

International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters
August 2010, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 246–269.

**“Studying Up” on Women and Disaster:
An Elite Sustained Women's Group Following Hurricane Katrina**

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Existing research on gender and disaster has examined how women with limited socio-economic resources organize to manage risk and to engage in disaster-related response and recovery activities. However, as Enarson, Fothergill, and Peek (2007) have argued, “in-depth class analysis is still relatively rare in gender-focused disaster research.” Drawing on an ethnographic case study of a women's group that self-organized following Hurricane Katrina, the author examines how affluent, philanthropic women mobilized social, economic, and cultural resources to respond to catastrophe and to engage in community-based recovery efforts. The author applies the concept of an “elite-sustained movement” (Taylor 1994) to understand how elite women mobilize socio-economic resources to respond to disaster and how resources at elite members' reach contribute to the group's continuance across phases of the disaster cycle. The author concludes with a theoretical and methodological discussion of “studying up” on relations of power in disaster.

Keywords: Gender, disaster, grassroots activism, elites, class, Hurricane Katrina, power

Introduction

On September 25, 2005, less than one month after Hurricane Katrina, Elaine Enarson published an editorial that briefly surveyed women's differential experiences of the storm and outlined a preliminary research and action agenda for averting a second disaster for women along the Gulf Coast. Drawing on knowledge from previous disasters, Enarson warned of women's double shifts (especially for socially marginalized women of color), women's direct and indirect economic losses, and women's voluntary organizations stretched thin when pulled into relief work, as well as increased reports of violence against women perpetrated in private homes by professional men and in volunteer housing by outsiders converging to help in reconstruction efforts.

In the years since the devastating storm, vast gender inequalities at every phase of

Katrina's disaster cycle have become more evident. Social science researchers have uncovered empirical evidence that supports what Enarson, among others (see Seager 2005), foresaw immediately after the storm. These include parenting challenges (Peek and Fothergill 2008), limited access to adequate health care (Mock 2008), patterns of domestic violence (Jenkins and Phillips 2008a, 2008b), and sexual assault during emergency, recovery, and reconstruction periods (Bergin 2008; Luft 2008a; Thornton and Voigt 2007). Despite these bleak circumstances of stress, violence, and vulnerability, which were no doubt intensified for some women based on race, class, geography, and cultural difference, Enarson confidently expected signs of women's capacities and resilience, noting that "women will also be at the heart of the city's rebirth."

In line with Enarson's predictions on women's response to disaster, the present article focuses on the steadfast efforts of one women's group, Women of the Storm, which has figured prominently in Gulf Coast recovery efforts following Hurricane Katrina. The group is unique in that it was initially organized and spearheaded by socially privileged women who were least affected by Hurricane Katrina, though the homes of some women involved did receive significant flooding. Based on ethnographic, case study data, I examine the group's central role in shaping federal policy on disaster-related assistance, and I propose that disaster scholars would benefit from better understanding the underutilized knowledge, talent, and creativity of women of means in recovering from crises, mitigating future disaster losses, and building more sustainable and resilient communities.

I begin by reviewing the literature on women's grassroots activism following disaster and focus on how women in numerous United States and international contexts have responded to actual or potential disasters with collective organizing and heightened gender solidarity. After briefly outlining the methods employed in this study, I present Women of the Storm as a case study of women's collective action following Hurricane Katrina and detail the group's contributions to Gulf Coast recovery efforts. In the section that follows, I compare Women of the Storm to two women's groups in quite different contexts, noting similarities and differences in goals, organizational structures, and outcomes, and I examine how elite status and access to resources helped to promote group continuance and to avoid group dissolution. I conclude with a theoretical and methodological discussion of "studying up" on power in disaster.

Literature on Women's Grassroots Responses to Disaster

In the first decade and a half of gender and disaster literature (Enarson and Meyreles 2004), which included the seminal publications of Enarson and Morrow's (1998a) *The Gendered Terrain of Disaster* and the first special issue on gender in *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* (1999), scholars in both the United States and in international contexts have documented women's grassroots responses to disaster

as part of collective efforts to trace women's active participation at various stages of the disaster cycle. Mostly drawn from event-driven case studies, this lively body of scholarly and activist research moves understandings of women and disaster beyond victimization and vulnerability to focus on "women's instrumental and proactive work" in responding to disaster and mitigating disaster losses (Enarson and Morrow 1998:195). The social group context, in particular, has served as an important location and resource for women's active participation in disaster-related activities. In a widely cited study on the role of women in disaster-related emergent groups, Neal and Philips (1990) found that preexisting social and friendship networks factored into women's increased participation in disasters. While frequency and level of women's involvement has been well documented, additional efforts have been made to broaden understandings of women's lived experiences before, during and after disaster, rather than treating gender differences as static demographic variables (Fothergill 2004). This intellectual period, which highlights women's lived experiences in specific social circumstances and the meanings subjects attribute to those experiences, can be characterized as the "ethnographic moment" in gender and disaster research.

