

# Lines that divide, ties that bind: race, class, and gender in women's flood recovery in the US and UK<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

'I want you to listen to these women. I want you to hear their stories and how they struggled.' The speaker urged researchers and policy-makers to attend to the neglected experiences of Latinas like herself, a former migrant worker, in a major US flood. Why are these stories and struggles so important? Why are they so little heard?

This paper examines diversity in flood impact and recovery in major floods in the US (Red River Valley, Upper Midwest 1997) and UK (East and West Scotland 1993 and 1994), bringing a comparative perspective to two primary questions: First, how did the social relations of race/ethnicity, social class and gender increase the structural vulnerability of women in communities subject to flooding? Secondly, how did these patterns affect women's subsequent recovery from major flooding?<sup>2</sup>

Our investigations were intended both to offer a more nuanced perspective on 'diversity' in the development of disaster theory and research, and to influence organisational practices and cultures in emergency management. In the communities we studied, as in others (Wiest 1998; Finlay 1998; Fothergill 1999a), power structures based on race, gender and class exposed some residents more than others to the effects of disastrous flooding and complicated their emotional and material recovery. There was little evidence, however, that local emergency planners in these two settings had at hand an analysis either of women's structural vulnerability or of organisational barriers to recovery, to help guide the effective use and distribution of scarce resources. As our research is intended to help address this planning gap, we conclude with specific action recommendations for change.

## Diversity in disaster sociology: feminist and social vulnerability theory

Notwithstanding the popular notion of disasters as social levellers impacting residents indiscriminately and the focus in dominant disaster theory on ostensibly universal patterns, the social impacts of

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extreme events are socially constructed within particular sociological contexts and experienced, at least in part, through gendered, racialised, and classed parameters. Deeply embedded patterns of gender, racial/ethnic, and class stratification and segregation shape the relative vulnerability of residents to extreme events like floods, their capacity to recover from flood effects, and their power to engage in community reconstruction (Blaikie et. al. 1994; Peacock, Morrow and Gladwin 1997; Enarson and Morrow 1998).

Specific social decisions, for example regarding urban development, zoning, social insurance, or construction codes, interact with physical hazards to shape the relative vulnerability of residents to extreme events. Community and household power structures place residents at risk, for example through racial bias in insurance payments or racial segregation fostered by real estate and lending institutions (e.g. 'redlining' neighborhoods), economic barriers to safe housing, poverty rates among the elderly, race- and gender-based job segregation and wage differentials, and exposure to personal violence (see Peacock, Morrow and Gladwin 1997; Enarson 1999; Childers 1999; Fordham and Ketteridge 1998; Fordham 1999; Enarson 1999a). Quite apart from the water, wind, or fire, social forces produce unsustainable environments and inegalitarian social relations setting the ground for 'disaster by design' (Mileti 1999) when natural hazards threaten human communities in the future.

Studying disasters 'through the eyes of women,' for example, clearly illustrates the inadequacy of theory which either universalises or compartmentalises or both (Enarson and Morrow 1998; Fordham 1998). Notwithstanding the self-evident diversity of the world's women, there are

common patterns in the material conditions of women's everyday lives, including domestic and reproductive labor, caregiving and family support, and vulnerability to sexual and domestic violence. These commonalities afford women a unique angle of vision when natural and technological disasters impact human communities.

To study the social relations of gender in disaster is necessarily to study intersecting patterns of race/ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and other power relations in culture and society. There is a clear need to move beyond analysis limited to demographic variables or focusing on victimisation, i.e. examining race only as minority status, gender only in women's lives, and class only in the lives of the poor. We draw on feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock 1998; Smith 1987) and other writing by women of color (Hill Collins 1990; Narayan 1989) to analyse these intersecting patterns in women's flood experiences. In doing so, we reject the misconception (embedded as much in popular culture as government research) of a dichotomy between 'women' and 'minorities', including the false implication that 'all the women are white and all the blacks are men', to paraphrase the title of a popular women's studies text (Hull, Scott and Smith 1982).

Feminist standpoint theory, as developed by Nancy Hartsock (1983), Dorothy Smith (1987), Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and others, does not suggest a single, unitary female stance or exclusive truth claims, as the experiences of women across racial, ethnic, economic, sexual and cultural divides are manifestly diverse. But the knowledge earned by women, forged by oppression into a social group at once highly vulnerable to disaster and marginalised in emergency management, cannot be captured without attention to

## Notes

1. We gratefully borrow our title from Johnnetta Cole's edited text *All American Women: Lines That Divide, Ties That Bind* (The Free Press, 1986).

2. In a forthcoming paper, we develop a comparative perspective on race, class, and gender in women's flood experiences in the US/UK and in developing societies.

gender relations in disaster theory and practice.

That we have not yet heard the voices of women disaster subjects, understood calamitous events and processes through their everyday experience, documented their disaster decisions and survival strategies, or addressed their interests and needs in disaster practice and policy reflects, not their irrelevance, but our failure to ask the right questions (Enarson 1998; Bolin, Jackson, and Crist 1998). Because the social location of the observer shapes knowledge claims (Stanley and Wise 1993), including the knowledge we have about disasters, the absence of these specifically female experiences in the sociology of disaster is a real loss.

Both vulnerability theory and feminist theory insist on a 'bottom up' or 'inside out' perspective on the social construction of disasters. As we argue in conclusion, disaster mitigation cannot remain the province of credentialed experts or community elites but must centrally engage the individuals, households, and communities most at risk (Maskrey 1989).

