

## When disaster strikes: women's particular vulnerabilities and amazing strengths

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Disasters, whether triggered by natural hazards or human behavior or by the interaction between the two, affect millions of people for long periods of time. Often the effects last for decades after the disaster has long disappeared from our headlines and evening news. This presentation explores some of the particular issues affecting women in disasters --- both the specific vulnerabilities they face but also the amazing strengths which they bring to recovery efforts. And since we're in New Orleans, I'm going to make reference to Hurricane Katrina, but also to the current disasters in Haiti and Pakistan.

First, let me say that there's a bit of a controversy about using the term 'natural disasters' because it's always a combination of natural hazards and human action that cause a disaster which is usually defined as: "the consequences of events triggered by natural hazards that overwhelm local response capacity and seriously affect the social and economic development of a region."<sup>1</sup>

The number and severity of disasters (particularly hydrometeorological disasters which includes cyclones, floods, hurricanes, etc) is increasing as a result of climate change. In the course of 2009, there were 335 natural disasters worldwide which killed 10,655 persons, affected more than 119 million others and caused over US\$ 41.3 billion economic damages.<sup>2</sup> This was considered a relatively quiet year in comparison with recent years. For example, in 2008, disasters took the lives of more than 235,000 people, affected 214 million and resulted in economic losses of over \$190 billion.<sup>3</sup> And we know that 2010 is going to go down as a particularly bad year with the megadisasters of Haiti and Pakistan.

As Margareta Wahlström pointed out in 2007, "over the past 30 years, climate-related disasters – storms, floods and droughts – have increased threefold according to the UN International

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<sup>1</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Protecting Persons affected by Natural Disasters: IASC Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters*, Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, June 2006

<sup>2</sup> Vos, Rodriguez, Below, Guha-Sapir. "Annual Disaster Statistical Review 2009: The numbers and Trends," p. 1. Centre for research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, World Health Organization, Université Catholique de Louvain, available at: <http://cred.be>

<sup>3</sup> Vos, Rodriguez, Below, Guha-Sapir. "Annual Disaster Statistical Review 2008: The numbers and Trends," p. 1. Centre for research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, World Health Organization, Université Catholique de Louvain, available at: <http://cred.be>

Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR).”<sup>4</sup> Some of these disasters are large, high-profile disasters which are well-covered by the media and attract significant amounts of international assistance, but most are much smaller in scale and never make it to the front pages of international newspapers. The cumulative impact of smaller-scale disasters can be as devastating to a community as a large one-time catastrophic event and yet generate far less response. Often the news coverage of a particular disaster is determined by what other news events are taking place at the same time. Thus, “...when Hurricane Stan hit Guatemala roughly a month after Hurricane Katrina, it resulted in a similar number of fatalities but generated only a fraction of the media coverage and subsequent aid response.”<sup>5</sup>

Obviously when a disaster occurs – whether a volcano, earthquake, floods or hurricane – both women and men, rich and poor, children and the elderly are affected. But specific groups are impacted differently. We know for example, that poor people are more likely to have less sturdy homes and to live on more marginal land than the wealthy – and thus tend to be more directly affected as a result of disasters. While there is growing awareness of the particular needs of children (and a UN agency and many NGOs which focus on children), we have only recently become aware of the particular needs of the elderly. Thus in New Orleans, most of the casualties of Hurricane Katrina were older people<sup>6</sup> while in Haiti, the elderly face particular difficulties. And in Hurricane Katrina, there were some differences between races in their experience of the storm. Thus while 63% of African-Americans said they feared for their lives, the corresponding figure for whites was 39%; 55% of African-Americans reported going without food for at least a day while for whites, less than half that percentage (24%) did so.<sup>7</sup>

While the experiences of young and old and of black and white women are often different, there are a few generalizations which we can draw about women’s experiences in disasters. Let me begin with some of the particular needs which women face.

