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Women Will Rebuild Miami: A Case Study of Feminist Response to Disaster

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The seemingly gender-neutral stance of most disaster research and theory in effect masks the gendered organization of social life. Arguably, this ignores and distorts much of women's disaster experience and conceals men's gender-specific experiences when their lives too are disrupted by disaster. Despite their central roles in families, communities, and economies, women are relatively invisible in the world of disaster planning and response and their considerable efforts before, during, and after natural disaster are masked by the female victim/male rescuer paradigm. To broaden this view we examine women's engagement with the politics of recovery in the wake of a major hurricane in Miami in 1992, specifically the short-lived women's coalition organized in opposition to elite male control of private disaster relief funds.

BEYOND VICTIMIZATION

The gender-based vulnerability of women to hazard and disaster is well-documented (e.g., Wiest et al. 1994; Blaikie et al. 1994) but women's instrumental and proactive work after disaster is less self-evident. Typecast as hapless victims protected and rescued by vigilant men, women are in fact actively present to some degree in every aspect of disaster. Gender relations in late twentiet-century cultures, though widely varying, tend to place women in roles central to disaster recovery, as food and water providers, paid and unpaid caregivers, community leaders and activists, household and family advocates, protectors and nurturers of children and dependents, and material and emotional sustainers of home and neighborhood. Often marginalized in practice, women in developed societies increasingly participate as professionals in emergency management organizations and in human and social service agencies serving disaster survivors.

Women's traditional community-building roles place them at the forefront of disaster recovery. When formal infrastructures are destroyed, the female-dominated informal infrastructure becomes more visible; women preoccupied with their own disaster recovery may withdraw their voluntary labor and human service agencies, schools, and hospitals feel the difference. Women historically

respond in a range of ways to meet critical family needs in crisis (e.g., Enarson and Morrow 1997; Bennett 1995; Pardo 1995; Moser 1996). Sociologists and social historians have documented women's rich history as activists on issues ranging from lack of public services and domestic violence to electoral politics, police brutality, and the location of chemical dumps (e.g., Schecter 1982; Bennett 1995; Garland 1988; West and Blumberg 1990; Brown and Ferguson 1995). Women's networks and informal community leadership are integral resources in community organizing (DeSena 1993) and the achievements of many local, national, and international social justice and peace movements reflect female skills and talents□if only through women's "invisible careers" as volunteer community organizers (Daniels 1988).

Disasters create moments of opportunity as well as crisis; in Miami, for example, some women found employment in construction work, developed new negotiating skills working with home contractors and insurance adjusters, or used disaster relief monies to escape violent relationships (Morrow and Enarson 1996). Female leadership often emerges when communities struggle to recover after disaster, as, for instance, among public housing tenants who organized to improve living conditions and empower residents in the wake of devastation caused by the civil unrest in Los Angeles (Leavitt 1992) or in Mexico City, when women politicized their demands for disaster relief after the 1985 earthquake (Massolo and Schteingart 1987).

In disaster organizations, women's extensive voluntary efforts make them central players in religious or relief agencies like the Red Cross. Ironically, crisis affords women a platform for demonstrating effective leadership as elected officials, emergency managers, community activists, and neighborhood leaders. Few postdisaster communities are without emergent grassroots activist groups responding to the disaster recovery process (Quarantelli 1978). Women tend to dominate when informal groups emerge in the postdisaster environment to meet perceived unmet needs. Typically, they organize primarily as mothers responding to traditionally defined maternal role obligations (Neal and Phillips 1990).

A gender-sensitive lens on disaster-struck communities makes women's capacities as well as their vulnerabilities visible, suggesting a more nuanced view of women as victim/survivors and responders. For disaster managers and practitioners, as we have argued elsewhere (Morrow and Enarson 1996), the capacities of women are a significantly underutilized resource in disaster preparation, mitigation, and response.

GENDERED RESPONSE ORGANIZATIONS

Established disaster response agencies, like informal or emergent community groups, arise within communities structured by gender, race, and class relations as well as historically specific social and cultural patterns. At the organizational level, covert and overt patterns reflect and reproduce the social relations of gender (Acker 1991) in ways that matter for women responding to disaster.