## Overview

While stratification patterns impact all aspects of the disaster cycle, our focus in this paper is on emergency flood relief and long-term recovery. We also focus largely on women and issues women identify as significant in their relationships with male partners, fathers, sons, and brothers, and the male-dominated disaster planning and response organisations. We invite and anticipate the direct investigation of men's specifically gendered disaster experiences<sup>3</sup>.

We begin by sketching a framework for women's structural flood vulnerability in the Grand Forks and Scottish study areas. Here, despite the geographical and cultural spread of our study locations, we identify common intersecting patterns based on race, class and gender which can, and should, be identified as an important part of social vulnerability analysis. Next, we use data from open-ended interviews and focus groups to suggest how the social relations of race/ethnicity, class and gender created significant organisational barriers to resources vitally needed by women and their families.

But these 'lines that divide' are more than simply the basis for increased disaster vulnerability. In the third section of the paper we argue that patterns of difference also make women especially important partners in community-based mitigation. We conclude with three major steps toward structural and cultural

change in emergency management which, in our view, would help disaster planners and responders better identify and address diversity issues in emergency planning and response.

## The flooded communities: event, method and sample

Two locations in Scotland form the basis for the UK research: the floods in Perth and Kinross in 1993 and in Strathclyde in 1994. A series of in-depth, qualitative interviews were carried out at various periods after the events (from 3 months to 4 years). The floods were region-wide events, which disrupted large parts of West (1993) and later East Scotland (1994). Most communities had experienced floods before but none remembered them to be of the same magnitude. Early emergency operations were compromised to some extent, in both events, because people were expecting the floods to follow the same path as before. When floods went beyond previous boundaries, or in unexpected directions, there were some delays in action. The damage was variable but many of the respondents had to be evacuated (or self-evacuated) from their homes and spent between a few days to nearly a year in temporary accommodation of various kinds<sup>4</sup>.

In the twin river cities of East Grand Forks, Minnesota and Grand Forks, North Dakota, a series of severe winter blizzards set the stage for 'the flood of the century' in the Red River Valley. When local dikes were unexpectedly breached, emergency managers implemented the midnight mandatory evacuation of East Grand Forks (9000) and Grand Forks (50,000). Residents dispersed for periods of two to six weeks to relief centres, host families and extended kin around the nation as the isolated prairie cities assessed significant housing, industrial and agricultural damages and began vital repairs. In order

to examine women's formal and informal disaster work, open-ended interviews were conducted at six, 12 and 18 months after the flood with 113 women in focus groups and personal interviews involving service providers, emergency responders, disaster outreach workers, single women, single mothers, rural women, crisis workers, women in service clubs, home health aides, senior women, family day care providers, housing specialists, professional and business women, neighborhood activists and others<sup>5</sup>.

## Structural vulnerability to flooding

How do taken-for-granted patterns of everyday life before major floods expose some, more than others, to chronic crisis and heighten their vulnerability to the social impacts of extreme events? It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop a complex analysis of local community power structures, nor do we want to suggest that this is necessary for effective emergency planning. But race/ethnicity, class and gender were, in the actual flood experiences of those we interviewed, inextricably interwoven into consciousness, living conditions and social relations impacting emergency preparedness, relief, recovery and mitigation. For the purposes of discussion, we take up race/ethnicity, class and gender sequentially in the following three sections, and focus more on the 'lines that divide' than the 'ties that bind' flood-impacted women. In the predominantly white Scottish communities studied, race/ethnicity issues did not emerge and were not directly focused on; thus, the first section below focuses more specifically on the Grand Forks study.

## Racial/ethnic patterns along the rivers

As life is lived as a whole and social power constituted and experienced interactively,

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3. Some recent work focuses on men and masculinity in disaster contexts but the literature is sparse. See Enarson and Scanlon [1999]; Alway, Belgrave, and Smith [1998]; and Roberts [1997].

4. In the earliest stages of research the respondents were predominantly white, working class women whose ages ranged from their late teens to some in their 70s and even 80s. They also ranged from single women in full time work, through married or separated women with young children and working part-time, to older women in full time employment or retired. Their jobs were mostly of relatively low status and low pay - cleaning, retail, clerical. In later research a number of middle class women were interviewed, again ranging in ages from their mid-twenties to beyond retirement. They were either married or widowed. Their occupations included those of human services (teacher, social worker) or small business owners. Additionally a number of

interviews and informal meetings were carried out with professionals (emergency planners, social workers, police, etc.) connected with the events.

5. Respondents were predominantly Anglo (white, non-Hispanic), though a focus group was conducted with seven Latinas and four Native American women were interviewed. Eight women were over 70 but most were middle-aged, and either married or widowed. They were generally middle-class women employed in or retired from jobs in education, health, and human services (e.g. nurse, teacher, counselor, social worker). The group also included affluent women with secure careers as agency administrators, executives, or small-business owners, and marginally employed women in working-class occupations in the retail, clerical, and personal service sectors (e.g. teacher's aide, family day care, home health). The great majority reported moderate to severe damage to their homes and/or workplaces.

the race-specific aspects of living life as a woman cannot be isolated nor gender factored neatly from race. But the places in which disasters unfold have a racial history and structure important for planners to understand, as race in the US and elsewhere so powerfully limits people's access to key survival resources like economic security, safe housing and political voice<sup>6</sup>.

The culture and society of this floodplain in the Upper Midwest were constructed first by indigenous cultures and then during white settlement by Northern Europeans interacting with native populations. More recently, demand for cheap agricultural labor in the rich fields of the floodplain drew Mexican and Mexican-American migrant workers to the region. Anglos continue to dominate both Native Americans and Hispanics politically, economically, culturally and demographically. On the North Dakota side of the Red River over 95% of Grand Forks residents are non-Hispanic white (Anglo). East Grand Forks, MN is also predominantly Anglo though Hispanic families reside there in larger numbers. Air Force Base personnel based just outside Grand Forks were visibly part of flood preparations and response<sup>7</sup> but these racially diverse military families were not so visibly part of the cultural community, nor was their flood work consistently acknowledged, for example in flood anniversary ceremonies.

