CHAPTER 12

WITNESS: THE RACIALIZED GENDER IMPLICATIONS OF KATRINA*

KATHLEEN A. BERGIN**

INTRODUCTION

Rechelle Carter. Brianna Carter. Linda Watson. Errolyn Warden. Barbara Richards. These five women came to Houston following Hurricane Katrina on a bus from Violet, Louisiana, a small black community located on the banks of the Mississippi River in St. Bernard Parish east of New Orleans. I met them while volunteering at the Reliant Complex, where 25,000 hurricane evacuees lived for three weeks in the fall of 2005. There I learned their story.

Several neighborhood streets in Violet are sandwiched between Judge Perez Drive and St. Bernard Highway: Guerra Drive, Lucciardi Drive, Caluda Lane. They are also surrounded by water. Behind St. Bernard Highway is a levee that holds back water from the Mississippi River basin. On the opposite side of Violet, behind Judge Perez, is a floodgate that traps the water from Lake Borgne.

On August 29, residents of Violet breathed a sigh of relief when the local news announced that Hurricane Katrina had passed. There were a few downed tree

** Many friends and colleagues read earlier drafts of this chapter and kept me stable through my own experiences, however comparatively trivial, with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. I hope they will understand if I thank them collectively and use this space exclusively to honor and dedicate this chapter to the brave women of Violet, Louisiana, whose unbreakable spirit I could only hope to emulate.
branches and a few puddles on the lawn, but the neighborhood was intact. Violet was not destroyed by the hurricane. But it was destroyed. After the storm was over, police cruisers and fire trucks rolled down the streets with bullhorns warning residents to take cover: "We're about to open the floodgate."

Rechelle was cooking lunch for her family when she heard the ominous warning. Within minutes a violent surge of water burst through her house. Before she could react, the water was knee deep. It was waist high by the time she made it to the living room to save her daughter. She knew her elderly neighbors in the home across the street would never make it out alive.

Errolyn saw the warning about the floodgates on the television news ticker. The water came so fast she nearly drowned before she could reach the bedroom to warn her sister. Neither of them could swim, so they clung breathlessly to a floating dresser that had overturned in the surge. Water reached the ceiling in minutes but neither of them had the strength to punch a hole to the roof. They were lucky, though. Errolyn's brother and her sister's boyfriend were home. They punched the hole. For two nights the four of them waited to be rescued from the roof. They weren't. Rescue choppers flew so low they could see the crew smile. But the pilots did not stop. Finally, out of food, out of water, sweltering in the rotten stench, men from the neighborhood took matters into their own hands. They jumped from the roofs, waded through the sewer below, commandeered a canoe from Tim's Marine, and went house to house picking up stranded survivors. Errolyn was one of them. She was six months pregnant.

The men ferried hundreds of stranded survivors to the dry levy behind St. Bernard Highway, across town from the opened floodgate. There they waited for days, again, no food, no water. A "big house" owned by a white family sat just beyond the levee. The owners invited the evacuees to take refuge from the scorching sun under their patio roof. But they weren't allowed inside the house. Coast Guard choppers eventually arrived to drop off bottled water. None of the pilots spoke with the stranded black survivors. They spoke only to the white woman who owned the "big house." They gave her the bottled water and told her to pass it on to the rest.

All five women eventually came to Houston as part of the massive evacuation from New Orleans. For weeks, they set up camp at the Houston Astrodome and Reliant Arena with tens of thousands of other evacuees. Some they knew. Some they did not. They now owned only what they wore on their back. Nothing else. Even that was torn, dirty, and reeked of stench. They slept one next to the other alongside unknown evacuees in rows of cots that stretched the length of a cement amphitheater. It was hot. It was cold. It was loud. It was dirty. It stunk. There were strangers on all sides of them, front and back, right and left. Snoring. Coughing. Pissing. Vomiting. Still, Rechelle was grateful to be alive in the Astrodome and for the angelic charity of individual volunteers who worked to make an intolerable situation—well, survivable. There were many: those who believed her when she said that no one came to rescue them, how they had to rescue themselves; those who listened when she said that Katrina did not destroy Violet, that someone opened the floodgates; those who didn't question. She worried, though, how long she and her daughter would have to stay in the Astrodome, when they could get back to New Orleans. She worried whether her daughter was safe. Men had repeatedly entered the women's restroom and showers, and she and her daughter was inside.

Linda Watson and her family had just moved from the Astrodome. They had been raped and sexually assaulted in the Astrodome. And brought toys for her two daughters and a housing voucher from the time officials in Houston. Linda's daughter, Livy, was in the Astrodome, hardly enough to move to an unknown city. In the Astrodome, they moved from a roof tent to the Astrodome Stadium, and they were eventually given alternative shelter by the Red Cross.

Multiple vulnerabilities related to gender, race, and class made the experience of Black, white, rich, poor, and working-class women very different within the hurricane response. While more than half of the hurricane's victims were women, Linda Watson, and her family, along with many other men, owned fewer resources, were in less lucrative jobs, and were members of the elderly population.