The masculinist vision inherent in mainstream disaster management practice is a case in point. Do male-dominated disaster organizations respond effectively to women's needs and take advantage of their strengths? Do they assume an

invisible "auxiliary organization" (Kanter 1977) of wives and other women limited to support roles? Are gender-specific crisis needs considered in the design of relief programs, for example childcare in relief centers, translators for undocumented women refugees, temporary quarters or camps secure against sexual assault? What provisions are in place for women maintaining families, elderly women, and single mothers in public housing, battered women in shelters, or disabled women who may have special needs? Are women involved in redesigning community housing or transportation systems and are their informal networks and resources accessed by disaster managers? Who controls the key resources of recovery and in whose interests are they utilized? These questions arise from the critique of gendered practice within emergency management and disaster response agencies.

Women's organizations, too, are gendered and have a racial and class politic. They are the public face of women's movements in any society and critical vehicles for social change, yet are rarely analyzed (Ferree and Martin 1995). In the United States, women organizing around gender issues draw from a rich history, including African-American women's antilynching efforts, the civil rights movements, and opposition to the masculinist New Left politics of the 1960s. "Second wave" feminist organizations arising in the late l960s and l970s took many forms, from the free-wheeling collectivist to the more familiar bureaucratic model.

The feminist critique of bureaucracy and hierarchy inspired new ways of organizing, characterized by participatory democracy, consensus decision-making, inclusivity, and diversity (Fergussen 1984; Rose 1994; Ferree and Hess 1994; case studies in Ferree and Martin 1995). Feminist groups and organizations vary widely in their goals, outcomes, funding, and membership, and no single ideal-typical feminist organization can be identified (Martin 1990). The rejection of hierarchical structures and exclusionary practice has inspired a lively and continuing debate about the "tyranny of structurelessness" and the relationship between organizational process and attainment (e.g., Freeman 1972; Eisenstein 1991; Staggenborg 1995).

Women's efforts to find common ground across differences and organize in nonhierarchical, inclusive, and participatory ways is at the heart of feminist organizing in the l990s. It is within this tradition, and in the context of the manifestly gendered response to the devastation of Hurricane Andrew in Miami, that *Women Will Rebuild* arose.

MIAMI AND HURRICANE ANDREW

Hurricane Andrew hit the southernmost part of the metropolitan Miami, Florida area (South Dade County) with terrific force in the early morning hours of August 23, 1992, displacing more than 180,000 people and virtually destroying the infrastructure that had sustained a population of more than 375,000, including 8,000 businesses, and nearly all public buildings, thirty-one schools, fifty-nine health facilities, and most fire and police stations (Governor's Disaster Planning and Response Review Committee 1993). Entire communities were literally wiped out. In the final analysis, about 108,000 private homes were damaged, with about 49,000 of these rendered uninhabitable (*Miami Herald*

8/24/94). Economic losses in excess of $28 billion made this the costliest disaster to hit the United States (Hebert et al. 1996).

Virtually all public and subsidized housing in the area, home to many of the region's poorest women and children, was either damaged or destroyed, and repairs were agonizingly slow. Every cultural group was affected, from Mexican migrant farm-working families and Haitian refugees maintaining extended households to affluent Anglos and Cuban-Americans, African-Americans in struggling working-class communities, and newly arrived, sometimes undocumented, immigrants from Central America.

Private donations poured in as the media reported the devastation. At the personal request of then-President George Bush, a recently retired publishing executive put together an organization similar to the one that was spearheading the rebuilding efforts in Los Angeles after racial riots. This well-known community leader drew upon his extensive personal and political network to appoint the founding board members of *We Will Rebuild* , which would eventually raise and distribute over $27 million in private funds and steer billions of public dollars to targeted programs (*We Will Rebuild* Foundation 1995). The invitation-only group of Miami insiders initially included few women (eleven of the fifty-six members on the decision-making board and thirty out of 160 trustees) and underrepresented African-Americans and Hispanics, particularly non-Cuban. The widespread impression was that job of rebuilding destroyed communities was now firmly in the hands of Miami's elite male-dominated, mostly Anglo, downtown business community (*Miami Herald* 9/19/92; Balmaseda 1993). Ironically, this same issue continued to plague the Los Angeles group used as a model (Donnelly 2/3/93).