Like Hispanic residents generally, the small minority group of Latinas residing in the Red River Valley are more likely than Anglos to live in poverty, to rent rather than own homes, to have limited formal education, and to work in low-waged occupations. Thirty-eight percent of Native American households in Grand Forks were headed by women, compared to 9% of Anglo and 22% of Hispanic households<sup>8</sup>. Among this group are many former migrant workers now settled in the region. As discussed below, deep-rooted social tensions between migrant and host residents clearly structured the interaction of Latinas with other victims and with relief workers, impeding their recovery in ways emergency planners cognisant of local racial power structures might have anticipated. We note below that Latina women were primary users of postdisaster relief systems and hence more exposed to racial bias than either Latino men or more affluent Anglo women.

A mechanism both of solidarity and division, race or ethnicity assume no single meaning in disaster contexts among either dominant or subordinate groups. As noted

below, tribal membership was an important resource for Native American women seeking help for their families and cultural bonds among Spanish-speakers were strengthened by the flood and the shared experience of racial bias in the relief system. Ethnicity was also made meaningful in the dominant community through the celebration of Scandinavian culture, for example in the public discourse of media stories, local jokes, original songs, and local flood art. Residents and outsiders typically attributed the resilience of flood victims to the Scandinavian heritage of this stable Midwestern agricultural community, describing residents as 'very stalwart and noble and strong and tremendously courageous... and generous'<sup>9</sup>. This cultural heritage could be empowering for women:

'Well, I'm a pretty stubborn Norwegian! And one thing that my husband taught me is you tell it like it is—you know, if something bothers you or whatever . . . And I don't take any guff from anybody. When I couldn't get my building permit because they said the Corps of Engineers had to come, and I had my contractor coming to put my window in, I wasn't going to cancel him because then I'd have to wait again. I just said, you know, in the building permit office, 'What are you going to do to me? My windows are going to go in.' . . . My doors when they came in were wrong compared to what I ordered, and I went back to the person and he was hemming and hawing and I just said, 'Don't mess with me.' I took my finger and I said, 'You don't mess with me. Give me what I ordered.'

But ethnicity was not always interpreted positively by Anglo women; for example, one social worker attributed high rates of alcohol abuse and domestic violence after the flood to the reluctance of stoic Norwegians to speak publicly about 'family matters'.

Similarly, working-class cultural identity in the Scottish case studies played a part in both disadvantaging and empowering women in different situations. Working-class Scottish women empowered to take on the officials felt themselves regarded as nuisances when they demanded their rights. Their vociferous complaints meant they were sidelined during official visits in case they embarrassed local and visiting dignitaries:

'Any dignitary that came after the floods, it was highly chosen people they got to speak to. I mean they were no' coming to me or Janet or any ordinary people like us, because they

were too bloody feared [afraid] to! I think they were scared to come to people like us. Can't blame them. To think of the amount of times I sounded off to people!'

Thus, in both communities, some stories were silenced in order to present a public face of satisfaction and consensus rooted in cultural homogeneity. Social relations grounded on race and ethnicity structure disaster vulnerability in any community and impact groups of people differently. Here, the compound effects of racial and gender dominance put women at special risk.

### Rising above the water: economic patterns along the rivers

Structural economic barriers also differentially impact the recovery of flooded households. Women's economic status is a key factor universally in the ability of households to repair, rebuild, or relocate, to repair or replace cars, replace damaged clothes and household goods, to help family members recover financially, purchase physical and psychological health services, and in other ways begin again.

Social class mattered to women in Grand Forks and in the Scottish localities. Reflecting international gender patterns (e.g. the feminisation of poverty), women in these flooded regions were concentrated in female-dominated occupations in the service and retail trade sectors in female-dominated jobs less likely than others to provide security of tenure, flood services like on-site child care, uninterrupted pay-checks, and flexible working hours. Residents with insecure seasonal incomes or incomes contingent upon social relationships with men are inherently more vulnerable when the waters rise. In Grand Forks, more than 65% of all women (and 74% of women with children younger than six) were employed at the

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6. Racial/ethnic patterns have not been fully explored in US disaster research, nor have gender and class differences within racial and ethnic groups been examined. But see Perry and Mushkatel [1986], Bolin [1986], and Peacock, Gladwin, and Morrow [1997].

7. Military personnel provided critical help preparing homes and businesses against flooding and evacuating residents, operated a major emergency relief center serving all Grand Forks residents, and operated a comprehensive flood recovery program for impacted military families living off base. Military families also hosted evacuees for weeks in their homes on base and volunteered in response organisations like the Red Cross.

8. 1990 North Dakota Census, General Population Characteristics. Table 12.

9. Quoted in an oral history from the Flood Oral History Project, University of North Dakota, directed by Kim Porter and Eliot Glassheim.



time of the flood<sup>10</sup> but few could support their families on their own wages. Lower-income households, including those headed by women, were rarely economically secure homeowners to whom many disaster relief programs are geared. Many of the Scottish women interviewed lived in social housing, which gave them no choice over location. Many would have moved away from the flood risk areas if they could have afforded to, as this woman reported: 'If we had the money, we should be safe because I still [don't] feel safe. No.'

