



Editorial

Noticing gender (or not) in disasters

As I write this in September 2005, it is one week after Hurricane Katrina precipitated what will arguably be the greatest disaster in United States' history. Since the hurricane's landfall, media outlets in the US have been providing on-the-scene non-stop coverage of the unfolding disaster. It was this media presence as much as anything else that prodded the US federal government out of its stupor in the week after the hurricane's landfall. The in-your-face coverage of the accelerating calamity and the irrepressible outrage of on-the-scene reporters—usually so detached and calm—finally pricked the national conscience, and the federal machinery of disaster relief slipped into gear, albeit dollars short and days late. The pictures from New Orleans of old people dehydrating and dying on curbs, of bodies floating past storefronts, of families sleeping under highways on beds of garbage and sewage, and of thousands of people sheltering amidst squalor and sewage will haunt US disaster planning, and perhaps US electoral politics, for years to come.

The intense coverage also, remarkably, provoked a national discussion about race, class, and privilege. By about the third day, reporters (mostly white) started to say out loud how noticeable it was that the people trapped in the disaster in New Orleans were mostly, undeniably, Black. In the tone of this discovery there is something of the quality of Captain Renault in *Casablanca* who was “shocked, shocked” to find gambling in his fine establishment; in point of fact, it would have been extremely difficult to *not* notice that the dead, the dying, and the desperate on the streets of New Orleans were African-American. Nonetheless this enlightened “noticing” by the media produced a moment of genuine inquiry as mainstream reporters and analysts started asking tough, targeted questions about why this disaster fell so hard on one side of the race line. African-Americans comprise about 68% of the population of New Orleans (US Census Bureau, 2004), but clearly represent a much larger proportion of trapped survivors than that. This is a race gap that warrants the outrage and attention it has received.

And yet there is another equally important and starkly apparent social dimension to the hurricane disaster that

media coverage has put in front of our eyes but that has yet to be “noticed”: this disaster fell hard on one side of the gender line too. Most of the survivors are women. Women comprise 54% of the population of New Orleans, so the gender gap amongst victims is even more dramatic than the race gap (US Census Bureau, 2004). The two gaps need not compete for our attention; they are linked. The surviving victims of this hurricane are mostly African-American women, and no doubt the ranks of the dead will be also.

The gender gap is no surprise, or shouldn't be. Disaster is seldom gender neutral. In the 1995 Kobe (Japan) earthquake, one and a half times more women died than men; in the 1991 floods in Bangladesh, five times as many women as men died; in the South East Asia 2004 tsunami, death rates for women across the region averaged three to four times that of men (UNEP, 2005). The gender, class, and race dimension of each disaster needs particular explanation. Feminists working in relief agencies and the UN, for example, identified several factors that explain the gender skew in the 2004 tsunami deaths (Oxfam International, 2005): sex differences in physical strength that make a difference when clinging to life might mean clinging to a tree or climbing to safety; prevailing ideologies of femininity that influence the extent to which women are encouraged to or allowed to develop physical strength and capacity, and that mean, among other things, that women and girls are not taught to swim; the different social roles and locations (metaphorical and literal locations) that men and women occupy, particularly with regards to responsibility for children. In a fast-moving storm surge, children slow things down. Mothers who stop to find and gather up children lose valuable time, and with children in their arms they cannot swim, climb, or hang on.

Experience from these and other crisis zones around the world allows us to start to explain the gendered nature of the New Orleans disaster. The biology and ideology of physical strength may turn out to play as much a role in the gender-skewed survival rates in this hurricane as they did in the tsunami. Additionally we know that the poverty that leaves people more vulnerable to disaster amplifies gender as surely as it does race. Indeed, everywhere in

the world women are the poorest of the poor. In New Orleans, a city with a poverty rate higher than the national average, 15% of all families live below the official poverty line; 41% of female-headed households with children fall below this line (US Census Bureau, 2004). People in poverty are the least likely to have access to good information ahead of disaster, the least likely to have a place they can go to and stay for days or weeks, and the least likely to have the means to leave. In the days ahead of the storm a lot of people did get out of New Orleans, almost all of them by car. Poverty combines with race and ideologies about gender to produce a metric of deep disadvantage in terms of mobility: even in a country as awash in cars as the United States, women are less likely to have a car or driver's license than their male counterparts. Of all Americans, it is poor African American women who are the least likely of all to have a car or access to one.

International disaster and refugee agencies have been profoundly influenced by feminist insights into the importance of the gender dynamics of disaster. From Oxfam to the UN High Commission on Refugees, experts now routinely incorporate the understanding that disasters magnify gender disadvantage, that women and their children have specific post-disaster recovery needs, and that preparations for gender-specific emergency intervention and recovery are integral to disaster planning. This knowledge appears to have entirely bypassed American commentators, planners and media.

The “not-noticing” of the gendered dimensions of this disaster by the American media and by the panoply of experts who interpreted the disaster to the public through the media is alarming and warrants attention in itself. Feminist theorists have long pointed to the public invisibility of women, especially women of racial minorities, and the New Orleans case study provides a dramatic example of the “unremarkability” of racialized minority women in the gaze of a predominantly male and white media. In the real world of an unfolding disaster, this comes at a price. For example, the lack of curiosity about the rapes in the midst of the New Orleans disaster is just one particularly disturbing aspect of this willful ignorance. Rapes have been reported by dozens of survivors, and mentioned as a sub-text in several news stories but always in passing and with no follow-through: to date, there have been no attempts to verify the dozens of reports, no interviews with police

chiefs about the magnitude of rape, no curiosity about the construction of masculinity that contemplates rape in conditions of such extreme human suffering, no disaster experts assuring us that rape-support teams are included in the rescue teams, no discussion about the medical and psychological resources that women will need who have survived unimaginable tragedy and stress and have then also been raped. And, of course, in the climate of conservative triumphalism in the US, there will be no public discussion and almost certainly no provision by the government of the reproductive services, including abortion, that should be made available to women who have been raped.

American media commentators and politicians insist on referring to this as a natural disaster. There's a certain comfort and perhaps political cover in that designation, but experts eschew this term. The hurricane came ashore, but from then on it's been a human disaster all the way. The gendered character of this disaster, and the willful silence about it, is also more artifice than nature. An Oxfam report on the Asian tsunami reminds us that “disasters, however ‘natural,’ are profoundly discriminatory. Wherever they hit, pre-existing structures and social conditions determine that some members of the community will be less affected while others will pay a higher price. Among the differences that determine how people are affected by such disasters is that of gender” (Oxfam, 2005). At some point in the New Orleans disaster, this will be officially “noticed” but the costs of not paying attention to the gendered divide earlier in the disaster will be high for the women whose needs have gone unnoticed and unaddressed.

References

- Oxfam International, 2005. The tsunami's impact on women. Oxfam Briefing Note, March 2005.
- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), 2005. “Feature Focus: Gender, Poverty and Environment” GEO Yearbook 2004/5. UNEP, Nairobi.
- US Census Bureau, 2004. American Community Survey. Washington DC.

Joni Seager
Dean, Environmental Studies,
York University,
4700 Keele Street, Toronto,
Canada M3J 1P3
E-mail address: jseager@yorku.ca