Physical limitations made it impossible for her to leave the Astrodome, the difficulty of sex and sexual assault from her family, and from them.4 For Linda Watson, Cater and thousands of women and children in New Orleans during Katrina, sex and sexual assault were not just aggressive acts; they were structural, and at times, systemic, and for some women, were part of the storm's catastrophe.5 The result was a terrible paradox: a search for a nonexistent vacuum of isolation and a search for words that subjected these women to a system that no woman is immune to. Sexual violence, gender, and race and class contributed to increase the risk of sexual assault.

The sexualized violence of Katrina, lived by the women of both intimate partners and strangers, emerged in the narrative, the creative, and the political.
and showers, and she knew that it was only a matter of time before they came when
her daughter was inside.

Linda Watson and her best friend Barbara Richards stayed at Reliant Arena after
moving from the Astrodome when rumors started to surface that women there had
been raped and sexually assaulted. They too were indebted to volunteers for human-
izing their very inhumane ordeal, those who laughed with them and cried with them
and brought toys for their kids. But they had no "next step." Linda and Barbara had
two daughters and two grandchildren between them and still had not received a
housing voucher from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) by the
time officials in Houston issued their own orders to evacuate the city in advance of
Hurricane Rita. Linda was earning $12,000 a year as a school bus driver in New
Orleans, hardly enough to pay for a new apartment, never mind rebuilding in an
unknown city. In three weeks' time, Linda, Barbara, and four children in tow had
moved from a rooftop, to the Convention Center, to the Astrodome, to Reliant
Stadium, and they were now being told over the public address system to find
alternative shelter by the morning or board a bus to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas.

* * *

Multiple vulnerabilities uniquely endanger the lives of women in times of displace-
ment and disaster, particularly poor women of color. Katrina was no exception.
Black, white, rich, poor, young, old—the storm showed no mercy. But Katrina
was both a highly racialized and gendered event. New Orleans had a higher propor-
tion of blacks and greater number of women than any other metropolitan area
within the hurricane's path. According to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research,
more than half of the women in the city were single mothers, like Rechelle Carter,
Linda Watson, and Barbara Richards, independently responsible for ensuring they
and their children survived the storm. These women lived in greater poverty than
men, owned fewer assets than men, had less formal education than men, and worked
in less lucrative jobs than men. Women in New Orleans also comprised a majority
of the elderly population, most of whom were destitute.

Physical limitations, economic hardship, and dependent care responsibilities
made it impossible for many women to escape rising flood waters and compounded
the difficulty of securing housing and employment once the storm took these things
from them. For this reason, black women, including Errolwyn Warden, Brianna
Cater, and thousands of others like them, made up the majority of those trapped in
New Orleans during Katrina and confined to evacuation centers after the storm
passed. The resulting forced isolation—whether in an abandoned city or the anonym-
umous vacuum of a mass evacuation shelter—amplified the violence of Katrina by
subjecting these women to an unprecedented risk of rape and sexual assault. Though
no woman is immune from sexualized violence following a natural disaster, dimen-
sons of race and socio-economic status converged in Katrina, as they typically do,
to increase the risk for black women.

The sexualized violence black women disproportionately experienced at the hands
of both intimate partners and strangers, both during and after the storm, is being sub-
merged in the narratives arising out of New Orleans. This is in part reflective of most
postdisaster discourse that marginalizes the experiences of women. It is in part the product of patriarchy that promotes sexual exploitation with the aim of subordinating women. It is in part proof that racism intersects with patriarchy to propagate stereotypes of black women as deceitful and promiscuous to an extent that denies their vulnerability to sexual assault.

This essay testifies to structural inadequacies in the official Katrina relief effort that contributed to the sexual exploitation of black women during and after the storm. Part I discusses false reports of violence coming out of New Orleans that made it difficult to bring attention to the real risk of rape and sexual assault. Part II explains why rape, an already under-reported crime, was even less likely to be reported during and after Hurricane Katrina. Part III discusses the proven risk of sexual assault during natural disaster and exposes the tragic risks that brought these risks to bear during Katrina and its aftermath. This essay concludes that race, sex, and class played a role in the government’s failure to adequately predict, prevent, and respond to this risk of sexualized violence during Katrina.

No doubt this small effort to speak truth to power will meet resistance. Black women who speak out on their own behalf will be denied, disparaged, and disbelieved. White women and other allies who stand in solidarity with black women will be doubted, too, though we will be silenced in a different way. Charges of racism will be levied against those of us who seek to expose how sexualized racial violence was permitted to flourish in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. We will be blamed for mythologizing stereotypes of black men when we protest the rape of black women. We will be accused of conspiring a divide-and-conquer strategy that pits black men against black women in the service of a white racist patriarchy. Most ferocious in assaulting us will likely be the very same reporters, politicians, media analysts, and law enforcement officials who themselves shamelessly disparaged black men through sensationalized violence after the storm. Still, the charges will sting. They are meant to. These charges divert attention away from the aim of this project, which is not to perpetuate black male stereotypes but to expose the indifference government officials displayed towards black women in failing to anticipate, prevent, and respond to the predictable epidemic of forced sex Katrina would bring to them. In short, we will be called racist for exposing racism in America. And still we bear witness.