Important insights can be drawn from ethnographic research produced during this period. While highlighting women's experiences of disaster serves to correct gender-blind theories in disaster research, the focus on women as a social category also requires acknowledgement of differences among women (Enarson and Phillips 2008; Enarson and Fordham 2001; Finlay 1998; Fordham 1999). In addition to recognizing commonalities as well as differences among women, these approaches also seek to challenge essentialist notions of activity and passivity rooted in what some see as biologically determined sex differences. The research firmly challenges widespread notions that women are helpless victims in need of assistance or protection by men during times of crisis (Enarson and Morrow 1998b). Moving beyond victimization paradigms, women's participation and leadership activities are well documented in a number of geographic contexts as well as in response to various disaster agents. These include, for example, environmental, health, and toxic waste activism (Agarwal 1997; Brown and Ferguson 1995); hurricane recovery efforts ranging from Galveston in 1900 to Nicaragua in 1998 (Turner 1997; Bradshaw 2002); women's nongovernmental organizations in India and Turkey (Yonder, Akcar, and Gopalan 2005); and housing activism in Turkey following a devastating earthquake (Ganapati 2005) as well as after a major flood event in Pakistan (Bari 1998). International women's groups such as Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) and Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS International) attest to the fact that women's collectives can self-organize to support local, community-based initiatives in disaster-affected areas, especially among poor populations (Martin 2003).

Given what is known from previous studies of gender and disaster, alongside the fact that there were glaring social disparities along the Gulf Coast prior to the Hurricane Katrina that exposed some groups to heightened risk and vulnerability—particularly

women, the poor, and people of color (Jones-DeWeever 2008) —one would expect similar cases of women's collective organizing following the Katrina catastrophe. But most immediate analyses of the event focused first on race and class inequalities, and later, when gender began to be included in the analysis, the focus tended to draw attention to women's experiences of hardship, disadvantage, and experiences of poverty (see Ransby 2006 for an early exception to this pattern). Along these lines, it is important to note that Enarson's editorial, mentioned above, was soon reprinted by the Social Science Research Council's *Understanding Katrina: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* under a new title, "Women and Girls Last?: Averting the Second Post-Katrina Disaster." The new title is significant for several socio-political reasons, including the delayed focus on gender by early media coverage and analyses of the Katrina catastrophe. However, it could be argued that a parallel path of addressing "women and girls last" has been carved out in the academy and intellectual communities, though some scholars are seeking to correct this omission by first making gender visible and inseparable from discussions of race and class (Seager 2005). For example, in a recent review of three edited volumes on the social dimensions of Hurricane Katrina—*The Sociology of Katrina: Perspectives on a Modern Catastrophe* (Brunsma, Overfelt, and Picou 2007); *Through the Eye of Katrina: Social Justice in the United States* (Bates and Swan 2007); and *Racing the Storm: Racial Implications and Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina* (Potter 2007)—Rachel Luft (2008b:262) observes that major omissions from these three collected works are a focus on gender or women, as well as documentation of social movement activity and grassroots response.

Research on the gendered dimensions of Hurricane Katrina is beginning to appear (Belkhir and Charlemaine 2007; Bergin 2008; Brown 2009; David 2008, 2010; Davis and Land 2007; Gault, Hartmann, Jones-DeWeever, Werschkul, and Williams 2005; Jones-DeWeever 2008; Jones-DeWeever and Hartmann 2006; Katz 2008; Pfister 2007; Pyles and Lewis 2007; Ransby 2006; Seager 2005; Tyler 2007; Tuana 2008; Vaill 2006; Williams, Sorokina Jones-DeWeever, and Hartmann 2006; Willinger 2008). In efforts to add to this existing research on women and disaster, this article examines a case study of women's grassroots activism following Hurricane Katrina, with particular attention given to social class and women's bridge work across social difference.

Despite the fact that women of means have figured prominently in historical studies of social reform and social change efforts following disaster (Turner 1997), there are still very few systematic studies of elite women's cultures within contemporary disaster contexts. According to Enarson, Fothergill, and Peek's (2007:132) recent review of the literature on gender and disaster, "in-depth class analysis is still relatively rare in gender-focused disaster research," and when socio-economic class is addressed, it is usually from a perspective that highlights vulnerable populations. Because of this trend in the literature, many studies of gender and class tend to focus on impoverished women's experiences of vulnerability and resilience, with the exception of a few studies that

examine how affluent women experience distress, anxiety, and downward mobility following disaster (Enarson and Fordham 2004; Fothergill 2004).