In the aftermath of Andrew, established organizations delivering direct relief services to hurricane victims were overwhelmed. Human and social service agencies stretched their resources or expanded their mandate to assist disaster victims (*Miami Herald* 11/08/92; Morrow et al. 1994). Direct service providers struggled to help their constituents while working under terrible conditions themselves. To the victims housed in tent cities, doubled up in partially destroyed houses, occupying condemned apartment buildings, and living in other dismal circumstances, the pace of recovery was painfully slow.

In this tense climate, critics charged *We Will Rebuild* with emotional distance and posturing when board members toured devastated areas in air-conditioned buses and worked from well-appointed offices in affluent Coral Gables (Donnelly 5/12/93). Criticized as "an uptown group trying to deal with a downtown problem," some dubbed the group "*We Will Remeet*" for its go-slow approach (Goss 1992). Priorities were called into question over decisions to use donated funds to pay an executive director's $150,000 salary, and to rebuild the Chamber of Commerce facility. Many felt there was excessive focus on business and long-term economic recovery at a time when thousands were still suffering from lack of basic necessities, community services, and neighborhood parks.

In counterpoint, *Women Will Rebuild* emerged as a coalition of existing women's groups focused on directing more resources to the crisis needs of women and their families. We analyze the efforts of this postdisaster coalition with special attention to its organizational structure and feminist process. *Women Will Rebuild* captures a significant moment in the history of U.S. women's

community organizing, adds to our understanding of communities in transition, and documents the diversity of women's active responses to disaster.

We draw on data from participant-observation during the group's four-hour bimonthly Saturday morning meetings; semistructured interviews with leaders and observers; secondary document analysis; *Women Will Rebuild* records; and a followup telephone survey with nineteen key observers and participants. We also utilize survey and interview data from related projects conducted by the Florida International University's disaster research team in which the coauthors were involved.

"TO GIVE VOICE TO WOMEN"[1]

In the sweltering months after the hurricane, the birth of a women's coalition was unlikely. Miami is an eclectic decentralized urban area with a conservative political context fractured by racial, cultural, class and gender divisions (Grenier and Morrow 1997; Portes and Stepick 1993). The politics of postdisaster relief are inevitably grounded in predisaster community power structures and historical patterns of dominance and privilege (e.g. Oliver-Smith 1994). The gender politics of relief, too, are grounded historically. *Women Will Rebuild* was inspired, in part, by its members' deep resentment of elite male dominance in Miami's civic culture, now including the reconstruction of South Dade County. Most of its active members were long-term residents who knew first-hand what they were up against, and that it was going to be too much for those who were " 'please, sir' kinds of people*."*

Some long-term Miami women activists, "tired of being cajoled or ignored by men," saw *Women Will Rebuild* as a chance for women "to get a piece of the pie" and "upset the applecart" of the male establishment. Potentially, the coalition would "give voice to women as to how the communities they lived in would be rebuilt, because they were shut out from the power group." Those who eagerly joined the new coalition "saw the good ole boy network once more taking charge, running things when they had no real idea of what the problems were, especially the problems of women. It was business as usual." Many founding members had direct experience trying to help meet the crisis needs of low-income neighborhoods and families in South Dade:

What I was seeing when I went to the trailer parks . . . over and over again the people who were living in unbelievable circumstances were women. They were living in those ghastly trailers. There was no playground, there wasn't a swing, there wasn't anything. The kids' main toys were razor sharp pieces of metal from the blown away trailers. They were being incredibly persecuted by the white mobile [park] owners who were getting zillions from the feds and who never had "funny people" in their place before. And it was hell down there. Grandmothers were taking care of a trailer full of kids. Mothers were out working. There was one huge park with no phones because the owner wouldn't let them in. So try to imagine all those children with no access to a 911 number. These were the kinds of stresses I was seeing. I was listening to those fancy people sitting over in the Gables who had no sense of what was going on down on the ground. So it wasn't only a feminist thing . . .what I was seeing was that the needs of those suffering the most were not even being seen by those guys sitting around in the suits and ties. And that made me very angry. *(*Founding member, Anglo activist*)*