PART I: CRYING WOLF

Raising awareness about sexual assault is never an easy task, but false reports of violence that erupted in the wake of Hurricane Katrina make it even more difficult to convince observers that allegations of rape and sexual assault taking place during and after the storm are legitimate.

Hurricane Katrina bulldozed the Gulf Coast of the United States on August 29, 2005. Leading up to the storm, the nation’s attention was focused on New Orleans, a city of 1.2 million people situated below sea level directly inside Katrina’s path. Thousands of evacuees were ordered into the New Orleans Superdome and Convention Center without being told that the shelters did not have enough food or water. Within days supplies ran out, and desperate evacuees began to leave the shelters looking for food. Other survivors struggled to find themselves to find shelter.

Reports of looters and looters have been seeing all the more because of the Convention's help in reaching those out there, have been watching hooligans watching Winfrey Show on Sundays. The conditions on the conditions are such that in New Orleans, little babies getting raped since.

The picture of Katrina is different than what the Convention Center had described. Some survivors reported in late September that no child was found.

Racism undoubtedly plays a part in this in turn perpetuating and particularly black men. As one DWJ commented, behavior were taken as an example of poor, black men being reduced to as beasts, raping and raping and raping and raping to save them.”

This epidemic continues now. This epidemic is out of control, and the crime wave are evidently.

Kathleen A. Bergin
shelters looking for a way to escape the city. They were not alone. Thousands of other survivors stranded on rooftops descended into the flood waters, taking it upon themselves to find a means to survive.

Reports of lawlessness spread like wildfire: thieves bulldozed a pharmacy, looters raided Wal-Mart, rioters sacked Baton Rouge, and gangsters waged open warfare in streets that had not flooded in the storm. The Time-Picayune reported that up to forty decomposing bodies were stuffed in freezers in the Convention Center, one of them being a 7-year-old girl “with her throat cut.” A later report told of rescue helicopters taking on sniper fire from stranded survivors perched on a rooftop. The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Chicago Tribune, and every other major news outlet in the country repeated these accounts without verifying their accuracy. So, too, did media outlets across the globe. BBC News, the Ottawa Citizen, The Australian and Al Jazeera all reported how black evacuees stranded by Hurricane Katrina had descended into a state of madness. The unprecedented destruction and desperation of the storm dovetailed with, and seemed to explain, these accounts as survivors struggled to find food, water, and bodies of loved ones in a city Katrina had turned into a toxic wetland.

Confirmation by public officials made unverified reports of carnage and depravity all the more believable. Mayor C. Ray Nagin publicly pleaded for federal intervention to help evacuate people out of New Orleans: “They have people standing out there, have been in that frickin’ Superdome for five days, watching dead bodies, watching hooligans killing people, raping people.” Appearing on the Oprah Winfrey Show on September 6, New Orleans Police Chief Eddie Compass reported on the conditions in the shelters: “We have individuals who are getting raped; we have individuals who are getting beaten. We had little babies in there, some of the little babies getting raped.”

The picture of New Orleans that ultimately emerged after the storm is now very different than what was first reported. Dead bodies were never found in the Convention Center freezers, and though it remains unclear whether helicopters in New Orleans took fire during the initial rescue effort, officials from the U.S. Air Force, Coast Guard, and Department of Homeland Security could not immediately confirm such incidents. The Louisiana State Department of Health and Hospitals reported in late September that ten people died at the Superdome, four at the Convention Center. Only two of those deaths appeared homicide related. Thankfully, no child was found with a slit throat.

Racism undoubtedly contributed to reports of widespread violence after Katrina; this in turn perpetuated invidious stereotypes about black storm victims, particularly black men. As one commentator noted, unverified accounts of black criminal behavior were taken as true because observers were “predisposed to accept the worst about poor, black flood victims.” The aggregate of these initial reports coalesced into a single master narrative of mostly poor, mostly black flood victims “portrayed as beasts, raping and killing one another and even shooting at rescue workers trying to save them.”

This epidemic of false reporting reified criminal stereotypes about black men. Now, against this backdrop, those who shamelessly sensationalized a post-Katrina crime wave are eager to deflect charges of racism by demanding hard evidence,
eyewitness testimony, or "official reports" before acknowledging an episode of Katrina-related violence, particularly sexual assault. Yet to presumptively discredit what is an objectively predictable form of violence against women—rape in times of natural disaster—reflects its own brand of racism. It relies on racism against black men to excuse the structural inadequacies of the relief effort that contributed to the sexual victimization of black women. It perpetuates stereotypes about black women—that they are deviant, deceptive, and promiscuous, and therefore to blame for their own victimization. It discredits the heroic efforts of the many black men who no doubt fought against individual predators and simultaneously shifted attention from those government officials whose malicious indifference ultimately provided those predators with an opportunity to assault black women. To deny the violently sexualized reality of Katrina on account of previous false reporting only compounds the horror of the storm for both black men and black women.