At the same time that women have responded to disaster with gender-based mobilization, scholars also recognize that social categories create specific challenges for women who are positioned differently in their communities. Social class is just one axis among many that shapes women's experiences of disaster. For example, Fordham (1999) examines the intersection of gender and class through an investigation of the social geography of flood risk in Scotland. By contrasting working-class communities and middle-class communities, Fordham found that members of both communities experienced vulnerability as well as resilience during disaster, thus challenging notions that vulnerability is anchored in social class position. Women of the upper class were left unexamined in the case mentioned, though it is important to note that cross-cultural definitions of class status would contribute to the fact that very few women in Fordham's study area, other than aristocracy and those living off capital assets, would fit into this social category. While this sharp focus on vulnerability, exposure, and risk is driven by practical concerns as well as a need for specific policy recommendations linked to redistributions of wealth and resources, an examination of how privileged women in the U.S. manage disaster would shed light on how inequality is shaped through relational social processes and structures and would reveal the ways in which groups in position of power influence short-term and long-term disaster recovery. In the same way that femininity is produced in relation to masculinity (i.e., regimes of the gender order), poverty is intimately shaped in relation to affluence. As such, elite status, as conceptualized here, is relational rather than absolute. Such an approach to inequality and difference would treat conceptual markers such as race, class, and gender as dynamic, interactional, and situational rather than static characteristics, and it would focus on the micro-level management of difference and inequality as well as more structural and institutional approaches.

Affluent, philanthropic women (along with their extensive social networks and socio-cultural resources at their reach) remain understudied in gender and disaster research. Surprisingly little is known about affluent women's experiences of disaster and what activities they undertake to benefit community recovery as a whole. This article adds to the archive of intersectional studies of gender and women's grassroots activism in the U.S. and begins to fill gaps in the literature on women's post-Katrina activism.

Method

This study is based on ethnographic research conducted in post-Katrina New Orleans. Shortly after Hurricane Katrina's landfall on August 29, 2005, I received a "Quick Response" grant to study group organizing in post-disaster recovery efforts. My main research goals at the time of preliminary fieldwork were to survey the range of

organizational responses to Katrina with particular emphasis on group and behavioral emergence as well as groups aligned with social justice and environmental movements (David 2006). Women-centered emergent groups were not a central focus during this stage, but my research unexpectedly shifted to that topic when I noticed media coverage of newly formed women's groups in the area during my in-depth fieldwork in 2006. One such group was Women of the Storm, which I contacted after the group was profiled in a local daily newspaper in January 2006.

To examine the subject of gender and group emergence, data were drawn from in-depth interviews with women activists, observations of emergent group activities, and primary and secondary document analysis. I conducted fifty open-ended interviews with participants active in women-centered emergent groups, with priority given to those who participated in Women of the Storm. The women in my sample range in age from 32 to 78 years old, and they were 51 years old on average. The sample is composed of thirty-nine women who self-identify as White/Caucasian; six who self-identify as Black/African American; three who self-identify as Asian/Vietnamese; and two who self-identify as Other. All fifty women completed at least some college. Forty-eight women held a Bachelor's degree; twenty-six women completed some graduate school; twenty-one women earned Masters Degrees; and two women hold JDs. Interviewees were asked about socio-economic class; however, most interviewees chose not to share specific information about individual and household income levels. Instead, interviews revealed that many participants were part of the elite circles as evidenced by their professional careers, lifestyle, education, socio-political connections, residence in areas with high land and property values, and for some, membership in exclusive social clubs tied to the Carnival tradition in New Orleans. The women were asked about their experiences with the emergent groups; how they became involved; their reasons for participating in post-disaster recovery work; and their reflections on participation in group activities. The average length of each interview was two hours. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and then coded.

Case Study: Women of the Storm

Women of the Storm describes itself as a non-partisan, non-political group of women from New Orleans and south Louisiana whose main goal is to invite every member of Congress to visit the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina. The group made its debut on the post-Katrina political scene on January 30, 2006, five months after Hurricane Katrina, when 130 Louisianan women from diverse backgrounds boarded a plane in New Orleans and flew to Washington DC to hand deliver invitations to elected officials to visit the destruction in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast.

The story of the group's emergence began several months earlier, in late November 2005, when Anne Milling, founder of Women of the Storm, initiated a movement that

would radically change the face and pace of the Gulf Coast recovery. Milling, married to a prominent New Orleans banker, is a longtime community activist whose impressive volunteer and charity record ranged from sitting on the Papal Visit Committee that organized Pope John Paul II's 1987 visit to New Orleans, to volunteering at Lazarus House, a hospice for people living with AIDS, to serving on governing boards and steering committees for the New Orleans Museum of Art and the Bureau of Governmental Research (Grissett 2005; Williams 2006). Shocked that so few lawmakers had visited the region in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, she thought that if lawmakers saw the devastation firsthand, there would be significant changes in the slow pace of the Gulf Coast recovery, including federal policy measures and increased funding. The proposal was simple: gather a diverse group of women, fly to Washington, and invite lawmakers to see the magnitude of the destruction for themselves. Her initial idea set in motion a series of events that led to the founding of Women of the Storm.