Women are more likely to die and to suffer ill health effects as a result of natural disasters. For example, globally, for every one adult male who drowns in a flood, there are 3-4 women who die.<sup>8</sup> This is because many women/girls don’t learn how to swim or climb trees, they may be unable to leave their homes for cultural reasons. One study on a 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh

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<sup>4</sup> Margareta Wahlström, “The Humanitarian Impact of Climate Change,” UN Chronicle Online Edition, available at: [www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2007](http://www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2007)

<sup>5</sup> IFRC, *World Disasters Report*, 2006, p. 168.

<sup>6</sup> A 2007 study of 850 autopsies performed on storm victims in New Orleans found that 64% were people aged 65 and older while an earlier study of 1300 people in Mississippi and Louisiana who died during Katrina found that nearly 40% were over the age of 71. See John Pope, “Katrina’s toll on elderly renews safety concerns,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 20- August 2007. Also Audie Cornish, “Katrina took deadly toll on elderly,” *National Public Radio*, 5 March 2006.

<sup>7</sup> David W. Moore, “Katrina hurt blacks and poor more,” *Gallup*, 25 October 2005, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/19405/katrina-hurt-blacks-poor-victims-most.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> Lorena Aguilar, “Acknowledging the Linkages: Gender and Climate Change,” Presentation at the World Bank’s Workshop on Social Dimensions of Climate Change, March 2008, [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTSOCIALDEVELOPMENT/Resources/244362-1170428243464/3408356-1170428261889/3408359-1202746084138/Gender\\_Presentation022808.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTSOCIALDEVELOPMENT/Resources/244362-1170428243464/3408356-1170428261889/3408359-1202746084138/Gender_Presentation022808.pdf)

noted that many women died at home with their children as they had to wait for their husbands to return and make the decision to evacuate.<sup>9</sup> The first statistical analysis of the effect of natural disasters on the life expectancy of men and women (a study of 4,605 natural disasters occurring in 141 countries) not only found that women were more likely to die in natural disasters and their aftermath, but discovered that this effect was strongest in countries with very low social and economic rights for women. In those countries where women in their everyday lives enjoy rights equal or almost equal to men, this effect disappeared. Natural disasters lower the life expectancy of women more than that of men (they either kill more women than men or kill women at an earlier age than men.) Actually since female life expectancy is generally higher than that of males, for some countries natural disasters narrow the gender gap in life expectancy.<sup>10</sup> The study also found that the stronger the disaster (as measured by the number of people killed relative to population size) and the lower the women's socioeconomic status, the stronger this effect on the gender gap in life expectancy.<sup>11</sup> In the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan – which killed 73,000 people – women were mostly at home when the earthquake hit while their adult male family members were working in the fields. This meant that women were more apt to be injured by collapsing homes than their husbands and indeed UN agencies reported a large number of paraplegics among Pakistani women.<sup>12</sup>

Some of the differences in men's and women's experiences in disasters are due to women's reproductive roles. Normally in developing countries about 1 in 5 women of childbearing age is pregnant.<sup>13</sup> Women don't stop giving birth when a hurricane or earthquake occurs. However, they do have a harder time. Studies show adverse reproductive outcomes following disasters, including early pregnancy loss, premature delivery, stillbirths, complications and infertility.<sup>14</sup> There can be social taboos around norms of appropriate behavior which contribute to health problems in young women.<sup>15</sup> And there can be consequences for children; for example, 20% of mothers who had been breastfeeding their infants at the time of the 2005 Pakistan earthquake

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<sup>9</sup> World Health Organisation, *Gender and Health in Disasters*, 2002. Pg. 2. Available at: [www.who.int=gender=other\\_health=en=genderdisasters.pdf](http://www.who.int=gender=other_health=en=genderdisasters.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Eric Neumayer, and Thomas Plümer. "The Gendered Nature of Natural Disasters: The Impact of Catastrophic Events on the Gender Gap in Life Expectancy, 1981–2002." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 97, no. 3 (September 2007): 551-566. SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCOhost (accessed October 25, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, *Protecting and Promoting Rights in Natural Disasters in South Asia: Prevention and Response*, July 2009,

[http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2009/0701\\_natural\\_disasters/0701\\_natural\\_disasters.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2009/0701_natural_disasters/0701_natural_disasters.pdf), For gender and spinal cord injuries resulting from earthquakes generally, see

