

## SOME OF WOMEN'S DISASTER STORIES: WHAT ABOUT YOURS?\*

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### Women have a lot to lose:

When the tide came, it covered the sky and my children slipped away from me in the strong current. A man is a man, but what am I without my children? <sup>1</sup>

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It's mainly us women who suffer the most when the river is full. We get wet, even when we are ill, we must cross the river because we don't have a bridge. We also run the risk of drowning.<sup>2</sup>

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I experienced Storm Debby in 1994 [in St. Lucia]. The wind blew four sheets of galvanize off my house and I lose my rug and my wardrobe, the water entered by house causing me to lose my sewing machine as well. . . Well there is a disaster group in the community, they did not really assist me, because I never went to them. And in the countryside, where I have my bananas I lost everything through landslides. After the storm I had to move to the [shelter in the school] where I stayed there for one week. I believe the house got damaged because of the location it was. When the water entered by house, it reached my waist. . . I never got assistance for my bananas that were destroyed. And up to now things hard in the country, I never got my sewing machine back and many other things that I lost.<sup>3</sup>

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I had just experienced a vehicular accident when Debbie visited us. I had twenty lines of sea moss in the water, all of which got white [ruined] cause the chemical it was treated with created a distaste for the sea moss. The banana farm all of which was destroyed by the devastating storm. Even our water was polluted with debris and other chemicals as well as toxic waste. We were prepared at home because we were really secure.<sup>4</sup>

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The tremor has affected us a lot. There is less movement, tourists go to other places. My salary depends on commission according to the number of [bus] tickets sold. Lately, I've sold very few.<sup>5</sup>

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[Following the Berkeley/Oakland firestorm] I had no thread. By this I mean I had no thread to stitch my daughter's hem, and also I lost the thread of my life. The pattern of my days, my plans, my routines were

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<sup>1</sup> Sona Bari, 1992. Women in the aftermath. In H. Hossain, et al. (eds.), *From Crisis to Development: Coping with Disasters in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: University Press Limited.

<sup>2</sup> Interview conducted by community researchers in El Coco, El Salvador, fall 2002.

<sup>3</sup> La Point Development Committee community research project, St. Lucia, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> La Point Development Committee community research project, St. Lucia, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Carolina Serrat Vinas, 1998. Women's disaster vulnerability and response to the Colima earthquake. In E. Enarson and B. H. Morrow (eds.), *The Gendered Terrain of Disaster: Through Women's Eyes*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing. Available in paperback from the International Hurricane Center of Florida International University [[www.fiu.edu/~lsbr](http://www.fiu.edu/~lsbr)].

irrevocably ruptured. The warp of my past was torn from the weave of my future. Who I am, what I was, what I intended to do, the fabric of my life, utterly unraveled.<sup>6</sup>

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He is a new kind of mad. He has this anger in him that I have never seen before.<sup>7</sup>

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My husband went crazy. He couldn't take the pressure—being used to everything, and then coming down to no eating, because we could not find food . . . And then he was beating me up, taking my money—there was just so much going on that I just couldn't—he was really going berserk. I was getting beat up pretty bad. I didn't have a job, I didn't have any clothes, because I was fleeing for my life. I came here with one shoe, ended up going to the hospital, the emergency room...He really went crazy. Before, I would get beat up maybe once a month if I was lucky. . . . But then, after the hurricane it all got worse... It was really rough for a female. I ran across a lot of women suffering too with their children—husbands beating them up and leaving them. It was pretty bad.<sup>8</sup>

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[Migrant] women are still expected to do their normal job. . . and to come home at night and take care of the kids. . . and to help their husband with the disaster-related clean-up or whatever else is going on. And I've seen a lot of stress issues, where women are taking it on—they've done it and done it and done it.<sup>9</sup>

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He likes things ordered and when things are out of order he doesn't like it. So the flood was a nightmare for him. It's not like his temperament completely changed with the flood but I definitely do consider us to be a flood casualty. The flood did bring on his anger.<sup>10</sup>

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I used an oil lamp to see, and all of a sudden all the little animals had drowned and I found my daughter hanging on to a hammock. I was so nervous because I couldn't find my daughter. Later during the earthquake, we had not recovered from one when the other came, I was just arriving at home when I felt like I was dizzy, and I had three children inside. . . . And for a long time I put containers with water on all sides of the house until I felt sure that the earth would [not] shake again. It took a lot to rebuild our kitchen and to recover other things that were lost. Some were given tents but not us. We cooked outdoors on the ground. I have managed to reconstruct my kitchen with pieces of brick.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Women listen to hazard warnings:**

After about 1 ½ hours of sleep Friday night, I turned the radio back on and they were saying that the whole town should evacuate—our area was specifically named. I woke [my husband and grown son] about 5 am. Both said they would not go . . . It took me until the afternoon on Saturday to convince [him] that we

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<sup>6</sup> Susanna Hoffman, 1998. Eve and Adam among the embers: gender patterns after the Oakland/Berkeley firestorm. In E. Enarson and B. H. Morrow, 1998, op.cit.