**PART II: RAPE AND REPORTING**

To deny that black women faced a disproportionate risk of sexual violence during Hurricane Katrina naively overlooks what is, at bottom, an unexceptional female life experience. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, nearly 18 million women are forcibly raped at some point in their lives. A woman in this country is raped or sexually assaulted every 2.5 minutes, most often at the hands of an acquaintance or intimate partner. Whether characterized by violence, sex, or both, the sadistic subordination of rape and sexual assault perpetually endangers the everyday lives of women, especially women of color.

Against this reality it is incomprehensible to suggest that sexual assault was anything but commonplace among black women already ravaged by Katrina's deadly strike on Louisiana and the other Gulf Coast states. Unlike acts of murder or other forms of alleged Katrina violence that can be discredited in the absence of hard evidence, the same cannot be said of rape and sexual assault. Rape scars are not always visible on the surface; and the emotional signs of sexual assault—anxiety, depression, sleeplessness—are indistinguishable from the posttraumatic stress induced by the death, destruction, and displacement of a natural disaster. Sexual violence would compound the trauma of Katrina but would not be immediately apparent to an untrained eye.

Nor does the lack of an "official report," eyewitness testimony, or confirmation by police discount the violently sexualized aftermath of Katrina, as some news accounts and public officials suggest. Experts agree that even in times of social stability less than one third of all rapes and sexual assaults are reported to police. The majority of rape survivors never tell anyone about the incident. The intimate nature of rape and sexual assault, coupled with feelings of guilt, shame and stigmatization, make it extraordinarily difficult to track these crimes even under normal circumstances. Indeed, the worldwide attention paid to high-profile accounts of sexual violence, such as that of singer-songwriter Charmaine Neville, might have legitimized the experience for women subject to similar violence, but it exposed the risks of disclosure for those victims emotionally unprepared to relive the nightmare of assault.
Witnesses to sexual violence also struggle to process the stigma, guilt, and helplessness that keeps victims themselves from reporting, and they are also not likely to come forward with an accusation of abuse in the immediate aftermath of a crisis when focused on their own survival and that of their loved ones.

Indeed, few women should be expected to take on the psychological stress of coming forward to reveal a rape when displaced by a natural disaster. This is particularly true for those women whose motivation for reporting might be retribution against an assailant. The likelihood of a sexual predator spending any amount of time behind bars is negligible. When a rape is reported, there is only a 16 percent chance the rapist will go to jail. Factor in unreported rapes and sixteen rapists will walk free. Only one will spend a day in jail. Moreover, research suggests that perpetrators who sexually assault black women are less likely to be prosecuted or convicted. The prospect of prosecution and punishment, therefore, is neither a significant deterrent against an act of sexual aggression nor an incentive for black women to report one.

The government's botched relief effort is itself partly responsible for the low number of official rape reports immediately following Katrina. Inadequate preparation and inexcusable delay showed government officials to be wholly indifferent to the survival needs of the mostly poor, mostly black residents of New Orleans hardest hit by the storm. Though scientists for years had predicted the destruction of New Orleans in the wake of even a category 3 hurricane, Louisiana officials had no preestablished plan in place to evacuate the city's most vulnerable residents. Once the storm hit, state officials failed to muster all available resources to accelerate evacuations and made an unwise and dangerous choice in directing stranded residents to either the Superdome or Convention Center as a refuge of last resort without an adequate supply of food or water. Governor Kathleen Blanco's failure to make good on her promise to expedite evacuations using hundreds of available school buses showed her to be either incompetent or apathetic to the 150,000 residents who could not afford their own transportation out of New Orleans. Convinced that government officials cared not whether those trapped inside New Orleans lived or died, why would black women trust law enforcement on the ground to respond to the victimization they experienced during or after the storm?

The federal government's deadly nonresponse likely killed whatever trust in government officials anyone should have had following the storm. Katrina made landfall on August 29, but as early as August 26, the likelihood of "unprecedented cataclysm" had been predicted. President Bush nonetheless refused to convene a task force to coordinate a federal response until August 31, four days after Louisiana was placed under a state of emergency. That same day Bush told the nation, "I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees." Yet even before the storm made landfall, in addition to the public reports warning of catastrophic devastation, the Director of the National Hurricane Center personally briefed Bush and other high-ranking security officials that Katrina would overwhelm the deteriorating levee system meant to keep flood waters out of New Orleans.

The Department of Homeland Security was also aware. Still, FEMA director Michael Brown waited three days before formally requesting that the Department dispatch rescue personnel to the Gulf, and though the Louisiana National Guard
requested 700 buses to speed evacuations, FEMA sent only 100. All the while, on a Navy vessel stocked with hospital beds, food, and supplies, doctors and rescue workers waited offshore for dispatch instructions that never came. The President vacationed in Crawford, Texas and posed for a birthday photo-op; the Secretary of State enjoyed a Broadway show in New York City; and the Secretary of Defense took in a San Diego Padres baseball game. For high-ranking national officials, first-class entertainment appeared more important than saving the lives of destitute black hurricane victims abandoned in New Orleans. Surely such indifference at the federal level did little to persuade black women to trust the government officials and law enforcement agents they encountered in New Orleans.