Women supporting families on their own incomes were clearly more in need of help after the flood. In Grand Forks, savings accounts and credit cards helped some women evacuate their families to hotel rooms instead of to crowded emergency shelters. Affluent married women often described evacuating to the relative comfort of nearby lakeside cabins. In some cases, middle-class women and their husbands bought cheap flood-damaged rentals as investment properties. Professional women were also more able to take advantage of new social service flood recovery jobs. The availability of flood insurance freed some of the Scottish women from dependence on disaster rest centres or the poorest quality accommodation but the insurance money was limited and once spent they were again dependent on what the local authority could provide. However, they were perhaps better off than those in Grand Forks as there was a greater quantity (though never enough) of social housing generally available.

More than twice as many female household heads in Grand Forks are renters than are home owners. Single mothers in particular were highly represented in Fema<sup>11</sup> trailers, where managers estimated they comprised one-third of the total and were among the very last families to find other accommodation when Fema closed its trailer parks. Many older, large, affordable houses needed by single mothers with large families were located in the area most hard-hit by the flood. Asked where single mothers found housing 18 months after the flood, a member of the service agency coalition responding to 'unmet needs' on a case-by-case basis explained many were 'scattered out in the small rural areas—in Fema trailers but also scattered in other

communities, just following low-income housing wherever they could'.

Women owning homes or land were clearly better able than renters or homeless women to recover from material flood losses. But our focus on the structural vulnerability to flood created by the divisions of social class should not be mistaken for a deterministic economic argument about vulnerability and power. Many affluent women in our studies drew on their husband's income, savings accounts, credit, second homes, professional credentials, and networks of social influence during this difficult period. But they were not immune to the emotional impacts of mandatory evacuation, housing

... The gendered division of labor in the home left women disproportionately responsible for children, seniors and chronically ill or disabled relatives...

damage, loss of personal memorabilia, the strains of rebuilding, or the loss of control. This member of the Grand Forks disaster outreach team recalled affluent residents she encountered during 18 months of outreach work:

'I wonder, too, if those that had more wealth maybe had more difficulty because they had more destroyed. Sometimes people with wealth or influence or power aren't used to dealing with hard stuff. And this was pretty hard. They were totally out of control. They had no management of what happened to them. For many of them, that was a new experience.'

'Talk about money—money doesn't do nothing for you,' a woman remarked as she read aloud from a letter written by a friend, an affluent widow evacuated out of town with her profoundly disabled grown son:

'We eventually ended up in [another state] in a Holiday Inn motel. While there I fell lifting [him] and injured

my back. . . I was barely able to walk and was taking care of [him] even though my back was killing me. . . They fit me with a brace and as yet have no relief from the pain. And in the process of all this I began losing weight. I still weigh a husky 97 pounds. Needless to say, I look a mess and feel like one too. We are in an apartment but we both need more room and better traveling for [him]. Thick carpets are hard for him. What we are doing is marking time, day by day. We are lonely, lost, and I for one am too old to start over. . . Would you believe this place is so small we only have a card table and two chairs? I miss my kitchen, I miss my home and everything in it, I miss my friends. I miss my security. I miss my identity. Every single day. Nothing will ever be the same again. . . . I lost 50 years of love and history. There's not a thing to work or to fight for anymore. Forgive me, this is a very bad day. I hope things start looking better.'

Similar stories could be added from the Scotland case studies. One of the most distressed interviewees was a woman from an economically secure background who was left by the flood without the will to pick up the pieces of her life. As with the case above, she also has a disabled child. The complexity of these women's lives suggest questions for future research into the way people who are already multiply impacted (e.g. through poverty, ill health, with carer responsibilities, etc.) do or do not cope with sudden disaster.

Women who did own or reside in single-family dwellings were not a homogeneous group. An Anglo wife and mother in a two-job working-class household described her 'depleted' checking account, high gasoline and food bills, and the painfully slow process of replacing household goods 'piece by piece by paycheck', notwithstanding receiving temporary housing assistance from Fema, private donations to flood victims (see below), voluntary labor from a visiting clean-up crew, \$1,000 from their church, and canned goods from Salvation Army.

Class differences were vividly illustrated by the varying uses women made of flood recovery funds, including the controversial \$2,000 'Angel' grants an anonymous donor made available to all Grand Forks residents on a first-come-first-serve basis. One woman used her Angel money to purchase a cheap used car to replace the one destroyed by the flood. A friend paid her ex-husband for his help mucking out the house to make it habitable for the children.

#### Notes

10. 1990 North Dakota Census of Population and Household: Summary Social, Economic, and Household Characteristics, Table 5.

11. The US Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The grant helped another woman rent an apartment for her family for three months rather than moving into a FEMA trailer while the family searched for a new home to buy. An affluent woman in a two-career household applied for the grant but later passed it along to the family that had hosted them during their lengthy evacuation.

As in Grand Forks, flood recovery funds in Scotland became a focus for community divisions; what, in Perth, was originally termed a 'flood fund', and thus available to all impacted by the flood, was renamed (for the best of reasons) a 'hardship fund' to be targeted at those in greatest need. The latter were generally those without insurance and many of the insured felt aggrieved that they were now being disadvantaged for what they regarded as having acted responsibly:

'So you get people like us, pay your insurance, you skrimp and scrape to do it. . . And I know people who were not insured at all and they've got better houses now than they ever had before.'

However, some of those that did get help through the hardship fund found that rather than money they were given vouchers that they had to take to certain listed shops and were only allowed to replace particular selected items. They felt stigmatised when they went into the shops and could not hand over money like everyone else but were marked out instead as 'poor flood victims.'

