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CHAPTER 4

A Feminist Perspective on Katrina

Loretta J. Ross

A tragedy like Katrina in August 2005, which devastated the Gulf Coast and flooded New Orleans, compelled feminists to examine the impact of the storm and the response to it on women and children. As a Southern feminist, I knew that the Deep South has some of the highest poverty in America, affecting all races of people. Through a Katrina lens, the world witnessed that great dirty secret that is America: shame. Black and brown people drowning in filthy floodwaters exposed the reality that this country did not protect the human rights of its own citizens in this disaster.

Poverty in America is not only racialized but also gendered. The aftermath of Katrina, when examined through a gender lens, identified the myriad of violations experienced by women, especially women of color. A disaster like Katrina was a violator against the entire community, but when threats to women's lives were not recognized and steps are not taken to ensure that they are, women became doubly victimized—by the disaster and by the response to it.

I wrote this article a few days after the flood because I lost a family member in New Orleans, an eighty-year-old relative in the Ninth Ward who was eventually found by cadaver dogs three months after we began searching for her. She was disabled and could not escape by herself; she had drowned in her bedroom. The flood kept our family from rescuing her. Although her son-in-law was a New Orleans sheriff, he could not get to her house or command a thorough search for her. We received a false report that she had been evacuated, and wasted months looking for her around the country. Most of my other family escaped, especially those who lived on the West Bank. But my family lost a life, several homes, and many livelihoods because of that storm and the miserable response to it. My grief and anger began on August 29 and have not subsided even as I update this article four years later.

The political became personal. The company of my sisters in struggle helped me survive those anxious days. Right after Katrina hit, I was privileged to attend a meeting September 10–14, 2005, on "Women's Global Strategies for the 21st Century" at Sarah Lawrence College organized by the Women of Color Resource Center, the Global Fund for Women, and the Center for Women's Global Leadership. This conference brought together one hundred women from around the world to have a global dialogue on critical issues facing women leaders. The workshop on militarization and occupation helped me understand some of the issues we faced here in the Deep South as we struggled to rebuild our lives after Katrina.

From a feminist perspective, there are certain predictions we made concerning what happened to some women and children based on our collective experiences in

helping women and children survive trauma. We knew that women and children were more vulnerable. We knew that racist and sexist responders, commentators, and pundits would blame the victims of the disaster. We knew that violence against women would increase while services for women would decrease. And finally, we knew that the recovery from Katrina would not only fail to prioritize the needs of women and children, but would neglect to include women's concerns in the reconstruction of a city reconfigured for elite developers, not poor women and children.

Vulnerability of Women and Children

The hurricane and the subsequent flooding exposed the special vulnerability of women, children, the elderly, and the disabled by revealing the harsh intersection of life expectancy, race, class, gender, and ability. Many people could not escape not only because of poverty, but because they were not physically able to punch through rooftops, endure intense heat and dehydration, perch on top of buildings, or climb trees to survive. Horror stories of people abandoned to drown in nursing homes and hospitals emphasized that any disaster preparedness planning must take into account those unable to evacuate themselves.

Instead, many in the mainstream media and government sources chose to blame the victims as if these vulnerable people simply made bad choices, ignoring the context in which these "choices" were made. Right-wing pundits—such as those at the Heritage Foundation—quickly said that the tragedy was the fault of single mothers who were not married so that their husbands could lift them out of poverty! The prejudiced powerful did not speak about the intentional chaos in people's lives created by constantly scrambling for survival while living in poverty or with disabilities that leave many women feeling simply overwhelmed by life itself. Feminists had to respond to this sexist and racist folderol of victim blaming.

We also predicted that women's issues would not be seen as "important" during the crisis, as we were advised that larger issues like maintaining law and order and securing the affected areas were of higher priority. There was a risk of too much focus on the disaster crisis, shifting dollars from previous unmet needs, and forgetting older crises around the world and in our country. For example, Mississippi already had only one abortion provider before the storm. Women traveled to Louisiana or Alabama for services. What did an already underserved region do to help women receive reproductive health care?

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

Redefining Military Occupation

We witnessed a very authoritarian militarization of New Orleans during the crisis as police and the military were given permission to forcibly evict survivors, arrest or shoot lawbreakers, and impose martial law on the city. No one in authority questioned whether it is ethical to give orders to shoot flood survivors, even if they are

supposedly looting. Alternative media reports revealed that many of the alleged "looters" were actually heroes trying to find food to feed their families by securing food and relief supplies from stores whose inventories would have been lost to the flood anyway. The concentration camp—like conditions of the Superdome and Convention Center provided no privacy for women, no safety for children, and, for days after the tragedy, no basic needs like food, water, and sanitation. Notably, while the police and military were protecting the property rights of business owners, they somewhat neglected to protect the lives of women and children jammed into the Superdome and the Convention Center. Women, children, the sick, and the elderly died waiting for help.