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2031935/>

<sup>13</sup> UNFPA, *State of World Population 2010*, 2010, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> World Health Organisation, *Gender and Health in Disasters*, 2002 Available at [www.who.int=gender=other\\_health=en=genderdisasters.pdf](http://www.who.int=gender=other_health=en=genderdisasters.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> During the 1998 floods in Bangladesh, adolescent girls reported perineal rashes and urinary tract infections because they were not able to wash out menstrual rags properly in private, often had no place to hang the rags to dry, or access to clean water. They reported wearing the still damp cloths, as they did not have a place to dry them. World Health Organisation, *Gender and Health in Disasters*, 2002 Available at [www.who.int=gender=other\\_health=en=genderdisasters.pdf](http://www.who.int=gender=other_health=en=genderdisasters.pdf)

were no longer able to do so, either because their supply of milk was insufficient or because (in 10% of the cases) the mothers were missing or dead.<sup>16</sup>

So women are more likely to die in natural disasters. What happens after the disaster? Let me focus on three factors:

First, there is sometimes a post disaster 'flight of men', which leaves women as heads of households with sole responsibility for providing for the family. Sometimes men are killed, leaving their wives/partners behind. But the loss of livelihoods also often pushes men to migrate from rural areas to towns in search of work, leaving their wives with the immediate responsibility to feed their children.<sup>17</sup> In Haiti, before the earthquake 44 % of households<sup>18</sup> were headed by women; post-earthquake reports come up with higher numbers of close to 50 %.<sup>19</sup> The fact that women tend to have lower literacy levels than men and are less likely to own land leave women at a disadvantage at a time when they have increased responsibilities.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, women are more likely than men to experience violence – both at the hands of gangs who are often emboldened by the breakdown in law and order resulting from the disaster and by domestic violence. Security risks are common around temporary shelters for communities displaced by natural disasters. For example, there were allegations of gang infiltration in urban shelters in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch in 1998, resulting in robberies, rapes and even killings due to the lack of law and order in these places.<sup>21</sup> In Haiti after the 2010 earthquake numerous cases of rape and sexual assault in IDP camps were reported by media and NGOs. The paralysis of the police and justice system (who were themselves heavily hit by the earthquake) coupled with general distrust towards state institutions, mean that it is likely that sexual and gender-based violence are severely unreported.<sup>22</sup> Girls in camps were also at risk of sexual exploitation. In several camps, women reported to Amnesty International that it was a

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<sup>16</sup> Michael M Priebe, "Spinal Cord Injuries as a Result of Earthquakes: Lessons From Iran and Pakistan", *The Journal of Spinal Cord Injuries*, 2007, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2031935/>

<sup>17</sup> Krishna Bandyopadhyay, Soma Ghosh and Nilanjan Dutta, *Eroded Lives*, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, December 2006, [http://www.mcrg.ac.in/Eroded\\_Lives.pdf](http://www.mcrg.ac.in/Eroded_Lives.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Office of the Special Envoy to Haiti, "Women and Gender, Key Statistics" [http://www.haitispecialenvoy.org/reports/women\\_gender](http://www.haitispecialenvoy.org/reports/women_gender)

<sup>19</sup> See: National Organization for Women, "Women of Haiti: A Violent History and Uncertain Future", 19 March 2010, <http://www.now.org/issues/global/030910haiti-b.html> See also: AlertNet, "Haitian women lose out in post-quake "survival of the strongest"", 29 January 2010, [http://www.alertnet.org/db/an\\_art/57964/2010/00/29-162402-1.htm](http://www.alertnet.org/db/an_art/57964/2010/00/29-162402-1.htm). See also UNFPA, *State of World Population 2010*, UNFPA, 2010