As in the U.S., some middle class women found themselves in a liberal dilemma when offered flood recovery money: should they take it or not? For them, it represented the possibility of extra luxury items rather than the replacement of bare essentials and some struggled with a degree of guilt.

'We got money from the flood fund as well. . . I feel the money should have gone to people who needed it and, I'll be quite honest with you, we didn't particularly need it, so that might have been better managed.'

Structural factors increasing women's poverty and economic insecurity placed women at higher risk than men in these floods. Like race/ethnicity, class differences among women also positioned women differently to withstand the material losses of a flood and rebuild their homes and daily routines after these major community floods. The economic status of women was not, however, addressed as a public concern in the rebuilding process.

### Gender patterns along the rivers

Gender relations in both public and

private domains also increased women's structural vulnerability. Among other features of 'normal' pre-disaster life, the gendered division of labor in the home and violence against women put women and men differently at risk when massive flooding occurred.

The gendered division of labor in the home left women disproportionately responsible for children, seniors and chronically ill or disabled relatives. Accessing food, cleaning supplies, clothing and household equipment continued to be women's work under emergency conditions and later on. Some domestic tasks were also much more difficult. The employed woman quoted below strongly objected to the suggestion that women's work was less severely impacted by the flood than the work of men 'in the provider role'. She explained:

'I disagree. Personally speaking, when I couldn't fix a meal because I didn't have water, when I had my basement water in my kitchen—that's what I felt like I was responsible for, is washing their clothes. And I had to—it majorly disrupted my life, where my husband could go off and go to his job and bring a pay check home, and 'everything's just fine.' And I'm like, 'Everything's not!' I couldn't shop at the stores I wanted to shop at, I couldn't do anything. I thought the day-to-day living tore me apart big time.'

The floods sensitised some of the Scottish women to the limitations of their existing relationships and the gendered division of labor that had formerly gone unchallenged:

'I mean his whole total effort was shrugging his shoulders and sighing. I mean I was turning out my whole house, seeing to my kids, worrying myself sick. . . and I just felt he thought that where we were was very comfortable. . . 'I like it' and I says 'but you dinna understand.' He didna' understand how I was. And I just realised really what a hopeless sod he was. I mean probably if we hadna' been flooded out I'd have just sauntered along with him. His life didn't change. His Monday to Friday job was the same but from Friday to Sunday he was still assuming he was going out to the pub. I was left in the caravan and that's the bit I couldnae cope with. . . I couldnae cope with my house and him and. . . a new baby and everything.'

Outreach workers, teachers, service providers and many mothers both in the

US and UK commented that the work of mothering was also more complicated. Children unexpectedly became hostile or aggressive, developed psychosomatic illnesses, reverted to earlier developmental stages, became ill after exposure to mold and to hazardous substances used in rebuilding, and in other ways needed more time and attention.

As parents with primary responsibility for child care, women were especially vulnerable to disruptions in the formal and informal child care system. Costs are generally higher in centers than in private homes, so working-class women earning low wages relied more than others on informal home-based day care. Floodwaters damaged these home-based facilities substantially, delaying the return of many employed women to their jobs and putting many family day care providers out of business.

In addition, patterns of interpersonal violence exposed women disproportionately to harm in the wake of the flood. On the day the Red River crested, the local shelter housing homeless and battered women was already filled, so several clients of the local crisis center were housed instead in area hotels and motels. Crisis workers were out of touch with them during the emergency evacuation but learned later that some returned to unsafe relationships for lack of alternate housing. In any community, emergency managers can predict where resources will be most necessary by understanding patterns of power and privilege in their own community. Race, class, and gender inequalities—not simply proximity to hazard—set up some residents more than others to disaster long before floodwaters rise.

There is a second important dimension to 'diversity' issues in emergency management. Though flood recovery was generally interpreted as a race-, class- and gender-neutral process complicated only by bureaucracy, patterns of community and household power clearly impacted access to vitally needed services. These organisational barriers are outlined in the following section.

### The flood recovery process: organisational and interpersonal barriers to services

Flood-impacted women across racial/ethnic and class lines drew heavily on

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12. Quoted in a newspaper account of 2,500 flooded Chippewa families who returned to the Turtle Mountain Reservation 150 miles outside Grand Forks [Long 1997].

immediate family and extended kin networks for lodging, money, emotional support and other key resources. Along the Red River Valley, a vibrant and resourceful family and kin network was an especially critical survival resource for women in subordinated racial communities.

Native American women turned for help to their extended families and, more broadly, to their tribal community. This parallel relief system based on tribal membership provided Native American women with critically needed material and emotional support. It also reduced their dependence on the racially-charged relief process in the Greater Grand Forks area. The tribal chairwoman explained it was the 'people's tradition to return to the land where they have their extended families. . . where they will be cared for'<sup>12</sup>. Another tribal official continued, 'It is our tradition that nobody would ever be without a home. . . that you would never refuse anyone anything'<sup>13</sup>.

Underpinning race and class differences was the gendered division of labor in flood recovery. Notwithstanding supportive family, extended kin and flood relief on Native reservations, impacted women in all our study areas had in common with disaster-hit women around the world the need to publicly seek assistance from public and private agencies. Asking for help was women's work, including standing in line to receive emergency goods, information, or guidance; doing the paperwork of recovery (e.g. completing forms, providing supporting documents, following-up with phone calls and letters); and contacting agencies for specific flood relief (e.g. counselling for disturbed children, health services for senior family members).