Indeed, at the local level, allegations of racism and rampant corruption in the New Orleans Police Department led black residents of the city to distrust law enforcement long before Katrina hit. The devastation created by the storm only exacerbated existing tensions. Police officers themselves lived and worked in New Orleans and witnessed their own loved ones and livelihoods wash away in the storm. Looting among some members of the New Orleans police force was caught on video. Others abandoned their posts in the midst of the relief effort. At least two committed suicide. Widespread reports of New Orleans descending into chaos, though now largely discredited, at the time prompted Governor Blanco to announce on television that local law enforcement agents deputized by the state “have M-16s and are locked and loaded. These troops know how to shoot and kill and I expect they will.” This hysteria influenced how law enforcement officials perceived and behaved towards black residents strained by the hurricane, and it no doubt contributed to several shoot-outs, a videotaped beating, and at least one post-Katrina fatality at the hands of the police.

Police from New Orleans were not the only law enforcement agents black citizens had reason to fear. To escape the intolerable conditions in the Convention Center, an estimated 800 black residents of New Orleans attempted to cross the Crescent City Bridge into neighboring Gretna where they were told buses would be waiting to take them to a safe shelter. But before they reached the other side, members of the local sheriff’s office halted them at gunpoint and turned them back to New Orleans. These experiences surely discouraged black women from engaging the help of law enforcement officials they already considered hostile to black men and distrustful of black women even before Katrina confirmed that impression.

Despite all this, some women did bravely attempt to elicit the help of law enforcement in response to rapes that did occur. Overwhelmed by the storm, however, some law enforcement officials were either unable or unwilling to take reports. When a forty-six-year-old home health care worker was raped at gunpoint in an abandoned New Orleans apartment building on the first night of the storm, a rape subsequently verified by a forensic nurse, members of the local National Guard refused to take her report a week later when they finally came with guns drawn to evacuate the building. The police were “stressed out themselves,” the woman later recounted. “They didn’t have no food. They didn’t have water. They didn’t have communication. They didn’t have ammunition. The National Guards didn’t want to hear it.”

Rescue operations taking place in cities outside of New Orleans also made it impossible for some Katrina evacuees to report a sexual assault that occurred in the Superdome, the Convention Center. For the first several days, police and rescue operation centers refused to take reports, explaining, “that the National Guard and law enforcement explained, “that the National Guard don’t have the resources to go into the Convention Center to coordinate things.” Ultimately, local authorities did not sign an agreement to coordinate efforts until September, two months after the disaster. In the meantime, the New Orleans police [would] be the only law enforcement agency on the scene.

Under these conditions, women and girls who found themselves raped in New Orleans faced an added hardship: the police officers in a city where they lived and worked were not qualified to investigate. The local police had established a “shoot on sight” policy for rapists. It is unlikely any rape victims sustained injuries.

Law enforcement agents all over the city were overwhelmed by the storm, and as a result, rape reports were largely neglected or attempted raped victims were not taken seriously. At least 81 additional rape reports were filed in the days after Katrina.

The National Sexual Assault Network Foundation Against rape and sexual assault set up a toll-free hotline to track the number of sexual assaults in New Orleans. The number was accessible to medical personnel in the region including medical and social work professionals, and the group received reports of at least 140 rapes and attempted rapes. One victim, a woman who fled her home in the aftermath of Katrina, received 15 different versions of her report from police officers across the city. All of these reports were dropped after police returned the victim’s name to the medical hotline database.

The experience of women and girls who survived the violence of the hurricane with the violently male-dominated environment of New Orleans during the course of the sexual assaults was made worse by the response of law enforcement agencies. Similar levels of violence and non-response to sex crimes have been reported in other cities, including South Africa, the Philippines, and Mexico. The Valdez experience of Katrina evacuees, meanwhile, was common throughout the devastated areas of New Orleans and Jackson.
Superdome, the Convention Center, or anywhere else on the Gulf Coast for that matter. For the first several weeks following Katrina, police in Houston's major evacuation centers refused to take reports from shelter evacuees about sexual assaults that occurred outside their jurisdiction because, as a spokesperson for the police department explained, "there was no way to code reports from Katrina evacuees in the Department's computer system." Though such "courtesy reports" are routinely collected to coordinate law enforcement activity, officers in Houston did not start doing so until September 13, after this appalling administrative defect was revealed in the press. In the meantime, the spokesperson stated, "Anything that happened in New Orleans [would] be reported to New Orleans" for possible investigation in the future.

Under these conditions, it is inconceivable to require a woman to produce an eyewitness, police officer, or "official" report to confirm that she was raped. Women raped in New Orleans were told in Houston to report the assault to law enforcement officers in a city whose infrastructure was submerged in water. In New Orleans itself, local police had either abandoned their post or remained on duty with orders to shoot on sight. Six regional domestic violence shelters were closed because of hurricane damage. Five were destroyed. In the wake of Katrina to whom, exactly, were rape victims supposed to report?

**Part III: Rape and Natural Disaster**

Law enforcement officials shrewdly denounced an epidemic of violence following the storm, and as of December 21, 2005, the official number of post-Katrina rapes and attempted rapes stood at four. What should have been apparent at the time is that additional rapes would eventually be reported. Predictably, they have.