<sup>20</sup> Graham Tobin, Linda Whiteford. "The Role of Women in Post-Disaster Environments: Health and Community Sustainability". The Center for Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, November 2001. pg. 7. Available at [http://hsc.usf.edu/nocms/publichealth/cdmha/images/tobin\\_women.pdf](http://hsc.usf.edu/nocms/publichealth/cdmha/images/tobin_women.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/10/13/Add.1, 5 March 2009, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Nina Lakhani, "Rape on the rise in Haiti's camps", *The Independent*, 7 February 2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/rape-on-the-rise-in-haitis-camps-1891514.html> ; Also see: Amnesty International, *Sexual violence in Haitian camps of the displaced, beyond the number*, 22 March 2010, <http://livewire.amnesty.org/2010/03/22/sexual-violence-in-haitian-camps-of-the-displaced-beyond-the-numbers/>

common practice for many girls to exchange sex for food or material goods.<sup>23</sup> And increases in gender-based violence are not limited to developing countries. In the US, after Hurricane Katrina, sexual violence was common in trailer camps set up to house those displaced by the storm. A 2006 survey conducted by the International Medical Corps in the trailer camps found alarmingly high rates of gender-based violence. The rate of rape was found to be 53.6 times higher than the highest baseline state rate. "In the 274 days following the disaster, the rate of women experiencing beatings by a spouse was 3.2 per cent – more than triple the US annual rate."<sup>24</sup>

Not surprisingly, women tend to have higher levels of depression than men after disasters.<sup>25</sup> A UNHCR spokesperson running a welfare center in Pakistan for victims of the 2010 floods reports that the majority of the women "are suffering from phobic or panic attacks, depression and anxiety... This is linked to losing homes and all means of livelihood in the floods. Women are particularly worried about the future, with husbands unemployed and children out of school, and wonder how to feed their extended families."<sup>26</sup>

Thirdly, there are gender inequities evident in response to most disasters. Disaster and emergency management agencies, law enforcement and fire personnel have historically been dominated by men – who may overlook the special needs of women and children (for example, sanitary supplies and contraceptives.)<sup>27</sup> Traditional cultural patterns, and particularly inheritance laws, present particular difficulties for women after a disaster. In Pakistan, displaced women living in camps find that finding privacy and maintaining purdah are difficult; "many have never been around a man who isn't a member of their family. Now they are amongst hundreds of men who are complete strangers."<sup>28</sup> In another example, the Sri Lankan government offered funding to families affected by the 2004 tsunami, but in the eastern coastal area of Batticaloa, authorities recognized only male-headed households, so women whose husbands had died weren't eligible to receive the assistance. Sri Lankan and Acehnese women described many instances where they received relief supplies in the form of goods, but were not able to access recovery grants which only went to men as heads of households. Without cash to start over, it would be difficult for them to re-build their livelihoods.<sup>29</sup> In Thailand,

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<sup>23</sup> Amnesty International, *Haiti after the Earthquake, Initial Mission Findings*, March 2010, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> IFRC, *World Disaster Report 2007, Focus on Discrimination*, 2007, <http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/pubs/disasters/wdr2007/WDR2007-English.pdf>, p. 123

<sup>25</sup> See both: Matthew Ehrlich, et al. "Loss of Resources and Hurricane Experience as Predictors of Postpartum Depression Among Women in Southern Louisiana." *Journal of Women's Health* (15409996) 19, no. 5 (May 2010): 877-884. SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCOhost (accessed October 25, 2010).

And: WHO, *Gender and Health in Disasters*, 2002, [www.who.int/gender/other\\_health/en/genderdisasters.pdf](http://www.who.int/gender/other_health/en/genderdisasters.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), "Pakistan: Changed Lives after the Floods," 28 October 2010, [www.plusnews.org/PrintReport.aspx?ReportId=90904](http://www.plusnews.org/PrintReport.aspx?ReportId=90904).

<sup>27</sup> WHO, *Gender and Health in Disasters*, 2002, [www.who.int/gender/other\\_health/en/genderdisasters.pdf](http://www.who.int/gender/other_health/en/genderdisasters.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> BBC news, "Pakistan floods: 'Cultural shock' for women in camps," 18 August 2010, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11013826](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11013826).

