Meanwhile, in this region with single mothers and grandmothers heading up so many of the households that live at poverty level or below, women's economic status is not improving. New Census data indicate that women's earning are not rising, as some men's are, especially not among women of color who earn far less than either white women or men. Now, after the oil spill, women in fishing families must work harder to make do and help the men in their lives, some near the breaking point. They wonder if their small businesses that have kept the family afloat in hard times will survive, or be compensated by the oil recovery fund if not. With unemployment rates high and extensive layoffs in the public sector (teachers, teachers aids, health providers), women are hurt as providers of essential services. New signs can be seen advertising "ironing taken," and home gardens are more common.

And now, more than ever, women's time is needed, even when those who have returned to the Gulf still lack affordable and habitable housing, child care, employment, health services, transportation, and antiviolence services. When they can manage it, they attend public meetings on rebuilding and speak out; they help friends and family translate complex official forms and seek out essential information on the moving target of disaster relief. Like women around the world, they stand in those endless lines to petition for help, keep home fires burning no matter where they are, and do their level best to support their children, partners and families. No wonder so many studies find especially high post-disaster stress symptoms among women, the proverbial "shock absorbers" of social crises. But should the high-profile issue of "trauma" dominate the agenda when so many other inequalities persist? Why is so little attention paid to the root causes of women's challenges in Year 5 after Katrina?

Still in the eye of the storm, for many long months and years the women of the Gulf have worked for no salaries, lived in trailers or cramped living quarters around the country, and continued to help others. Across the region, they are highly involved in local work toward a more just and sustainable future, taking lead roles in grassroots environmental work and social justice groups engaged in rebuilding. Pam Jenkins, scholar, community activist, and GDRA member, watched "women step up, in the face of terrible conditions and at great personal sacrifice, to re-open battered women's programs, rebuild day care centers better and stronger, create food programs for low income families, reestablish literacy programs, and offer women and children opportunities for creativity and expression."

There are hundreds of women, unnamed, who get up every morning and make this life better in the Gulf Coast. Women from hard-hit Bayou communities also traveled to New York to speak out at the United Nations on indigenous concerns and others went to Alaska to exchange knowledge about the long-term effects of oil spills. Long-standing participatory research partnerships between local women on the Gulf Coast and the Center for Hazard Assessment, Response and Technology [CHART] at the University of New Orleans enable this work. In other places, women's funding networks continue to support grassroots women as rebuilders and a new generation of gender-focused disaster researchers will document these efforts in future publications on "the women of Katrina."

As Eve Ensler remarked, looking at some of the five-years-on updates she solicited from women in the antiviolence Katrina Warriors project: "Really, it is community activists, and particularly women community activists, who have kept New Orleans alive. I mean, they are the ones who, you know, had their doors open, like Carol Bebelle at Ashé, where people could come for refuge. They are the ones who are keeping education alive. They are the ones who are keeping children in safe places and the buildings continuing. And just reading the updates, you know, here they are with so little resources, but their hearts and their spirits and their desire to keep New Orleans the amazing place that New Orleans has always been. And I think that's been the most moving part of this journey, is the reminder that it's people, right, who keep the world spinning and going."

Women's hard-won lessons from past US disasters must be widely shared and those hardest hit and on the ground, given voice. "Women are a powerful agent for sustainable rebuilding," says Angela Devlen, President of Mahila Partnership and a member of GDRA, "Undermining them or approaching their role as only victims who need to be beneficiaries of external aid alters community recovery in a negative way." The US-based Gender and Disaster Resilience Alliance was formed in this spirit, seeking relationships of reciprocity and respect with Gulf Coast women and their families in the rebuilding of sustainable and just ways of living along the coast and across the US. The new *Women Building Disaster Resilience* project is one model, designed to offer tools and education for women to lead their own communities towards resilience. The national program focuses on mitigation and risk reduction through community-driven, women-led work, for example the stellar hazard mitigation efforts of the women in the community of Jean Lafitte, and women's antiviolence work across the region. "We are advocates and facilitators," says Elaine Enarson, co-founder of the international Gender and Disaster Network and GDRA. "By leveraging solutions drawn from grassroots experience and research we hope to support and strengthen local women through these twin catastrophes. Five years will soon be ten and women cannot wait."

For more information about women and gender in long-term recovery from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the BP oil spill, visit the website of the GDRA. We invite you to join us and help support the **Women Building Disaster Resilience Project.** 

To learn more about the GDRA, visit our website: <a href="http://www.usgdra.org">http://www.usgdra.org</a>

This new voluntary network is a sister network to the global Gender and Disaster Network, focused on developing safer, more just and disaster resilient communities in the US by developing and strengthening women's capacities before, during and after disasters. Visit the website to learn more and to access *Hard-Won Lessons: Responding to Women's Interests and Needs in the Gulf Coast Oil Spill*, a two-page set of guidelines for gender-responsive recovery. Links to short videos profiling women's work in the Gulf Coast and what is at stake for women can be found on the website. *You may also contact GDRA through email: usgdra@gmail.com* 

## For more information about women at the fifth-year

The Institute for Women's Policy Research: <a href="http://www.iwpr.org/index.cfm">http://www.iwpr.org/index.cfm</a>
Three new fact sheets distributed in August, 2010 tell the story:

- Women in New Orleans: Race, Poverty, and Hurricane Katrina
- Mounting Losses: Women and Public Housing after Hurricane Katrina
- Women, Disasters, and Hurricane Katrina

The Newcomb College Center for Research on Women, Tulane University:

http://tulane.edu/nccrow/research.cfm

Two fact sheets were developed to track progress through women's eyes:

- New Orleans Women Pre-and Post-Katrina: A Demographic Profile of Age,
   Race/Ethnicity, and Family and Non-Family Households
- New Orleans Women Pre- and Post-Katrina: A Profile of Labor Force Participation,
   Earnings and Occupations

Democracy Now! Interview with Eve Ensler: <a href="http://www.democracynow.org/shows/recent">http://www.democracynow.org/shows/recent</a>

Hear Amy Goodman's full interview August 26, 2010 with Eve Ensler along with excerpts from a pending production of *Swimming Upstream*, based on women's experiences, feelings and ideas after Katrina.