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center has partnered with the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault and four other Gulf Coast rape crisis centers to track the number of unreported post-Katrina rapes through an internet database accessible to medical practitioners, social service providers, crisis counselors, and sexual assault victims. In its first six weeks of operation, and with almost no publicity, the group received forty-two reports of Katrina-related sexual assaults that occurred both inside and outside of New Orleans, including a disproportionate number of gang rapes and stranger rapes. Witness Justice, a nonprofit victim services organization, received 156 reports of Katrina-related violent crimes in the first few days after the storm. About one third of those involved sexual assault. That number no doubt continues to grow.

The experience of the women who reported these crimes is entirely consistent with the violently sexualized aftermath of mass displacement worldwide. Reported sexual assaults rose 300 percent following the 1990 earthquake in Lome Prieta, California. Similar trends were reported in the wake of the 2005 tsunami that pummeled South East Asia and the horn of Africa. The eruption of Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines, and Mt. St. Helens in Washington state triggered a spike in violence against women, as did the massive 1998 Canadian ice storm, the 1995 Exxon Valdez environmental oil disaster, and every one of the four major hurricanes that pummeled Florida in 2004.
The reality of gender specific violence, particularly sexual assault, is so predictable during times of catastrophic upheaval that major human rights instruments that address the needs of refugees and displaced persons—including the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, and the United Nations' Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement—presume a heightened risk to women. The World Health Organization advises relief agencies, health workers, and other field staff working with displaced populations to "assume that sexual assault may be a problem unless they have conclusive proof to the contrary." The United Nations Population Fund advises that emergency responders treating refugees and others subjected to refugee like conditions "should act on the assumption that sexual violence is a problem, unless they have conclusive proof that it is not the case." The United Nation's Inter-Agency Standing Committee instructs relief workers that preventive measures should be implemented in the earliest stages of a disaster "regardless of whether the known prevalence of sexual violence is high or low." Because of the difficulty in accurately measuring the magnitude of sexual violence in an emergency, "all humanitarian personnel should therefore assume and believe that gender-based violence, and in particular sexual violence, is taking place and is a serious and life-threatening protection issue, regardless of the presence or absence of concrete and reliable evidence."

These organizations recognize that hardships created by displacement following natural disaster precipitate conditions ripe for sexual assault and violence. In his opening remarks to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, Francis Deng, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General emphasized, "Displacement . . . breaks up families, cuts social and cultural ties, terminates dependable employment relationships, disrupts educational opportunities, denies access to such vital necessities as food, shelter and medicine, and exposes innocent persons to such acts of violence as attacks on camps, disappearances and rape. . . The internally displaced are among the most vulnerable populations, desperately in need of protection and assistance."  

Experts in the gendered dynamics of natural disaster agree that the destruction and disorder created by Katrina undermined social constructs of masculinity in a way that rendered women vulnerable to rape and violent assault. "Men without jobs and those unable to save family members and other victims may feel humiliated and unmanned. . . Some men will cope through drugs, alcohol, physical aggression or all three, hurting themselves and putting the women and girls around them at risk." In Katrina, sexual violence provided a mechanism for reasserting control and reestablishing patriarchy upset by social instability.

Natural disasters are particularly threatening to women when they obstruct law enforcement capabilities and destroy familial arrangements that naturally deter aggression. Katrina rendered large portions of New Orleans inaccessible to law enforcement officials and rescue workers. Communications breakdowns, logistical obstacles and personnel shortages delayed even volunteer efforts to rescue stranded survivors in those few areas that were marginally accessible. In the isolation of disaster, sexual abuse at the hands of a spouse or intimate partner becomes much more likely. At the same time, a disproportionate number of stranded survivors were single women, including those widowed or abandoned in the storm. Left to fend for themselves and their children without the protective buffer of a male spouse or partner, these women too began to experience sexual violence as a common property.

Moreover, gender roles and power dynamics of labor render women particularly vulnerable in times of crisis. This is especially true for women who do not have the means or opportunity to deny consent to sexual acts. "I'm basically forced to have sex. If you don't, you will be forced to back out and deal with the consequences. And you're going to need food, you need water. . . ." An undetermined number of women find themselves trapped by rising floodwaters and in need of sexual intercourse, overcrowded shelters, and the supply of human waste and sewage. "It's almost like a Resource Center and a Red Cross合并," said the Executive Director of a women's shelter. "In the first steps should immediately address the prevalence and severity of sexual assault at the Superdome in the days following Katrina."  

It is no secret that the sexual assault rates are the highest they have ever been and that the effects of sexual violence on all women is well known. That sense of powerlessness is what makes women angry; for good reason. They feel they have no choice but to do as they are told, or have to stand by while those with power and connections get what they need to commit rape.

Shelters in Houston, Galveston, and Beaumont, as well as "the Astrodome, which was not much better," were less than ideal. These shelters were not equipped to handle the crimes. We have along way to go before we are waiting to be rescued.