<sup>29</sup> UNIFEM, *UNIFEM responds to the Tsunami Tragedy, Protection and Rights*, <http://www.unifem.org/campaigns/tsunami/page4.html>

families received twice as much aid from the government to bury male relatives than female ones.<sup>30</sup> Concerns about reproductive rights often are not addressed immediately following a disaster, although women still give birth when earthquakes occur, still need contraception while living in tents, and still need sanitary supplies.<sup>31</sup>

Since this is all very depressing, let's look at the other side of the coin – the resources which women bring. First, women are remarkably resilient and they will do just about anything to keep their families together, to keep them safe and healthy. Women are the “frontline responders in the moment of extreme crisis and long-term caregivers to disaster-impacted family members.”<sup>32</sup> Over 300,000 people were injured in the Haitian earthquake, many with severe injuries (which are unfortunately common in cases of earthquakes.) Women are the main caregivers of the injured, the elderly and family members who have been left with long-term disabilities. Women are important not just in providing physical care for their family members but also in providing the emotional support necessary to deal with the psychological trauma of loss. They are often better able to talk about the emotional side of things than their male family members even though men also experience fear and trauma. As Fareed Azia, a psychologist in Karachi, explained “Women have been deeply affected. So have men, but they do not speak up as easily.”<sup>33</sup>

Secondly, when a disaster occurs, traditional gender roles can change. Sometimes women are called to perform tasks that would normally not be considered as women's jobs. For example, Hurricane Mitch (1998) provided an opportunity for the mobilization of women. “Men and women worked side-by-side during the emergency of Hurricane Mitch and observers were impressed by the high level of community participation. The fact that women cleared roads, dug wells, and performed other non-traditional tasks was surprising to many relief workers. Women's groups mobilized to clear roads, provide food assistance, and organize relief efforts at community level.”<sup>34</sup> More immediately, women often display ingenuity and creativity in coming up with livelihood strategies to meet immediate family needs, as in the many small scale producers selling goods and food in Haitian markets. The fact that women turn to prostitution or survival sex in order to support their families is evidence of the failure of the

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<sup>30</sup> Lin Chew and Kavita N. Ramdas, *Caught in the Storm: The Impact of Natural Disasters on Women*, December 2005, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> See Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, *Summary Report: Protecting and Promoting Rights in Natural Disasters in South Asia: Prevention and Response*, July 2009.  
[http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2009/0701\\_natural\\_disasters/0701\\_natural\\_disasters.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2009/0701_natural_disasters/0701_natural_disasters.pdf)  
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<sup>32</sup> Enarson and Morrow, 1998a:5 cited by Graham Tobin, Linda Whiteford. “The Role of Women in Post-Disaster Environments: Health and Community Sustainability”. The Center for Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, November 2001, pg. 7, Available at  
[http://hsc.usf.edu/nocms/publichealth/cdmha/images/tobin\\_women.pdf](http://hsc.usf.edu/nocms/publichealth/cdmha/images/tobin_women.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> IRIN, “Pakistan: Changed lives after the floods”, 28 October 2010,  
[www.plusnews.org/PrintReport.aspx/ReportId=90904](http://www.plusnews.org/PrintReport.aspx/ReportId=90904).

<sup>34</sup> Patricia Delaney, Elizabeth Shrader. *Gender and Post-Disaster reconstruction: The Case of Hurricane Mitch in Honduras and Nicaragua*, LCSPG/LAC Gender Team, The World Bank, January 2000,  
[ftp://ftp.shef.ac.uk/pub/uni/academic/A-C/ar1mb/WB\\_GenderAndPostDisasterReconstruction.doc](ftp://ftp.shef.ac.uk/pub/uni/academic/A-C/ar1mb/WB_GenderAndPostDisasterReconstruction.doc)

international aid machinery – women should never be so desperate that they have to sell their bodies to provide for their families – but it is also testament to the strong will of women that they will do whatever is necessary to support their families.<sup>35</sup>