On January 10, 2006, a small group was invited to gathering at Milling's home in Uptown New Orleans, and on this afternoon she gained the support and encouragement needed to activate the proposal. The core group, all white women with preexisting social ties, began recruiting women to participate, and from the group's inception they tried to diversify the group membership to reflect the population of the region with women representatives from a wide range affected communities. Mindful of their privilege, they knew very well that representing the city of New Orleans would have implications for the Gulf Coast recovery as well as for the social standing and respectability of those involved. Because the core leadership aimed to create a heterogeneous group of women unified by difference, they actively sought women of color, women who had lost their homes, everyday women, and local luminaries. Spiraling outward across the affected areas, they also drew participants from existing friendship networks and membership in exclusive social clubs. Eventually, two women of color were invited to serve on the group's steering committee to have racial difference represented across the group's organizational structure. Several women spoke explicitly about the diversification efforts during participant recruitment:

Oh, I and we felt very strongly that we were representing metropolitan New Orleans, which is a very diverse area, south Louisiana, I mean, you knew you've got African Americans, you've got Caucasians, you've got Hispanics, you've got Vietnamese. That's what makes our area so unique and special. And just to go there with a group of Uptown white swells, I mean, as attractive as they would be, is not New Orleans and not metropolitan New Orleans and not Louisiana. And we were trying to project an image that was very inclusive, and it was important to me that this—and to the other ladies working on this project. I think everybody

felt the same way. We want diversity. We want to promote that. (white woman in her 60s)

And we all just ended up calling people and we knew that diversity was going to be a huge [emphasized] part of this—huge. Because we couldn't be seen as a group of white uptown well dressed women going to Washington. It just wasn't going to work. (white woman in her 50s)

And they [the core leadership] recognized right away that it had to be all races, colors, classes, creeds—everything. It had to cross all borders, Vietnamese, black, you name it. They needed to be there. (white woman in her 60s)

As the group size increased to accommodate women from diverse social backgrounds, so did the complexity of tasks needed to pull off a successful lobbying trip. The group quickly produced structural arrangements to help with the division of labor. This multi-level structure is typical of arrangements found in other disaster related emergent groups: an “active core,” “supporting circle,” and “nominal supporters” (Quarantelli 1983; Stallings and Quarantelli 1985). While the active core membership carried out important logistical work, additional tasks were delegated to those in a second tier in the organizational structure, Women of the Storm “Captains,” who served as liaisons between the core membership and those members who only attended the larger actions like those in Washington. A white woman in her 50s explained the organizational structure:

It was a network. I mean again, it wasn't just “here are my friends.” It wasn't that kind of network. It was a network of who might be involved, articulate, passionate, effective—all those things. And so it—the group is organized by —there is a group, there is about five or six, and I'm sure [one of the core members] told you this because she is one of them, five or six, more than that, maybe ten organizers. Then there are team captains, kinda underneath that. And I am one of eight team captains. And then each team captain has either seven or eight teams, which is about 15 people.

While some women's groups have self-consciously organized as collectivities in order to minimize bureaucratic structures and inequalities in power, Women of the Storm established formal organizational structures and rankings, such that the organizational structure assisted in the division of labor and task distribution necessary for the successful navigation of political institutions.

In just twenty days, Milling and the core group of organizers recruited 130 women from diverse socio-economic, racial, religious, and geographic backgrounds. This collective endeavor was different than anything the women had done prior to the storm. It was dynamic, contingent, and did not fit neatly within prescribed formulas or scripts for charitable organizing that were familiar to many women in the group. A white woman in her 60s explained:

There were so many unknowns in this. In other organizations, or maybe fundraising endeavors I've done, there's pretty much a formula, a way of doing things, and it's pretty pro forma in a way, whether you're doing a capital campaign for the University or a capital campaign for the museum, there's a process that we can almost give to you. This is so much unknown. It's totally different from anything I've ever done.

This was not the everyday charity event or philanthropic project that characterized the women's pre-storm experiences. Instead, this project required that the emergent group engage in ongoing adaptation and improvisation under time constraints created by the disaster; the emergent group quickly became what Wachtendorf and Kendra (2006) call a "learning organization," one that has the "collective ability to think about the environment; to pick up signals; compare them with what is known, and then assess what is needed to fill in gaps in knowledge." Women of the Storm's participation in recovery efforts reflect common themes of improvisation and organizational adaptation in disasters (Wachtendorf 2004; Wachtendorf and Kendra 2006).

Similarly, one white woman in her 50s explained how this project differed from other projects in routine times that only targeted subpopulations (i.e. disadvantaged populations) of the community:

The difference is a sense of urgency and a sense of survival. Before, they were always projects to enhance. They were projects to certainly help people that needed it. Never, have they been projects to help ourselves. We need help. Never in my life would I have considered myself a victim of anything. I'm a victim. I'm a victim of Mother Nature. But more importantly I'm a victim of flooding that did not have to occur. And I am in danger of losing the place I live in and the place I love. So it is very, very—it is vastly different.