Women Will Rebuild tapped this strong sentiment of exclusion and resistance. The idea originated with a community activist whose work experience included disaster relief projects around the country. With other leaders of a feminist collective, she developed the idea of a coalition. From the outset, it was intended that this emergent group have short-term goals and an informal collectivist structure. A newcomer to Miami seemed ideal to head the group, and they selected an affluent, Anglo mother of two young children, temporarily out of the labor force, who had demonstrated leadership in another part of the state. She brought feminist "passion" and solid organizing skills and was acknowledged by members later for conducting open, democratic meetings and exercising effective leadership. She credited her success to being an outsider: "I don't think an insider could have done this . . . I didn't know who hated who and why□they had no idea who I was . . . It took a while to gain trust, but I had no old laundry. They could just see the idea□it wasn't a person."

At an organizational meeting, women put names to faces, often for the first time, and spoke in turn about women's need for legal assistance and health services, the efforts of mental health workers to reach women through their traumatized children, the enormous needs of women and children living in tent cities and trailer parks, migrant women's experiences with relief agency managers, the impact of the storm on battered women's shelters, and more. A Mexican-American woman rose to remind those present of their collective strength as women.

Over fifty women's groups eventually joined the coalition, including women business owners, women in building construction, feminist organizations, immigrant groups, university women, civic service clubs, migrant farm workers, and sororities, as well as local chapters of such traditional women's groups such as the YWCA and League of Women Voters.

Using consensus decision-making, the new group decided on two formal goals: to "urge *We Will Rebuild* to include 15 more women on the Board of Directors" and to "request that 10% of the private funds collected by the *We Will Rebuild* [Foundation] be distributed through the Women's Fund of Miami directly to projects that specifically address the needs of South Dade women." This latter request was soon changed to a request that "at least $2.5 million be used for women's health, housing, employment, education, day care, safety, and other needs in the hurricane-affected areas of Dade County" (Shea 1993). They hoped to accomplish these goals by identifying qualified women as potential *We Will Rebuild* board members, and then using both direct contacts (letters, calls, personal meetings) and indirect pressure (an active media campaign and "silent witness" tactics at *We Will Rebuild* meetings) to promote their appointment to the board.

Founding members affirmed their intention to work collaboratively as a coalition with short-term goals and a shared vision:

We don't have any money, we pass the hat for coffee. We don't have any rules except common civility. We understand we are temporary and we are here because we believe in something. We all have different ideas, and we have got to get largely consensus to get where we are going. No artificial ideas about consensus, that we have to all sign on to

every single thing all the time. (Founding member, Anglo activist)

They also hoped to build on common ground and not flounder over obvious differences: "Do you ask or do you demand? Do you challenge or request? Do you use honey or vinegar to get what you need? As strange as this seems, when women from different backgrounds work together, method becomes tremendously important. To be inclusive means to respect the importance of differences, while trying to forge common ground" (Versaci 1993). The original members of the coalition rejected bureaucratic structures (e.g., a decision-making board, bylaws, elected officers) and committed the group to an informal consensus decision-making process emphasizing full discussion and agreement on significant decisions. Seven working committees were established and bimonthly Saturday morning meetings called, sometimes in South Dade.

Three months after their initial meeting, they were sufficiently established to draft letters to President Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, meet with state senators in Washington, D.C., cultivate "a cheerleading section" in Florida's capital city, and earn generous press coverage.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

Like *We Will Rebuild*, the women's coalition ceased meeting at the end of 1993. It was a difficult time for feminist organizing, as one active member recalled: "At that point in my life I was dealing with about 30 employees of which most had lost everything. My office, my home, the lives of many people in many companies were majorly affected. I felt like I was being pulled in so many different directions and so many things had priority all of it was important."

What had been achieved? Through their effective media campaign, *Women Will Rebuild* had advocated the interests of low-income women and children at a time when the larger community was absorbed by the post-hurricane disaster cycles of renewal and despair. They maintained consensus over organizational structure and process, though challenged both by disgruntled members and by practical pressures.