Thirdly, women’s organizations can play a particularly important role – even though they seldom receive the acknowledgement or the support they need. In the case of the Haitian earthquake, many women’s groups, badly affected themselves by the disaster, were able to reconstitute themselves and resume their work with women. Thus Kofaviv, an organization of and for rape survivors, was able to reconstitute itself after the earthquake and is working both to support individual women and to mobilize for broader social change.<sup>36</sup> Women’s groups in Haiti have names like Shining Star, Valiant Women, Vigilant Women, Femme Democrat and Women of Courage. “We have kept these names for our women’s organizations as they are meant to inspire women. We believe women are the pillars of society.” Women in these groups explained that they had organized immediately to set up community kitchens, provide first aid and care for the sick children and orphans. “When relief was being distributed, agencies enlisted help of male leaders. This led to a lot of violence, disruption, stoppage of aid and unrest in several communities. At some point, several aid agencies reversed this trend, by relying on women. They trained women as camp organizers and charged them with relief distribution.” This is almost always a good strategy for distribution of food – women are more apt to know where the vulnerable groups are – those who can’t make it to relief lines and are often invisible. Women’s groups have organized all kinds of collective self-help activities from community kitchens to cleaning sites and toilets to calling for camp lighting to reduce violence against women.<sup>37</sup>

Central to post-disaster reconstruction is an assessment of the needs and in February-March 2010, the Haitian government with support from the UN, International Development Bank, World Bank, Economic Commission on Latin America and the European Commission conducted a Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA)<sup>38</sup> to serve as the basis for the Donors’ Conference in March 2010. At this conference close to \$10 billion was pledged for long-term reconstruction in Haiti, but women’s organizations were not happy with either the process or the findings of the PDNA, charging that Haitian civil society had not been involved nor were women’s concerns adequately represented. Ten women’s organizations worked to create a PDNA shadow report which was released on the same days as the donors’ conference in March 2010 at UN headquarters. The shadow PDNA report urged the immediate inclusion of Haitian women’s

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<sup>35</sup> The World, “Resorting to prostitution in Haiti”, 7 October 2010, <http://www.theworld.org/2010/10/07/resorting-to-prostitution-in-haiti/>, see also: Latin America News Dispatch, “Sex Work Flourishes In Post-Earthquake Haiti”, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2010, <http://latindispatch.com/2010/11/05/sex-work-flourishes-in-post-earthquake-haiti/>

<sup>36</sup> MADRE, KOFIVIV (Commission of Women Victims for Victims), <http://www.madre.org/index/meet-madre-1/our-partners-6/haiti-kofaviv-zanmi-lasante-36.html>

<sup>37</sup> Disasterwatch, *Sparks of Hope: Grassroots Women organize Self Help efforts to restore communities after the Haiti disaster*, July 2010, <http://www.disasterwatch.net/resources/Haitireport-June2010.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Government of Haiti, “Haiti Earthquake PDNA: Assessment of damage, losses, general and sectoral needs”, 2010, [http://www.refondation.ht/resources/PDNA\\_Working\\_Document.pdf](http://www.refondation.ht/resources/PDNA_Working_Document.pdf)

voices and their equal participation in all sectors related to the reconstruction of their country, noting that of the eight themes included in the PDNA only one theme peripherally addressed gender. But the shadow report goes beyond asking for more women's participation. It is a 60 page outline of what should be done on issues ranging from governance to accountability. It notes for example, that post-event spending by the state on rubble clearing, road building and housing construction typically benefits male youth and able-bodied men, with the apparent assumption that assisting men in this way benefits the entire household. This is not always the case due to gender and age based entitlement patterns in the household.<sup>39</sup>

### Concluding thoughts

Disasters affect men and women, the young and the old, the rich and the poor in different ways. International humanitarian actors are increasingly aware of these differences and are trying to develop response strategies which respond to these vulnerabilities. But there is still much to be done as evidenced by the present situation in Haiti.