As the data reveals, even privileged women experienced Hurricane Katrina a threat to their livelihoods and communities and this created a sense of collective identification with those who experienced more devastating losses.

In preparation for the trip to Washington, the women made appointments with members of Congress and their aides. Participants received additional material that helped facilitate the process of securing appointments, including a form letter that participants could use to formally request appointments with lawmakers. Some appointments were made through cold calls to lawmakers, aides, or legislative assistants. In other cases the women drew upon an extended network of professional and social contacts to increase the chances of scheduling meetings with senior lawmakers and high-ranking government elites. For example, as one reporter observed, one woman used social networking to “orchestrat[e] an audience with Laura Bush’s chief of staff, relying on connections through Adriel ‘Sparky’ Arceneaux, a member of Women of the Storm, who Milling described as a former roommate of the president’s wife” (Williams 2006). In this way, the women used their extensive social connections to gain access to high ranking officials and the U.S. political elite, thereby increasing the chances of gaining support for their initiatives.

Those involved also researched and studied the biographical information of each lawmaker, and read up on the personal and financial impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Their rapid political education was accompanied by hours of self-driven homework, studying, and memorization, and some made electronic spreadsheets that outlined the demographics and voting record of their assigned representatives. Many women exhibited an encyclopedic knowledge of Congress, including the composition of each House and Senate subcommittee as well as the ranking (junior or senior) and voting record of each lawmaker.

On the morning of their first trip, the women boarded the chartered plane destined for Washington, which was paid for with \$70,000 in donations raised in less than twenty days. The trip necessitated some background education on lobbying and on the plane the women received a quick introduction by a few women who had lobbying experience. The crash course in lobbying also gave instruction on proper conduct in the presence of lawmakers and the media. They were to emphasize their position as well-mannered Southern ladies, and warnings that press were on the plane also helped remind those involved to monitor the gendered presentation of the self and the group. While many of the women were angry about the federal responses to the Katrina catastrophe, they were encouraged not to reveal those emotions in front of the press or with lawmakers. Instead, the women were instructed to be polite and mannerly, to be charming and grateful, to use their position as Southern women to bring about social change and political reform. In short, the women did not make demands of the state: that type of behavior would be unladylike and too closely resembling radical strains of the contemporary women’s movement. Instead, their mission was to extend invitations; and as a group they knew they would be most effective as good hostesses. The group relied on its ability to invoke cultural assumptions about femininity and womanhood, and they strategically deployed non-threatening, docile demeanors that were dignified, polite, and grateful.

Once in Washington, the women were taken to the steps of the Capitol for a press conference, which included statements by several participants as well as Senator Mary Landrieu, and they assembled behind a news podium and faced a sea of reporters. They were framed by the Capitol dome behind them, which placed every media photo of the group in national context, thereby linking their Katrina-related collective actions to a national agenda. The goals were simple: they sought to personally invite more than 250 members of Congress to spend 36 hours in New Orleans touring the devastation. Women of the Storm founder Anne Milling said:

Our hope is to convince a number of members of Congress to come here and see the destruction for themselves, up close. [...] Only 12 and a half percent of Congress has come to witness the devastation, and less than a third of our Senate has come. This is a major national catastrophe, but we don't think they understand the magnitude of it. And that's been a big disappointment. (Dubos 2006:15)

At the press conference, the group unfurled what became its trademark "blue-tarp umbrellas," a somber reference to the FEMA blue-tarps that covered homes across the region. These umbrellas became a collective representation that came to symbolize women's solidarity efforts and political persistence following Hurricane Katrina (David 2008). Holding the blue-tarp umbrellas, embossed with the Women of the Storm logo, the women fanned out in pairs to their pre-arranged "Hill visits," and spent the entire day attending pre-arranged meetings with Congressional delegates or their aides. During these meetings, participants provided lawmakers with packets of information, a book on Louisiana's coastal wetlands, and an invitation to visit the hurricane devastated region at the group's expense.

The invitation took on strategic importance, and it helps reveal the role of culture in shaping action in the disaster context. The invitation, itself a social practice that is specific to class and culture, served to facilitate discussions with lawmakers about more long-term disaster recovery efforts. In other words, the women's invitations helped open up dialogues with lawmakers, many of whom were resistant to supporting the Gulf Coast recovery with federal funds. Thus, by extending invitations to lawmakers, the group was then able to discuss more politicized initiatives, such as requesting that shares of oil and gas revenues, royalties from energy sources produced off Louisiana's coasts, be placed in a trust fund for coastal restoration as part of efforts to reduce hurricane surge impacts. In doing so, the group sought to make Louisiana more autonomous and self-reliant, as well as more disaster resilient, breaking the dependency between the state and federal levels of government for flood-protection and environmental conservation projects. To link Gulf Coast recovery efforts to long-term coastal restoration projects, the group partnered with the non-profit environmental organization, America's Wetlands. Anne Milling's husband,

R. King Milling, served as Chairman of the Board of the America's Wetlands Foundation and as Chairman of the Governor's Advisory Commission on Coastal Protection, Restoration, and Conservation, and also as the President of Whitney National Bank.