<sup>7</sup> K. Davis and M. Ender, 1999. The 1997 Red River Valley flood: impact on marital relationships. *Applied Behavioral Science Review* 7 (2).

<sup>8</sup> B. Morrow and E. Enarson, 1996, Hurricane Andrew through women's eyes: issues and recommendations. *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 14 (1);

<sup>9</sup> Interview conducted with Migrant Outreach professional in Grand Forks, N. Dakota. See Enarson 2001, What women do: gendered disaster work in the Red River Valley flood. *Environmental Hazards* 3 (1).

<sup>10</sup> Alice Fothergill, 1999. An exploratory study of woman battering in the Grand Forks flood disaster: implications for community responses and policies. *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 17 (1).

<sup>11</sup> Interview with survivor of 2001 earthquakes conducted by community researchers in El Coco, El Salvador, fall 2002.

should leave. All medical services were down, and I didn't want to have to worry about getting him to medical help if he should need it in an area where none was available. [My son] refused to go.<sup>12</sup>

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In 1980 I experienced hurricane Allen. . .It was a Sunday night about six o'clock p.m. when the wind began to blow with such force and the sound of breaking branches could be heard a far distance away. We were advised by the radio announcers to stay tuned to our radio because hurricane advisory would be issued, and so we did just that. We were tuned and were prepared.<sup>13</sup>

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He didn't want to evacuate. He wanted to stay here and protect the place. . . I was scared. I wanted to leave. . . He wanted to come back here sooner also. . . He did come back a week earlier. . . I felt the safety issue was too much. He should have stayed away.<sup>14</sup>

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[W]hen we heard that Lincoln dike had broke, we all called my sister to say we'd come over and get trucks and we would move everything out of their home. And [my brother-in-law] just refused. He said "It's *not* going to flood. We're all right." He just absolutely—and she had a business down in her basement and she wanted to get all that stuff and he just, he refused. . . And I think when it hit, [he] was very closed. You couldn't get him to talk. He would go off and walk by himself a lot, just not talk to anyone and I think he felt really guilty that—'What if I would have done this, we wouldn't have lost all of our furniture, [her] business.'<sup>15</sup>

#### **Women show leadership:**

People came with no clothes. We set up a clothing drive, a food bank. We put all of those rural women—used all of their energy, even though they were housing people, to do things for others. *They* were the ones that held it together.<sup>16</sup>

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[During the volcanic eruption in Montserrat] women were quick at becoming enterprising. They filled the gaps. They moved their hairdressing shops, seamstresses continued to sew school uniforms. They tried to keep the community together even when they were in shelters—cooking, feeding people in shelters. Food was a big thing because it was difficult to cook in the early days.<sup>17</sup>

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As a woman, I faced a shock along with my female colleagues when we were told that we could not accompany the relief mission with the visiting team because there was no guarantee of any 'secure' place to stay. . . [It] was important for women workers to help women survivors. We learned from other NGOs that they sent mainly male relief teams. This may have been unintentional but indicated that women were seen more as victims and not as providers of services during and after disasters.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> E. Enarson and J. Scanlon, 1999. Gender patterns in a flood evacuation: a case study of couples in Canada's Red River Valley flood. *Applied Behavioral Science Review* 7 (2).

<sup>13</sup> La Point Development Committee community research project, St. Lucia, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Karen Davis and Morten Ender, 1999, op.cit.

<sup>15</sup> E. Enarson, 2001, op.cit.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Soares and Audrey Mullings, forthcoming. 'A we run tings': women rebuilding Montserrat. In G.D. Howe and H. Fergus (eds.), *A Will to Survive: Volcanic Impact and Crisis Mitigation in Montserrat*. Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press.

<sup>18</sup> Farida Akhter, 1992. Women are not only victims. In H. Hossain, et al. (eds.), *From Crisis to Development: Coping with Disasters in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: University Press Limited.