The population that was forced to evacuate included evacuees made them more vulnerable to assault. The surrounding parishes were also affected by evacuation. Many were already struggling to make ends meet. In the initial evacuation process, police kicked out the four shelters for being ineligible for entering the identity of register...
Moreover, gendered economic disparities, childcare responsibilities, and divisions of labor render women increasingly dependent on abusive partners for support in times of crisis. This situational vulnerability undermines the ability of poor women to deny consent to sex and reduces the chance that a woman will report a sex crime that does occur. It also increases the likelihood that a woman trapped by disaster will be forced to barter sex with men in exchange for food, shelter and children’s needs. An undetermined number of women from New Orleans will be forced into prostitution as a result of Katrina.

Katrínas forced these conditions not only on black women and their children trapped by rising floodwaters in New Orleans, but also on those stranded in sweltering, overcrowded shelters where they were forced to sleep and breathe in a miasma of human waste and disease. This is why leaders of the National Sexual Violence Resource Center and other anti-violence advocates called on government officials to prioritize evacuations out of the shelters as early as September 2. Judy Benítez, Executive Director of the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault, warned that steps should be immediately be taken to avoid sexual violence in light of the powerlessness and alienation evacuees were experiencing. Speaking of the inhumane conditions at the Superdome, Benítez warned:

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.

Shelters in Houston were only marginally safer than those in New Orleans, if at all. A spokesperson for the National Alliance to End Sexual Violence confirmed that “the Astrodome, while convenient and a first-step towards the goal of evacuation, [is] less than ideal. These large-scale shelters can become dangerous settings for so many crimes. We have already heard of many rapes being committed among those still waiting to be rescued and among those in the refugee areas.”

The population mix in the mass evacuation shelters established to house Katrínas evacuees made them particularly dangerous settings for women. In anticipation of the storm, more than 15,000 registered sex offenders from New Orleans and surrounding parishes were sent to open shelters along with tens of thousands of other evacuees. Though some states require that sex offenders be housed in separate facilities, no apparent effort was made in New Orleans either at the Superdome or Convention Center to segregate sex offenders from the general population during the initial evacuation effort. Nor did officials in Houston monitor initial access to the four shelters there. Privacy concerns prompted federal officials to withhold the identity of registered sex offenders from state and local officials operating shelters...
outside of Louisiana. The absence of an accessible national database made it impossible to identify known sex offenders even among the understandably few evacuees who would have been able to show any form of identification. High rates of recidivism particular to untreated sex offenders, coupled with the increased stress created by the disaster itself, rendered the environment within the mass shelters particularly volatile for the many black women housed there.

Conditions within the mass evacuation centers that I witnessed firsthand in Houston aggravated the risk of assault by a sexual predator. The people who came to Houston arrived on hot, crowded buses after spending days upon days trapped on a rooftop or packed into a distressed shelter in New Orleans. Many were elderly, many were sick. By the time the first few buses arrived, basic medical supplies had already run out. Several evacuees approached me begging for insulin to stave off diabetic shock—an elderly man, a sixty-year-old woman, a ten-year-old boy. The medical team had none, and together we tried to compensate with orange juice and chocolate bars that my colleague and I had brought anticipating a shortage of supplies.

Inside the Astrodome, evacuees were promised a cot to sleep on. There were not enough. Blankets, sheets and pillows had either run out or were not being distributed. Clogged toilets spewed feces and other waste onto the bathroom floors that bare-footed evacuees tracked into the hallways, spreading disease where babies wrapped in soaping, soiled diapers slept on hard, cold, dirty concrete. The inhumanity of these conditions undoubtedly created frustrations that a sexual predator would unleash on a more vulnerable evacuee.

Though shelter conditions improved over time, their physical layout was inherently dangerous. International relief agencies recommend against "shared communal living space with unrelated families" in order to reduce the likelihood of sexual exploitation among displaced populations. Despite this advice, women had no option but to share sleeping space with strangers while sheltering in the Astrodome and Reliant Park, as they did in the Superdome and Convention Center in New Orleans. This oversight was particularly troublesome in Houston given that protective arrangements were provided to families sheltered in the George R. Brown Convention Center, a downtown facility connected by skywalk to the Hilton of the Americas that operated its services under the watchful eye of international visitors.

Security lapses created additional problems. "The sheer size of the shelters and their many hiding places, coupled with a lack of lighting due to power outages, makes them less than ideal for emergency housing," said a representative for the Red Cross, the organization in charge of coordinating Houston's relief effort. Though shelters were inexcusably overcrowded, they nonetheless provided ample opportunity for violence to take place without notice, especially in the most crucial hours of the evacuation when volunteers focused on rescue and relief over sex and security. In the Houston Astrodome, dark hallways, open storage rooms, and a labyrinth of secluded bleachers provided plenty of opportunity for a would-be rapist to perpetrate an assault beyond sight and out of earshot. A colleague and I proved as much by photographing these hotspots without ever being detected by law enforcement officers, evacuees or other volunteers. Broken bottles, open liquor bottles, the pungent stench of urine and feces and, most disturbingly, a wet, discarded baby's yuuting, made it clear that someone had located these areas before we had. Surely one intent on personal attack would report these areas, if they existed.

Intermittent military gestures for women and "sexual safety officers" for both male and female evacuees, were clearly facing hurdles in their right. Law enforcement officers did, they stood on their backs to shield the female evacuees. In the parking lot of the showers, one officer took a group of women down the hall. More than one evacuation center had showers without doors for women's showers.