The invitations also created the conditions for women to testify about the ongoing needs along the Gulf Coast. In the meetings, the women told their stories about the storm to lawmakers and relayed the need for them to visit New Orleans. The group offered land tours of decimated neighborhoods and air tours of the eroding wetlands by Blackhawk helicopters, assisted by Brigadier General Hunt Downer of the Louisiana National Guard (Williams 2006). The Greater New Orleans Hotel and Lodging Association also contributed to the women's efforts by the providing hotel rooms for the congressional visits (Williams 2006).

In the months thereafter, members of Congress began to trickle into the New Orleans at the group's invitation, and the women coordinated meetings for lawmakers with residents, community activists, and civic and business leaders, and they escorted elected officials on air and land tours of the devastated city so that lawmakers could witness the destruction "block by block, and mile by mile." Given the scale of the destruction, participants knew that long-term recovery efforts for the Gulf Coast would hinge on Congressional support and federal appropriations. Yet, when the group first formed in January 2006, only 12 U.S. Senators and 24 members of the U.S. House of Representatives had visited Hurricane Katrina's devastation. After three years of pressuring lawmakers to accept its invitations, as well as multiple lobbying trips to Washington DC, Women of the Storm increased that number to at least 57 senators and 142 representatives. As a result, Women of the Storm for helped influence federal policy, including the passage of an emergency-spending bill in 2006 that brought billions of US dollars in aid to the Gulf Coast.

Comparisons and Continuance

To date, two studies have addressed Women of the Storm specifically; however, neither has done so from the gender and disaster tradition. Pyles and Lewis (2007), in "Women of the Storm: Advocacy and Organizing in Post-Katrina New Orleans," discuss Women of the Storm from a social work perspective and situate the group in relation to two other women's groups involved in community organizing following the Katrina catastrophe: domestic violence/sexual assault workers and women activists involved in the return of public housing residents. In a second study, "The Post-Katrina, Semiseparate World of Gender Politics," Pamela Tyler (2007) provides another overview of women's post-Katrina organizations that focuses, in part, on Women of the Storm, and she adds layers of complexity to understandings of the women-centered group by situating the group's actions in an historical context of women's reform and political participation in New Orleans (Tyler 1996). Tyler, an historian, also compares Women of

the Storm to other women-centered groups working in post-Katrina New Orleans—Katrina Krewe and Citizens for One Greater New Orleans—and she highlights the class dimensions that enabled the groups to emerge in the first place, “enjoying box seats, not bleachers.” She continues, “Their lives were such bastions of comfort and security” that they had “the luxury of concentrating first on systematic reforms,” rather than focusing on pressing issues like affordable housing or public education (Tyler 2007:788).

Although Women of the Storm is in many ways specific to New Orleans and the Katrina catastrophe, the group shares important features with other women's groups in quite different disaster contexts. To examine specific similarities and divergences in group goals, organizational structure, successes, and failures and to situate women's post-Katrina organizing in an historical and sociological context, Women of the Storm will be discussed in relation to two other groups: Women Will Rebuild and the Nineteenth of September Garment Workers Union. The groups discussed here are in no way representative of all women's organizing following disaster. Instead, these select cases of women's grassroots activism during social and political upheaval provide an historical and comparative backdrop for an analysis of the socio-cultural account of gender collective identification following Hurricane Katrina. Comparative work can help reveal that women's grassroots activism in New Orleans is not entirely unique to the Katrina disaster or geographically bound to the affected areas along the Gulf Coast and instead can be positioned in relation to broader sociological patterns of gendered leadership practices during times of crisis.

Though unknown to group members at the time of its emergence, Women of the Storm resembles a women's coalition that emerged in Miami following Hurricane Andrew in 1992. In “Women Will Rebuild Miami: A Case Study of Feminist Response to Disaster,” Enarson and Morrow (1998b) document the emergence of a Miami-based women's cross-cultural coalition of over forty groups, which organized in response to a predominantly male organization, We Will Rebuild, that controlled millions of dollars in private disaster relief funds. The coalition Women Will Rebuild developed with the goal of redirecting portions of these resources to the needs of women and their families, and it had a non-hierarchical, participatory structure characteristic of feminist organizing in the 1990s, and the authors suggest that Women Will Rebuild was a “uniquely feminist achievement of Miami women responding to disaster” (Enarson and Morrow 1998b:198). However, in 1993, just one year after its inception, the Women Will Rebuild coalition ceased meeting (Enarson and Morrow 1998b:192).