The news from Haiti is not good. In spite of strong political will and large-scale commitments of funds, over a million Haitians are still living in flimsy shelters, women are still attacked at night and are using survival sex to support their families. There are lots of reasons for this – from the weakness of the Haitian government to the destruction of government capacity to the grinding poverty and inequity which characterized the country long before the earthquake. But we have got to do better. I suggest that by putting women front and center in the reconstruction effort, everyone would benefit. There's not a lot of research, but there is at least some evidence that women approach reconstruction differently than men. While men tend to see reconstruction in terms of physical infrastructure, women tend to focus on the family, community and social capital.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, women often take disaster warnings more seriously than men do and communicate them through networks they create and maintain with friends, family and other community members. Disasters can provide an opportunity for community organizing and the emergence of women community leaders to address existing structural problems affecting communities. After Hurricane Katrina, for example, women's organizations reported that "If nothing else, Katrina and her ravages have given us an opportunity to shift the status quo in a new direction: one in which the needs of women and families fall at the center – not the margins – of policy agendas. We know that services and policy-making processes that put women first have the capacity to lift families and whole communities out of misery. This wisdom should inform response to future natural disasters and for that matter, the larger work

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<sup>39</sup> "Ensuring Haitian Women's Participation and Leadership in All Stages of National Relief and Reconstruction: A Gender Shadow Report of the 2010 Haiti PDNA.", March 2010, [http://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/Resources/NGO/humasst-reconpb\\_haitiprelimgenshadowrrt\\_2010.pdf](http://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/Resources/NGO/humasst-reconpb_haitiprelimgenshadowrrt_2010.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> Graham Tobin, Linda Whiteford. "The Role of Women in Post-Disaster Environments: Health and Community Sustainability". The Center for Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, November 2001, pg. 7., Available at [http://hsc.usf.edu/nocms/publichealth/cdmha/images/tobin\\_women.pdf](http://hsc.usf.edu/nocms/publichealth/cdmha/images/tobin_women.pdf)



of social change. Applying the gender lens isn't just the right thing to do: it's the smart thing to do."<sup>41</sup>

What does this mean to us – seated in an elegant dining room of a nice hotel with the remains of an abundant lunch in front of us? Churches have provided substantial support to Haitian recovery and will undoubtedly play a role in supporting Haitian reconstruction. Many of your organizations, from United Methodist Women to the ACT Alliance have supported women's groups, but I suggest that it isn't enough to support a few women's initiatives with church funds while the overall reconstruction plans largely ignore women's potential contributions. I think you should engage in advocacy with the institutions in charge of Haitian reconstruction – institutions such as the the Interim Haitian Recovery Commission and the Haiti Reconstruction Fund. These institutions need to hear that the 'business as usual' models are not working in Haiti and that it's time to put women's needs and resources front and center. It isn't just a question of getting Congress to release the funds the US government has already committed (though that is important), it is a question of making sure that all Haitians and particularly women are included in the reconstruction process and that they own the process. Reconstruction isn't just about removing rubble and building new buildings, it fundamentally must be about ensuring that women's contributions are valued and that other groups usually invisible -- the elderly, the children, those with disabilities – benefit from the reconstruction efforts. Members of Congress, the State Department and the aid community generally need to be challenged to take seriously the blueprint for action in the Shadow PDNA produced by 10 women's organizations. This is a good place to start. Haiti's women have a lot to say and a lot to contribute to their country's recovery. Their amazing strengths need to be given a chance to rebuild their country. As former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet observed in February 2010 during a visit to Haiti "Haiti's reconstruction will be faster if women are an intrinsic part of the process."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Sara K. Gould and Cynthia Schmae, "Katrina's Gender Focus Offers Lesson for Recovery," <http://womensenews.org/story/commentary/070829/katrinass-gender-focus-offers-lesson-recovery>

<sup>42</sup> UNIFEM News 20 February 2010. This theme was echoed by Marie Guirlene Justine, program director of REFRAKA who said "One of the new concepts following the earthquake is reconstructing another form of participation, where women can participate in everything, in the big debates about reconstruction, in planning national development for another Haiti. A process where women and men put their hands together to build something new in this country will be very different than one where men are making decisions for everyone. When we have a society where women have a say in what they want and need, we'll be closer to having a society based on social justice, an equitable society. Then we'll have balanced relations, with the possibility for everyone to live in peace." [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/beverly-bell/broadcasting-womens-voice\\_b\\_547686.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/beverly-bell/broadcasting-womens-voice_b_547686.html)