

katrina

# Were Women Raped in New Orleans?

Addressing the Human Rights of Women in Times of Crisis

by Lucinda Marshall

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, women whose lives were disrupted by the storm face numerous gender-specific vulnerabilities that commonly occur with disasters of this magnitude. For instance, while it will be sometime before the final death toll from Katrina is known, women and children are more likely to die in natural disasters than men (the Tsunami in southeast Asia late last year is the most recent example of this). Female victims of catastrophic events are more likely to lack mobility and resources as well as having caretaking responsibilities that make it more difficult for them to flee. Pregnant women and mothers of newborns in particular face greatly increased health risks.

There is also a significantly increased risk of sexual assault, particularly for those who relocated to shelters to escape the storm. Economic uncertainty, increased stress, powerlessness and the scarcity of basic necessities are all contributing factors to the increased risks faced by women. In the aftermath of Katrina, women who were living in violent relationships before the storm hit may experience increased violence in its aftermath and may find themselves dependent on the perpetrators of the violence for their basic survival, particularly if they have been separated from family and social networks.

The breakdown of law enforcement and social service agencies such as rape crisis centers during and after the storm particularly exacerbated the problem. In the days following Hurricane Katrina, major media providers such as CNN and the *Chicago Tribune* were reporting that rapes were taking place in the Superdome and New Orleans Convention Center. Police Chief Eddie Compass quickly made a statement saying, "We don't have any substantiated rapes. We will investigate if any come forward." Compass' denial that rapes had been reported quickly led some to question whether these stories were merely media hype, perhaps motivated by racial prejudice.

The concern about prejudicial, hysterical reporting is certainly understandable. There is no question that the evacuation of New Orleans and the treatment of the victims of Katrina raises some very serious issues of racial and classist prejudices, as evidenced by commentary such as an article by R. Emmett Tyrell Jr. in the September 9, 2005 edition of the *Washington Times*:

To see the bulk of the victims as black is misleading. If a similar natural disaster afflicted Appalachia, most victims would be white. More properly understood, these victims are members of

society's underclass, a chronically disorganized collection of wretched people incapable of governing themselves and difficult to govern in the best of times: thus the rape, the pillaging and the shooting at rescue workers at the Superdome and probably elsewhere.

Prior to the hurricane, 70 percent of new Orleans' population was black and 25 percent of the city's population was impoverished. In other words, by definition, those are the people who for the most part were left behind in conditions that rapidly became inhuman, fostering a situation where crimes could easily be committed with little or no consequence. But just because that was the case does not make it make it prejudicial to say that rapes and sexual assaults took place.

Hysteria on the part of the media also bears examination. After all, these are the self-same news "reporters" who routinely fall for the catch-phrase of the day ("weapons of mass destruction" and the "war on terror" for example) spewed out by the Bush administration to foster fear, not to mention the perpetrators of 24/7 coverage of the Runaway Bride and Terry Schiavo stories.

But the insistence that reports of rape were untrue because they hadn't been "substantiated" smacks of misogynist ignorance. In an article titled, "The Bigotry of Low

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Expectations,” Matt Welch writes on *Alternet* that “The only problem—none of the reports were true.” He boldly asserts that the rape reports were “invented out of whole cloth” and that somehow such reports unfairly blamed the police department.

It is not really surprising that Chief Compass did not know of any rape reports in as much as government officials were ignorant for a while that there even were people taking refuge in the Convention Center. Most obviously (as even Welch admits), the usual channels through which rapes are reported (law enforcement agencies, rape crisis centers and medical facilities) were unavailable. There were no functioning social service or law enforcement agencies in the Superdome or Convention Center at the height of the crisis, and phone service was spotty at best. There was no way to report these crimes or seek assistance.

However, as Judy Benitez, executive director of the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault (LaFASA), explains, “The idea that because something cannot be measured, it does not exist, is ridiculous.” She also points out that:

The mixture of frustrated, angry, powerless people in one place for a long time is a toxic one. Some of them were drinking and using drugs, which exacerbates the problem of violence. The intermingling of men and women, children, elderly folks, people with disabilities, people with substance abuse problems, people with mental illness, and people with criminal tendencies was a deadly one. It is no secret that in our society, some people are strong

and some are weak. Some of the strong help those who are weaker—and some prey on them. The animal-like circumstances of the evacuees in the Superdome—conditions in which no human being should ever have to live—caused frustration on a level that most people will never know. That sense of helplessness, lack of control, and powerlessness would make most people angry; for predatory people, the availability of someone over whom they can have power and control, on whom they can take out their anger, is all the excuse they need to commit rape.

Under normal circumstances, rape is a very under-reported crime due to its personal and frightening nature, according to Benitez. Victims fear being blamed or just want to pretend it didn’t happen. It is also important to realize that, according to the FBI, false reports of rape are roughly the same percentage as false reports of other crimes (2 to 5 percent). When victims do come forward, they are more likely to seek help at rape crisis centers than from law enforcement agencies.

But in the immediate aftermath of the storm, LaFASA reported that six Louisiana crisis centers had been shut down with many of their staff themselves displaced, leaving sexual assault survivors without the services and support they can normally depend on and the places where they are most likely to report sexual victimization unavailable.

Another organization serving sexual assault survivors in the area, the Louisiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence (LCADV), reported that all direct services to survivors of domestic violence had been suspended but that LCADV was

receiving reports of women being battered by their partners in emergency shelters. According to Captain Jeffrey Winn of the New Orleans Police SWAT team, police officers on the scene at the Convention Center told him that a number of women had been gang-raped. Similar reports were also made by emergency personnel and National Guard troops.

The reality is that while the extent of the problem is not yet known, it is clear that rapes did in fact take place. And as Sheila Dauer of Amnesty International recently told *Women’s Enews*, this is unacceptable because relief organizations have an obligation to protect vulnerable populations from violence and abuse. Placing evacuees in large shelters like the Superdome without a significant law enforcement presence as well as lack of food and water and adequate sanitation clearly contributed to the violation of the human rights of those who sought shelter there; particularly those who were most vulnerable.

While trivializing the dangers of personal violence faced by women routinely and unnecessarily puts them in harm’s way and denies them of basic human rights, the problems of this misogynist policy lens are significantly magnified in times of crisis. It is crucial that this issue be addressed in the investigations and analysis of the factors that exacerbated the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina. ♦

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