There are striking parallels between Women Will Rebuild and Women of the Storm. The most obvious similarity appears in the formal titles of the organizations: both groups unified under explicitly gendered terms. Challenging the universalized category “women,” both groups sought diversity in their membership base, highlighting cultural difference as an important and necessary feature of each organization. Women of the Storm, like the women's coalition in Miami, sought to engage in non-hierarchical,

consensus decision making (at least within the core membership), despite the fact that its bureaucratic organizational structure set limits on these efforts. In these ways, we see examples of women's efforts to address differences within the category women and to counter inequalities by including women from diverse backgrounds.

There were, however, several important differences between Women of the Storm and Women Will Rebuild. First, Women Will Rebuild was explicitly feminist in its goals and requested aid to reach women and girls specifically. While members of Women of the Storm used feminist discourses such as empowerment to describe their experiences and often talked about their actions in terms of female strength and women's unique capacity to organize for a collective good, many participants simultaneously distanced themselves from the contemporary women's movement. One way participants managed these contradictions was to describe empowerment as a defining characteristic of Southern womanhood, rather than a feature that aligned group members with feminism. In this way, group members drew upon a strong place-based identity grounded in cultural notions of Southern womanhood. This became an important cultural and discursive resource that women strategically deployed in its actions precisely because it is part of a firmly rooted, and legitimized, regional gender identity.

A second difference concerns group outcomes. Enarson and Morrow report that Women Will Rebuild's efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, at least in terms of material outcomes; they were able to negotiate an earmark of just ten percent of all private funds in the foundation for the needs of women and girls. Women of the Storm, on the other hand, has met considerable success. Perhaps because legislation was directed towards a broader constituency rather than just towards women and girls, Women of the Storm was largely successful in its efforts, securing billions in recovery aid through federal legislation.

A third difference reflects diverging trajectories in the survival and continuance of the two groups. Unlike the short-lived group Women Will Rebuild coalition, which dissolved only one year after its inception, Women of the Storm has had an enduring presence since its founding in 2006 and continues to intervene at the heart of U.S. politics and social changes efforts more than three years after Hurricane Katrina.

Another cross-event comparison helps provide insight on the case study of Women of the Storm following Hurricane Katrina. Disaster scholars have learned from women's labor union organizing following the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, for example, that women have responded to structural opportunities following disaster situations with increased solidarity efforts, and they have long mobilized for political reform and long-term institutional change. In tracing the emergence of the Nineteenth of September Garment Workers Union, Teresa Carrillo (1990: 216) notes, "[d]uring the first six months of the union's existence, the garment workers' movement evolved apace with the sudden political opening that followed the earthquakes". According to Carrillo, the earthquake "destroyed 400 centers of production in the central garment district, leaving an estimated

800 garment workers dead and 40,000 unemployed” (1990: 213). In the month following the devastating earthquake, the labor union “rose from the rubble” as the garment workers, many of them women, demanded state recognition as an independent national union. Carrillo describes the composition as “women-led with a predominantly female membership” and arising from the “collaboration between garment workers and feminist advisors” (Carrillo 1990: 213). Although Carrillo did not situate her research within existing models of organizational responses to disaster, she states, “that this new organization would outlive the crisis of the earthquake to become a permanent fixture among Mexican trade unions” (Carrillo 1990: 216).

When Hurricane Katrina gave rise to women's collective efforts to bring about institutional and political change, the long-term needs often forced groups to organize in ways that allowed adaptability and innovation in a shifting context of ongoing recovery. And while some disaster scholars recognize that many emergent groups do not become institutionalized and dissolve with the return to normalcy when immediate tasks are met (Drabek and McEntire 2003; Neal and Phillips 1990; Stallings and Quarantelli 1985; Tierney, Lindell, and Perry 2001), Women of the Storm, like the Nineteenth of September Union in Mexico City, has continued to use its organizational resources for promoting social and political change following disaster. The rapid political education and experience gained during Women of the Storm's initial emergence shifted into full fledged political participation at the local, state, and national levels, as evidenced by the group's efforts to convince the 2008 presidential site selection committee to hold one of the presidential debates in New Orleans. This shift marks an enduring presence for the emergent group turned formal social movement organization within the national political arena.

Studying Up on Women and Disaster

What accounts for the group's continuance several years after Hurricane Katrina? What is gained by studying women of privilege? Understanding these questions requires a more nuanced understanding of difference and inequality in the study of women and disaster. The historical record of women's organizing provides some insights. For example, Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor's characterization of the American women's rights movement as “elite sustained” can help explain Women of the Storm's continuance. In their classic book, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s*, Rupp and Taylor (1987) argue that—despite widespread assertions of the decline, dissolution, or death of feminism during the periods examined—the women's movement in fact persisted under the guidance of a small group of elite, committed women. Rupp and Taylor (1987:203-4) remark:

The movement operated from a small social base of well-educated economically privileged, and already committed women with ties to established institutions. Recognizing the unlikelihood of generating wide support for its aims, the movement had little choice but to adopt legal change and institutionalized reform as its ultimate goals, and to use strategies that were respectable and non-disruptive to persuade political elites and other established groups of the righteousness of its cause.