He was not the strong one any more because he had such a difficult time, thinking, not only did he lose his home but his parents' home. And so I had to be the strong one. I still had to take care of my daughter. He did come up [where we evacuated] for a week. . . The first three or four months he was, he stayed away. He was real distant and kind of did his own thing. . . He said the most difficult thing for him was the fact that he is supposed to take care of his family and he had nowhere to bring that family.<sup>19</sup>

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If there is one member of the community through hurricane they help each other. We join our hands together and do what is necessary. In Praslin [St. Lucia] we do not have an established group for disaster preparedness. But there that tendency that exist in the community. That where they need a ride too. Especially in disasters people come together and they lend a helping hand and we make things happen.<sup>20</sup>

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When exposed to a dangerous situation, I have an overwhelming desire to put myself where I can physically help others. . . I still look forward to the excitement disaster work provides, but now [after going back to college] I am getting paid for my disaster preparedness work and part of my motivation is an increased sense of duty to my city. I have a greater degree of identification with the community, and the better I come to know it, the more I am motivated to get this city prepared for disaster!<sup>21</sup>

#### **Women help themselves and others:**

Women in times of disaster are stronger than men are. Women are the ones who hold the family together emotionally while men do it physically. Furthermore women are more capable of doing domestic chores. . . Yes, it is different for some men I know because they are capable of doing the things women can but they just do not do it.<sup>22</sup>

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I did the cleaning while the others sandbagged. I kind of thought to myself 'Who's going to help me while you help the neighbors?'<sup>23</sup>

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Not only my husband, but my 12- and 14-year old sons were swiftly recruited. However when with my daughter and a female friend, I offered my services in the [fire fighting], they were declined. We worked instead where it was deemed appropriate for us—preparing food in our kitchen, which was already stacked high with [food] made by district women for the firefighters.<sup>24</sup>

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One lady on 10th Street, I'll never forget her, I don't know why. Her mother was dying of cancer, her sister was dying of cancer, and she had kids, she had a house, they had a flooded basement. Her husband wasn't living there because he had to work someplace else. . . Massive craziness. And she was just strong,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> La Point Development Committee community research project, St. Lucia, 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Carrie Barnecut, 1998. Disaster prone: reflections of a female permanent disaster volunteer. In E. Enarson and B. H. Morrow, 1998, op.cit.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Hurricane David survivor conducted by community researchers in Canefield, Dominica, fall 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Interview conducted in Manitoba during the 1997 Red River Valley flood. See E. Enarson and J. Scanlon, 1999, op.cit.

<sup>24</sup> Gretchen Poiner, 1990. *The Good Old Rule: Gender and Other Power Relationships in a Rural Community*. Sydney: Sydney University Press.

and going here at 2, going there at 4, got to be here at 6, got to be home at this time because the kids are going to be home, gotta cook dinner. . . I mean, she had everything going.<sup>25</sup>

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I had a hard time going to, like, Red Cross or anything like that. I had a very difficult time. And I don't know if it was a pride thing or what. My dad would not go [And your husband?] Oh, there's no way. No. And when we were [evacuated] out there, I had to go. I had nothing for my daughter.<sup>26</sup>

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I did most of the going out and finding the resources that were available to us. Standing in line, waiting for this, waiting for that. I mean, all I remember is *standing in line*.<sup>27</sup>

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There was fifty caravans and one washing-machine, so it was pandemonium trying to wash everything for the kids. . . You'd have to sit up 'til about five in the morning, and if you seen [the washing machine] was free, you'd run down and get your washing in.<sup>28</sup>

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Their men may have lost the fishing equipment necessary to earn a living, their children may have died and their homes and belongings were washed away but at the end of each day it was the wife/mother who had to cook for whoever survived in her family. In all the relief lines I saw, women stood first. They were the ones collecting bits of wood and bamboo to rebuild the houses. As is customary, they dealt with the sick children and lack of food.<sup>29</sup>

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I mean his whole total effort was shrugging his shoulders and sighing. I mean I was turning out my whole house, seeing to my kids, worrying myself sick. . . and I just felt he thought that where we were was very comfortable. . . I mean probably if we hadna' been flooded out I'd have just sauntered along with him. His life didn't change. His Monday to Friday job was the same but from Friday to Sunday he was still assuming he was going out to the pub. I was left in the caravan and that's the bit I couldnae cope with. . . I couldnae cope with my house and him and. . . a new baby and everything.<sup>30</sup>

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I was forced to deal with my ex. He ended up evacuating, he came up to the apartment that we were in because he didn't have anywhere else to go. . . My ex-husband [was] just totally drinking every day. And then I relied on his help so I could try and get my kids back into the house and he was drinking so much it took him, like, ten times as long as he needed to try and clean the basement out.<sup>31</sup>

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[We] three women spent 39 days without electricity—washing clothes in the bathtub, heating water on the campfire for the children's baths, washing dishes in a bucket. We cooked Mexican food over a makeshift kitchen in the yard, preparing corn tortillas on a cast iron griddle . . . Disaster or no disaster, the men demanded hearty meals of traditional foods and refused to eat at the military kitchens . . . The men began to hire themselves out, repairing others' homes as the job market for workers boomed, but our home lay in disarray.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> A. Fothergill, 1999, op.cit.