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

We may never learn the full extent of the human rights violations during the crisis. There were reports of massive arrests, police brutality, and even deaths at the hands of the police and military during the crisis, yet these reports were not featured in the mainstream news, just over alternative sources such as the Internet. There were also stories of people being shot by authorities in the Louisiana Superdome. One brief report on CNN told the story about the Gretna Police Department blockading a bridge by firing over the heads of black people attempting to flee the flooded city to this predominantly white suburb west of New Orleans. The Gretna police evicted, confiscated food and water from women and children on the bridge at gunpoint claiming they did not want their town "turned into another Superdome," an obvious racist reference to the fact that most of the people were African American. The normal brutality with which cops usually treat poor black people lends considerable credence to these reports of injustice, particularly if the police are operating in situations with little likelihood of formal investigations into their actions because they are "justified" by the crisis. "They came to help" language thwarted a thorough examination of the negative effects of the occupation and may forever obstruct any notion of accountability.

Unfortunately, actions like these denigrated the undoubtedly heroic actions many people in law enforcement and the military as they risked their lives in comparison with rescue survivors. But as feminists, we did not confuse individual compassion with structural injustice. Katrina poignantly proved that both can exist in the same place at the same time.

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

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

Economic and Environmental Impact

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

What was particularly telling about the Gulf Coast crisis was that the owners of casinos and Walgreens were apparently able to return to their businesses much more quickly than others to repair storm damages long before federal assistance arrived to reduce the needless loss of lives. They were the first businesses to offer jobs to the massive numbers of people forced into unemployment because of the storm. More than 400,000 jobs were lost in the disaster. Workers were not in any position to challenge their labor practices and impact on communities, as they are the only employers available. Walmart already discriminates against the women it presently employs. President Bush relaxed the minimum wage laws for companies hired to rebuild the Gulf Coast, and women made even less money, below the paltry \$5.15/hour federal minimum wage of 2005.

The impact of the storm and subsequent flooding on women was studied by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR), which reported that 3,000 licensed Gulf Coast child-care facilities were damaged or destroyed and only 10 percent received federal assistance to reopen. Charity Hospital, Louisiana’s biggest hospital for the poor and mentally ill, was closed after Hurricane Katrina and has yet to be reopened.

Approximately 142,000 units of affordable housing were damaged or lost as a result of the storm; nearly four-fifths (79 percent) were affordable to low-income housing, according to IWPR. Because of the housing shortage, many women shared accommodations with extended family members, friends, and—in some cases—with known batterers and rapists in order to have a home.

Of course there were damaging environmental impacts because of Katrina. Or more properly, damaging the environment through global warming and criminally

ineffective levee construction and maintenance precipitated the disastrous flooding of New Orleans. The effects of the storm on injuries, environmental exposures, an infectious diseases have been reported by the Katrina Environmental Research and Restoration Network and Advocates for Environmental Human Rights, among others. Exposure to environmental contaminants, psychological stress, and the lack of adequate health care during the disaster had serious consequences for women and children, particularly pregnant women. Studies have revealed an increase in problem pregnancies, low birth weights, spontaneous abortions, and untreated chronic diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure in the wake of the storm.

Despite our worst fears as feminists, what we did not anticipate were the attacks on housing, health care, education, and municipal services for poor people after Katrina. We did not imagine that the local, state, and federal governments would collude to actively eliminate affordable housing in New Orleans. We did not predict the restoration of health care services and educational institutions like schools would be a low priority for those with the responsibility for protecting the human rights of the people of New Orleans. Katrina became a hideous example of how a storm and the response to it violate the human rights of vulnerable women and children.

Gender-Based Violence

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

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

Because women’s social networks and battered women’s services were disrupted by the hurricane, many women found it harder to escape domestic violence. They were more vulnerable because of economic insecurity and the lack of affordable housing, meaning that they were often forced to continue living with their abusers. Re-

searchers studying violence against women report that in post-Katrina New Orleans, programs increasingly found themselves helping the predisaster populations, but also middle-class women, immigrants, and others who had not previously sought shelter care, according to Pam Jenkins and Brenda Phillips, who studied the conditions battered women faced after the disaster.