Similarly, the role of elites in the continuance of broad-based grassroots activism during Katrina reconstruction efforts is seen in the operations of Women of the Storm. Since its emergence following Hurricane Katrina, the group persisted because of the activities of a small group of privileged white women and privileged women of color. I have examined the ways in which core members drew upon social, cultural, and economic resources to sustain group activities, in spite of the risk of separating themselves from the group's broader membership base. These group characteristics—power, economic privilege, political and social ties—were highlighted elsewhere in feminist analyses of “elite-sustained movements” (Rupp and Taylor 1987; Taylor 1990, 1994), and similar struggles encountered by Women of the Storm attest to the ongoing challenges for women-centered groups in particular and social movements in general.

The comparisons made here should be qualified; not all women's groups are feminist, and in fact, some members of Women of the Storm distanced themselves from feminism precisely because they believed it would undermine the group's legitimacy with political elites. As such, the trope of Southern womanhood and the invocation of gendered cultural practices were strategically deployed to persuade the nation's government leaders to support its efforts. In this way, elite status helps account for Women of the Storm's continuance, at least past the first year of existence (in contrast to Women Will Rebuild), but it also created specific challenges. Members of Women of the Storm believed that they had set aside their differences, especially by creating what appeared to be a diverse group of women, and many were surprised by media coverage that focused on class status and personal appearance.

Further empirical research is needed to understand what initially motivated this of kind diversification and how well-meaning participants managed the charges of elitism during efforts to represent those who experienced loss. Fordham (1999) demonstrated that women in middle-class communities can experience hardship during disaster, and that balancing vulnerability and resilience needs to account for the ways that actual or potential adversity shapes social action. Similarly, in cases that include privileged women in disaster, understanding what motivates and discourages efforts to engage in charitable and philanthropic activities will have broader implications for the recovery of communities as a whole. Methodologically, studying up provides challenges to understanding inequality, specifically gaining access to those in positions of power. The

actual and potential challenges of studying elites in disaster need to be discussed and researched further in order to improve the range of knowledge available.

Conclusion

The case of Women of the Storm provides empirical evidence of women's collective activities following Hurricane Katrina, and points to the fact that privileged women figured prominently in disaster recovery efforts. The data reveal that these women did not work in isolation and made concerted efforts to build bridges across social difference. In doing so, the women devised comprehensive agendas to educate lawmakers and to convince them to support initiatives to support the ongoing recovery needs of the Gulf Coast. Additionally, the women engaged in extensive advocacy and lobbying activities, located commonalities in the face of calamity and acknowledged differences between and among women. Many were positioned as part of New Orleans' social, cultural, and economic elite, whereas others in the group were not. Although many of the women involved in Women of the Storm report losing their homes, they were still part of a social network that included privileged and powerful subjects in the affected areas. The case of Women of the Storm provides empirical evidence of successful bridge work across social difference, which began from the group's inception because of a moral imperative to represent the victims and survivors of the Katrina catastrophe. The materials presented here are part of a larger discussion about the unequal access to status, power, and prestige, and ultimately about the relations of inequality that exist in disaster (Tierney 2006).

Based on these findings, I argue that understanding social inequalities in disaster also requires investigating the lives and activities of those in positions of power. The recent focus on "elite panic" shows that the field of disaster studies is opening up to conceptual shifts in this analysis of power (Clarke and Chess 2008; Solnit 2009; Tierney 2008). If researchers continue to focus solely on the vulnerability and resilience of disadvantaged populations, knowledge will only be generated about these positions, and the important activities of those who wield considerable power will remain unexamined and undocumented. This statement does not suggest an intellectual or practical turn away from historically marginalized groups. Rather, this call to "study up" on disaster—by extension, to study whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, as well as socio-cultural, political, and economic elites—is part of a larger critical project. Such a research agenda in gender and disaster scholarship would aim to uncover the potential strengths and limitations of activities of those subjects who are well positioned—positively or negatively—to bring about long term changes in disaster recovery and to work across social divides, while those most affected, usually those with fewer resources, struggle to rebuild their lives.

Notes

- ¹ For an extended discussion of methods, including sampling techniques, gaining access, establishing trust and rapport, and ethical dilemmas in the field, see David (2009).
- ² For additional comparisons, see the “Madres de Plaza de Mayo” (Mothers of the Disappeared) in Argentina’s Dirty War (Bouvard 1994); and the “Jersey Four,” a group of 9/11 widows that pushed for an independent congressional investigation of the 2001 terrorist attacks (Barry 2001; Breitweiser 2006; Lorber 2002).
- ³ For additional examples of examples of “studying up” on power, see Fine, Weis, Pruitt, and Burns (2004); Kendall (2002); Marcus (1983); McDowell (1998); Messner (1996); Nader (1972); Ostrander (1984).

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