Class resentment in the politics of the flood recovery was complicated by gender and race/ethnicity, as we see below. Their visibility as service users exposed low-income women in particular to criticism. Social workers described women with severe economic problems as 'using the system', criticising them for accessing more than one service at more than one time in order to help solve problems after the flood. Like the men in their families, many resisted asking for emergency assistance from government and private relief agencies, reflecting the stigma-

tisation of social assistance and welfare. Yet women more often than men put aside these feelings and visited relief agencies repeatedly. Like so many other women with family responsibilities, this Native American mother of a young daughter had no choice:

'I had a hard time going to, like, Red Cross or anything like that. I had a very difficult time. And I don't know if it was a pride thing or what. My Dad would not go. [And your husband?] Oh, there's no way. No. And when we were [evacuated] out there, I had to go. I had nothing for my daughter.'

Women's interaction with institutional flood recovery systems not only illuminated gender patterns but also made race and class privilege starkly visible. In the next section we discuss a range of observed service barriers linked to the social relations of race/ethnicity, class, and gender.

### 'You don't belong here': racial/ethnic barriers to service

Hispanic migrant workers who returned to work the rich fields along the Red River after the spring flood suffered indirect but significant flood losses. Many migrant families skipped the 1997 summer season, but those who did come faced intense competition from flooded Anglo families also needing temporary housing, work clothes, and cheap household goods. Some established migrant families lost the trailers they left in the area from the previous season. Because these were not full-time residences they were classified as 'second homes' ineligible for compensation, although the trailers were significant primary residences during the field season for migrant workers otherwise forced to sleep in their trucks or camp in parks. After the spring flood, migrant families faced a more hostile environment than usual as flood relief was both covertly and overtly restricted to Anglos through coded references to 'Minnesota families' or 'residents'. As single mothers are over-represented among migrant families, these racially-based patterns seriously disadvantaged many Hispanic women.

Ironically, some programs became more racially inclusive. An East Grand Forks agency serving migrant children integrated flood-impacted Anglo children into their summer programs, somewhat reducing the previous level of services to migrant children but providing vitally needed child care to flooded residents. A program director recalled bracing for community backlash when migrant and

Anglo children were placed together in bilingual classrooms, but during a 'family fiesta night' for staff, parents, and children was pleased to see 'tables with migrant families sitting next to the local banker'.

Latinas in an East Grand Forks focus group discussion described many incidents of racial bias. One single mother, whose extended family lives in Texas, made a perilous 72-hour long-distance drive home after a distressing encounter with Red Cross volunteers unable or unwilling to assist her and her three children. Still seeing a counselor and taking antidepressant medication 18 months after the flood, she described her struggle to find housing when she returned to East Grand Forks:

'I had a hard time getting that apartment but I actually begged them—actually, I kneeled down and I said, "Please, me and my kids need a place." I had my furniture and clothing and everything in storage and I said "I have to go into storage to get clothing for me and my kids." I said, "I need a home." And he's over here. . . "Well, let me think about it for two weeks, because Mexicans used to live in my place and destroyed my apartments before the flood". That's what I was told by him. So that's where I thought racial had something to do with it. . . It really upset me when he did make a comment about Mexicans. I said, "Not all Mexicans are the same, that's where you are wrong".'

Race/ethnicity was also a factor in informal communication networks about the relief process. Language was a powerful barrier to Spanish-speaking women and men facing 'a wall of English', notwithstanding the availability of bilingual helpers in relief centres. At least some flood information materials were translated by the bilingual staff of service agencies working with Spanish-speaking families in the area. But this translation work took place after the flood under very difficult conditions and was not part of emergency planning to serve diverse populations. Latinas also reported exclusion from informal communication networks. For example, they recalled learning too late about the arrival of a semitruck loaded with donated vacuum cleaners, though many of their Anglo co-workers had already made arrangements for time off from work to meet the truck.

Formal service barriers (e.g. lack of assistance to migrant families not resident during the flood) were compounded by informal organisational practices. Both

#### Notes

13. Quoted in a newspaper account of 2,500 flooded Chippewa families who returned to the Turtle Mountain Reservation 150 miles outside Grand Forks [Long 1997].

economic need and their gendered role as help-seekers exposed Latina women in particular to racial bias and restricted access to vitally needed recovery assistance.

### **'Back to my abuser?' Lack of services for women in crisis**

Flooding damaged or destroyed most downtown buildings in Grand Forks and East Grand Forks, including businesses and financial institutions but also community-based agencies serving residents struggling with flood damage and the chronic crises of homelessness, substance abuse, violence, mental illness, and unemployment. Although their work with these vulnerable populations was even more essential after the disaster, the flood's direct and indirect impact on facilities, staff, and resources made services less available.

Women were at greater risk of personal violence in the wake of the Red River floods<sup>14</sup>. Service statistics from the local crisis center indicated a 47% increase in crisis calls over the same quarter the previous year and a 65% increase in requests for protection orders. In some households, women were unwillingly drawn back into relationships with former partners who could help them clean their homes, make repairs, replace possessions, fix cars, or relocate. Crisis counselors heard later about the problems, which followed:

'It's not working out well, because there's a lot of promises that they don't keep. So they're trying to rely on 'em but yet they're not getting the support they need, and plus then the abuse continues. You don't necessarily have to be living with them to continue to be abused. . . [A] few have wanted to get divorced and then the divorce was delayed because of the flood, one for over a year. The courthouse was down for awhile, and all those issues of trying to get that back up and running.'