Society's attempt to respond to the disaster in Houston was erratic, and responses to the management of the evacuees were mixed. A girl in my group was taken to the ladies room not permitted to enter the men's restrooms. A girl half my size was able to pass the police barrier to the ladies room. In other cases evacuation centers were not able to accommodate the evacuation and arrival of new arrivals, and a number of evacuees remained outside the center before the man group.

Gendered aspects intersected with race in the management of the evacuation. Social constructionists have failed to respond to the mistreatment of women of color in the disaster. More specifically, Houston that was not a city of color had the vast majority of the women they knew to be black. Acknowledging the fact of race is informing until an attainment of understanding where you have a little, you get a little. It is evident that many individuals, particularly women of color, were not able to respond to the call of the evacuation centers they had been "attacked in the evacuators."

To me, there was no one intent on personal attack in these areas, if they existed.
one intent on perpetrating an act of violence could have surreptitiously accessed these areas, if they had not already.

Intermittent monitoring of restrooms and shower areas created additional dangers for women and girls housed in evacuation centers. At Reliant Arena, access to both male and female shower stalls was through a single entrance that opened to opposite facing hallways-showers for men to the left; showers for women to the right. Law enforcement officials monitored this area only sporadically. When they did, they stood outside the open entryway facing the shelter's main living area with their backs towards the hallways that led to the shower stalls. Men and boys entering the showers took advantage of this arrangement by making a quick turn behind the officers, down the right-facing hallway, into the women's bath. I observed this on more than one occasion and chased down several boys trying to sneak into the women's showers. This was more than child's play. Many female evacuees I spoke with at Reliant Arena, as well as other shelters in Houston, refused to enter the showers because men and boys had made their way inside. The same was true for female restrooms. A girl about twelve years old recounted to me that a man opened the door to the ladies room and attempted to pull her into the men's room where she could see a number of other men waiting behind the open door. She was able to escape before the man grabbed her.

**Part IV: Conclusion**

Gendered aspects of inequality endanger all women in a natural disaster. They cruelly intersected with race and class to particularize the danger for black women trapped in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina and housed in Houston's shelters following the storm. But more than situational vulnerability is to blame for the circumstances black women faced following Katrina.

Government officials inexcusably failed to anticipate and prevent hurricane-related sexual violence throughout the evacuation and sheltering process. They also failed to respond when concerns about sexual assault were brought directly to their attention. More than once I personally informed law enforcement officials in Houston that women had related to me their fear of vulnerability, that they or other women they knew had been harmed. Yet these concerns were dismissed. One officer acknowledged that he too "heard rumors about sexual assault," but could do nothing until an attack was "officially reported." Another blithely conceded that "anywhere you have 25,000 people, sexual assaults are bound to happen," so there was little he could do to prevent them from occurring. Only after photographs of security lapses inside the Astrodome were posted on the internet did law enforcement officials in Houston block access to at least some secluded rooms and passageways.

To me, there is no doubt that the bulk of this indifference was influenced by race—by the fact that a majority of the evacuees sent to Houston from New Orleans were black—and poor. Just as quickly as law enforcement officers and other shelter officials dismissed my concerns for the security of evacuees, they queried whether I had been "attacked," whether I felt "unsafe." These exchanges became routine, and I suspect that similar exchanges with white volunteers took place in New Orleans as
well. I wonder how they would have responded had I answered yes to their questions. I wonder if they understood, as I did, how racism, conscious or otherwise, influenced their interactions with me, how it triggered a spontaneous emotional concern for the well-being of a white woman while at the same time dampened their willingness to acknowledge, much less address, the very real risk of rape and sexual assault facing thousands of stranded black women. Perhaps they cannot see, and would never admit, the pernicious influence of sex, class and race on the decisions they made, and action they neglected to take, during Katrina. Yet some of us know. Because this we witnessed.

Notes


50. Reproductive Health, 38.
60. Nancy Cook Lauer, “Rapes in New Orleans Chaos Were Avoidable,” Women’s eNews, September 4, 2005, http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2439/context/cover. Ironically, the representative praised Houston for its response, even though the characteristics of its major relief centers created the very conditions for abuse she warned against.

In the days immediately following the storm, the media attention focused on the physical damage and loss of life, one of the worst natural disasters in American history. Media attention was also drawn to the social problems resulting from the storm, including the displacement of thousands of people, the lack of food and water, and the physical destruction of homes and businesses. The media, journalists, and officials alike emphasized the need for immediate relief efforts and the importance of providing adequate resources to those affected by the storm. The attention was also focused on the need for long-term planning and infrastructure development to prevent similar disasters in the future.

This chapter explores the challenges of poverty in New Orleans, a city with a large African American population that has been disproportionately affected by natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. The chapter argues that there is a growing divide between the affected communities and the rest of the city, and that efforts to address this divide are necessary to ensure a more equitable and sustainable future for all residents of New Orleans. The city of New Orleans has a rich history and culture, but it has also faced significant challenges, including poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation. The chapter highlights the need for continued efforts to address these challenges and to create a more just and sustainable society.