Violations of International Human Rights Standards

We also witnessed the incredible violations of the human rights of the Katrina survivors. Not only was their right to survive threatened by the painfully slow response of local, state, and federal governments, but also their right to stay united as families, their right to adequate and safe shelter, their right to social services, their right to accurate information, and their right to health care and freedom from violence. All of these are human rights violations but the one that brings the Middle East most forcefully to mind is the violation of the right to return to one's home. For those of us with short-term memories, keep in mind that the Supreme Court ruled in 2005 that governments have expanded powers of eminent domain that were used to prevent some survivors from ever returning to their communities as land was turned over to corporate developers. New limits on the protections of bankruptcy laws caused further harm to Katrina's survivors.

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

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

Our people from New Orleans who fled the flood were called "evacuees" by the media and the government, a term that has no legal basis in international law. They are, in fact, internally displaced persons, a status that affords them legal rights and protections. The U.S. government was very careful not to use this term to describe the people from New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast because it would trigger obligations defined by human rights treaties to meet the needs of our people.

The U.S. government is always careful not to use language that requires it to protect people's human rights, especially in applying human rights standards to the United States to question its own behavior and responsibilities.

For example, the U.S. government was resistant to using the word "genocide" at the 2001 World Conference Against Racism to describe the theft of Indigenous lands and the enslavement of Africans. John Bolton, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations appointed by President Bush, was busily trying to undermine antipoverty goals at the UN Millennium Summit in 2005, instead of focusing on eradicating poverty, improving education, and empowering women. The U.S. government's assault on the human rights framework is unending, and we must not let them get away with it. We must respond by ensuring that the Katrina survivors learn about their human rights and the obligations they are due from our government.

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

Despite the magnitude of the catastrophe, it is amazing that the authorities found the time to harass undocumented immigrant women and men in the affected region. Reports of people targeted by immigration officials surfaced, and many people were afraid to seek help for fear that their suffering would be exploited as an opportunity to forcibly deport them. Those without Social Security numbers were denied emergency assistance by some agencies and harassed by law enforcement.

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

Development for Whom? Using a Gender Lens to Rebuild

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

We can learn a lot from our sisters around the globe who have endured terrible tsunamis and callousness from military occupiers and humanitarian agencies. Women from the Gulf Coast contacted our sisters from Asia who survived the December 2004 tsunami or women from the Middle East who have lived for years under mili-

tary occupations. They offered valuable lessons about empowering women during national crises. They were the experts we needed, not the men with guns pointed at us as we sought food and shelter. Katrina became a moment for global solidarity, even if the Bush administration was too arrogant to accept help from people in countries they don't respect.

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

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

To counter this, women seized our power and made our concerns known in the media, to government agencies, and to the humanitarian organizations. There are human rights standards that humanitarian agencies should follow and most require that women's perspectives are respected and incorporated. Women's organizations worked together, giving space to the creativity, energy, and brains of young women. Leadership by the Women's Health and Justice Initiative, a project of Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, brought women leaders and concerns to the decision-making tables. Their contact info is www.wbjj.org/home.html.

Women must ask critical questions during this crisis. Who are the groups benefiting from the disaster and who are the groups hurting or excluded? We must work together to address our collective trauma, fear, and anxiety so that we can reduce its multigenerational impact. We have the right to quality schools for our children, jobs that pay living wages, communities free of environmental toxins, and opportunities to develop our full human potential. We have the right to reclaim our land, rebuild our homes, and restore our communities.

Under the classic style of economic development of poor areas of America, communities are destroyed, people are forcibly relocated, and transnational corporations are invited to redevelop the seized lands. They called this urban renewal in the 1950s and 1960s. The 1970s brought us spatial deconcentration. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was called gentrification. Now it is called security.

It may take many years to rebuild the Gulf Coast, particularly the city of New Orleans, and right now we need to demand that the services to which we are entitled—that are our human rights—are delivered with respect, efficiency, and dignity. Our sisters from other countries advise us that disasters can wipe out the past and create an opportunity to better include people to reshape the future. We can use this

moment to force bureaucracies to become more flexible. Like changing normal admissions procedures to get our kids back in schools or demanding that quality public housing be provided instead of permanent refugee camps. We need schools, voter registration, immigrant services, driver's licenses, housing, medical care, and public assistance put on the fast track, not bottlenecked services mired down in the typical bureaucratic snails that characterize government assistance programs.

We need to demand economic redevelopment strategies that center our needs not those of casino owners, in the picture. It will be mighty tempting to use this as an opportunity to not rebuild our communities in New Orleans or the rest of the Gulf Coast. New Orleans is particularly at risk of becoming a tourist mecca with a French Quarter, plantation mansions, and endless casinos where the only jobs available to people of color will be low-paying ones supporting the tourist and oil industries. We have to claim our human right to sustainable development and insist on the enforcement of economic and social rights in redevelopment strategies.

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

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The Women of Katrina

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in an American Disaster*

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