Battered and homeless women in the Red River Valley lost safe space to floodwater—and to community complacency about their vulnerability before, during, and after the flood. Community crisis agencies for women are not recognised by emergency managers as critical care facilities and the women they serve not seen as vulnerable in the way that nursing home residents or disabled residents are. Gaps in service were described by a staff member concerned for the life safety of women after the flood:

'We're very cramped here [in temporary facilities] and we don't have

a place to hold our groups and we don't have any storage space and we don't have offices to do the private counselling we'd like to do. . . I think [the lack of a shelter] really compromises the security and the safety element for women. Abusers aren't stupid, by any means. They're going to figure it out. I mean, I don't think—Grand Forks isn't a large enough place where they might not think of some of the other places that we might be putting them. . . It's very easy to track somebody down, and that doesn't provide the kind of security and safety that we want to be able to provide for our clients. So,

**Coping with the emotional needs of male partners was a major challenge for many women in the recovery period.**

I mean we do the best we can, but I don't think—I don't feel very good about the options that we're offering right now, and I know that our clients don't. I assume that some people probably don't even utilize these options because that doesn't feel safe to them. So people aren't getting the help that they need.'

In the Scottish case studies, issues of domestic violence did not emerge although their absence in interviews does not mean they did not exist at all. However one social worker involved throughout the 1993 floods near Perth, remarked that domestic violence had not been an issue and that on the contrary many of the women had been made stronger by the flood.

### **'Women were the strong ones': women helping men**

Not all barriers to women's recovery emerged from organisational practices. Women's recovery was also complicated by the need to respond to men who

struggled emotionally with the effects of the flood.

In many of our study locations, effective and wide-ranging door-to-door disaster outreach teams were in place for many months after the floods, offering a variety of resources targeting seniors, children, employers, and neighborhoods.

Many churches and social service agencies also offered flood-recovery programs like support groups or counselling. Yet there was no single pace of recovery. Many women interviewed a year and a half after water entered their homes described continuing physical symptoms of stress, needed help coping with children's self-destructive or aggressive behavioral changes and were still taking antidepressant medication.

Coping with the emotional needs of male partners was a major challenge for many women in the recovery period. This college-educated Native American woman described how her husband's emotional withdrawal from the family (and his physical absence two separate times) led to 'role reversal' after the Red River flood:

'He was not the strong one any more because he had such a difficult time, thinking, not only did he lose his home but his parents' home. And so I had to be the strong one. I still had to take care of my daughter. He did come up [where we evacuated] for a week. . . The first three or four months he was, he stayed away. He was real distant and kind of did his own thing. . . He said the most difficult thing for him was the fact that he is supposed to take care of his family and he had nowhere to bring that family.'

Interviewed a year and a half after the flood, and newly settled into a new job and new house, she felt ready for counselling but others were now reluctant to talk about personal issues raised by the flood, and free counselling was no longer available:

'It's now that I think that people need help, it's not right after the fact and it's not five months later, it's when they're settled. . . It's a year later, more than a year later, and I know I haven't dealt with it, but I'm conscious of that, and I know when I'm ready and my mind is ready I will deal with it. . . Men are supposed to be strong and tough and don't need

#### **Notes**

14. For a more extended discussion of violence against women in disasters, see Enarson [1999a] and Fothergill [1999].



anything. Women are supposed to be the ones who need help all the time. It's like—"excuse me?" It should have been there for him right after the flood, and then for me, now.'

In Scotland, the son of a single-parent family, who had taken on the role of 'man of the family', but who was absent during the floods was nevertheless affected by them:

'Now when it came to moving, to chucking everything out, coming back when the water went down and put it all out to get thrown away, which was pretty traumatic, he couldn't do that. He literally couldn't do that, he broke down. And a lot of it was that he couldn't stop blaming himself that he wasn't there to help us that night. And although he wasn't here the night of the floods, the floods have affected him.'

A social worker involved in the floods in Scotland told how 'the flood wiped the men, paralysed them' and the women became stronger through it. Men could not ask for counselling help for themselves but when their wives or partners received home visits from counsellors, the men would listen attentively in the background or slowly feel able to communicate their personal distress.

Gender identity, the gendered division of caregiving and the gender politics of disaster decision-making make emotional recovery difficult for both women and men.

The different emotional worlds of women and men may equip them differently for the hard work of disaster recovery and warrant more investigation, as do class and racial/ethnic patterns of emotional recovery.

### **Lines that divide and ties that bind: solidarity and flood recovery**

The strength of the 'therapeutic' united community was undermined by the very different experiences of women across class and racial/ethnic lines. We found that flooding reflected and exacerbated economic, racial/ethnic and gender inequalities.

In the Red River Valley, flooding increased the salience of ethnic identity, making racial bonds and divisions of long standing more visible. Ethnic solidarity seemed to increase among Euro-Americans, who experienced the flood as members of the dominant population; among Native Americans who turned to tribal authorities and systems for emergency relief and emotional support; and among the Hispanic community after their

exclusion from the resources of mainstream relief agencies.

In Scotland, class divisions were exacerbated as spatially scattered middle class residents expressed their resentment of those in the spatially coherent social housing locations of North Muirton (Perth) and Ferguslie Park (Strathclyde) who appeared to command greater attention and services.

Women were not united across racial or class lines as a unitary or self-conscious social group. Many women did appear to become more conscious of gender divisions while negotiating with partners over household preparations and recovery work and observing the public flood

**Our findings in these flooded communities suggest that addressing population diversity and community power structure is not an indulgence but a necessity in emergency management.**

recovery process. Most respondents agreed that women's specific interests and needs were neither identified nor explicitly considered. Women across races and classes, and in our different national locations, had sandbagged, walked the dikes/floodbanks and prepared families and workplaces for disaster, but were mostly (although not exclusively) absent from the table when planners developed reconstruction projects or local action groups formed to formulate action plans.

The solidarity of flood victims as a whole was undermined by an implicitly gendered, racialised, and classed vision of community recovery. In the long run, community divisions were not overcome but strengthened.