The coalition recruited, interviewed, and publicized a roster of fifteen potential appointees to the executive board of *We Will Rebuild,* and held a series of largely unsuccessful negotiating meetings with its chairman and selected board members regarding their appointment (Donnelly 4/28/93). Committee members made reports to the group on housing, domestic violence, economic, and youth issues; several members researched community needs and proposed submissions to the financial committee of *We Will Rebuild*, for example, expanding funding for recreation programs serving South Dade youth.

The most difficult battle, both internally and externally, centered around the request for meaningful representation on *We Will Rebuild's* executive board. Faced with a publicized roster of influential women put forward as potential *We Will Rebuild* board members, the chair and his allies jockied for position, responding publicly that all executive board members achieved their nomination on the basis of prior committee work, an assertion at odds with the record. They were requested to discuss their demands, not with the chairman, but with the vice-chair, a popular nun who heads a local university. The outcome was an

offer of token membership on the larger advisory board and advice to work on committees in hopes of eventually earning a place on the executive board (Donnelly 4/28/93, 5/26/93). No doubt in response to charges of underrepresenting women and minorities, during this time *We Will Rebuild's* board of directors voted to invite three more women (not from the *Women Will Rebuild* list) to join it (*Miami Herald* 5/12/93), as well as several more African-American and Hispanic men.

Following six months of sustained lobbying from the women's coalition, *We Will Rebuild* crafted a compromise proposal. Two new committees were created (Families and Children, and Domestic Violence); each of the two cochairs, drawn from among women on the coalition's list, then came on to the executive board. Additionally, the leader of *Women Will Rebuild* accepted an offer to join the executive board, after difficult and divisive consultation with coalition members. Ten women from the list were added to the larger board of trustees. In a very controversial act, a sixth woman, also a coalition member, independently accepted board nomination.

Taking on the chair of *We Will Rebuild* was not an exercise for the faint-hearted: "[He] is a frightening man. . . . He is not a man who is used to being challenged in this community . . . he can do you a lot of mischief. His tentacles reach far into the community." According to the coalition's leader, some of the internal tension within *Women Will Rebuild* occurred as members saw how much publicity the group was getting and how high the stakes were. "They began to see how risky this was. We were going up against the power structure of Miami and a lot of people began to feel personally threatened, to feel that there might be professional fallout. No one had believed it would get as far as it did. On the other hand, our best protection, our only protection, was our press coverage."

As it neared the end of its work, *We Will Rebuild* focused on funding social services and affordable housing (Donnelly 8/18/93). Arguably, the pressure exerted by *Women Will Rebuild* influenced the board decision to fund teen pregnancy services and contribute over $2.1 million for childcare services. In earlier committee votes, *We Will Rebuild* had split along gender lines regarding related funding; with this increased female presence on the executive and finance committees, substantial funds were allocated to domestic violence programs and youth recreation services.

Most members confirmed that the coalition had also expanded their personal and professional networks and had increased the opportunities for women to serve on community boards and commissions in subsequent years. For many, this was their first experience with feminist process and it helped secure their identities as feminists, as well as community activists (Abrahams 1996). They credit the coalition with achieving visibility for women's needs in disaster, influencing the distribution of relief funds, and challenging male power structures, including control over postdisaster reconstruction: "I would say that this was almost the first time in this community that particular set of establishment people were told they could not tell everybody else what to do and have them be thankful for it."

In practice, the coalition's goals were fluid and contested. Women representing very different constituencies brought divergent visions of *Women Will Rebuild*: some hoped it might evolve into an established multicultural women's coalition;

others found the meetings draining and tedious and drifted away even before discussions of possible future goals began. At a retreat conducted to explore possible new goals, members failed to reach consensus over displaced goals. Few shared their leader's sense of possibility:

[S]ome of us see *Women Will Rebuild* in all its potential☐the process going on here. Remember the time people said this is the first time in Miami that we had such a diverse group of women come together? It's beautiful. Wait until the elections come up, that's what I think. . . . What a great process here that we're in the middle of. . . . Let's get beyond *Miami Herald.* Let's get to the big money that's coming down, the advocacy roles, influencing policy. We've got a constituency here. That's what politics are about.