<sup>28</sup> Maureen Fordham, 1998. Making women visible in disasters: problematising the private domain. *Disasters* 22 (2).

<sup>29</sup> Sona Bari, 1992, op.cit.

<sup>30</sup> E. Enarson and Maureen Fordham, 2001. Lines that divide, ties that bind: race, class and gender in women's flood recovery in the US and UK. *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* 15 (4).

<sup>31</sup> E. Enarson, 2001, op.cit.

<sup>32</sup> D. Colina, 1998. Reflections from a teacher and survivor. In Enarson and Morrow, 1998, op.cit.

**Women can change their lives:**

I can do wire now! Changed all my outlets and I can put up lights. I'm real scared of wiring even though I've done that. And I really got to be a good plasterer because I didn't like the way they did it so I redid it at nights myself.<sup>33</sup>

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There were more decisions to be made . . . We're not agreeing on anything . . . He's not taking me seriously. You can't go your whole life with someone without having something to offer them . . . It's his way and that's it. It wasn't a big deal before the flood. Now it is.<sup>34</sup>

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I gained a lot of respect from the city employees during that time because of course, they expected that I would be the person that they should all be taking care of, and instead, I was there helping them, organizing. We worked 16-hour days straight for over 5 weeks. But I enjoyed it. We have a good old boys' system here, so afterwards this one guy didn't want me to attend the meetings anymore. I told him, 'I have been here since day one, and I've had to make a lot of decisions, my signature is on everything, and you should back me.' The city council completely supported me. And now, well, they all definitely listen when I say something.<sup>35</sup>

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Then came the drought of 1985. Both my husband and I started going to work on the relief sites—digging earth. . . we dug earth for four years—there was no other way. All my hair fell out and I went bald. But now I have guaranteed work. I am a member of SEWA [Self-Employed Women's Association, an Indian savings bank for low-income women] and our village group leader. From my year's savings, I have now bought a buffalo, so that gives me extra income. I am the sole breadwinner: my whole family lives on my income. I also assist the other village women to do high-quality embroidery so that they also get regular work and income. Now, all the men in the village also respect me.<sup>36</sup>

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I thought I wouldn't be able to endure the hardship of being a victim of the volcano. But it was shown to me. . . that I can be empowered.<sup>37</sup>

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It was just houses, you know? We've come through the depressions and wars and we are a tough generation. This was just a miserable little bushfire. When you have got kids, your order of what is important in the world is quite clear. If your kids are happy and safe and you are not injured, you can get on.<sup>38</sup>

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In fact, I got together with another woman and we're thinking about forming a group. It's still in the making, but we want to get together—all Hispanic women—so we can have a voice. We still need to get some basics. . . We don't know who [the local political candidates] are. Do we know what they stand for? As Hispanic women, we're still not out there, letting our voices be heard.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> E. Enarson and J. Scanlon, 1999, op.cit.

<sup>35</sup> Alice Fothergill, 1999. Women's roles in disaster. *Applied Behavioral Science Review* 7 (2).

<sup>36</sup> Intermediate Technology, 1997. Women and drought. Disaster and Development Occasional Paper.

<sup>37</sup> Zenaida Delica, 1998. Balancing vulnerability and capacity: women and children in the Philippines. In Enarson and Morrow, 1998, op.cit.

<sup>38</sup> Helen Cox, 1998. Women in bushfire territory. In E. Enarson and B.H. Morrow, 1998, op.cit.

<sup>39</sup> E. Enarson, 1999. Women and housing issues in two US disasters: hurricane Andrew and the Red River Valley flood. *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 17 (1).

[Women Will Rebuild in Miami] brought together women who had never come together before. I think they did make an honest effort to represent all the groups in Miami. I give them credit for that.<sup>40</sup>

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In the aftermath of the hurricane I found a source of strength and power of survival that I hold within myself and because of that I am a stronger person today.<sup>41</sup>

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I'm starting a new life. So I'm going to take that flood and all that abuse, and when the flood waters left Grand Forks, well, *that was my old life leaving*. All the abuse left with the water. That's how I look at it.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> E. Enarson and B. H. Morrow, 1998. Women will rebuild Miami: a case study of feminist response to disaster. In Enarson and Morrow, 1998, op.cit.

<sup>41</sup> D. Colina, 1998, op.cit.

<sup>42</sup> Alice Fothergill, 1999, op.cit.