### **Responding to diversity in emergency management: strategies for change**

Our findings in these flooded communities suggest that addressing population diversity and community power structure is not an indulgence but a necessity in

emergency management. Building sustainable disaster-resilient physical environments for the future necessarily involves building more sustainable disaster-resilient social structures. The action steps identified below suggest a new model of emergency planning predicated as much on social as on physical vulnerability and a vision of residents as knowledgeable community planners and effective disaster responders as well as future victims.

### **Utilising social vulnerability analysis**

Flood mitigation is not a technical accomplishment but a social process. Effective emergency preparedness and response must incorporate an analysis of how local racial, class, and gender inequalities are likely to impact residents through the disaster cycle. Differentials in housing, economic security, family status, health and other living conditions in diverse populations provide important clues about patterns of vulnerability and recovery.

Social vulnerability analysis is, or can be, an important planning tool for emergency managers. Concrete knowledge of local community power structures enables emergency planners to anticipate needs and target resources. Knowing the right questions to ask is the first step. What can be done now to ensure that mixed-sex teams are available to contact stressed families after the next flood? Where are the battered women's shelters and other group homes located and how prepared are they for a major community flood? Where are most women in the area employed and what proportion are single mothers? How can families living below the poverty level prepare their homes for flooding? How many families use which kinds of child care, and how well equipped are these facilities for a major flood? What are the major community language newspapers in the area and who in emergency management can communicate with their publishers and writers?

Few emergency management offices have the resources at hand to research historical and contemporary patterns in local community power structures. Relevant data are not always available (e.g. gender and race sensitive census data). Emergency management agencies should utilise the resources of universities and colleges and, in the process, forge new links with the disaster researchers of the future.

### **Concretely, we recommend that:**

- baseline community vulnerability profiles be developed and updated



- community planning agencies be required to provide gender-, class- and race-sensitive social indicator data for the purposes of emergency planning
- data and reports from non-profit organisations serving vulnerable populations be utilised in emergency planning

### Increasing organisational diversity

The concept of 'flood responders' is narrowly written to refer to those in formal occupational roles (e.g. police, fire-fighters, utility workers, social workers, elected officials, EMOs/Emergency Planners) acting in the public sector during and immediately after the event. This fails to capture the informal, private sector, voluntary, and on-going response roles of other women and men through the extended period of flood recovery.

A Latina social service administrator objected to the 'old military model' for just this reason: 'It doesn't address what happens right after, it doesn't address the healing part. Women tend to pick up the brunt of that.' She also protested that emergency managers fail to consult those most knowledgeable about vulnerable populations:

'Migrant women are an untapped resource. . . [V]ery few community planners would go to a [migrant woman] and say, "How do we plan for migrant families coming in? What do we need?" And I think here's where you have the. . . understanding, the knowledge of the community and the knowledge of the client.'

Because service barriers to women are most likely to be anticipated when organisations represent the full range of their own community, hiring for diversity is an important step forward. The employment, retention and promotion of larger numbers of women, and in higher status positions, in emergency management organisations is one change strategy, but it is essential to more fully engage non-specialists and to employ or otherwise involve women whose life experiences sensitise them to the privileges of race, class and gender. The burden of our argument is that those most needed at the table are women and men whose life experiences have made race, class and gender issues significant in their thinking about community development and emergency planning. We do not call for any litmus test of 'identity' or mechanistic model of affirmative action in emergency planning. We do argue that it is critical for local planning groups to include women whose life experience closely reflects the

vulnerabilities and strengths of those most at risk in their own community should rivers flood or other extreme events occur.

### Concretely, we recommend:

- self-assessments in disaster organisations to document existing race, class, and gender patterns of employment, training, and promotion.
- expanding community-based planning groups to include agencies representing the needs and interests of battered women, the homeless, immigrants and refugees, single mothers, low-income families and migrants, as well as the elderly and disabled
- increased consultation and interaction between emergency planners and local community groups serving vulnerable populations (e.g. inclusion in disaster plan exercises, shared mailing lists for newsletters and other emergency communications, revising emergency resource handbooks to include these groups)
- development of appropriate training materials on race, class and gender issues in disasters designed for in-house use by disaster organisations (e.g. anti-racist training for relief agency volunteers, in-house gender-equity programs)
- revising organisational mandates and relevant laws and regulations to include priority attention to all populations designated highly vulnerable at the local level
- direct assistance, as feasible, to assist crisis shelters and other community action groups to develop effective in-house disaster plans
- attention to details of program design which facilitate the participation of diverse groups of residents, e.g. childcare at relief centres and flood response events, mid-day rather than evening flood preparation and recovery meetings, long-term mental health services, appropriate venues, transportation assistance, and other changes.

### Conclusion

Gender, race and class shape all people's lives, but women's experiences provide a particularly revealing lens on these intersecting patterns of power and privilege. Analysing women's disaster experiences is not a frivolous distraction from the hard work of identifying known risks and preparing communities for emergencies. It is an important part of the work ahead and can be advanced through new models of analysis and increased organisational diversity.

We have found as many similarities as

differences in our geographically and culturally dispersed case studies. There is a need to increase the search for common patterns within and across national/cultural boundaries to develop our recommendations for organisational diversity and better meet the diverse needs of vulnerable communities. Our case studies have been from the developed north but there is a wealth of experience from the perspectives of the south (see for example the work of Duryog Nivaran and the papers in Twigg and Bhatt 1998 amongst many others), which would aid this analysis. We hope other researchers will further develop such international comparative work with the ultimate aim of building sustainable, participatory, disaster-resilient communities.

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