PARADOXES OF FEMINIST ORGANIZING IN DISASTER RESPONSE

Practical conditions of feminist organizing often impel the strategy of coalition-building, as for example in the domestic violence movement (Reinelt 1995) or in urban areas where single-issue women's groups unite for strength and visibility (Strobel 1995). Because most women's groups are predominantly homogenous in terms of class and race and (generally) sexual identity, women's coalitions offer the best opportunity for organizing across these lines (Acker 1995; Pardo 1995).

Women Will Rebuild succeeded in uniting a wide range of women's communities around a single issue when it was most needed. Disaster so starkly exposed both the vulnerability of women and the traditional male power elite that women's groups across the political spectrum were able to identify common issues. Business organizations saw the needs of female small-business owners ignored and worked with religious women leaders active in tent cities serving Miami's poorest women. Mainstream Cuban-American women's groups aligned through *Women Will Rebuild* with more radical Haitian-American community activists around shared goals. The divisive issue of abortion choice was put aside, if only temporarily, as organizations concentrated on the needs of thousands of women and children in South Dade.

I think it's one of the few times☐I've lived in the community for 45 years☐I've seen women really mobilize around an issue and get something accomplished. It was different than other organizations. . . . [T]he atmosphere was different, the way in which they worked, the way in which they cooperated, they were organized and knew what the hell they were doing.

Not all participants felt the coalition satisfied either its formal or informal goals. Critics charged the leader with self-promotion and "delusions of grandeur." A particularly harsh critic rejected the premise of female exclusion from *We Will Rebuild* , arguing that women were not appointed because they lacked power to mobilize resources: "This group of women could not deliver." She and several others found the nontraditional organizational structure ill-suited to the urgency of the task.

Was *Women Will Rebuild* undone by feminist organizational politics? The short answer is no. Feminist values motivated the skillful leader, inspired the search for diversity that gave the coalition legitimacy in Miami's political

culture, and focused community attention on the daily needs of those most hurt by the hurricane. We take up three ways in which a feminist politics shaped disaster response, framing the issues as paradoxes to highlight contradictory meanings and consequences.

Unity through diversity? The political and cultural diversity of *Women Will Rebuild* was a carefully constructed and projected identity. Regarding active participation, the extent to which it remained diverse varied in the eye of the beholder. In retrospect, Anglo women were more persuaded than others of the coalition's ethnic and racial diversity. Most members, such as this African-American educator who was a founding member, agreed that the coalition tried harder than most: "I think they 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. They went out looking for people." Referring to the leaders, an Anglo coalition member said: "They were the activists, but they brought in a diverse group□Hispanics, the Honduran, the Haitian. The groups truly in need were represented in the group to accomplish its purpose. I believe that's what created the diversity, not the core group. They were the movers and shakers of the community and that's what it takes."

Coalition leaders were quite aware that their diversity did not adequately include the people for whom they were advocating. For the most part they themselves were an "uptown" group of mostly white middle- and upper-middle-class professional women. Representatives at negotiations with *We Will Rebuild* were self-consciously pluralistic and the list of fifteen possible women appointees was carefully balanced to reflect Miami's racial, ethnic, and political identity (i.e., one-third Anglo, one-third Hispanic, and one-third African-American). Representatives of highly marginalized groups such as Haitian women and women farmworkers were actively recruited and their counsel sought. Most South Dade residents were too overwhelmed with day-to-day survival to be active members of the coalition.

There was enough diversity to create dilemmas as well as opportunities. Conflict arose over style as well as substance, from the wording of coalition press releases and letters, to negotiating tactics with *We Will Rebuild*. Tensions arose during most meetings between coalition members who were more or less comfortable with challenging the powerful elite group and more or less at ease with feminist process. To some degree historical patterns of mistrust between and among racial and ethnic groups in the broader community were reproduced.

Internal differences are central to coalition politics, but are more salient when coalitions are unfunded and volunteer-driven, and challenge vested political and gender interests. To help balance fragmenting forces, *Women Will Rebuild* meetings self-consciously sought to reinforce the passionate commitment of women acting together on behalf of the women of Andrew. Coalition meetings were opportunities for planning, delegation, assessment, and critique□but also for reaffirmation, personal connection, and emotional expression. Women still cleaning up hurricane debris in their own homes, struggling to get their own organizations back on track, or feeling stressed at work in social service agencies serving Andrew victims still attended long Saturday morning meetings week after week.

Feminist values of unity and shared goals greatly strengthened the coalition,

even as the structure of a coalition threatened to destroy the group. The emotional substructure of organizational politics, including passion and emotional connection in feminist organizations, has been underresearched but invites more analysis (Taylor 1995).

Consensual decisions? If their strong collective commitment to helping women and children after the hurricane united the coalition, feminist process divided it. Consensus decision-making was consistently affirmed when challenged by more conservative members during meetings. However, the concept was poorly understood and debate about it lengthened already-long coalition meetings.

Information-sharing is essential to consensual decision-making. Mailings of group minutes were insufficient when time and events moved swiftly; eventually a telephone "hot line" was established with a taped message updating coalition news and recording caller questions or comments. Communication was difficult and quick action impossible when powerful coalition members insisted on prior review of outgoing materials.

Consensus was also undermined by shifting representation; few members consistently attended meetings so organizations were represented by different people from one meeting to the next, including some who were indirectly connected to *We Will Rebuild* and were not there to contribute to *Women Will Rebuild*'s success. Consensual decisions assume a sense of ownership and engagement that the *Women Will Rebuild* coalition did not consistently foster. Retroactively, members cite even-handed, democratic meetings but not always the achievement of genuine consensus. Ironically, the ground for consensus was progressively undermined by debate over the nature of coalition decision-making processes.

The coalition disbanded before these conflicts were fully aired or resolved. Some former members we interviewed shared their frustration about time spent refining group process; on balance, they concluded that the group's size, shifting membership, and urgent tasks made the consensual decision process inappropriate. As a whole, most group members who regularly attended were engaged in the effort to reach consensus over group decisions. A few reported carrying consensus decision-making into subsequent groups.

Rejecting hierarchy? The informality of *Women Will Rebuild* mystified mainstream women's organization representatives, who lobbied unsuccessfully for more structure, including bylaws, officers, incorporation, an office, and a steering committee. In effect, *Women Will Rebuild* had a clear structure though it was rarely identified; paradoxically, the debate over formal structure deflected attention away from emerging informal power structures.

As the coalition's efforts became more visible and the workload increased, consensus emerged that more explicit structure could help coalition members use time more effectively. In the declining months of the coalition, one member circulated a proposal for a new structure, maintaining essential feminist principles but detailing the dynamics of consensual decision-making, divisions of labor, delegation of responsibility, and so forth.

Feminist collectives, like other organizations with formal hierarchical structures, often develop a parallel informal power structure. More powerful for being unacknowledged, informal leaders nonetheless emerge in feminist group process; the "tyranny of structurelessness" can be divisive when this power is

not recognized (Freeman 1972).

The coalition leader, a self-described "coordinator" who minimized her own power ("Power? Give me a break! Give me a paycheck!"), saw her role as empowering other women and modeling feminist process:

Part of my role has not only been to make the things happen, but to be the group psychiatrist☐to keep everybody working together, coming to consensus. . . . These are powerful people we're going against. They could do damage if they wanted to. [There was] a lot of hand holding in the beginning. . . . Did you ever read *In a Different Voice?* I think about that book so often as we've been going through this process. How women have to work together, maintain their relationships. It can't always be a win-lose situation. You lose your strength. That's a male way to work.

We observed at coalition meetings that she sought to delegate tasks and share skills (e.g., media contacts), consistently if not always successfully asked for help from other members, and publicly affirmed her sense of herself as working for the coalition rather than leading it. Between meetings, she worked closely with selected confidants and allies in what was perceived as an inner circle.

When the leader was out of town on coalition business ("like Mom being gone"), some members complained about perceived obstacles to information-sharing and democratic process. However, when coalition members remained committed to achieving fifteen board seats, the leader continued with that strategy against her own desires, respecting her role as group spokesperson: "I feel I have to do what the group wants." Finding it hard to imagine the headline "*Women Will Rebuild* gets fifteen women on board," she preferred an alternative one heralding coalition success at restoring services in South Dade County or other direct-action goals.

Debate over coalition structure threatened to subsume action toward the coalition's stated goals, especially between pragmatists who focused on action in South Dade and activists who saw *Women Will Rebuild* as a model for future feminist organizing in Miami. Founding members, who set the tone for the coalition originally, defended the notion that the act of creating a functioning feminist multicultural coalition was essential to broader goals:

[I]f you don't do process, you don't get product. It seems like a waste of time to process stuff, like every time we'd have new people and people who were used to an agenda and moving on got impatient. But some people learned another style after all these years. And I tell you, there are women, amazing people, in this community who aren't in the official leadership. Leadership emerged. That's one of the great things about emergent organizations. I'm always amazed at what people can do.

Shifting goals were part of the unarticulated coalition agenda. Divisions persisted over commitment to the group's stated goals, framed largely as a response to *We Will Rebuild*; some members sought a more activist role in the disaster response while others envisioned the coalition as a base for women's long-term empowerment in the broader Miami power structure. Ironically, individuals and members of groups long practiced in feminist process progressively disengaged from *Women Will Rebuild* as it haltingly worked toward affirming feminist group process.

Deciding whether to accept or reject the eventual compromise offer made by *We Will Rebuild* (two new committees and five executive board members) crystallized latent divisions and marked the coalition's end. Members eager to accept cast the issue as "a purist versus a pragmatist" decision; while others felt "we sold ourselves out." Several founding members resigned, criticizing women who accepted positions on the *We Will Rebuild* board for "crossing over."As one critic put it: "Frankly, I think it was a disgrace and embarrassed all of the women and will always be remembered by the men. We gave in." Former members speaking about a new sensitivity to issues of gender and racial balance in Miami's political life five years after the disaster take a longer view.

These dilemmas of feminist organizing shaped the structure and process of *Women Will Rebuild* and make its successes all the more striking. Feminist process unites women and women's groups not otherwise experienced in feminist group process, but their unfamiliarity with or hostility to these structures disrupts the intended unity and invites conflict over ends as well as process. Feminist leaders bring enormous resources to emerging coalitions yet because their individual power is often seen as illegitimate within a collective dedicated to internal democracy, their very strengths become weaknesses within the coalition.

FEMINIST ORGANIZING AS DISASTER MITIGATION

Our study suggests that the diversity, democratic participation, nonhierarchical organization, and consensual decisions of *Women Will Rebuild* were the coalition's defining features, making it the uniquely feminist achievement of Miami women responding to disaster. The coalition's controversial structure and process may well have limited its ability to meet stated goals, but theirs were ambitious goals unlikely to be met in any event. These organizational features also account for the coalition's success, including achievement of some additional financial resources for women and children in South Dade, a greater voice for women in disaster recovery, informal rewards individually and collectively, and increased community visibility of gender issues. A visionary sense of possibility among Miami women may be its lasting legacy. To continue "rebuilding our female position in this world" is a desire created through the difficult days of organizing around disaster.

This account of one short-lived response to disaster is a powerful example of how communities are strengthened through self-organization and better able to prepare for, respond to, and recover from major disasters (Maskrey 1989; Blaikie et al. 1994; Berke et al. 1993; Gillespie et al. 1992). We found wide consensus that when Miami is struck again by a hurricane, as it will certainly be, women will be far more engaged as active and empowered responders. If only to coopt their opposition, mainstream disaster response organizations and groups are now unlikely to exclude women. A broader base of acknowledged female leadership is evident in the metropolitan area. Personal and professional networks have been created or strengthened among Miami's diverse women's groups, ensuring that future responses to crisis or disaster are also less likely to be racially or culturally exclusive. These are important dimensions of nonstructural mitigation, leading toward more disaster-resilient communities.

NOTE

1. Comments appearing in quotation marks and without citations throughout this chapter are direct quotes taken from our transcripts of interviews and meetings with *Women Will Rebuild* members.